

# Why Fanfiction? A Literary Analysis of Lived Experience

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## Abstract

What inspires individuals to write fanfiction? The answer to that question requires a careful evaluation of individual contexts and the trends they create and are influenced by. This chapter titled 'Why Fanfiction?' will attempt to answer that question while carefully undertaking a discourse analysis of fanfiction, unearthing the motivation, lived experiences, and cognition that go behind the production of literary pieces like *After*, *Dominance*, "*Moriarty x Eurus*"- A BBC *Sherlock Fanfiction* and *Till the End*.

Keywords: Fanfiction, Lived Experience, Popular culture, Writing

## Fanfiction: A Saga of Lived Experience

Fanfiction is not essentially a recent phenomenon. Some elements of it might seem new with the advent of the internet, social media, and access to consumption of media. However, the idea of rewriting about particular books, celebrities, and TV shows with specific characters taken from the stories has been in literature for a long time, for instance, Dante's *The Divine Comedy* or John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Even though the larger argument is that they are not considered as fan fiction they are an attempt to rewrite particular characters – 'Satan, God' from the book, *The Bible*. And there is no denying the fact that many of the practices, ideals, and values practiced today in Christianity are because of these literatures. They had their reason for why they wrote their piece which is traced back to their particular social context. Thus also the reason why fanfiction exists today and individuals write them cannot be solely attributed to the consumption of popular media. There is a need to extend this argument. The focus here is to place the

inspiration behind writing fanfiction into the context of the lived experiences of the individuals. As much as the characters people write about are taken from the media they consume, the ways of retelling the stories are navigated through their individual and social consciousness. This takes us to Foucault's concept of discourse and power. The attempt the paper makes is to argue that writing is a highly active act. Through the stories created by authors of fanfiction, we come across versions of stories that are in turn so different from the original, and hence the discourse analysis outlines that fanfiction becomes an exercise to reclaim narratives from either their personal lives or popular culture as a whole (Fleischer, 15).

Fanfiction thus acts in ways to make sense of what an individual is going through by putting it across through stories and characters, which they love and relate to. The general consciousness about the context of writing fanfiction is that the writers purely consume what is popular. Then they want to rewrite the stories which excite them. Nevertheless, the media they watch or read, or are exposed to are dependent on their social context. The trajectory one follows that ultimately leads them to start writing is different for everybody. There are certain TV shows, movies, celebrities, and books that become popular all of a sudden. There is not one particular 'trend' that becomes popular. There is a multiplicity of trends that are popular. That makes it crucial to focus on not just different tastes and trends that exist in society but also on ambiguous and diverse attitudes it creates within the same individuals (Jung, 20). When talking about the process of influences influencing the process of fanfiction, we need to take a closer look into how individuals are not passive consumers of popular culture.

Amongst all the authors who were interviewed the answer at first was that writing fanfiction was just a hobby. The in-depth interviews of these Wattpad and Inkitt authors helped us to understand why individuals were writing fanfiction. The interview did not follow a strict questionnaire pattern. The questions were open-ended to allow the authors to explain their individual experiences that led to writing fanfiction. Our focus during the interview was to establish the correlation between their individual experiences and the larger social aspects along with contemporary popular culture. The authors were chosen from the specific kinds of fanfiction they wrote. Further textual analysis of the fanfiction gave insights to connect the influence of popular culture on the writers. They were all teenagers obsessed with particular characters and famous personalities which ultimately led them to write how individuals influence fanfiction writing.

Four fanfiction authors were interviewed via Google Meet for this research. The fanfictions were based on TV shows – Sherlock, Supernatural, Shadowhunters, and Celebrity – Harry Styles. All the authors were in their teens when they started writing specific fanfiction. Three of the four authors wrote on Wattpad and the remaining one on Inkitt. While focusing on the content analysis of the stories they had written, we also did a content analysis focusing on comments and notes written by the authors in the site to gain the writer’s perspective into writing. That allowed us to quantify the popularity of these fanfiction and their patterns of what makes a fanfiction popular. This can also help us to assess the popularity of fanfiction and the wider implication of such portrayal on the authors themselves. One of the authors stated that her obsession with the band One Direction and its member, Harry Styles reached a “*delusional point almost bordering on insanity.*” It was thus no more than a teenager’s way of “*goofing out*”. They did not give much thought to why suddenly they started writing. They all were a part of multiple fandoms but all of them decided to write fanfiction on a particular one of them. Fanfiction writers are very territorial about the particular universe they want to write about. According to them, they might like being a part of multiple universes of fandoms but they truly internalize only one of them. And that could look like an unconscious choice but in reality, that choice is much more complicated. The choice is both individual and influenced by the socio-cultural elements of the society they are a part of. This chapter focuses on placing the individual i.e. the author’s consciousness in the midst of the context of popular culture.

### **Moriarty x Eurus: A Textual Analysis**

“Allibum”, one of the fanfiction authors we interviewed wrote “*Moriarty x Eurus*”- *A BBC Sherlock Fanfiction*. She was a teenager when she started writing. She was infatuated with the character of Jim Moriarty, the primary antagonist in the series, and more so with Eurus Holmes, the unknown psychopathic sister of Sherlock. The premise of the story is of Moriarty and Eurus being in a romantic relationship. Both the characters in the TV show were villains, this makes the dynamic of them being in a relationship together more complicated. Eurus is shown to be misunderstood and abandoned by her family in the TV show. However, she is fierce, cunning, and calculated. She is only driven by her goals and extreme logic. She does not care for feelings. In Allibum’s version, Eurus is still the evil sister looking for revenge. But her relationship with Moriarty is not platonic that exists merely to defeat Sherlock. “It is romantic.” This apparent

romantic relationship is not consensual. It propagates abuse under the guise of love. Eurus's character is not fierce in the fanfiction. She is of timid nature and meets Moriarty. And he saves her. She is childlike and needs Moriarty's protection. He refers to her as his 'little girl' in the fanfiction. Moriarty forces a romantic relationship on her by the virtue of protecting her from Sherlock. She is kidnapped by him from the psychiatric facility she was earlier in. He initially just wanted to use her. But felt —he needed to have her and had this intense feeling of saving her. Her every movement is controlled by him. He manipulates her when she is in distress and emotional turmoil. The story ends with Moriarty changing himself for her. Learning not just to “have her but to love and cherish her.” Eurus is happy to have found someone who loves her unconditionally and is possessive over her.

According to the author, Eurus needed someone to save her. She sees herself in Eurus. The same feelings of abandonment and neglect that Eurus lived with; the author could relate herself to that. She stated she needed to humanize the character of Eurus. The BBC version was too crude and the story of Eurus and Moriarty both ended too abruptly.

The interviews and the analysis of the fanfiction give us certain insights into why these specific portrayals exist. There is a certain pattern to this diversity of portrayals. The idea that certain characters would be dominant in the relationship against a submissive timid one is a common reoccurrence in fanfiction. Which character is dominant varies according to the context. Some characters become dominant or submissive in different fanfiction. Another theme here is fixing the dominant person. That no matter how horrible and abusive the character is, they are capable of change and capable of loving others. And they heal because of the love of the submissive person. Another point to be noted here is how the submissive individual needs saving and protection. They need to be looked after and cared for. The manifestation of these aspects might be different in different fanfiction but these patterns repeat themselves in fanfiction writing.

## **The Experience of Fandoms**

Fandoms are more than a group of people who are fans of someone or something. They allow individuals to feel connected. The sense of belongingness they provide is a source of comfort for individuals who are struggling to fit in. The existences of fandoms are vital to understanding what inspires people to write fanfiction. Overwhelmingly the writers of fanfiction are teenagers.

Thus fandoms provide essential context for writing fanfic. The boom of fanfiction is often traced to the 2012-2013 era in the West. That was the heyday of ‘Twitter’ and ‘Tumblr’ being the place for fandoms. With that, if we combine the emergence of Wattpad which is a free app that allows one to read and publish their own stories led to the creation of the creative space that made writing fanfiction easier. Access to the internet made a person comfortable in exhibiting ‘fan’ behavior which otherwise was judged and criticized in the mainstream.

The four authors who were interviewed all were teenagers when they started writing fanfiction. They enjoyed reading as a hobby to escape what they were facing in reality. They were struggling with their sexual identity as teens with no support from their immediate family. One of them was struggling to come to terms with their parent’s divorce. Another shared their experience of sexual abuse as a child. That led them to try and find comfort in reading. They found solace in fanfiction because they idealized the character and the celebrity in the first place. Those made them feel less alone.

Fandoms provide the first inspiration for writing fanfiction. It is not just that individuals were a fan of a particular show, movie, or celebrity. It is about the experience of being in a fandom. The space that celebrates discussions on the media consumed and extends those even more. The shared sense of being allows for the imagination of minds to be translated into writing. This exposure allows them to mold their imagination and live out the fantasies they have through the particular characters they are infatuated with. Writers are fiercely loyal to the characters of the fandom because that is something they relate to the most. For instance, the BBC Sherlock is a favorite to write fanfiction about. Fanfic authors are very particular about the kind of values and character traits they want for ‘Sherlock’ or ‘Jim Moriarty’. Fandoms build their own world most importantly virtual worlds with characters that lead to the creation of certain dominant ideologies, tropes, and trends about that character. Fanfiction author then refines and reiterates those trends and tropes through writing at the same time creating new tropes of their own. It is thus a cyclical process.

What needs to be understood here is that all fanfiction authors write because they loved movies, TV shows, books, or a celebrity. However, the argument must not end there. *“I was 13 and loved the Supernatural. And after reading a few snippets and watching a lot of edits on what Dean’s relationship with Castiel might look like on Twitter that I started writing ”* one of the authors

stated. They were in their teens struggling to find their identity in terms of their sexuality. The idea is thus that it's the introduction of a fan into a fandom that made them take the first step into writing their first fanfiction. *"It made me realize that I was not alone in thinking that Dean and Castiel should have ended up together in the show"* they further elaborated. This is what fandoms are capable of doing. They give a push to the fan that what they are feeling is valid and writing is a powerful way to express it. Twitter and Tumblr in 2013-14 were full of snippets of "what could have been..." of a particular show. The access to specific apps like Wattpad and Inkitt solidified the experience of being in a fandom. Individuals now had access to ideas that earlier were out of place in their lives. This aspect assisted in creating a powerful group of people who could exchange ideas, speeches, and expressions that were earlier not available to them. These apps like Twitter allowed individuals to express their thoughts freely without judgment. All the authors interviewed stated that another crucial point about these apps was that they were free with built-in features to text and comment. It was *"like Facebook but for stories"* Jerrysticks one of the authors who was interviewed stated.

## **Appeal of Fanfiction**

The existence of fandoms gave us a partial idea about what inspires people to write fanfiction. The full picture would take us to explore another aspect of writing. The idea that authors are inspired to write from their immediate social context has been established. We are all inspired by our experiences when it comes to writing. Writing as an exercise is very subjective. Writing fanfiction is also subjective. But there is a need to put this subjectivity in the context of individual consciousness. What is so special about fanfiction? Why not just write any other fiction? The answer to this question is complicated. Individuals dream and aspire. But they aspire in relation to something. TV shows, movies, books, and celebrities on which the fanfiction is based, already have a built-in structure. The world is somewhat created. The fanfiction authors state that I talked to talk about how it was easy to put my imagination within the universe that was already created.

Individuals would express their fantasies and imagination within the particular world that already exists in books, movies, and TV shows. Fanfiction on celebrities has a little different story. It is mainly pinpointed to the idea of being obsessed with someone famous. However, I believe it is more about living out your fantasies with the person whose life experience, the individual is

obsessed with. An author who wrote a fanfiction on Harry Styles talked about how they wanted to live out their fantasy of being in a band and thus they started writing fanfiction about Harry Styles. The concept of writing fanfiction, therefore, becomes appealing to teenagers who look for preexisting structures to fit their own universe into. Fanfiction is a way out. When reality becomes too tough to handle, we all try to escape it. Their personal experiences with abuse, violence, isolation, and assault led them to fanfiction writing, allowing them to disassociate from reality.

## **Lived Experiences and Fanfic**

The life experiences of individuals determine which popular media inspires them to write fanfiction. For popular culture is based on being relatable. And choosing to write fanfiction on a specific thing is not solely based on how popular a particular show or a person can become. At the end of the day individuals must relate to the media consumed enough to write fanfiction on that. For instance, the TV show *Shadowhunters* influenced many writers because they could relate to the mature dystopia that showcased real-life issues like coming to terms with one's sexuality. Many teenagers felt that they could be a part of the universe where they are brave enough to fight for what they believed in and not get killed for it. 'Jerrysticks' one of our respondents who wrote fanfic based on the character of Magnus from *Shadowhunters* wished they could have stood up to their parents and told them that they are not *"a freak."*

Every fanfiction author has a deeply individual and personal reason why they chose that particular character or person to write the fanfiction on. That makes it extremely important for us to not put a singular cause to why certain characters are fan favorites to write fanfiction on. That reason cannot be quantified. Moreover, it also cannot be explained in terms of just obsession with one character. Our attempt here is to argue against the idea of just the pure physical attractiveness of the characters as to what inspires authors to write that particular fanfiction. All the responses we got as the answer to this particular question were based on the lines that they could see themselves in the characters or could relate to the elements of those characters inhibited. "Allibum" stated that her infatuation with the BBC *Sherlock* was not because of the mysteries and clever solutions. She did not start writing fanfiction because of *Sherlock* or John Watson but because of Eurus, *Sherlock's* fictional sister. *"I never enjoyed reading Doyle. But in the BBC one, the character of Eurus was just perfect"*. She could relate to Eurus because she

craved comfort that unfortunately she did not receive from her parents. She felt misunderstood and she felt that Eurus understood her.

This aspect of what inspires human beings to write fanfiction takes us to the juncture of comprehension that it is high time we move away from the argument that writing fanfiction is just childish, purely based on obsession. Therefore, this chapter tries to boldly assert the fact that fanfictions are literary projects in their own right and of no lesser degree, whereby authors make a conscious choice (though not completely independent) as to what to write a fanfiction on. Furthermore, that choice encompasses not the mere consumption of popular culture but their socio-cultural lived experiences, inviting more in-depth discourse and textual analysis.

### **We Wanted More**

To conclude this chapter we trace back our way to the question we started with, ‘Why Fanfiction?’. Here we would like to draw the attention of our readers to perhaps the most repeated argument we came across in all our interviews with the authors in regard to why fanfiction was that “*We wanted more.*” They wanted the portrayal very different from what was originally being shown or written. They would for instance want specific characters to end up together which did not happen in the movie or TV show. Certain characters like that of Eurus who was not the main character of Sherlock, and fanfic authors would try to put her in the spotlight. Authors attempted to create their universe within an already existing universe. Simply put the portrayal of characters in TV shows, movies, books, and even celebrities was not enough for the viewer. They felt the character they could relate to the most was not given adequate plotlines or the appropriate plotlines. There seemed to exist a gap between what they wanted the characters to be and what the character ultimately was. Thus fanfiction filled that gap.



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