



I WROTE 14,332 WORDS & NO ONE PAID ME: Fanfiction as a Critical Practice You Do for Fun

Lindsay Walker

Writing is a wholesome endeavor and a pretty decent hobby. Words are free. If you're feeling old-fashioned, paper is readily available and recyclable. And we're not really running short of room on the Internet for words yet. Yet some people grapple with the idea of writing as a hobby and not a vocation. There's still a weird expectation that hovers over writing—once you've met some arbitrary standard of “good,” you're supposed to want to be published. But a hobby's value doesn't come from monetary gain. A hobby's value comes from how it enriches your life. And no one has to be good at their hobby to continue doing it.

As a writer of fanfiction, I think it's perfectly possible and plenty fine to write for fun or write for yourself or a little pool party of friends. But, even on social media, it's easy to find people who spend their time digging up the most “cringe-worthy” aspects of fandoms—usually they target teens who write out their deepest fantasies about their favorite TV shows, books, movies, and games. Fanfiction is often labeled “terrible,” “bad,” “lewd,” and “poorly crafted.” It's assumed to be “juvenile” and, on that note, it's deeply coded as “feminine,” or worse, as the exclusive realm of teenage girls, who are often disparaged in popular culture.¹

But fanfiction, which is a subset of transformative works, is a broad category. Transformative works are derived from existing media, and include everything from fanfiction, homemade music videos, fanart, collages, to pretty much anything else some enterprising person makes, usually for free. There's a divide between people who maliciously seek terrible fanfiction and those who lovingly pursue a weird-read. If Sabrina, the 15-year-

¹ Constance Grady, [“Why We're Terrified of Fanfiction.”](#) *Vox*, June 2, 2016, accessed April 6, 2017.

old from Connecticut, feels inclined to spin the tale of Sabrina Earthshaker, proud Gryffindor, winner of Princess Peach's heart, and secretly the powerful Sailor Guardian of Earth, I want them to feel empowered to tell this ridiculously awesome story. Writing isn't a skill that's born out of some innate ability. It takes practice and work—a process that's hard, but beautiful. It's fine that Sabrina's relationship with writing isn't purely academic or fueled only by the possibility of fame and fortune; that they have the relationship at all is something to celebrate. Let their work be terrible even—but let them have the work without harassment.

When people argue that “fanfiction is all bad porn,” or “all fanfiction is written in horrible English and is garbage,” this trivializes what, for some people, is their only way to be an active part of the media they consume. Media representation and opportunities for marginalized people are still severely lacking. In 2016, The Center for the Study of Women in Film and TV found that women composed only 26% of writers, producers, editors, and directors in broadcast network, cable, and streaming programs.² GLAAD's annual report on representation in television found that in 2015 only 4% of regular characters in broadcast primetime TV were identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual.³ In fanfiction, finally, someone besides the over-represented straight white man gets to take the helm of a story.

In addition to offering a form of active media engagement for marginalized people, fanfiction also serves as an alternative to writing critical analysis to understand a problem with a narrative. Fanfiction writers can experiment with what a narrative does, explore how a character acts, and analyze the impact of major themes. In short, it offers the chance to engage in honest, open media criticism that might not be explored in any other manner. With the advent of more easily accessible Internet, critics and opportunities to critique are more easily found. Is every fanfiction a genius work of narrative critique that rivals the in-depth analysis of your favorite “politically charged” writer? No. Probably no. But it is a gateway for a person without much privilege or writing experience to experiment with language and storytelling, to try and re-envision media from an active angle.

Media critique doesn't belong only to published critics and those in higher education—it can be a practice for any person who consumes media. Cynthia Vinney and Karen E. Dill-Shackleford take a more psychological approach to studying transformative works: in a study that looks at a series of fanfictions (fics for short here) written about the television show *Mad Men*, they categorize individual fics by what kind of values each fic seems to explore or question.⁴ Some fics explored unanswered questions posed by the narrative, others focused

² Dr. Martha M. Lauzen, [“Boxed In 2015-16: Women On Screen and Behind the Scenes in Television,”](#) *Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film*, September 2016, accessed April 6, 2017.

³ [“GLAAD - Where We Are on TV Report - 2015,”](#) GLAAD, 2016, accessed November 26, 2016.

⁴ Cynthia Vinney and Karen E. Dill-Shackleford, “Fan Fiction as a Vehicle for Meaning Making: Eudaimonic Appreciation, Hedonic Enjoyment, and Other Perspectives on Fan Engagement With Television,” *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, 2016, doi:10.1037/ppm0000106.

on relationships, and others still focused on exploring minor characters. The study is a small one—it only sampled fics in one small fandom over the period of a few months, but it does give us something to think about when we consider what fanfiction actually does and what writers like to try to accomplish with it. Writers’ willingness to question the narrative and actually expand their engagement into further writing, and possibly research, is terribly undervalued when fanfiction is written off by the general public. Asking questions and starting to fill in blanks takes a concerted effort.⁵ This act involves critical thinking and literary analysis—whether the writer realizes this or not.

Vinney and Dill-Shackleford found that “the writers used their fan fiction [sic] to grapple with the issues presented or alluded to on the show. Moreover, the perspectives supplied by these stories provoked further thought and elaboration on the implications of a given story element in the reader.”⁶ These elements were found in 88.46% of their sample size. Fanfiction provides a space to process issues, and the feelings surrounding those issues, that might otherwise be left unaddressed. Feelings are complex; sometimes writing them out just to grapple with them is the best thing we can do for ourselves.

During my long existence in various fandom circles, I’ve seen a lot more going on than simple daydreaming. For instance, a “here, I’ll fix it” approach inspires some fanworks. Sometimes writers try to address unanswered questions, to give a background character a more fleshed-out role, or to pair together characters who the authors were not bold enough to put in a relationship. They are, whether consciously or not, applying a sort of reparative reading to the piece as well—investing time and effort to construct a version of the work that is more hopeful, enjoyable, and reflects their personal identity and their struggles within their current culture.⁷ Fanfiction allows writers to approach a process of repair and healing by writing from an original source that might be full of any number of oppressive tropes and issues.

This healing process is when the active work of the writer comes forward. What didn’t the original authors take up and why didn’t they? If an allegedly “amateur” writer on FanFiction.Net can work out a way to significantly include people of color and queer characters, why can’t the professionals? Why do our romance stories end at marriage and/or reproduce unchecked toxic behavior? What can we say about the success of stories that romanticize abusive behaviors? These questions are some of the most important ones we can ask of our media today—especially in terms of representation. Will all fanfiction

⁵ Not everybody makes this effort: the sort of person who watches every season of a series a dozen times might call themselves an “expert” on their media of choice, but they have a much different relationship with media than the fanfiction writer does. Although I think there are times when the cataloging fan is watching or reading with the intention of drawing out another interpretation of the media they’re looking at, a fan who catalogs and a fan who creates wind up in different online circles.

⁶ Vinney and Dill-Shackleford, “Fan Fiction,” 8.

⁷ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, Or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You,” *Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity Touching Feeling*, 2002, 123-51, doi:10.1215/9780822384786-005.

approach these questions better than other media? No, that would be ridiculous to promise. But the opportunity to explore these questions exists and it isn't untouched in fandom circles—in fact it is often specifically highlighted.

But say someone is still unconvinced. They might say that writing fanfiction is a waste of time—especially for more “mature” writers who won't get published that way. As frustrating as it can be to stoop to mentioning a book that has succeeded despite its ill-informed premises, we live in a post-50 *Shades of Grey* world. Fanfic can indeed lead to publishing deals.

Regardless of whether you're interested in being published or not, putting work out there in fanfiction communities can be a great boon to your writing craft. These spaces help writers develop a voice, play with style, and earnestly experiment in a community where thoughtful writing and enthusiasm are not only welcome, but encouraged. Constructive feedback and reactions aren't uncommon—especially when participating in a busier community. It's unusual for fanfic writers to post an entire, large work all in one go—and that's not a bad thing. Readers give feedback and ask questions online as new chapters are posted, which can lead the writer to insights in their process and maybe even help them find their own weaknesses—especially with plot holes and mischaracterization.

Academic and other kinds of writers' circles are definitely valuable, but dabbling in fanfiction has brought me a lot more insight on storytelling and what an audience is willing to put up with. A lot of fic comments I've received use emotional language to talk about their experiences while reading my work—they walk me through their feelings at different points in the story. Other forms of feedback tend not to offer me the same kind of emotional response. It can also be motivating to see where a commenter expresses urgency in terms of what happens next. And sometimes readers' raw responses from diverse points of view can also be useful. Of course, I have always found that Helpful Commenter who is happy just to point out my typos. Some things are the same everywhere.

The fanfiction community is full of eager readers who we might do well to respect a little more. It won't hurt anybody to welcome critical and emotional engagement with media beyond, “Oh yeah, I liked that,” or, “It sucked,” but snubbing that work and looking down on it will. While fanfiction is not an almighty answer to all writing and critical woes, it does allow people who might not otherwise feel welcome to share their writing with a passionate audience and gain feedback with relative safety. I greatly look forward to more research on why writers write fanfiction and how they're doing it. What really gets fans invested deeply enough to rework the media they make contact with? It looks like studies may begin to answer this question as people start to realize what kind of power fandoms hold here in the years where “nerdy” is more and more normalized.⁸

⁸ Comic book shops, and certain pretentious workers and customers, sometimes act as elitist gatekeepers that keep folks from feeling welcome to try out comics, limiting access to joining fandoms. But have you seen how many Marvel

Before we wrap up, I'd like to pose a few questions to the reader. How much media, of any kind, do you consume regularly? How much of it do you really process? How much of that time is spent passively taking it in? Maybe you could spend a little extra time pontificating on those frustrating plot holes, those moments of hope where you thought the characterization would take a bold direction, those minutes of indescribable awe that come with an infinitely awful directorial decision. Don't you just want to fix them or play with them? Even just the smallest bit? You can sit down and do that right now—right this second—I'm not stopping you. You don't have to stop you either.

superhero movies there are now? Anyone can love Captain America! Gatekeep that, you jerks! Do you know how many fanfics have been written about Cap and his possible boyfriends now? As of March 22, 2017 there are 18,933 Steve/Tony fics on AO3. THAT RULES!!