

Abused, Misused, and Memed: Charlotte Temple in a Modern Media Landscape

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Introduction

If you were to visit the Trinity Church graveyard in New York City today, you could see a gravestone adorned only with the block letters “Charlotte Temple.” Standing there, you’d be following in the footsteps of countless people who have made the journey to visit Charlotte’s final resting place over the decades. But who is Charlotte anyway? She is the heroine of America’s first best-selling novel, *Charlotte Temple* (1794), but she is actually a fictional character. No one knows who, if anyone, lies beneath that gravestone in Trinity Churchyard (Davidson xiii). Nonetheless, as the heroine of Susanna Rowson’s immensely popular novel, Charlotte lives on in our literary imaginations.

Charlotte’s story is one of seduction, deceit, and destruction. It begins in England during the American Revolutionary War, where Charlotte, a girl of fifteen, meets a dashing young military officer named Montraville who is about to sail to America. Through various accidents and coercions, Charlotte ends up becoming his mistress, despite his promises to marry her, and going to America. Ultimately, Montraville abandons Charlotte. Penniless, pregnant, and all alone, Charlotte dies just after giving birth and moments after being reunited with her father, who takes her child home to England. Her tragic story has moved readers to tears for generations. It’s a classic example of the seduction novel so popular during the eighteenth century--what Julia Stern calls the American “urtext” of the “gothicized sentimental tale of seduction and abandonment” that warned female readers of the perils of desire and the deceitfulness of men (10). The novel dramatizes Charlotte’s struggle to navigate her first crush in the face of manipulation by both her friends and suitor. In doing so, *Charlotte Temple* interrogates problems of sexual consent that bear an uncanny resemblance to discussions today.

This article investigates those discussions in the form of Internet memes. Memes have become ubiquitous on social media, and recently they have become significant objects of academic study. Memes, as Bradley E Wiggins and G Bret Bowers write, are “artifacts of participatory digital culture,” which essentially means that memes have a substantial cultural presence and complex histories in which practically anyone can participate, as people produce, reproduce, and consume them online (6). Memes function through paradox and surprise; their success depends on appropriately invoking shared conventions while supplying innovative content, as Asaf Nissenbaum and Limor Shifman point out (485). In other words, memes depend on the convergence of both continuity and change in order to supply humor and create critiques. As such, memes are es-

pecially suited to demonstrate the logical inconsistencies and intense emotions of the sentimental mode exemplified in *Charlotte Temple*, because they draw out the strange and absurd dimensions of what at first glance seems normal and familiar. Thus, memes allow us to investigate the dark side of romance and demonstrate the problems of consent in the face of coercion--which vex us today as they did in 1794.

Specifically, this article analyzes the following memes. “Persian Cats and Pissed Off Parents” demonstrates the reaction of Charlotte’s parents when they learn she has disappeared with a stranger. The Persian Cat Room Guardian, with its glassy yet indignant scowl, comedically portrays their dramatic response in a strange, untraditional manner in order to draw attention to the underlying absurdity of their reaction. “Escalated Regret” uses Anchorman’s Ron Burgundy to illustrate the moment Charlotte realizes she got a little “carried away,” meaning both that the situation got out of hand and that she has literally been carried away, and her distress at finding herself so out of control. The final two memes both interrogate the nature of her seduction. In “Coercion versus Romance,” Fry Futurama reveals the disconcerting similarity between the conventions of romance and sexual aggression, using dark humor to expose Montraville’s coercive behavior. And finally, “Adventures of Kidnapping” uses the Most Interesting Man in the World to make a mockery of Montraville and Charlotte’s “elopement,” showing how this seemingly love-sick man is actually violent and disturbing. Overall, these memes demonstrate how *Charlotte Temple* exposes the conventions of romance as shams that both coerce and shame women.

Persian Cats and Pissed Off Parents

For Charlotte Temple’s 15th birthday, her parents decide to have her grandfather bring her home from boarding school so that they can throw a party for her. However, on the intended day, Charlotte’s grandfather doesn’t return with her, but instead with something else: news that she has disappeared with a strange man. Devastated and confused by Charlotte’s sudden disappearance, her parents are left to wonder what motivated her to abandon her family. From Mr. and Mrs. Temple’s perspective, this was completely out of character for Charlotte. When they were planning the party, her mother even said that she is “a grateful affectionate girl; and I am sure she will never lose sight of the duty she has to her parents” (Rowson 34). Of course, in the eyes of her parents, their perception of Charlotte as a dutiful daughter is now shattered and replaced with apparent ungratefulness.

Despite the serious nature of the Temples' situation, the "Persian Cat Room Guardian," meme captures their shock in a humorous fashion. According to Know Your Meme, a wikipedia type website dedicated to documenting memes, this popular image is a "reaction image macro" typically used "to convey an incredulous reaction" in response to irritating but relatable scenarios, such as "when you wake up from a nap and your mom starts yelling at you" (Knowyourmeme.com). By adapting this meme to apply to Charlotte Temple, Charlotte's parents' reaction can be understood without using too much language. In the novel, the Temples are obviously disappointed in their daughter, her mother lamenting about "how ill [has she] requited [their] tenderness" and her father remarking on how "she has forgot[ten] us all" (Rowson 53). While his disappointment at Charlotte's callousness is actually more emotionally complex and described in more dramatized, romantic language, the meme conveys the basic information: her parents are frustrated, confused, and upset, as implied by the seemingly angry expression of the Persian cat and by positioning of the arms which, in terms of human body language, usually indicates confusion.



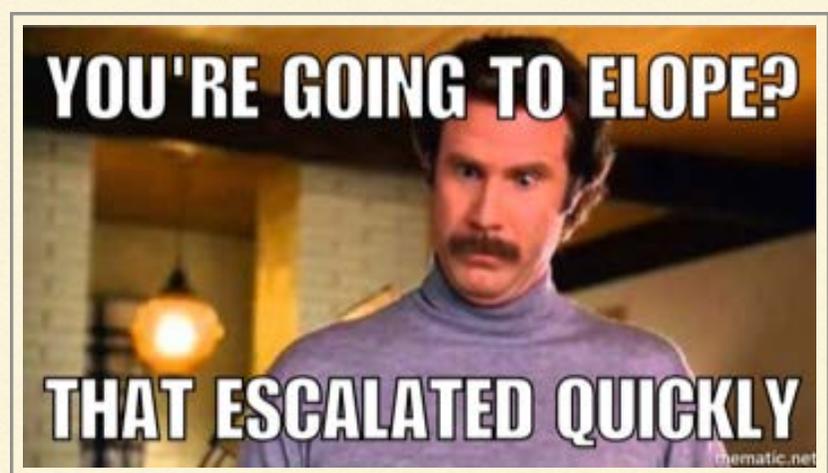
Even though this meme does work when altered to fit the context of *Charlotte Temple*, in doing so it twists both the nature of the original meme and the novel itself. Because the novel is sentimental, events and details are very rarely described in a mundane way. For example, Rowson even describes the tears of Charlotte's grandfather as "large drops of sorrow" (Rowson 51). On the other hand, the meme as a reaction image is "associated with the mundane," putting itself at odds with the novel (Shifman 2). Also, much of the humor in the original iterations of the "Persian Cat Room Guardian" meme lies in its relatability, yet the Temples' situation is anything but relatable. Nevertheless, by going against both the essence of the novel and the initial purpose of the base meme, this adaptation embodies the nature of internet memes as a whole. According to Limor Shifman, "Memes are all about mutation," meaning memes are meant to change and evolve as they are circulated (2). While

this meme is not mutating in regards to format, it is a mutation of the meme's context, thus allowing it to evolve without being too far removed from the original meme.

Escalated Regret

The story of Charlotte Temple demonstrates the ludicrous nature of Montraville's elopement with Charlotte. In just a few pages, Montraville goes from spying on Charlotte through a fence to kidnapping her. The plot of this novel escalates at a rapid speed and before the reader realizes what is going on, Montraville and Charlotte have eloped and moved to America. One can only imagine how much of a whirlwind this must have been for Charlotte. She starts the novel as a young, innocent, girl and finishes dead and abandoned in America. The elopement is unforeseen, even to Charlotte. The reader sees her own shock and guilty heart when she writes a penitent letter to her parents. Charlotte writes the letter in "most affectionate manner, entreating their pardon and blessing, and describing the dreadful situation of her mind" (55). Montraville is fully aware that if this letter reaches Charlotte's caring parents, he would have to pay due penance for his evil actions. Charlotte knows she has made a grave error and is writing one last letter to her parents attempting to explain herself. She knows that the situation escalated far too quickly, and that she has made a mistake that eventually ends her life.

The picture from the meme is of Ron Burgundy from the movie *Anchorman*. In the scene referenced, the cast of characters have just finished fighting an idiotic war with other news channel crews. The scene cuts to Burgundy in a room with his friends where he says, "That escalated quickly. I mean, that got out of hand fast." The phrase, "That escalated quickly," has become a huge part of meme sub-culture and is used on a frequent basis. In "The Cultural Logic



of Photo-Based Meme Genres" Limor Shifman says memes "are more about the process of meaning making than meaning itself" (3). Shifman is saying that in the meme culture, the meaning of a

meme is created rather than discerned from the picture. This is most definitely true for the Ron Burgundy meme. Thousands of people create memes surrounding this picture. Each meme can have different meanings, yet they all revolve around the idea of “That escalated quickly.”

Therefore, the Ron Burgundy meme can be well adapted to what is happening in Rowson’s novel, *Charlotte Temple*. Ultimately, the meme fits the novel because Charlotte’s elopement really does escalate at an intensely rapid rate. In the movie, *Anchorman*, the fighting scene had advanced to point of people killing each other. Ron’s weatherman, Brick Tamland, famously says, “I stabbed a guy in the heart with a trident.” The situation they found themselves in escalated quickly. Similarly, Charlotte steps in the boat and travels to the new world with someone she had only known a short time, her situation had also escalated quickly. The meme diction can be adapted here to fit the novel because both situations are completely ludicrous and blown out of proportion.

Coercion versus Romance

Susanna Rowson uses *Charlotte Temple* to illustrate the perils that young women can face when they believe that novels offer a realistic version of love and relationships. The main character, Charlotte, is seduced, coerced, and captured by her suitor, Montraville. Throughout the novel, Charlotte’s relationship with Montraville changes. Originally, she is excited with his interest in her, and he charms her with sweet words and flirtation, insinuating himself into her life. But as their relationship progresses, Montraville becomes more manipulative and violent towards Charlotte and himself. An example of his questionable behavior is when Montraville, multiple times, threatens to kill himself when Charlotte attempts to leave their relationship. Nonetheless, many of Montraville’s overtures are traditionally romantic and, without context, could be seen as such to young readers; however, Montraville stalks, threatens, and kidnaps Charlotte, ultimately causing her death. Rowson uses Montraville’s extreme behaviors to show young readers that traditionally romantic actions are not romantic but dangerous and creepy.

The text of this particular meme illustrates what Susanna Rowson is trying to warn young female readers of: unhealthy and unsafe behaviors that were stereotypically portrayed as romantic. Rowson’s warning also works in part by assuming that young women would not be able to see through the ruses of unsavory suitors. The meme references Montraville’s courtship of Charlotte. Many of the strategies that Montraville uses to woo Charlotte are sketchy at best; however, Charlotte is blinded by her own infatuation and does not escape Montraville.

The Fry-Futurama meme proves a point about Montraville’s unsettling romantic behavior towards Charlotte. This particular meme offers a rigid format that was simple to create yet stay true to the overall style of the meme. The base of the meme is the screen-grab of Fry, during a *Futurama* episode, looking confused with the words “Not sure if ____, or ____” at the top and bottom of the image, respectively. The meme used for the project says, “Not sure if you’re being a pervert, or romantic.” The text and the image work together because the connotations of the meme complement Montraville’s pseudo-romantic behaviors. Fry, the main focus of the meme, is the main character of the show *Futurama*. He is fairly unintelligent and gullible, and therefore the other characters easily (and often) taken advantage of him. Similarly, Charlotte is constantly misled by Montraville and her teacher Mademoiselle La Rue because of her innocence and gullible nature. This meme gives a humorous glance at what may have been going through Charlotte’s mind when she first began to suspect Montraville’s romantic behaviors.



Meme scholarship helps explain how humor within memes can often offer a critique, which is why memes can work as a mechanism to understand literature. In the article “Humor in the Age of Digital Reproduction” Limor Shifman states that “the capacity of the Internet... to convey and combine all existing communication morphologies... the competence of the internet to store and deliver digitized content...” allows users of the internet to communicate in a variety of ways (4). This is true especially in the case of memes. Memes themselves have the same capacity to “convey and combine” different types of communications (4). Humor is usually the purpose of memes, which use an image and text combination to achieve that purpose; however, humor within memes can be used to prove a point. This meme in particular illustrates Montraville’s overtly, dangerous sexual behaviors while providing humor. The adaptation of the meme used signifies what could have been a humorous moment

of realization for Charlotte about Montraville. Also, the meme can a reference to the reader's own thoughts about Montraville and his sketchy behaviors. Therefore, memes can be used to critique the discourse of romance within Charlotte Temple, reinforcing the novel's warning to warn young women.

Adventures of Kidnapping

Charlotte Temple's sheltered life launches into a series of insane adventures when Montraville enters the picture. While her adventures might be tragic, they are most certainly interesting. The disturbing thought is the enjoyment Montraville gains from seducing fifteen year old Charlotte and subsequently dragging her across the Atlantic Ocean to America. Montraville's little game with Charlotte ends in her death, but not before he leaves her destitute in a foreign country. During Charlotte's suffering, Montraville entertains himself by "advancing rapidly in his affection towards Miss Franklin" (82). Montraville's lack of remorse until the very end of the novel makes one wonder how many other girls he has seduced and left bereft of family, money, and self-esteem.

This particular meme comes from the Dos Equis commercials featuring The Most Interesting Man. According to the Dos Equis website, The Most Interesting Man has had many amazing adventures, including giving himself a tattoo, creating a culinary karate program in Guam, and performing in an acrobatic zip-lining show. While the man pictured in this meme is not the current actor for The Most Interesting Man, he is still an icon for this legend that began as a beer commercial. Because The Most Interesting Man is so recognizable with his catchphrase "I don't always drink beer, but when I do I prefer Dos Equis," he has become a viral meme adaptable to just about anything, including Charlotte Temple.

According to Limar Shifman, "photo-based meme genres. . .are more about the process of meaning making than about meaning itself" (3). Because social media is so littered with memes of The Most Interesting Man, the process of meaning making has already been completed by the time someone comes across this meme. That being said, Dos Equis portrays the original Most Interesting Man in a positive light. For this particular meme, the meaning is flipped. Obviously, the reader is not meant to believe that Montaville's treatment of Charlotte is just another fantastic adventure like those of The Most Interesting Man. Instead, the ironic use of a well-known positive meme allows readers to find humor in the ridiculousness of Montraville's behavior.

By having The Most Interesting Man say, "I don't always seduce 15 year old girls, but when I do, I leave them in a foreign country to die", readers better understand the true cruelty of Montraville's treatment of Charlotte. This point is incredibly important because in the novel, Charlotte takes the majority of the blame for her situation (Rowson 79). In reality, though, who could expect a 15 year old girl to be responsible for being kidnapped by an older man? The use of the Most Interesting Man meme in this ironic way sheds light on not only the ridiculousness of Montraville's treatment of Charlotte but also his previously underplayed guilt for kidnapping and abandoning a 15 year old girl.

Conclusion

Charlotte Temple's story may already seem outrageous, but couched in the such sugar-coated surroundings of eighteenth-century sentimentalism, it requires digging deeper to truly understand the coercion, kidnapping, and seduction at the heart of this story. Using well-known memes that already have an attached meaning allows the deeper themes of Charlotte Temple to shine through the shrouded text. Mr. and Mrs. Temple's over dramatic reaction to their daughter's elopement seems only tragic on the surface, but with the employment of a meme, readers easily see that Mr. and Mrs. Temple absurdly overreact to their daughter not showing up to her birthday party. Montraville and Charlotte's relationship feels like a whirlwind, an innocent, sweep-her-off-her feet romance. However, a deeper look into the text (or, even better, a glance at a



meme) reveals just how quickly they go from clandestine meetings to eloping all the way across the Atlantic Ocean. A dashing gentleman like Montraville could not possibly have anything less than innocent intentions towards his young sweetheart, right? Wrong. It may not be easy for readers to see--it certainly wasn't easy for Charlotte to see--that Montraville effectively coerces and kidnaps a 15 year old girl. Without specific explication of the text, Montraville seems like a lovesick young man just trying his luck with a beautiful girl. Memes, however, allow readers to immediately understand the underhanded tricks and perversion of Montraville's courtship. Inexperienced girls like Charlotte never expected to meet a Montraville. A clear understanding of the seduction, coercion, and kidnapping of an adolescent girl that goes on in *Charlotte Temple* is crucial to understanding the overlooked corruption and abuse of eighteenth century heroines and, further, the corruption of the conventions of romance and consent itself.

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