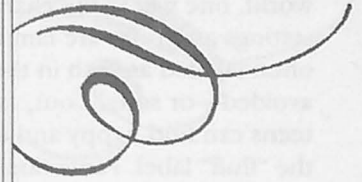


FAMILIARITY BREEDS CONTENT IN ONLINE FICTION CREATION & CONSUMPTION

by Caitlin Watt



“Fanfiction,” the use of others’ characters to write original stories, is not an especially new phenomenon, nor has it typically been the exclusive domain of the young. Movie and television show “tie-in” novels appeared alongside movies and television as early as the 1920s; the numerous retellings of the tales of King Arthur, Robin Hood, and Cinderella operate on the same premise. In recent years, however, fanfiction has increasingly appealed to young readers and writers. According to “Pop Fiction,” an article by Maryanne Murray Buechner (2002) in *Time Magazine*, a third of *www.fanfiction.net*’s 115,000 members were under the age of eighteen. Two years later, *www.fanfiction.net* has approximately 215,000 members; if the percentage of teen users has remained constant, there are over 70,000 readers and writers of fan fiction on one Internet site alone. Fanfiction has found its niche in the relatively ungoverned Internet among teen readers because it offers them familiar characters and situations, a means of romantic fantasy or sexual stimulation, and an escape from the stresses of everyday life.

Stephen Silver, in his article “Media Tie-ins and Mainstream SF,” offers an explanation for why readers buy tie-in novels for movies and television shows: “They pick them up for the same reason they pick up any other series. The characters and situations are familiar.” A similar motive could serve to explain why so many teenagers read fanfiction. They watch a movie, become emotionally attached to the characters, and want to read more about them. Often they want an explanation of what happened off-screen or after the story ended, or, if a favorite character died, they want some scenario in which the character would have lived. A whole subgenre of fanfiction, the “fix-it,” has sprung up to undo tragic events in the original medium. For those seeking a happy ending, fanfiction will provide reassurance that their favorite characters survived and rode off into the sunset with their true love, living happily ever after. Other types of fanfiction provide character introspection, filling in gaps in characters’ backgrounds and their emotional states at key points in the book or movie. Through this, the characters are fleshed out and become almost like friends to the teenagers who read their stories.

This love of the characters often extends to the romantic and even the sexual. One popular genre of fanfiction is the “self-insert,” in which the writer has inserted him or herself into the story. Another, the “Mary Sue,” contains a character, original or borrowed, that is completely perfect. The two can overlap. Neither genre is inherently sexual in nature, but both frequently feature an original character being rescued (or, more assertively, rescuing) the object of his or her affection, amazing the desired character with positive qualities or simply by being so different (a result of being transported from our universe to the medium’s universe), and creating a romantic relationship with said character. Some of these stories are romantic, some overtly sexual; both offer a way for teenagers who are not yet sexually active or romantically attached—or who are, unhappily—to experience what will undoubtedly be a perfect, albeit melodramatic relationship. More explicit stories of these types can provide a means of vicariously experiencing sexual acts with a character that they find attractive. Such stories, whether romantic or downright pornographic in nature, operate under the same basic principles as romance novels: the main original character is so devoid of realistic flaws or psychological idiosyncrasies that she or he can be easily replaced by the reader (Pflieger, 1999).

Other stories place two characters from the ur-text in a relationship. Reading stories like this can fulfill the dual purposes of giving the reader material about her favorite characters and providing some measure of sexual gratification. There are sites devoted specifically to “ships” such as Buffy and Angel’s relationship from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and the more nebulous relationship between Aragorn and Legolas in *The Lord of the Rings*. Teenagers who would not seek out pornographic material from sites devoted to such things might occasionally read sexually explicit fanfiction, perhaps because it uses familiar characters and is thus easier to visualize and less unnerving. It is an introduction to sexual behaviors that, unlike the “self-insert,” takes the reader entirely out of the picture and can therefore be more comfortable.

One reason that teenagers seek out fanfiction, perhaps less alarming to parents, is that it provides an

escape from the stresses of high school, socializing, and parental pressure. Like watching television or reading a favorite novel, fanfiction allows teens to inhabit another world, one where the characters are old friends and the settings and rules are familiar. Depressing stories are often labeled as such in their summaries and can be avoided—or sought out, as the case may be; similarly, teens can find happy and uncomplicated stories under the “fluff” label. Fanfiction is easy to access online, and it is usually free of charge. One can choose to participate, or not, in the fanfiction community by reviewing, hosting websites, or writing one’s own stories; few teachers or parents will push a child into a higher level of involvement with such online entertainment. Reading fanfiction can be a stress-free way to entertain oneself.

While the quality or even legality of fanfiction online can be debated, its quantity cannot. Fanfiction.net has more than twenty thousand stories in its *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* category alone, and it is merely one of hundreds of sites where fanfiction is posted. Teenage participation in the world of fanfiction has increased hugely with the widespread use of the Internet, and the trend shows no signs of ceasing. Teenagers are drawn to fanfiction because it gives them more adventures with characters and worlds they love, because it offers them a means of problem-free romantic daydreams and occasionally sexual gratification, and because it can be a way for them to relax.

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