

Perceptions of Fan-fiction and the Rise of Readers as Authors

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Abstract

This article is concerned with the rising popularity of fan-fiction, the communities that create them and the individuals that exploit them. It will give an overview of the roots of fan-fiction, questioning if it can be seen as a legitimate literary creation in its own right. Looking at the most hyped fan-fiction media coverage and the contentious notion of what constitutes an original creation – legally and as upheld by its respective fan-fiction community - this article considers whether the recent success of fan-fiction trilogy *50 Shades of Grey* has set a precedent for today's publishers.

Keywords: Fan-fiction; fandom; P2P (pull to publish); canon¹.

Introduction

An eye-roll followed by an 'I told you so' may well have been the reaction of British literary critic, F.R Leavis, had he witnessed the ever-growing cultural phenomenon of fan-fiction today. Cultural elitists of the last pre-digital century had concluded that public education would result in a downgrading of literature, as conveyed in Bourdieu's model, where such literary works would fall within the wide-scale domain of 'low-culture' written for the

¹ www.vox.com/2016/6/7/11858680/fandom-glossary-fan-fiction-explained

masses (Bourdieu 1993). Even within the masses, observed reactions to fan-fiction reveals a divide in public opinion and perception, despite its rise in popularity and production.²

Fan-fiction may be deemed contentious because of uncertainties whether fan-fiction is an ethically acceptable form of literary creation. Another reason for its divisive nature may be what Sandervoss explains as a result of our history of exposure to texts being “idealised as a closed form”, where until fairly recently, other forms of an original text would be seen as an alteration of the author’s intended meaning, thus rendering additional forms as impure (Sandervoss 2007).

As readers become fans, critics, editors and writers, changing original works into subgenres, altering plot, perspective and character disposition, integrity to both the original creator’s work and the concepts of fan-fiction are questioned on both sides. Some refer to fan-fiction as “stolen merchandise”, and “taking other people’s ideas and changing things just enough [to] pretend it’s original” (www.vox.com 2016).

However, if one were to define fan-fiction as simply the rehashing of another person’s original work, it would vilify the original practice of storytelling and widely renowned literature such as the bible, for its gospel accounts from the different perspective of his disciples; Shakespeare’s plays that were based on traditional story-telling and historical accounts; and Jane Austin’s portrayal of the ‘roguish’ male that had quite possibly been influenced by typical male characters in society. In an article analysing the evolution of the folk-tale, Cinderella, Margaret Lundberg attributes the wide-spread existence of the story to “a literary example of globalization through cultural flow”. One may expect that travel and trade routes would have been the prevailing force behind globalisation in Perrault’s Seventeenth century rendition of Cinderella (Lundberg 2013).

If it is, in part, through culture and globalisation that we have developed the practice of adapting, sharing and disseminating ideas and stories, a natural progression from simple

² Reportedly, 3 million members, on Fan-fiction.net, and over 40 million members, readers and writers, on Wattpad alone, two top-ranking fan-fiction sites – see <http://ffnresearch.blogspot.ae/>, <https://www.fan-fiction.net/>, <https://www.wattpad.com/>

word-of-mouth story-telling might be attributed to what Jenkins' 2006 study terms as 'participatory culture'. Where literacy was once a barrier, in today's society we may see "relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations and some type of information mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices" (Jenkins H. , 2006). A practice that is becoming more prevalent and directly linked (by Jenkins) to an increase in literacy of digital and media forms.

What is fan-fiction?

At its bare bones, fan-fiction is predicated on the notion that a canonical text can develop and evolve into increasingly diverse versions and forms of text. For the purpose of this article, a definition with a more historical foundation would be appropriate: one that takes into account the age-old practice of story-telling, where there have always been revisions, additions and alternate endings. Derecho's offering explains fan-fiction as a sub-genre that has its roots in achronic writing which has been around for four hundred years as a medium of 'social and political protest', largely as a genderised practice. Derecho points to the first example of published prose penned by a woman in the seventeenth century. (Derecho 2006) Readers must have been having conversations about the literature they read, or of works that did not inspire them, in order for them to further interpret the writing of others and assert their own input, and the internet has made things easier in this regard. (Delwiche 2013) Fandoms – groups or communities of fan-fiction have direct access to texts and interact with them and with fellow fans of a canon (original text) over the internet. Before the internet there were fanzines that allowed a similar shared interest of recreating popular fiction inspired by TV. Therefore, we see that there has been a long history of fan-fiction, even though it was not called that since its beginnings.

Why does it divide public opinion?

It is interesting that fan-fiction works that are produced for audio-visual consumption (fanfilms), as in Star Trek spin-off TV series, do not battle against the same vilifying generalisations as fan-fiction produced as books. Several writers of fanfilms, often commissioned by the original screenwriter(s) and producers of TV shows, are invited to add to the canon: its purpose being that it maintains the fan-base drawn in by the original work and continues to be profitable (Young 2015). This suggests that society perceives television writers as more anonymous and more detached from the writing itself; they do not share the same privilege of ownership and are not seen as authors in the way we have come to perceive *The Author*. This would be a worthwhile topic for additional analysis and discussion.

Perceptions of authors have been deeply societised since the dawn of printing and literacy itself. In today's system of property ownership, we believe an author to be one whom has created and published an original work. We have accepted the works of Shakespeare, and we do not question the uncertain authorship of *Arabian Nights*, yet the idea that there must be an original author attached to a written work in today's society remains an issue. We attribute an authorial name to newfound ideology or philosophy or scientific discovery; and at a more pedestrian level to styles and genres of writing.

The author is inextricably attached to the written work, and thus fits into our system of status validation, authentication and ownership (Foucault 1977). Foucault's discussion, *What is an Author?* Looks at the way authors have been exalted through the ages, questioning how far we can accept authenticity with a view that there is 'nothing new under the sun'. His argument is that the very fact that a writer uses words and letters to convey meaning built on experiences or observations and interpretations of them suggests that there have always been additional participants: contributory roles played by others. The most important role is given to the reader who, in part, also interprets and gives "rise to commentary" (Foucault 1977).

This is at the very heart of fan-fiction: reading into what has or has not been said and continuing the work. A truer perception of an author should be that which does not, as Foucault later writes “impede the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction.” In this way, it might be more helpful to view fan-fiction as a process where the reader gives the author status, relevance and value. The author via the written work requires an interactive relationship with the reader in order for it to have any relevance and value.

Barthes attempts to take this one step further by aggrandising the role of the reader, stating that “to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth” that society has indoctrinated about the author and realise that it is the reader’s relationship with it; that it is the text that enters a dialogue with the reader; that it is made up of the interpretations of many other writings that have been influenced by many other cultures (Barthes 1977).

Whether or not the reader is deserving of such an elevated position, the overriding factor found in a study of reader-writer interactions surmises that “central to our understanding the nature of reading is an understanding that reading and writing are social events involving multi-dimensional transactions between readers, writers, readers as writers and writers as readers” (Tierney and LaZansky 1983). What the fan-fiction writer does therefore, is join the discursive practice; it is not a removal of the author’s originality, but an adding to the work’s relevance. We cannot ignore that without reader interaction, the author merely has a relationship to his or her writing; the act of writing would be reduced to a pursuit for personal pleasure or a pointless undertaking.

The legalities of fan-fiction

The notion of authorship has historically been tied with ownership, with author’s rights made subject to the law since the introduction of the UK’s Copyright Act in 1710. Several changes have been made to accommodate the digital age, but it does not fully take into account genres like fan-fiction.

In addition, with the amount of content made freely available on the internet, the perception of property is changing, and to a large extent, where intellectual property is concerned, the lines are becoming ever more blurred.

Cases such as well-known author, J. K. Rowling, versus Steven Vander Ark show how authors can exert their rights, objecting to derivative work being published even though actively encouraging online fan-fiction (Shwabach, 2011). One question arising from this is should fan-fiction be called copying?

A 'Grey' Area

Fan-fiction as a genre, indeed as an exponential movement potentially towards the future of publishing, is just as concerned with protecting itself from infringement of copyright, as are the major corporations of the use of copyrighted property. Fandom adheres to a specific code of conduct when writing derivative or transformative work to remain within the rights of the US Fair Use and UK Fair Deal copyright laws. According to one fan-fiction blog,³ all writers must:

- 1. Be transformative*
- 2. Be noncommercial and produce no revenue*
- 3. Be only a limited portion of the original work (not a copy of the original)*
- 4. Be non-substituting of the original work. (does not take audience away from original work)*

In addition, writers should provide a disclaimer which acknowledges copyright and protects the originality of the source. These disclaimers only go so far as to protect the intellectual property of another: once an author has released their creative work into the public domain

³ www.writethatfan-fiction.com

it no longer exists as a closed form: it becomes 'shared property' from the moment it is published. Perhaps if the unwritten consensus of a shared ownership of accessible property were part of the copyright law, it might give rise to a greater sense of social responsibility towards protecting both what is original and what is derivative. Both are creative works that have a place in today's literary culture.

One of the most recent cases of how codes and practices can become blurred is the publication of Erika Leonard's *Fifty Shades of Grey* (under pen name, E.L. James) which received criticism on many levels: content; originality; its infringement of fan-fiction code, and copyright laws.

The work itself began as an AU (Alternative Universe) *Twilight* fan-fiction. Named *Masters of the Universe* (I and II), the episodic text was uploaded onto the fan-fiction repository www.fanfic.net. but was later taken down because it breached the website's code of conduct with regards to the text's sexually explicit content. This was possibly the first instance of a disregard for regulations. In order to continue the episodes of the *Masters of the Universe* duology, Leonard had a fellow fan create a site, naming it 50shades.com where *Masters of the Universe* I was made available for other fans. Whilst working on the second *Masters of the Universe*, Leonard joined an online writer's forum that was much more relaxed in terms of rules regarding explicit content, and would still have satisfied a writer's need for critical reception and affirmation. The writer's forum was not a fan-fiction repository, but would have offered a similar outlet for Leonard to invite comments and feedback on her work, which is one of the main elements of fan-fiction groups (Jenkins 1988).

Cultural studies on fan-fiction as a sub-culture suggest that fans write texts "because they seek acceptance of those texts and of themselves from the fan group in which they participate" (Davisson and Booth 2007). This move may be an early indication of Leonard's intent to publish, with the additional encouragement coming from The Writer's Coffee Shop, a writing and publishing website, who reported to have tried "for a period of twelve months to persuade Leonard to publish the work" (Brennan and Large 2014). The forum's

publishing division is likely to have known that this work had already been in circulation as fan-fiction AU of *Twilight*, freely available for other fans, who had undoubtedly followed Leonard, interacted with and possibly influenced the work that she later went on to publish through the writer's forum as *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

Based on the aforementioned fan-fiction blog, Leonard was in breach of both fan-fiction.net's⁴ terms of service and the Fair Use act. Leonard took the work posted as *Twilight* fan-fiction: a repackaged work that had been contributed to by other members of the fan-fiction repository and knowingly went on to use it for commercial gain⁵. Fans know that reworking or derivative works can place them in breach of copyright⁶; a reason for always including a disclaimer and making sure their work remains in the domain of fandom and not in the commercial sphere. However, this was not enough of a deterrent for Leonard who accepted the highest offer in the bid to publish *Fifty Shades Darker*, which was won by Random House's imprint, Vintage Books, who bought the rights to publish the entire trilogy. The success of the trilogy is an example of how lucrative viral marketing and fan-fiction repositories have become in the search for new and popular writing: original or not, it seems that reworked texts can be packaged as an original. This case also highlights how what is considered as 'original' is not really subject to copyright law; the lines can be fuzzed and muted by publicists and publishers alike.

Ways forward: the exploitation of fan-fiction as a legitimate source for commissioning and acquiring new titles

The *Fifty Shades* trilogy was not the first *Twilight* fan-fiction work to be published. *Gabriel's Inferno* by Sylvain Reynaud under the pen name Sebastien Robichaud, was also published in 2011, by *Twilight* fan-fiction publisher, Omnific Publishing.

⁴ <https://www.fan-fiction.net/tos/>

⁵ http://www.copyrightservice.co.uk/copyright/p01_uk_copyright_law

⁶ <http://www.copyright.gov/title17/circ92.pdf>

This has proved to be a lucrative strategy: to source marketable texts from fan-fiction repositories and publish them. The Writers' Coffee Shop was able to publish *Fifty Shades* as a low-cost Print on Demand publication, the sales of which were significant enough to attract one of the imprints of a big-name publishing house. Selecting work that already has a strong following of fans and, in this case, is evidently profitable makes good business sense, albeit ethically questionable in the world of fandom. Publishers can exploit derivative works by changing and repackaging them just enough to look original, and less like derivatives of original canons and similar fanfiction work, or in the case of Vintage keep changes to a minimum and maximise on profit even by retaining the original cover artwork.

While this might work as a strategy for trade and fiction books, it calls into question the function of copyright in the digital age and our attitude towards these regulations. Copyright exists to protect intellectual property but society's view of property is changing. Just as a work of fiction is released into the public domain, it becomes a shared source of re-interpretable and re-interpretable material. The sharing of which has built communities with their own ethics in order to appreciate and respect the original source. A 'canon', when understood in its ecclesiastical sense, is bound by rules, the treasurer and maintainer of original worship. While the meaning has been adapted for the use of fan-fiction, it is by no means less sacred: without the original form, there would be no derivatives. Fan-fiction keeps the original alive, maintaining it in the interaction between reader and writer.

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