

The (Queer) Reader Writes Back: Understanding The Profusion of Queer Voices in Fanfiction

Sneha Dominic

I M. A. English Language and Literature
Madras Christian College, Tambaram, Chennai, India
snehadominic41@gmail.com

Abstract: *'Fanfiction' is the moniker given to experimental forms of story-telling wherein 'fans' of a particular form of media (books, movies, shows, and so on) craft their own versions of the plot. In this mode of literary expression, the secondary writer generally retains the original characters but alters elements of the plot, through intertextuality (colloquially termed 'cross-overs'), alternate endings and inserting the authorial self into the narrative. Contrary to the popular notion that this is a modern invention, fanfiction has canonically existed from the 1950s, with unacknowledged versions of this phenomena existing since the dawn of literature itself. In our post-modern technological society, with the help of the Internet, fanfiction has become part and parcel of literary consumption worldwide. The immense popularity enjoyed by applications and websites like Wattpad, Archive of Our Own etc is proof of the ubiquitous nature of audience-driven digital literature. Although generally overlooked by academicians and literary scholars as a viable field of academic research, fanfiction has far-reaching impacts on the way literature is consumed today, especially by the younger generation. This paper aims to study the way fanfiction breaks the hitherto insurmountable boundary between the audience and the author by entering the reader into the creative process. Moreover, a trend observed in recent years has been the mushrooming of queer iterations of mainstream heterosexual narratives, in fanfiction. The paper will therefore also attempt to trace the connection between this proliferation of young, queer voices in fanfiction and how it succeeds in revealing the submerged queercoding in the popular literary productions of the day. This paper will explore popular "ships" like 'Drarry' from the Harry Potter franchise, 'Johnlock' from the popular BBC series Sherlock and the 'Ineffable Husbands' (Aziraphale / Crowley) from the novel-turned-series Good Omens by Neil Gaiman for the purposes of this study.*

Keywords: Fanfiction

I. INTRODUCTION

When fans of a literary work set out to create their own interpretations of the said work, it is termed fanfiction. In this mode of literature, the author is displaced from his central position in the literary structure, with the reader taking his place in the creative process. Fanfiction fills in the gaps left in a narrative, by re-imagining any of the elements in the text or even by inserting themselves into the textual work. It is a mostly illegitimate sub-genre of literature that, in recent years, has revolutionized the way literature is consumed in contemporary times. Although this practice has been around since ancient times, it is only with the advent of the internet that fanfiction experienced an immense surge in popularity. Since the 2000s, websites like Wattpad and Archive of Our Own have existed as vast online libraries of open, free publications by people around the globe. Among the millions of genres and subgenres of fan-created content, the re-imaginings of certain novels and TV series have enjoyed significantly more popularity than others, of which the *Harry Potter*, *Sherlock* and *Good Omens* fandoms have been among the most widely read.

Studies have found that the leading demographic of fanfiction writers and readers happen to be young and either women or genderqueer people, with the themes used being almost overwhelmingly queer. In fact, the most popular and widely read works on Wattpad and Archive of Our Own (popularly known as AO3) are all queer interpretations of heterosexual relationships in mainstream media. The three such 'ships' under consideration in this paper – namely, 'Drarry' from the Harry Potter novels, 'Johnlock' from the Sherlock series, and Aziraphale x Crowley from the novel

and series *Good Omens* – happen to the most well known of this genre of queer fanfiction, judging from both the proliferation of fan-work and their readership counts on the respective websites, not including their relative popularity across all social media. Using these three examples, this paper will explore how the queer section of fanfiction writers become interpretive communities of literature, as per the conception of Reader- Response theorist Stanley Fish in his essay “Interpreting the Variorum”.

Reader - Response theorist Stanley Fish in his essay ‘Interpreting the Variorum’ (from his book *Is There A Text In This Class?*) defines interpretive communities as “... those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions”. [PG NO] Through this theory, Fish posits that meaning is not inherent in the text, but rather, rests with the reader of the text, and his experiences which colour the subsequent interpretation. The concept of interpretive communities places the reader front and centre, arguing that all readings of a work are valid and meaning- producing. “In Fish’s point of view, the reader produces the literary text. Without the reader, the text does not exist. In such an existentialist situation, there is no right or wrong interpretation to any text. Each reader reads the text in his/her own way, or “each of us would be reading the poem he had made.” (218) [CITE WEBSITE].

The ship popularly known as ‘Drarry’ (a portmanteau term combining the names of both the characters involved in the fictional relationship) , imagines a romantic dimension to the hostile relationship shared by the protagonist Harry Potter and his schoolboy nemesis Draco Malfoy in the popular *Harry Potter* novels by JK Rowling. In the *Harry Potter* canon, (as canon is defined in cyberspeak), Draco and Harry hate each other with a passion. This is interpreted by fanfiction writers and readers to be a queercoded relationship, with their animosity disguising the misguided sexual tension between the pair. To the lay reader conditioned to view heterosexuality as the norm, the subtle queer undercurrents of their relationship would go unnoticed, or even seem extremely improbable. However, there are multiple scenes in the novels which give validity to this claim by queer analysts.

A rather telling quote from the Chapter “Elf Trails” sixth book in the series, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, goes “Harry, however, had never been less interested in Quidditch; he was rapidly becoming obsessed with Draco Malfoy. Still checking the Marauder’s Map whenever he got a chance, he sometimes made detours to wherever Malfoy happened to be,” (Rowling 550). In the same book, there is a pivotal scene in the bathroom in Chapter “Sectumsempra” where Draco and Harry hex each other, with the former ending up mortally wounded by the encounter.

Malfoy wheeled around, drawing his wand. Instinctively, Harry pulled out his own. Malfoy’s hex missed Harry by inches, shattering the lamp on the wall beside him; Harry threw himself sideways, thought Levicorpus! and flicked his wand, but Malfoy blocked the jinx and raised his wand for another — ... Blood spurte from Malfoy’s face and chest as though he had been slashed with an invisible sword...his wand falling from his limp right hand. “No —” gasped Harry. (Rowling 701)

Fanfiction writers have interpreted moments like these as having definite homoerotic undertones, with hundreds of works having been spun from the “Sectumsempra” scene alone. Examples include *Desperation* by author blood makes noise whose blurb goes thus: “If you had only died when you were meant to, I’d have grown up in a wizarding world already ruled by the Dark Lord. I wouldn’t be screaming at you in a sixth floor bathroom. I wouldn’t be raising my wand, Crucio on my lips.”, *Rebuilding* by electric blue lilies: “Before Harry has a chance to cast Sectumsempra, Draco breaks down crying, crushed by the weight of everything he’s had to do, hitting his lowest low. Harry decides to help him rebuild.” (Archive of Our Own), amongst others.

Reading queer ‘Drarry’ fanfiction in the light of these observations by Fish, it becomes evident that the queer community is an interpretive community of literature on its own. By adopting certain common methods of evaluating a literary text – such as exposing the veiled homosexual symbolism in particular scenes in the text – queer fanfiction writers produce their own, valid meaning from the text. These readings are also equally valid to the understanding of a text as any and all other interpretations of the same text. Thus, in the context of the *Harry Potter* novels, queer iterations of the seemingly heterosexual relationship between Draco and Malfoy gain legitimacy, and becomes a relevant meaning-producing process when seen through the lens of Fish’s theory.

Another popular ‘ship’ in modern media is ‘Johnlock’ (yet another amalgamation of the first names of the pair), which analyses the romantic undertones of the ‘friendship’ between Sherlock Holmes and Dr. John Watson in the BBC series *Sherlock*. *Sherlock* follows the adventures of the much loved duo originally written by Dr Arthur Conan Doyle in the

nineteenth century through the streets of modern day London. Throughout its four seasons, the show remained hugely popular among audiences owing to the chemistry between the lead pair (played by British actors Benedict Cumberbatch and Martin Freeman respectively). Predictably, one of the main reasons behind its success was that fans of the show read into its queercoded portrayals of the classic literary characters, and the sexual and romantic undercurrents of the apparently platonic relationship. This ship enjoyed such immense popularity among contemporary audiences that at one point during the mid 2010s, the entire website of ‘Tumblr.com’ was jokingly said to be dedicated solely to this pairing. Vastly detailed blogs on the same are still in currency on social media, even after six years from the release of its last season.

‘Evidence’ of the homosexual nature of their relationship abounds in the show as well, as retired army doctor Dr. John Watson and Sherlock Holmes the consultant detective have sexual undertones in their conversations from the first episode. When they meet, Watson, with a significant look, asks Sherlock whether he has a boyfriend. The romantic symbolism extends so far that Sherlock gives a long, angst-ridden speech to Watson at his wedding to Mary Worstan in Season Three Episode Two entitled “The Sign of The Three”. In a scene from Episode Two of Season Two, “The Hounds of Baskerville”, Watson says that he is intimidated by Sherlock’s sharp cheekbones.

Dr. John Watson: Oh, please. Can we not do this, this time? Sherlock Holmes: Do what?

Dr. John Watson: You, being all, uh, mysterious with your... cheekbones, and turning your coat collar up so you look cool. (“The Hounds of Baskerville”)

However, the showrunners never acknowledge the pair as a romantic couple. Instead, both male leads are given forced heterosexual romantic arcs, which lead to accusations of queerbaiting from the online community. Queerbaiting is defined as “the practice of implying non-heterosexual relationships or attraction (in a TV show, for example) to engage or attract an LGBTQ audience or otherwise generate interest without ever actually depicting such relationships or sexual interactions.” (Dictionary.com). Although the evident homosexuality of their ‘friendship’ is acknowledged explicitly in the show, it is immediately dismissed as being baseless, by Watson himself. Discussing his imminent wedding with Sherlock’s landlady Mrs. Hudson in Season Episode “The Empty Hears”, Watson says,

Dr. John Watson: Yeah. We’re getting married. Well, I’m going to ask, anyway.

Mrs. Hudson : So soon after Sherlock?

The last pairing in this trio, namely that of the ship fondly called ‘The Ineffable Husbands’ by fans, explores the inherent romance in yet another platonic ‘friendship’ between the protagonists of Neil Gaiman’s bestselling novel and later HBO series, *Good Omens*. Although Aziraphale and Crowley – the Earth-bound, representative angels of Heaven and Hell respectively – are depicted as an unlikely friend-duo thrown together by fate, fans have drawn their own conclusions about the nature of their relationship. The intimate bond between the two has inspired thousands of headcanons (“Something that a fan imagines to be true about a character even though no information supporting that belief is spelled out in the text”, according to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary) as they battle the forces of Heaven and Hell against bringing about Armageddon on Earth.

In Episode Two of the first Season of *Good Omens*, Crowley pins Aziraphale against the wall in a sexually charged scene. Crowley constantly calls Aziraphale “Angel” – a reference to the latter’s Heavenly connection and an endearing term for a romantic partner. When Crowley discovers Aziraphale’s beloved bookshop burnt down in Episode Five (“The Doomsday Option”), he is distraught, and the extremely suggestive choice of background music in this scene only strengthens the romantic symbolism. “Crowley: (*on the verge of tears*) Aziraphale... You’ve gone. Somebody killed my best friend! Bastards! All of you!” Although the show has taken care to refer to Aziraphale as Crowley’s “best friend”, fans have read into the romantic symbols present in the scene, leading to over three hundred fanfiction works spun from this scene alone, in AO3. Examples include *And it all went up in flames* by ‘ghost_daddy’: “Aziraphale’s bookshop is burning. All Crowley wanted was to run off to the stars with his angel. Maybe fate just hates him.”

The Creeping Void by ‘epsilon wolf’ (“What do you have left when the one who owns your heart is gone?”), *Burning* by ‘sadistically smirking’ (Archive of Our Own), and more. When asked by a fan on Tumblr.com whether Aziraphale and Crowley were in fact, “canonically gay”, Neil Gaiman wrote

Canonically, which is to say using the text in the book, you don’t get any description of Crowley’s sex life. The only thing the book says is ‘angels are sexless unless they specifically make an effort’. You can infer, and (more to the point)

you can imagine, and lots of people have chosen, not unreasonably, to ship him with Aziraphale, but you are still Making Stuff Up. It could be Making Stuff Up that happens between paragraphs, or Making Stuff Up that isn't mentioned at all, but it's still Making Stuff Up... The point is Fanfiction exists so that you can imagine, enjoy and fill in the gaps. The point is that you can change things and have fun with them. And the stories are absolutely true... for you." (Neil Gaiman).

Here, Gaiman perfectly sums up Fish's theory of interpretive communities, and the subjectivity of meaning in a literary text.

Scholars studying the inherent queerness of fanfiction culture have also observed that this particular creative process becomes a transformative and therapeutic experience for queer individuals. Marginalized and oppressed by a heteronormative culture, the queer community is still one that struggles to find a voice in society. From the proliferation of queer narratives in open forums such as Wattpad and Archive of Our Own (where there is little to no moral policing), it is observed that fanfiction becomes a site where this submerged class can express themselves freely and without fear of retribution, as most authors remain anonymous on these websites. For a community lacking severely in representation in mainstream media, fanfiction becomes the only literary output which is socially accepted. This is also behind the extreme passion that most readers and writers of fanfiction share for their favourite ship, and why most queer fan-made narratives tend to have at least one emotionally charged scene where a main character comes to terms with their own sexuality.

This quote from a Tumblr.com user we-all-have-magic-inside-us highlights the importance of such fictional 'ships' in helping people come to terms with their own sexuality. "When I say the Drarry-ship saved me, I don't kid. I stumbled upon this pairing (which is now my OTP) as I was going through a particularly anxious phase of my life. These fics made me laugh, cry and generally succeeded in distracting me from falling down a terrible anxiety spiral." (Top 10 Drarry Fic Recs). In an informal study conducted by a fanfiction website in 2013, it was found that only 38 percent of its respondents identified as heterosexual (Establishment). In a Vice.com article entitled "The Power of Fanfiction for Queer Communities", the author Satviki related how fanfiction helped her come to terms with her own sexuality. "I discovered Archive of Our Own—or as the fanfiction community calls this fanfiction hub, AO3. And I was hooked. To me, the stories were only a form of escapism. And if I was choosing the ones which solely had queer couples, it wasn't anybody's business. And before I knew, I had started subconsciously associating myself with the characters" (The Power of Fanfiction for Queer Communities).

In popular culture, fanfiction is generally regarded as an amateur and illegitimate form of writing. However, Fish's theory of interpretive communities says that queer readings of popular literature - like fanfiction - are a valid method of interpreting any literary text. Simultaneously, it is also a meaningful form of literary expression, as the reader gets the opportunity to step into the creative process and control the narrative, a position which has been carried out solely by the author since time immemorial. Fanfiction also allows voices which have been at the margins of the narrative to reclaim their story and 'write back', filling in the gaps left by the author in the narrative.

WORKS CITED

- [1]. "Sherlock Quotes." *Quotes.net*. STANDS4 LLC, 2023. Web. 20 Mar. 2023. www.quotes.net/mquote/850574.
- [2]. "A Study in Pink", *Sherlock*, created by Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat, season 1 episode 1, British Broadcasting Company, 2010.
- [3]. "In The Beginning," *Good Omens*, created by Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman, season 1 episode 1, Narrativia Amazon Studios BBC Studios The Blank Corporation, 2019
- [4]. "Neil Gaiman." *Tumblr*, neil-gaiman.tumblr.com/post/169084845106/i-am-genuinely-sorry-to-bother-you-with-this-but.
- [5]. "The Doomsday Option", *Good Omens*, created by Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman, season 1 episode 5, Narrativia Amazon Studios BBC Studios The Blank Corporation, 2019
- [6]. "The Empty Hearse", *Sherlock*, created by Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat, season 3 episode 1, British Broadcasting Company, 2014.
- [7]. "The Power of Fanfiction for Queer Communities." *The Power of Fanfiction for Queer Communities*, www.vice.com/en/article/m7jdp8/how-fanfiction-helped-me-come-to-terms-with-my-queer-identity.

- [8]. “The Sign of Three”, *Sherlock*, created by Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat, season 3 episode 2, British Broadcasting Company, 2014.
- [9]. “Top 10 Drarry Fic Recs.” *Tumblr*, we-all-have-magic-inside us.tumblr.com/post/184991353226/top-10-drarry-fic-recs.
- [10]. Establishment, The. “The Revolutionary Power of Fanfiction for Queer Youth.” *Medium*, 17 July 2017, medium.com/the-establishment/the-importance-of-fanfiction-for-queer-youth-4ec3e85d7519.
- [11]. Fish, Stanley. *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. 1982. Bowker, <https://doi.org/10.1604/9780674467262>.
- [12]. Roberts '06, Erie Martha (2006) "Something Fishy is Going On: The Misapplication of Interpretive Communities in Literary Theory," *The Delta*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 6.
- [13]. Rowling, J. K. *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*. Large Print Press, 2005. Bowker, <https://doi.org/10.1604/9780786277452>.
- [14]. Transformative Works, Organization for, and ElectricBlueLilies. “Rebuilding - ElectricBlueLilies - Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling [Archive of Our Own].” *Rebuilding - ElectricBlueLilies – Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling [Archive of Our Own]*, 17 Mar. 2016, archiveofourown.org/works/6272401.