



## VOYAGING THE WORLD OF COMICS AND CARTOONS TO UNDERSTAND THE SHAKESPEAREAN FOOL: AN INNOVATIVE WAY OF TEACHING-LEARNING SHAKESPEARE

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### ABSTRACT

Laughter, mirth and absurdity have always evoked interest in us. Shakespeare has been that one magician who gave us famous characters in this oeuvre known as the Shakespearean fools that one won't forget. Teaching these characters can be fun and made more capturing by introducing contemporary characters from the world of comics and cartoons. Media has been replete with characters that incite laughter among the audience by buffoonery or being burlesque or being in their wittiest best. These figures seem to be an offshoot of the Shakespearean fool that germinated in their respective creators' minds that were inspired after reading the Bard of Avon. They can be sole comic characters in a crowd of serious characters standing out individually like Flash Gordon among the super heroes, Wimpy in Popeye The Sailor man series or they can be a bunch of eccentric characters in a single plot like the Warner Bros. creation- 'The Looney Tunes'. The association of comics and cartoon characters with the Shakespearean fools seems inevitable. This paper attempts to draw analogousness between the famous Shakespearean jesters and some of the epoch making cartoon as well as comic books characters and demonstrate that teaching this oeuvre can be made interesting by this methodology. The aim of this paper is also to re-emphasize the fact that Shakespeare still inspires the creators of modern characters and reigns in them and the classroom teaching of Shakespeare can be made interesting by drawing affinity between the Shakespearean figures and their contemporary counterparts.

**Key words:** Shakespearean fool, cartoons, comics, entertainment

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Any subject's acquisition gets concretized when one assimilates it by reading it and also watching it with the help of visuals or illustrations. Thus, when one watches the movie adaptation of a popular book, the story remains imprinted forever. Same is the case with the illustrated books that were prescribed during early childhood school days. The knowledge was served visually that empowered

to draw inductive analysis of things around us. Taking a cue from this theory, teaching Shakespeare can be made interesting when a comparison between the Bard's creations can be made to similar content developed in the modern times. The characters given by Shakespeare have given rise to their own clans and thus researches can be done on each clan independently. One such figure that has

immense potential for new explorations is of the Shakespearean clown. And one of the best methodologies to understand the Shakespearean clown and find its successors in the modern world is to study the amusing characters present in the world of comics and cartoons. The world of cartoons and comics has given rise to a movement making its own independent genealogy. Comics are widely read by the audiences from all age groups. Same can be said for cartoons whose audience is not limited to young viewers only. Classroom teaching of Shakespearean fools can be made creatively interesting by finding the modern day jesters and fools in the delightful narratives of comics and cartoons.

Shakespeare has been a goldmine of dramatic inventions and discovery of characters. His style of characterization was epoch making and is still inspiring playwrights now. Shakespeare's craftsmanship brought to life an array of characters that one could easily idolize and relate to. Even though if a character could not be empathized with but it had at that time, and now too, the power to stir one's emotions. One of the characters that has always splendidly stood apart is the Shakespearean fool. As a result the character of the Fool in the Shakespearean oeuvre has captivated the attention of the modern audience and the contemporary critics.

The Shakespearean Fools were the most dynamic characters in the play. They could entertain us with their plain rustic comedy pertaining to their simple and uneducated background or were used by the playwright as the courtly jester which indulged in lowly comedy with his satirical language. Whatever be the category of the Fool, he had to be witty and came out as an emotional holiday from the intense action that the lead characters indulged in, thus acted as a source of entertainment. The clowning done by Shakespeare was a character from the commonality. As these characters were not heroic and had the liberty to produce pointed satire, they gave a new dimension to the subjects of love, psyche and morality and therefore could think differently from the narrow leanings of the societal norms. They evoked laughter by being euphemistic

and rejecting the social fabric, order and justice; and by not treading on any ideology.

Thus, the simple minded Shakespearean Fool is that one evergreen character that still inspires the world of entertainment with his verbal wit and intellectual repartee just like an old antiquity. As stated earlier this paper aims to establish a parallelism with the Shakespearean Fool and some timeless amusingly entertaining characters from the world of comics as well. The array of these characters includes individuals that are mentally deficient or indulge in slapstick comedy or inquiring the traditional world order or are overtly philosophical due to their ignorance.

Forsythe Pendleton Jones III, popularly known as Jughead Jones is one of the most loved fictional characters from Archie comics from Marvel Comics House. He is witty and mouths satirical dialogues. Unlike the central character, Archie, Jughead is not interested in girls but prefers to hang out with his sheepdog named Hotdog. Like the Shakespearean clown who is the confidante of the central figure, Jughead too is the best friend of Archie. He evokes laughter with his laziness and unusual antics. He always emerges as a victor whenever there is a tussle between him and his tormentors, especially with the character Reggie. Jughead always makes fun of the people who try to harm him or insult him and at the end walks away cool.

He has a great gastronomic obsession and is seen munching stuff and eating food all the time. If rest of the characters may be on a date or spending time with each other, Jughead prefers to spend time with food. His love for food has also sharpened his olfactory senses due to which he can detect the quality of food just by smelling a can or the container in which the food is kept. His sensitive taste buds can also find the slightest flaws in the preparation of a dish as result he is a revered food critic as well as a gourmet. Thus, once when he is seen trying his hand creative writing he ends up authoring his own cook book titled '*Forsythe P. Jones Cook Book*'. He is also blessed with an unusual metabolism rate due to which even after over eating he doesn't put on weight. He frequently keeps on participating in various eating contests and records

of gulping colossal burgers and loads of pizzas. He comes across as the unconventional winner in all these contests at a time when he is pitted against chubby looking competitors. On the contrary, Jughead is philanthropic as well. Though food is life for him but he is not selfish when the situation demands him to part from his food. Just like the Shakespearean jester, Jughead emerges to be an independent, strong and an entertaining character. He fools people around when they try to imitate him and thus, defies societal norms by not following a treaded path. Jughead can be fitted in the category of artificial fools who possess verbal wit for entertainment repartee and can be compared to the likes of Touchstone of *As You Like It*, the unnamed fool from *King Lear* and Feste of *Twelfth Night*. He surprises his skeptical friends with his vast knowledge on any topic under the sun, including Shakespeare.

Another character from the world of comics that seems to be an emergence from the pool of Shakespearean fools and also became a cult figure is Goofy from *Mickey Mouse and Friends* comic series of Walt Disney Productions. He is an animal character and has been named as 'Goofy' because of his eccentric and funny behavior. Being an anthropomorphic dog, his speaking style is also unusual and wacky. Similar to Shakespearean fool's close proximity to the central figure, Goofy is also the best friend of Mickey Mouse. Goofy is seen being dimwitted at times but is also showcased as an intuitive and clever character with his signature style of being idiotic and screwy. His is that one character in this comic series that debuted with a running gag and evoked laughter from the audience. Later on Goofy was also taken as an emblem by the US Air Corps for their 602<sup>nd</sup> Bombardment Squadron during the Second World War. After which Goofy was portrayed as a character facing the problems of the commonalities like the humdrums of daily life, fighting with oneself to give up smoking, the challenges of a family man and the issues of raising children. Thus, here we can see unison of the Shakespearean fool and Goofy who are characters from the common masses. When the spectators belonging to the peasantry or the ordinary class did not have money to reserve a seat with a better view

at the Globe Theatre, they were mostly drawn to the characters of Shakespearean fools due to their non-heightened personality and their roots lying in the common mass. Goofy is amiable and good natured. He is clumsy and keeps on tripping most of the times but he never gives up on trying. This portrayal makes him to appear funny. Goofy can be compared to Shakespearean clowns who like the modern day clowns appears to be a privileged laughter provoker carrying out his own funny antics and may not play a major role in the development of the plot. Though Goofy is a part of funny comic series, his actions create mirth and give the audience the dose of 'comic relief' that was provided by the Shakespearean fools in a tragic story.

In the parallelism drawn between Shakespearean fools and famous comic characters, one cannot complete this discussion without the inclusion of Norville Rogers aka Shaggy. He is a fictional character in the Scooby Doo franchise series created by Hannah-Barbera. His external appearance evokes laughter. He is dressed in loose fitted jersey and trousers and sports an unkempt tuft of beard on his chin. He is very lazy and extremely coward and also the best friend of his equally coward Great Dane dog Scooby-Doo. This duo is always on the run and being chased by ghosts and villains. Shaggy along with his dog is never interested in solving mysteries on the crime scene, instead will be seen as a glutton in the local restaurants of the place where he is travelling with his gang. His only concern in life appears to be food. So much so, that at times he is even ready to munch some Scooby snacks which are dog biscuits in reality. This provokes laughter among the audience. Shaggy justifies his big appetite to the loafing around and being a coward where he once says about himself and his dog, "Being in a constant state of terror makes us constantly hungry". Shaggy is whimsical and doesn't care much about what his other friends are into. He always manages to escape from the villains quickly by exhibiting some great athletic feats. Interestingly he is unaware of his prowess to run quickly and this is tapped by his friend Fred who always puts him as livingbait along with Scooby-Doo to trap villains. This agility is seen only when Shaggy is in a state of panic. The

mannerism of Shaggy appears like a hippie- absurd and loony. Shaggy gave the popular interjection 'Zoinks' which he exclaims when he is surprised or scared. Shaggy's character is quite similar to the characters created by the Bard- Bottom of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Lancelot Gobbo of *The Merchant of Venice* and Dogberry of *Much Ado About Nothing*. These figures are simple minded and rustic in their behavior and can be classified as natural fools unlike the artificial ones and whose principal work is to simply evoke laughter and mirth in the audience. Like Bottom, Lancelot Gobbo and Dogberry, Shaggy is also mentally deficient and ludicrous.

Thus, from the above examples of comparisons, the classroom teaching of one of the most riveting figures created by Shakespeare- the Fool, can be made engaging by keeping in tandem the famous Shakespearean characters of this genre and similar comic characters. The learners will be able to correlate their favourite comic characters to the Shakespearean fools that will help in the in depth understanding of this genre. This methodology can be taken up with the assistance of simple audio visual aids showcasing clippings of these characters or giving the learners the task of finding similar characters from other comics and cartoons and subsequently make a comparison between them.

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