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# Literature Through the Looking Glass: How Fan Fiction Can Save English

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**Literature Through the Looking Glass: How Fan Fiction Can Save English**

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ABSTRACT

English departments face a crisis of student disinterest. Scholars are struggling to sell the study of literature as practically useful in an increasingly STEM-dominated world. The literary realm of fan fiction, which can serve as a guiding star, demonstrates how a community of readers and writers can reach for ideals of democracy and creativity that acknowledge the inherent worth of studying literature while also examining how such study can help students thrive in a world threatened by censorship and authoritarianism. This is a prescription for a total shift in philosophy for the academic study of literature. Such study has been dominated by copyrighted single-author works, but fan fiction provides a blueprint for a more collaborative approach that more resembles the storytelling found in ancient human societies. I begin with a comparative history of literature study versus the reading and writing of fan fiction to demonstrate how the two worlds mirror each other. This leads to the guiding question of why one world is dying while the other is thriving. I investigate how the strategies that sustain fan fiction can be translated into the academic world, and I argue for a discipline-spanning course adjustment in terms of atmosphere and methodology based on the idea that fan fiction is the ultimate realization of reader-response criticism. The single-author copyrighted work approach has guided literary study in the past fifty years, but the discipline's response to the lessons of collaborative fan fiction will decide if such study will survive the next fifty.

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I. Acknowledgments

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II. Introduction

A divide persists between English scholarship and the world of online fan fiction, where millions of works of literature have been published. Fan Studies, the academic subdiscipline that aspires to analyze such works, remains a niche field in an increasingly unpopular discipline. Scholars of literature have failed to seize the opportunities that the study of fan fiction presents. Courses on fan fiction remain a rare sight in university offerings. This is a bizarre state of affairs in an era where many English departments are on life support and administrators are scrambling for new strategies to attract potential students. I have heard arguments that the English degree is useful for students bound for law school and that corporations value English majors for their communication skills, among countless other desperate assurances that English graduates are employable so long as they are not interested in studying English beyond their undergraduate years. This idea undermines the premise that is foundational to the study of literature: such study is an end unto itself, not just a means to an end.

The study of fan fiction presents the most superb realization of this ideal. Students studying English because they love reading and writing should not exist in a different world from online fan authors writing fictional stories out of pure passion.

I will explore what literature scholars can learn from readers and writers of fan fiction in the pursuit of shattering the mirror between these two worlds. This exploration follows the arc of history: the history of both derivative texts like fan fiction, the history of single-author copyrighted texts, and the history of storytelling itself. I will describe and question the academic work that Fan Studies scholars have already conducted in the realm of fan fiction and survey prior attempts to integrate fan fiction into academia. This

will precede my ideas on how academics might best analyze works of fan fiction using the existing lens of reader-response theory. Finally, I will investigate how the writing of fan fiction represents a democratic and creative storytelling ideal that literature scholars ought to look to as a guiding star; this point is particularly relevant when set against recent developments in AI writing.

First, though, I must dispel a misconception that might loom over the question of whether fan fiction should interact with literature study in the first place. We must not think that fan fiction is a young child asking to sit at the big table of academic study, hoping for a badge of worth. It is English academia that should hope to attract students interested in studying fan fiction. Approximately forty thousand undergraduate English degrees were conferred on graduating students in 2019 (Webb). In any given week in the same year, the largest fan fiction archive received approximately two hundred and thirty million visitors ("AO3 Statistics 2020: An Update"). The numbers for English departments trend downward over time, while the popularity of fan fiction grows every year.

Both of these populations are interested in reading, writing, and discussing works of fiction. The most significant difference between them is there are many more people interested in fan fiction than there are people interested in pursuing English degrees. On a surface level, the reasons for this disparity seem clear: pretty much anyone with an internet connection can write fan fiction, whereas entering the world of higher education is a more complex process. We might also ask if fan fiction is a worthy pursuit merely because it is popular. These are ultimately tertiary concerns, though, when we consider that the life support of many English departments is tied to the number of students they

can attract. We are playing a numbers game before anything else. Our present dilemma is not whether English academics should permit the academic study of fan fiction but rather if English academia can adapt fast enough to save itself from total oblivion.

Few students of English literature choose their major imagining they will ever grow wealthy from studying books. The present malaise in English academia stems from the discordant messaging that tries to sell the study of English as practically useful beyond training the skills of communication and analysis. The current trajectory of English departments towards a more practical STEM philosophy of learning is a misstep that the study of fan fiction can help correct by reemphasizing the 'human' element of the humanities. Our antidote must not be a desperate pivot towards other disciplines like law and business but a wholehearted embracing of the impractical usefulness that the study of English shares with the practice of fan fiction. The solution is not to meekly submit to the pressures of society and accept that fictional stories will never be as practically useful as a soldier's gun or a mathematician's calculator. Instead, English scholars need to join hands with a band of useless writers that have never earned a single dime of profit from the millions of words they have published.

Our aim should not be to make fan fiction more like academia but rather to make academia more like fan fiction. Systems either adapt or they die. Fan fiction has a long history of adaptation, as it has been routinely forced to justify its existence against countless adversaries. Veterans of English departments would likely recognize something familiar in such defenses. The Internet is crowded with creators trying to make money, just as colleges are crowded with students trying to find their way to profitable careers. Fan authors and readers defy the conventions of the hustle-culture Internet, just as

English and other Humanities majors defy the typical STEM-focused ambitions of many college students.

The study of literature is facing a slow and cruel battle of attrition. From observing the many scholars who seem determined to keep studying literature as they have for decades, one might question why more action isn't being taken to save this floundering discipline. Little is being done to seek out young readers and writers of literature. English departments seem stuck in the mud while other disciplines constantly adapt their strategies to identify and attract new generations. When stated in plain terms, the dilemma seems ridiculous: we have an ever-expanding community of readers and writers producing a massive amount of work, and an area of academic study that in theory commits itself to the study of reading and writing. What is keeping these realms apart? It certainly isn't the authors of fan fiction. These writers are on the Internet, publishing for free without paywalls or journal subscriptions, and they've been writing for a while. A scholar could not ask for a more accessible body of work.

But where are these scholars, for the most part? They're standing puzzled in university classrooms, wondering where all the students went. They're wondering how their syllabus, which has had the same list of novels on it for three decades, could have failed to attract students younger than these books.

I am not arguing that foundational texts in the study of literature should be thrown out in favor of the latest flavors of the month. Balance is the key to the survival of literature as an academic discipline, and fan fiction is more than just the sweet treat that can help the medicine go down if thrown on to course syllabi alongside the usual suspects authored by Austen, Dickens, James, and Melville. Open-minded English departments

can learn much from how the fan fiction community has succeeded in attracting readers and writers.

Fan fiction is simply literature as seen through the looking glass. Both are worlds of readers and writers criticizing and responding to existing texts, and both require readers to have prior knowledge of these texts. Both groups of readers and writers seek the engagement of their peers. The difference is simply in the types of conversation that dominate each sphere. Academics express their thoughts through theory, while fan fiction writers express their thoughts through narrative reactions. Academics tell, while fan fiction authors show. Comparing these two worlds and identifying their similarities is important because it forces us to ask the essential question of why the world of fan fiction is growing while the study of literature is dying.

Consider this analogy: two shipbuilders construct two different ships using their own methods. The first ship is slow, ponderous, and decades out of date. The builder has done nothing to make the ship attractive or remarkable. He ignores the second ship, which is built in a gaudy fashion; it is loud and colorful and modern. The two ships compete in a race, and the first ship sinks. The other ship reaches the finish line and attracts a crowd of adoring fans, who hardly took notice that the first ship ever existed in the first place. After all, the builder of the first ship wasn't interested in them, so it seems silly to expect them to care that it sank.

Of course, it could be argued that the different ships had different destinations in mind. Literature scholars are primarily occupied with analyzing texts and contributing to an existing body of criticism, and not with being popular or entertaining. Instead of critical response or financial gain, fan authors can receive only popular engagement with

their work. This is not an argument that literature scholars should forsake their academic careers and start writing essays exclusively on the latest *Marvel* films. As in most areas of life, there is a balance to be found here, and a certain cold reality that literature scholars must confront: what academics are doing now *is not working.* Rather than meekly submit to the pressures of society, literature scholars ought to endeavor to adapt to this changing world. Wouldn't the builder of the first ship have been wise to study the methods of the second ship? Can't literature scholars learn something from readers and writers of fan fiction?

III. Comparative History of Literature Studies and Fan Fiction

One major difference between the practice of fan fiction and the academic study of reading and writing is the form of literature each realm deals with. The worth of these respective forms cannot be taken for granted, considering the currently precarious position of the humanities. We have to remystify what has become an accepted standard–the idea that literature scholars should concern themselves mainly with single-author copyrighted works–when that accepted standard no longer seems able to sustain itself. English departments in 2023 overwhelmingly deal with such works, while fan fiction writers and readers engage with works of fan fiction.

The history of non-classical literature as a subject of study is a relatively recent and well-documented affair. This is a discipline that was only born in the second half of the 19th century when it dealt primarily with works of literature from England; American works only began to be studied in the 20th century and works from other countries long after that (Graff 1). English and Literature studies arguably peaked in popularity in American universities in the 1970s and have followed a downward trend since, with a particularly dire downturn beginning in the 2000s. (National Center for Education Statistics, "120 Years of American Education: A Statistical Portrait").

This is not an ancient area of study with a canon etched into stone and proven through many generations of scholars. The single-author copyrighted work may be centuries old, but the study of such works as a form is a relatively new practice that should not stand unquestioned, particularly if we want to save such study from those who would question it out of existence. We have to question why single-author copyrighted works have risen to such prominence and whether they still deserve such a position. We

must also explore how fan fiction might prove to be the next popular evolution of literature.

Fan fiction has two histories: one ancient, and one modern. The modern history of fan fiction has its roots in the 1970s when writers and readers exchanged fanzines (fan magazines) containing fan-written stories taking place in their favorite universes. *Star Trek* was the first significant franchise to earn such a following, but nowadays fan authors write in a wide variety of fandoms. Fan fiction is primarily written and shared on the Internet. The website archiveofourown.org (AO3) was founded in 2007 by The Organization for Transformative Works (OTW) to create a haven for fan fiction authors. On their "About" page, the OTW states that "The Archive of Our Own offers a noncommercial and nonprofit central hosting place for fanworks using open-source archiving software" ("About Home"). AO3 survives solely on donations from its loyal users, which means that corporate interests and advocates for censorship will never interfere with the content or function of the site. In contrast to other fanfiction websites like FanFiction.net and wattpad.com, AO3 is more of an online library than a social media platform, and any scholar who has ever perused an academic database will feel right at home with AO3's simple but intuitive visual design as well as its robust filtering system. Previous bastions of fanfiction writing have been subject to arbitrary purges of content which would prove disruptive to any reader interested in conducting a long-term study on any particular work. AO3 was founded in response to these difficulties which have plagued the fanfiction community for decades. The OTW declares that "[they] are proactive and innovative in protecting and defending [works of fanfiction] from commercial exploitation and legal challenge" ("About Home"). Such threats are far from

uncommon in the fanfiction realm. Wattpad was purchased for $600 million by an internet conglomerate in January of 2021, and there is an unfortunate history of irate authors going after creators of fanworks who are seldom able to defend themselves legally. AO3 is the only major fanfiction website with the long-term stability required to foster an atmosphere of scholarship.

As I mentioned, fanfiction authors occasionally face legal challenges from the creators of original works. Prominent names who have gone after fanfiction in the past include Anne Rice of *The Vampire Chronicles* and Orson Scott Card, the sci-fi author who wrote the *Ender's Game* series. The memory of the cease-and-desist letters associated with this brand of backlash lingers in the collective consciousness of fan authors. Until recently they had good reason to fear such author reprisals since there was no entity devoted to defending fan works. FanFiction.net was the dominant fanfiction website in the years before the creation of AO3, and it maintains a list of authors who have requested that fanfiction of their works not be published. This subservient attitude towards authors of original works is not conducive to the study of fan fiction stories. Instead of respecting the wishes of such authors, the OTW offers legal advocacy to threatened fan authors and maintains a fund to defend the creation of fan fiction ("Frequently Asked Questions").

The popularity of fan fiction is inexorably tied to the rise of the Internet in the last few decades, but we should not take this to mean that fan fiction is a young and untested mode of storytelling. Authors have been writing stories based on the works of other authors for centuries. We have to strip away all the distracting superficial details to truly compare the two worlds of published literature and fan fiction.

The answer lies in collaborative storytelling, an ancient mode that finds its modern expression in the art of fan fiction. Forget copyright, forget the Internet, forget publishing houses and self-publishing and money. None of these mundane concerns are ultimately relevant to the question of why fan fiction has become so popular. Fan fiction is widely read because it is accessible and because it is democratic. Anyone with access to the Internet can write fan fiction, and anyone with Internet access can read fan fiction. The modern single-author copyrighted work sold for profit is not something we should abandon as a subject of study or entertainment, but it is essential to recognize that this sort of storytelling does not represent how humans have traditionally told stories to each other.

Ursula Le Guin explores this sort of storytelling in her 1979 essay "It Was a Dark and Stormy Night," where she poses the question "why are we huddling about the campfire? Why do we tell tales, or tales about tales–why do we bear witness, true or false?" (Le Guin, *Dancing on the Edge of the World* 65). She goes on to describe a short story she is familiar with that consists of runes carved into the stone wall of a cave, that when translated read "Tolfink carved these runes in this stone" (Le Guin 65). Modern critics of both fan fiction and English departments might question why Tolfink would do such a thing without a profit motive. The pursuit of this question is of paramount importance to both literature scholars and fan fiction enthusiasts. People have been telling stories for as long as they've been able to. Humans have always desired to record their lives and experiences, and to leave proof behind that they existed.

Le Guin then recounts a ghost story with a familiar plot, a story that sounds like a hundred other stories one might have heard around a campfire. Although Le Guin is

sharing this story in an essay published in 1979, she reveals that she first heard it as a ten-year-old from her great-aunt, who first heard it from a German anthropologist who recorded the story told by a Great Plains Indian. Le Guin claims that "by remembering it [the anthropologist] had made the story his; and insofar as I have remembered it, it is mine; and now, if you like it, it's yours. In the tale, in the telling, we are all one blood" (Le Guin 68). This is storytelling portrayed as a conversation that spans decades or centuries or millennia. Notably absent from Le Guin's aspirational description is any mention of money changing hands, or copyright laws being enforced. Her descriptions line up far better with the average fan fiction story than with the latest offerings on the *New York Times* bestseller list.

In older ages, people shared stories through myths and legends; for the past few centuries, the novel has stood as the model for democratic storytelling. In her 2011 work *The Cambridge Introduction to the Novel,* Marina MacKay argues that "over the last three centuries, many claims for the novel's significance have rested on exactly this sense that, among all the literary forms, the novel–for better or worse–has an especially intimate relationship to ordinary life" (MacKay 3). This was in sharp contrast to earlier literary forms, such as the epic, that seemed so distant from the experiences of the common person. The definition of 'common person' itself is a complex issue that deserves its own thesis, but in the context of writing fiction we are best served by analyzing barriers to entry. A significant element of the novel's democratic potential was that anyone with basic literacy and writing supplies could pen their own story. MacKay cites a character in Henry Fielding's 1754 *Tom Jones* who declares that "for all the arts and sciences (even criticism itself) require some little degree of learning and

knowledge...whereas, to the composition of novels and romances, nothing is necessary but paper, pens, and ink, with the manual capacity of using them" (354). Fan fiction authors in our current age require only an Internet connection and a computer to write and share their stories. It is conceivable that anyone with a library card could become a popular author of fan fiction, without even having to buy their own paper or pens.

This is hardly the only respect in which the rise of fan fiction echoes the rise of the novel. It is an informal but widely acknowledged fact that most fan fiction is predominantly written and consumed by women, and MacKay writes that "women were believed to be the major consumers of fiction during the eighteenth century" (6). Novels also suffered–or enjoyed, depending on one's perspective–the same lack of prestige that works of fan fiction experience in the current era. The young novel had to prove itself against the legacy of the epic and the dominance of poetry. Now fan fiction has to square off against the novel, which has become a well-respected form considered worthy of literary attention. This is another area in which it is helpful to take a long-term historical perspective; in the case of fan fiction, we are simply witnessing what happens when a new literary form starts to break into the established literary scene. There is truly nothing new under the sun.

Fan fiction represents the next inevitable evolution of democratic storytelling, and a return to collaborative mythmaking cut free from any financial concerns. This is not an undiscovered country, but a rediscovered one. The Internet enabled this ancient and ever-present human desire to follow the path of least resistance: stories published for free on the Internet by authors unconcerned with any desire beyond simple storytelling. Published and copyrighted single-author literature is the true newcomer to this space. Fan

fiction is something we've always done, in one form or another. The rise of fan fiction is a course correction and a return to our storytelling roots.

Literature study is floundering as a discipline because of its determination to seemingly ignore this revolution instead of taking advantage of its clear popularity with an ever-growing group of readers and writers. Academic scholars should be aligned with the most democratic mode of storytelling that presently exists, not the mode entrenched in the financial concerns of our modern world. Official publication may have been democratic and based on merit, once upon a time, but this time has long since passed. We can turn to Le Guin again for her thoughts on the dismal state of the publishing industry.

In her acceptance speech for the National Book Foundation Medal, she declares the need for "writers who know the difference between production of a market commodity and the practice of an art" (Le Guin, "The National Book Foundation…"). There is no more fitting group to answer this call than a group of writers who can never hope to sell their stories as commodities. Publishers have lost sight of the guiding star of literature—it falls to all readers and writers of stories to steer our ships away from the dark waters that Le Guin describes. She argues that "books aren't just commodities; the profit motive is often in conflict with the aims of art. We live in capitalism, its power seems inescapable—but then, so did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings. Resistance and change often begin in art. Very often in our art, the art of words" (Le Guin, "The National Book Foundation…"). Beyond a reckoning in the publishing industry, Le Guin's words seem to call for an alternative world unbound by the same system of financial gain that has sustained the novel as a mode for centuries. I must reiterate that this is not a call for the destruction of that

system, but merely an end to its long-standing monopoly. The alternative world of fan

fiction and collaborative storytelling deserves to be studied, and I am hardly the first

person to think so. Fan Studies, a decades-old subdiscipline of literature studies, can help

literature scholars envision a world where works of fan fiction are studied alongside

single-author copyrighted works.

IV. Prior Scholarship

Fan Studies is a small but promising subgenre of English academia that deserves far greater attention than it has received. One unfortunate side effect of academia's tendency to file subjects away in specific disciplines is that niche subjects become even more hidden away from the unknowing scholar. Fan fiction should be studied more broadly as a successful experiment of readers and writers coming together in a collective expansion of literary consciousness. The world of fan fiction represents the realization of a storytelling ideal, and it's not a world that should be neatly categorized so that it can be dismissed.

In a 2012 interview celebrating the 20th anniversary of his field-establishing book *Textual Poachers*, author Henry Jenkins says other Fan Studies scholars "should write with a recognition that fandom has its own traditions, values, and norms which have emerged through collective decisions and actions" (Jenkins 14-15). Many academic explorations of fan fiction in the decades since Jenkins first published his seminal book have followed this suggested anthropological approach to fan fiction, because it seems impossible to detach the study of individual fan works from the study of the community and culture that produced said works. Kristina Busse's 2017 book *Framing Fan Fiction: Literary and Social Practices in Fan Fiction Communities* argues that "the study of fan communities and fan works covers a number of disciplines…cultural studies approaches connect media texts to fannish communities, often working within postmodern theoretical frameworks that read culture as a text in its own right" (Busse 5). Feminist and queer explorations also dominate the Fan Studies conversation, and there are numerous other critical lenses that scholars have employed when studying fan works. Both Jenkins and

Busse seem to express a struggle to break down the enormously complex world of fan fiction into something that can be studied and analyzed, and I experienced this struggle myself while writing this thesis.

One of the tragic realities of Fan Studies is that I've never met any English scholar or fan fiction author that has heard of it. This is somewhat understandable because literature scholars hardly have time to read all the new developments in their own subdisciplines, let alone track the creation of new ones. Nevertheless, I was distressed to learn during my research that the entire academic study of fan fiction had been filed away into one small subdiscipline, particularly considering the depth of potential academic study that Jenkins and Busse describe. The scholarship I've cited barely scratches the surface of potential study, and yet this promising subfield of literature remains obscure and underserved by scholars.

Labels like "Fan Studies" do seem strange when we consider that all that separates a Sherlock Holmes story published conventionally in 2023 from a Sherlock Holmes fan fiction story published in December 2022 are a few months of copyright restriction. The former story could sell one million copies and be studied in classrooms across the world, while the latter story would break the law if it made a single dollar, and That is fine–but why should modes of publication matter to literature scholars? Academics are not copyright lawyers. Scholars need not undergo some sort of transformation to help fan fiction enter the critical conversation.

A framework that can help scholars talk about fanfiction existed as a school of thought long before the birth of the Fan Studies subdiscipline: the school of reader-response studies. In the 2011 edition of *The Encyclopedia of Literary and Cultural*

*Theory,* Joe Hughes writes that "reader-response studies begins with the assertion that the study of literature cannot afford to overlook the role of the reader" (Hughes). Many books of impenetrable literary theory explore this phenomenon, but we can best identify the strain of thought that connects to fan fiction in the writings of Wolfgang Iser.

Iser argues in his 1979 work *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* that "the literary work has two poles…the artistic pole is the author's text and the aesthetic [pole] is the realization accomplished by the reader. In view of this polarity, it is clear that the work itself cannot be identical with the text or with the concretization, but must be situated somewhere between the two…it must inevitably be virtual in character, as it cannot be reduced to the reality of the text or to the subjectivity of the reader" (21). In plainer terms, Iser is describing an inevitable gap in comprehension between a text and a reader's interpretation of that text. This means that a reader forms a unique and subjective understanding of a text, and that this sort of reader participation is necessary for the text to have meaning. The text means nothing on its own; it *has* to be read, and there is no such thing as a reader who can analyze a text from an objective perspective.

This argument may sound complex and theoretical, but it is based in simple common sense. Words, excepting possibly onomatopoeia, do not have inherent meaning on their own. Readers have to provide that meaning through their own personal perspectives. This is why a reader in the 21st century likely has a different interpretation of Homer's works than a Greek who lived thousands of years ago, and neither interpretation is objectively more correct.

Iser goes on to say that "…literary texts initiate 'performances' of meaning rather than actually formulating meanings themselves. Their aesthetic quality lies in this

'performing' structure, which clearly cannot be identical to the final product, because without the participation of the individual reader there can be no performance. It is, then, an integral quality of literary texts that they produce something which they themselves are not" (26-27). Fan fiction is the ultimate realization of Iser's vision, where readers take an active and creative role in forming their responses to an original text.

Fan authors and readers set up camp in these disruptive lapses of understanding and create universes out of their interpretations. Another critical element of Iser's arguments that relates to fan fiction is the idea that these gaps can never be truly filled. The gap in comprehension between reader and author can never be mended, or else there would be a finite number of fan fiction stories that could be written. Joe Hughes interprets Iser's conclusion to mean that "the imaginative filling of gaps does not bring us closer to an ideal unity of the work. Rather it opens up further gaps, and asks for more work" (Hughes). This means that the practice of fan fiction is a perpetual motion machine sustained not by the creator of the original text but by the fan authors and readers themselves, which should come as no surprise to anyone familiar with certain fandoms. Arthur Conan Doyle died in 1930, and yet there are 135,488 works of fan fiction based on his *Sherlock Holmes* stories currently posted on archiveofourown.org. Victor Hugo, who departed the world before the 20th century, might be similarly surprised to see over 23,000 fan stories for his 1862 novel *Les Misérables*.

The importance of the reader-response framework as applied to fan fiction is that it allows academics to integrate fan works into their understanding of canonical literature without requiring the creation of yet another subdiscipline. In an ideal world, there should be no difference between how academics study a *Sherlock Holmes* story written by

Arthur Conan Doyle compared to a 2023 *Holmes* story by a fan fiction author. The fan story is just a narrative response to an earlier entry, and the fan writer is just another author in a chain of authors stretching back almost a century.

We do not need fan fiction classes–or, rather, we should not limit our academic exploration of fan fiction to classes specifically devoted to such a purpose. This would be tantamount to isolating the study of poetry to poetry classes, or only reading literature written by women in courses focused on women's literature. Instead, we need to broaden our description of "fiction" and tear away the labels that do not serve us. The alternative is that we must label legendary authors like Dante Alighieri and John Milton as fans whose famous works were merely derivative fictions based on an original text. Shakespeare, too, was a prolific fan author. Romeo and Juliet, arguably his most famous play, is a work of fan fiction based on Arthur Brooke's 1562 narrative poem *The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet*. If copyright had existed in the late 16th century, Shakespeare might have found himself in hot water for poaching from a story published only thirty-five years before his famous play. And we don't even need to reach back centuries to locate famous authors who seem strangely reluctant to adopt the fan label.

Nicholas Meyer published his *Sherlock Holmes* work *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution* in 1976 and described the novel as a missing manuscript by Dr. John Watson. Meyer has published four other Holmes adventures since, the most recent of which was published in 2021. These conventionally published novels are curiously described not as works of fan fiction, but as "pastiches." The 2012 edition of *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* describes the pastiche as "a work of art that imitates the style, gestures, or forms of an older work or antique model" (Bowen). Here we find yet another

existing framework that can help academics describe and discuss works of so-called fan fiction. Instead of labeling Dante, Milton, and Meyer as "fans," we would be best served labeling them and all writers of fan fiction as *authors.*

Words have implicit and explicit meanings, and it is essential to place academics, conventional copyright-concerned authors, and fan authors on the same level of credibility and esteem. The *Fan Studies* subdiscipline can be ignored and dismissed by the uninterested. The same is true for classes solely focused on fan fiction. My vision calls for an integration less concerned with classification, in which there is little distinction between conventionally published works and the derivative works that stem from them. Literature is an eternal conversation that ought to be unconcerned with such matters as intellectual property and copyright law and arguments over who-wrote-it-first, particularly since the inevitable answer to the last dilemma is always 'someone else.'

The beauty of this approach is that academics can have their cake and eat it, too. This is not a binary argument in which an author can either make a living and put bread on their table or publish fan fiction without profit. Fan fiction can exist alongside conventionally published literature and has done so for many years. One is not a replacement for the other, as is made clear by the fact that the *Harry Potter* series has not gone out of print despite the hundreds of thousands of *Harry Potter* fan fics that have been posted on the Internet. People still read *Sherlock Holmes* and Tolkien's fantasy novels not in spite of the extensive fandoms that have sprung up around these original works, but in many cases *because* of such fandoms.

Works of fan fiction help sustain the literary conversation with narrative responses just as academics sustain the same conversation with critical essays and

reviews. Authors have created writing exercises centered around this very concept, and I participated in one such exercise called "Yuletide" in 2020. Yuletide is an annual celebration of lesser-known fandoms and describes itself as "an annual fic exchange for rare and obscure fandoms run through the Archive of Our Own" ("Yuletide 2020"). Popular fandoms like *Harry Potter*, *Star Wars*, and *Marvel* are thriving and have hundreds of stories posted daily to their archives. Yuletide centers on fandoms with less than a thousand stories to shine a light on lesser-known works that have not received much fan attention.

This is not dissimilar to how a literature scholar might write a critical response to a novel or film that was largely ignored by their peers. Most academics can relate to the experience of seeking out scholarship for a particular work, only to discover that few or no previous scholars have ever tread such ground. For example, a cursory search for articles relating to Donna Tartt's 1992 novel *The Secret History* yields only 35 results on JSTOR. The fan response to the same novel seems more extensive, with 497 stories posted on archiveofourown.org, 29 of which have been posted since the beginning of 2023. One of these fan stories was written for me in 2019 as part of the Yuletide exchange, and it represents a small but significant part of the conversation surrounding *The Secret History.* Academics cannot afford to ignore such conversations merely because they exist outside a known and familiar scholarly framework. Implicit narrative responses merit as much attention and analysis as explicit critical responses.

V. Narrative Response

To expand this idea beyond theory, I have chosen a work of fan fiction that best displays this sort of narrative response. Subjecting a real fan fiction story to thorough analysis helps to bring all of these theoretical examples and scattered vocabulary words into sharper focus. I have chosen a novel-length *Harry Potter* story, Annerb's *The Changeling,* as my example due to this property's popularity in the fan fiction community as well as its popularity in Western culture in general.

First, a brief return to the world of vocabulary is necessary to explain this fic's premise. Unlike published books, fics on AO3 come with warnings and tags that allow informed readers to take in many details about a story at a glance. *The Changeling* is rated for "Teen and Up Audiences," which means the reader can be fairly sure no explicit violence or sex will be featured. The fic is also tagged with the warning **"**Rape/Non-Con**,"** but the "Teen" rating tells the reader that this instance of non-consent is not going to be explicitly described beyond what one would find in an ordinary young adult novel. The tags "F/M" and "Harry Potter/Ginny Weasley" inform the reader that this story will focus on a relationship between these characters, as opposed to a "Gen" fic which is not relationship focused. Having read this fic, I would argue that this relationship is not a prominent part of the story until a significant portion of the fic has already concluded, and so in Annerb's place I would have tagged *The Changeling* as "Gen" fic in addition to "F/M."

The most important tag the reader will see here is "AU," or "Alternate Universe". A fic tagged "AU" is declaring itself to have deviated in some way from the source material to such a significant degree that the canon universe is recognizably altered. In

the case of *The Changeling*, we are told what this deviation is in the story's summary: "Ginny is sorted into Slytherin. It takes her seven years to figure out why" (Annerb). Another vital tag to note is "Mostly Canon Compliant": this suggests that beyond the change made to Ginny's house, the rest of the story will remain loyal to the established canon of the universe. We can compare this to a science experiment in which one variable is changed, while others are maintained at their normal parameters. Readers familiar with *Harry Potter* would have difficulty recognizing the impact of Ginny Weasley changing houses on the well-known *Harry Potter* story if the author had also made sweeping changes to other elements of the fictional universe.

The maintaining of known constants is essential to the intentions of *The Changeling* because while J.K. Rowling takes seven books and over a million words to tell her story, Annerb needs only eleven chapters and 182k words to share the perspective of Slytherin-sorted Ginny. This is one of the beauties of fan fiction; out of Rowling's dense and complicated world, the author can identify an angle of entry and focus on a specific character to experiment with. Since the fanon text's audience is already familiar with the worldbuilding and main plotline, *The Changeling* can ignore these areas entirely and instead explore its own thematic material.

The beginning of this exploration demonstrates how academic literary knowledge can interact with fan fiction knowledge to provide a rich and rewarding reading experience that is more than the sum of its parts. What we have done so far is analyze the paratext of the work in the same way students in a conventional literature survey class might analyze the title, cover, and table of contents in a published novel. Our first major

departure from conventional study comes with a comparison between the fan work and the canon text it is responding to.

*The Changeling* begins with the sorting of Ginny Weasley into one of four magical houses. This exact situation is depicted in the second book of the canon series, which means we can directly compare the same event from fanon and canon perspectives. I liken this to two different artists painting the same subject. Here is the full account as described by Rowling in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*:

> "'Professor, I wanted to watch my sister being Sorted —'
>
>  'The Sorting Ceremony is over," said Professor McGonagall. "Your sister is also in Gryffindor.'
>
>  'Oh, good,' said Ron" (Rowling 82)

Ginny Weasley is a secondary character in Rowling's tale, and her brother Ron seems to take it as a given that she will be sorted into Gryffindor just as all her brothers have been for many years. In Annerb's story, we see the same scenario from Ginny's perspective, and her Sorting is described in detail:

> "'Slytherin!'
>
> It feels, for a moment, as if the entire world has ended as the Sorting Hat's voice rings out through the Great Hall. Not even the heavy cloth down around Ginny's ears can muffle the sound of four horrified gasps, each familiar enough to her as to be distinguished merely by pattern of air.
>
> There must be some mistake, she thinks, once in confusion and a second time more forcefully, as if compelling the hat to take it back" (Annerb).

I have provided a long excerpt from the fic to demonstrate how powerfully Annerb departs in tone and vocabulary from the source material. These are the very first lines of the fic and the atmosphere of shock and despair they evoke is an immediate signal that this work is not merely a mimicry of the *Harry Potter* series. Rowling's books have been praised for their accessibility to all ages, despite being originally written for children; *The Changeling*, in contrast, is written with a more sophisticated vocabulary that reflects its deeper and darker themes in comparison to its progenitor. *The Changeling* has its own style and literary purpose in mind beyond simply aping a popular book series. It is this sense of transformative purpose that prospective scholars of fan fiction must be taught to seek out and recognize. This purpose also serves to separate fan fiction from simple plagiarism.

*The Changeling* raises questions ignored or overlooked by the original author: why is there a magical house just for villainous people? To what degree do we determine our fate, and how do we respond to the classifications the world places on us? The story's first chapter explores these complicated questions through its no less complex portrayal of Ginny's unhappy first days as a first-year student of Slytherin. While in bed during her first night in the dreary Slytherin castle, Ginny "gives herself a mental shake and reminds herself that it's just a house…just a house. That doesn't explain why she feels sick in the green tinged depths. Wrong. As if the lapping waters of the black lake above are pressing down on her" (Annerb). The canon-informed reader knows just as Ginny does that Slytherin is the house that has produced the most wicked antagonists in her world, and that very few positive things are ever said about its members. The original series rarely if ever questions this strange state of affairs, but by placing a well-loved character in the

cold depths of a Slytherin castle, *The Changeling* asks its readers to abandon the canon

work's binary thinking in favor of a more nuanced exploration.

However, the fic does not merely serve up such paltry platitudes as "Slytherins

are people too." *The Changeling* refuses at every turn to insult its readers with easy

solutions that might leave their minds better settled. Instead, we are told that "the girl in

the next bunk turns her nose up at Ginny's secondhand things and the other girls follow

suit" (Annerb). Ginny's first year at Hogwarts is described in harrowing detail devoid of

the moments of hope that lighten the darker moments of the source material, further

demonstrating that this story is not merely a remixed version of Rowling's novel but a

radical reinterpretation by a fan author with their own unique style and voice.

The most essential event of this first chapter in terms of learning about fan fiction

comes when Ginny decides to write in her new diary which she finds in her trunk and

assumes is a gift from her mother. She writes "Ginny Weasley…is a Slytherin" (Annerb)

in the diary, only to watch the words "sink back into the page" (Annerb). After observing

this strange occurrence, Ginny writes "the one question that's been echoing in her mind

all day—What did [she] do wrong?...for a moment, she almost wishes the diary could

answer" (Annerb). Both the author and their fan readers understand the importance of this

incident because of their shared knowledge of the source material. *The Changeling*

communicates here through the unspoken word, through the invisible familiarity that

links fandom participants together.

A reader ignorant of *The Chamber of Secrets'* story is presumably left puzzled by

Ginny's interaction with the diary, and we must assume they are further puzzled when the

diary begins to talk back to Ginny later on in the chapter. Ginny explains, "His name is

Tom. He's her only friend" (Annerb). Unenlightened readers know as little as Ginny

about the identity of this strange 'Tom' character and don't enjoy the sense of dramatic

irony present for canon-informed readers that understand the consequences of Ginny's

choice to continue a dialogue with the journal. There is much that can be left unsaid or

implied because of this shared fandom knowledge. Just as a Batman movie released in

2021 does not need to rehash an origin story that has been depicted in countless Batman

films in previous years, *The Changeling* affords its readers a certain amount of respect by

refusing to simply recount the plot of *The Chamber of Secrets.* Instead, the reader is

given the missing side of the story from a character who is given better reasons for her

unfortunate choices.

In the original novel, Ginny is a passive character. She is unwittingly given the

cursed diary by a villainous figure. Her sole personality trait is that she idolizes the main

character Harry Potter. Throughout the novel, in which she is a secondary character very

rarely described, the reader is given brief glimpses of her deteriorating condition: Ginny

is described as "looking pale" (Rowling 310) and her brother Percy speaks of her "crying

her eyes out" (Rowling 157). Her sole attempt to inform the main characters of the dark

nature of the diary is quashed by the interruption of one of her brothers. This is the most

agency she is given in the entire book. She is brought to the Chamber of Secrets to be

Tom Riddle's victim. He bemoans having to listen to the "silly little troubles of an

eleven-year-old girl" (Rowling 309), and the chief of these troubles is "how she didn't

think famous, good, great Harry Potter would ever like her" (Rowling 309). Whilst Tom

Riddle and Harry converse and lay the foundation for a protagonist-antagonist

relationship that will endure for seven novels, Ginny Weasley lies unconscious on the

floor between them. Riddle uses her as a tool against his perceived nemesis Harry Potter, and Harry views her only as the quiet sibling of his best friend who happens to have an uncomfortable crush on him.

An informed reader going into *The Changeling* with this foreknowledge must ask themselves how the fan author transforms such source material. Does the fan text take cues from Rowling and emphasize Ginny's victimization at the hands of Riddle? Does the fan text expand on Ginny's infatuation with Harry Potter? Every departure that *The Changeling* makes from this baseline increases the level of complexity for the fan author, as they face the challenge of making these changes compelling and believable without altering Ginny and her world beyond recognition. Readers have to be convinced that the Ginny they know from the original books would behave as Annerb depicts her in these new situations. At the same time, the fan author runs the risk of boring their readership with a paint-by-numbers story they are already familiar with. The best fan authors walk a thin tightrope between originality and accurate depiction of the source material. They reveal new layers of complexity in familiar characters and explore themes never considered by the original creators.

*The Changeling* is an example of this ideal. The original Ginny's characterization is defined by her idolization of Harry Potter, and her use of Tom Riddle's diary is framed around her worry that she wouldn't live up to Harry's expectations. In *The Changeling,* Ginny instead turns to the journal due to her inner conflict about being sorted into a house of perceived villains, when every previous member of her family had been sorted into the Gryffindor house which values bravery and courage. Ginny reflects that "when the black outs begin, she feels a strange sort of relief. Waking up with blood on her fingers and no

memory seems a fitting thing for a Slytherin. Isn't it?" (Annerb). In Rowling's work

aimed primarily at children, the gruesome details of Ginny's unconscious acts during her

enthrallment by the diary are not closely examined, and her primary worry after such

harrowing events is her belief that "[she] is going to be expelled" (Rowling 323). At the

end of the novel, readers are told that "she was perfectly happy again" (Rowling 340) and

nothing more is said about Tom Riddle's influence on her mind. *The Changeling* averts

an easy salve for Ginny's grim experience, as after being rescued "she wants to shake

[Tom Riddle's voice] away, claw it out of her skull. There's painful anger here over

something she does not understand, things she's too young to grasp, just knows that for

all she poured into Tom, he poured some things back" (Annerb). The fan author adds

depth and complexity to an uncomfortable situation that was ignored in the original text.

This illustration of a narrative response demonstrates how fan fiction authors can

form nuanced reactions that mirror the complexity of critical examinations by academics,

even if the fan authors do not use critical vocabulary to describe such reactions. There is

truly very little separating a fan author like Annerb from an undergraduate student of

literature writing an essay on Harry Potter.

I am hardly the first person to recognize the potential for scholars interested in

studying fan fiction, and we can learn much from prior attempts to merge these similar

worlds. These examples of fan fiction classes provide useful lessons about the potential

for friction in attempting to mix the practice of fan fiction with the academic study of

literature. This is an instance in which contemporary scholars can benefit from the

example of those who have come before and made mistakes.

VI. Teaching Fan Fiction Academically

The literature scholar studying fan fiction inevitably finds themselves with one foot in the realm of academia, and the other in the realm of fandom. Both of these worlds place a high value on quality writing and engagement with their peers. The gap in their respective responses to constructive criticism, though, is a potential point of conflict for literature scholars. Most academic writers welcome criticism of their arguments. The rough draft of an essay is a dripping wet sculpture that an academic writer thrusts into a flaming oven of criticism so that the final result emerges much stronger than it would have been otherwise. Academic scholarship is essentially a long argument in which a certain degree of conflict is a vital element of the pursuit of knowledge, and 'picking a fight' is a common method for starting an analysis.

If most academic authors can be described as eager for constructive criticism, then most fan fiction authors can be described as loathing the practice. Academic critics seek out points of disagreement in studied works. Readers of fan fiction seek out points they particularly enjoyed, and it is generally considered rude to offer anything but praise to an author, particularly if there is no prior relationship between the author and reader. The Fanlore wiki, which arguably stands as the most organized collection of documentation on the practice of writing fan fiction, states that "the place of concrit is controversial in many fandoms…the idea that concrit is always or mostly negative comments is common" ("Concrit"). The academic world places a high value on informed and detached analysis, questioning established knowledge, and asking difficult questions. Fandom places a high value on the feelings of creators, the joyous spontaneity of (often unedited) creation, and the fostering of friendly relationships between authors and

readers. The potential for disaster with these intersecting philosophies is obvious. What happens when an undergraduate scholar studying fan fiction offers what they believe to be helpful criticism to a fan author who views such offered criticism as a personal attack? Unfortunately, this is not a theoretical question, as the students in a small student-run course at The University of California, Berkeley discovered in 2015. The dilemma these students faced reveals a pitfall of the academic study of fan fiction stories: many fan fiction authors simply do not wish to be studied.

In theory, the student instructors of "The Theory of Fanfiction" class did nothing wrong by putting the fan fiction story "Delilah" on their syllabus as required reading. I doubt many English academics would raise an eyebrow at the additional requirement that these students comment on the stories they read. Comment culture is an integral part of the fan fiction experience, after all; it seems intuitively correct that students in Fan Studies should engage with fan communities. The practical result of this requirement was a disastrous series of events that ended with a public apology from the student teacher and fans on the Internet pestering board members at UC Berkeley to request that the instructors be expelled for their actions. In the aftermath, the Daily Dot published an article titled "What not to do when teaching a class about fanfiction" (Baker-Whitelaw). The failure of this class serves as an example of a flashpoint of conflict between academic study and the fan fiction world. So where did the instructors for this class go wrong, and what can we learn from their mistakes?

The Fanlore wiki claims that "the tone and content of the [student] comments did not match fannish cultural norms" ("TheoryOfFicGate"). This description might conjure up the image of some scathing reviews that sought to personally hurt the fan authors, but

in truth, the offending comment reads more like a bit of admittedly cold constructive criticism: "First: Not to be rude but I have to ask, did you read what you have written? There are quite a few places at which the story is disjointed and seems like you thought about the interaction but neglected to type it out, as well as multiple areas where the grammar is negligent to say the least" (anonymous). In an ordinary class that required students to comment on the draft essays of other students, a comment like this would simply be a somewhat biting example of ultimately helpful feedback. As a comment on a piece of fan fiction, though, this comment set off an explosive chain reaction. The fan author "waldorph" replied to his critic: "this is extremely rude, and you saying 'not to be rude, but' doesn't make it less so, it just warned me that asshattery was to follow…I don't know if you realize this, but I don't get paid to write these stories. I do them for fun, because I like fandom…and this is my way of participating in a discussion of the text" (waldorph). This reply was the most polite response in the storm of scathing fan reaction that was to follow. Waldorph's thoughts here are an accurate reflection of the attitudes of many fan authors who believe that fan fiction stories posted for free on the Internet should not be subjected to the same level of scrutiny as published books or academic works.

The boundless nature of fan fiction means that these unspoken rules are far from official, and nothing is stopping any academic scholar from tearing apart any work of fan fiction posted publicly online. After all, these stories *are* public, which in the academic world connotes a certain willingness to weather criticism. Unlike academic works, though, most fan fiction stories are not held in the dark for tweaking and corrections in the days or weeks leading up to their publication, and few are peer-reviewed before

posting. Instead, many fan authors post as soon as they have finished writing. These are the works of hobby writers. Would it be appropriate for artists who paint for a living to seek out amateur creators online to offer unsolicited criticism?

Academics studying fandom have to find a place to settle somewhere in the wide gap between what is technically permissible and what is respectful to fan culture. Henry Jenkins says he "[does] not think we can study popular culture in any form, let alone something like fan culture, from the outside looking in. There are questions we can only answer by examining our own emotional experiences with forms of culture that matter to us" (Jenkins 13). Establishing an antagonistic relationship with fan authors runs against the foundation of mutual respect and shared wonder that should be at the core of any study of fandom. UC Berkeley's "The Theory of Fanfiction" class could not find the sweet spot that allowed them to engage with the community without provoking fan authors, but in the Fall of 2020, Kathryn Conrad taught a course that offers one potential solution to this dilemma.

Conrad's answer to the issue revolved around one work in particular: Francesca Coppa's 2017 book "The Fanfiction Reader: Folk Tales for the Digital Age." Coppa, a co-founder of the OTW responsible for operating the Archive of Our Own site, describes the book as "the first ever fanfiction reader framed to emphasize fanfiction's unique transformative nature and continuity with other storytelling traditions" (Coppa 1). "The Fanfiction Reader" contains a collection of short stories from many particular fandoms, with Coppa providing context and commentary for the selections. There are obvious advantages to using this reader for a fan fiction class. Students cannot leave comments or offer criticism to fan authors since all the readings for the class are contained in one

physical book. This means there is no danger of students upsetting said authors. In her article "Teaching fan fiction: Affect and analysis" which describes the formation of her course, Conrad says that "[the instructors] also wanted to make certain that we and our students did not repeat the mistakes of ["The Theory of Fanfiction" class]…and specified that students 'treat fanfiction or fandom communities outside of this classroom with respect'" (Conrad 5). Considering that Conrad's students did not experience the same controversies as their predecessors, it seems that this hands-off approach might be the easiest solution to provide students with a glimpse into the fan fiction world without disturbing its denizens.

Ultimately, the price of considering fan fiction to be legitimate literature worthy of study is that it must fall under the same potential scrutiny as any other literature. All the same, that does not mean that critical scrutiny should ever be an academic focus. Scholars are already familiar with the divergence between the popular consumption of a conventionally published work and that work's critical scholarship. Academics do not show up at Salman Rushdie's door asking for his opinion on their impenetrable critical analysis. Scholars studying fan fiction ought to adopt a similar approach when dealing with authors of fan fiction who post their works publicly on the Internet.

Students should never be encouraged to leave comments on fan works as part of the classroom experience simply because such an interaction does not contribute to any sort of academic understanding. However, academics need not flinch away from seeking out works of fan fiction beyond the selection featured in Coppa's *Reader.* There is a world of unexplored writing waiting at the fingertips of any scholar with an Internet connection, and the potential for critical analysis of these narrative responses is

staggering. Scholars must also remain aware that not every work of fan fiction is as rich and complex as Annerb's *The Changeling*.

Fan fiction is predominantly the product of amateur authors, and scholars may find it difficult to identify fan works that respond well to critical analysis. This is hardly a reason to shy away from the challenge–in fact, literature scholars can learn a lot from the democratic ideal that fan fiction represents. This is a realm where the barrier to entry is low enough that anyone with a working Internet connection in a censorship-free country can write and publish works of fan fiction. If you let just anyone do something, many people will start out very poor at it. This is the ideal that academics have lost sight of, and that they should strive to return to.

VII. Implications of Democracy

In my experience with fan fiction, a reader probably needs to sort through a few hundred stories that might be best described as "*Star Wars* set in a coffee shop" before stumbling across something like *The Changeling*. This difficulty is not an error to be repaired, but an inevitable feature of any truly democratic system. Half of all people possess less than average skill at writing, and half of all people possess greater than average skill at writing. The popularity of any given story is determined solely by the tastes of its fan readership. Subjectivity is already a blurry determiner in conventionally published literature; if publication was ever a signifier of quality, then the rise of self-publication has effectively smothered that debate.

One early concept any scholar studying fanfiction will need to grasp is that there is no set format for a fanfiction story. Kristina Busse states that "over the years, [she's] learned that while there are variations in quality, tropes, and style among different fandoms, all are too varied and diverse, not to mention dispersed in many different corners of the web, to draw any generalizations beyond the specific" (Busse 2). I would go further than this to say that the only common link between all the works on AO3 is that they were all published on the same website. Filtering for works with the tag "poem" yields almost fifty thousand results. One of the longest of these is a Harry Potter poem approximately five hundred thousand words in length, and the shortest is a single word. This is the freedom of expression beloved by most English scholars stretched to its highest ideals, where limits are set not by publishing houses and editors but by each author's imagination. As of early March 2023, there have been about 10.7 million individual works published on archiveofourown.com since its creation. If each of these

works were a book in a physical building, then AO3 would be the tenth largest library in the United States, narrowly beating out the University of Texas ("The Nation's Largest Libraries: A Listing By Volumes Held"). The longest work of fiction ever written in English is a *Super Smash Bros.* fanfiction story that is over 4 million words long and the total number of published words on AO3 as a whole was thirty-two billion. This means that a person reading at an average speed would need just about two hundred and seventy years to read everything on AO3, and in the meantime, billions more words would be added to the website.

This might seem to present problems for scholars seeking to integrate works of fan fiction into the academic world. Sorting stories in a particular fandom by the highest number of likes or comments will only highlight the most popular stories. The scholar must sift through various fan works to determine their potential for critical analysis. However, this is not so different from the perusal of conventionally published literature that a professor performs when constructing a syllabus for a specific course. Amazon or Goodreads reviews will not tell a scholar if a particular novel would be a good fit for a class in post-colonial study or a survey of novels written by women. The best way to determine a story's fitness for study is simply to read it with a critical eye. Scholars interested in fan fiction should embrace the challenges of such a pursuit.

VIII. Revolution of Spirit

We can imagine a scholar of literature who remains unswayed by these arguments that embracing fan fiction is the way forward for the academia of literature. Popularity is a fickle foundation to build an argument on; many unfortunate and unwise things throughout history have become popular, such as leaded gasoline and bloodletting. Fan fiction should not necessarily be embraced just because it is popular with young people.

Scholars might be equally unconvinced by my words on democracy. There are already more English graduates than there are paying jobs for people with English degrees. Is the answer really to draw more hopeful souls into a dwindling field to fight over the scraps of what remains? An argument could also be made that academia is already democratic enough. Undergraduate students can publish papers targeting the works of seasoned scholars, and 19-year-olds can write essays deriding the creative decisions of William Shakespeare. There is also no tangible evidence that throwing fan fiction into the curriculum will attract readers and writers of fan fiction into the academic sphere.

This is a literary realm detached from the free market by its very nature. A work of fan fiction that makes a profit is considered a crime, not a success. Connections that students of academia might make in the world of fan fiction will have little practical use in the job market. It is useful to be familiar with popular authors of original work, but connections with authors of fan fiction are only useful in the sense of connecting to another author in the eternal literary conversation. That will be of small comfort to anyone with an English degree hoping to put food on the table.  However, there's an

argument to be made in favor of fan fiction that surpasses the flimsy concerns of creativity, democracy, and preventing starvation.

Literature scholars face an existential threat that our discipline is only now beginning to acknowledge. Before the 21st century, the idea that academics could be replaced by artificial intelligence would have been a cliché science-fiction plot. That cliché is quickly becoming an uncomfortable reality. The best in AI generation has already surpassed the worst writers in both fan fiction and academia, and it is only a matter of time before it overtakes our best. This is not fear-mongering; this is the future.

To their credit, academics are not unaware of this rising danger. Academic publications like Inside Higher Ed have run countless articles written by scholars concerned about the proliferation of machine learning and how programs like ChatGPT pose a dire threat to human creativity. Here is a short comment written by an anonymous professor:

> As an English professor, I have devoted my life to studying and teaching the English language. I have seen the evolution of language over the years and have always been passionate about imparting this knowledge to my students. However, with the rise of artificial intelligence and machine learning, I can't help but feel a sense of apprehension and concern about the future of my profession…Despite these concerns, I believe that there is still a role for human English professors in the age of AI. Our expertise and experience can complement and enhance the capabilities of language models. We can provide a human touch, individual attention, and personalized feedback that machines may not be able to

offer. Additionally, we can foster a love of language and literature, promoting a deeper understanding of the humanities and cultural values.

In conclusion, as an English professor, I am cautiously optimistic about the future of our profession in the age of artificial intelligence. While machines have undoubtedly transformed the way we teach and learn, we still have a crucial role to play in educating and inspiring the next generation of language learners. We can work alongside these technologies, not as competitors, but as collaborators, to provide the best possible learning experience for our students. ("Can you pretend to write an article from the perspective of an English professor concerned about being replaced by artificial intelligence like ChatGPT?")

If this anonymous professor seems strangely hopeful about the future for literature scholars who have to compete with machine learning, it is probably because it has some skin in the game. That entire short essay was written by the free research preview version of ChatGPT. It was given the following prompt: "Can you pretend to write an article from the perspective of an English professor concerned about being replaced by artificial intelligence like ChatGPT?" Most of the reactions from actual human scholars are much less optimistic about their inevitable byte-based academic colleagues.

In his opinion piece with the alarming title of "ChatGPT Is a Plague Upon Education," Jeremy Weissman writes that "[scholars] are largely defenseless against this novel threat to human intelligence and academic integrity. A return to handwritten and oral in-class assignments—a lockdown response—may be the only immediate effective solution as we wait for more robust protections to arise" (Weissman). Weissman, like many scholars understandably unnerved by the rise of machine learning programs,

suggests that technological solutions may be a temporary solution to this technological problem, and outlines a distressingly contemporary analogy of online GPT detectors trying to keep up with the latest developments in GPT generation. In the same way that academics already use online tools to detect plagiarism in scholarly essays, they will be able to use new online tools to detect signs of AI writing. Weissman employs a COVID analogy that treats GPT generation as a spreading virus. I think the more apt metaphor is that of an arms race that academics are doomed to lose.

I have stated that scholars of literature are not lawyers or anthropologists. We are also not programmers or coders, and we cannot rely on technological solutions because the essential threat that programs like ChatGPT pose is not technological, but philosophical. If we enter into this arena with the idea that machines will never outperform humans, then we have already lost. Leave the AI detection to those equipped to fight that battle. As technical writers, we can be replaced. There will soon come a time when virtually every writing task performed by humans can be replicated by machines. So what is the way forward for us beleaguered academics? For that answer, we must look again to fan fiction.

No group of writers lives up to the ideal of practicing human creativity for its own sake more than fan authors, who write out of a pure passion for their material. Fan authors can never be replaced by machines because there is no practical purpose for fan fiction. This is a group of creatives that can never profit from their endeavors, and in that unprofitability they have a certain protection.

Fan authors and readers also place a high value on community interaction and the social aspects of literary creation. Machine learning will never have a place in fan fiction

because you cannot have a conversation with a machine. You cannot ask it about its creative decisions; it cannot place its creative output in conversation with another author. Every author is a product of their influences, and every author is responding to what came before. The difference is that machine learning is a permanent end to that conversation. An artificial intelligence gorged on human data literally can never be more than the sum of its parts.

Scholars of literature need to join hands with fan fiction enthusiasts behind the shield of affect and human creativity. We are entering a future where machine-learning programs will be able to replicate the writing patterns of the most beloved authors to ever enter the literary conversation. There will be machines that can perfectly ape the writing of Socrates, Daniel Defoe, Shakespeare, Alexandre Dumas, Toni Morrison and Ursula Le Guin.

There will be laypersons who see no difference between a book written by a human and a book written by a machine pretending to be that human. When that time comes, scholars should not be peeking over the shoulders of programmers who are desperately throwing together the latest GPT detectors. We cannot rely on technology to defeat technology, as if academics of literature were soldiers in a cold war. We should defend ourselves by saying that the difference between a machine-written book and a human-written book is that the former has no place in the literary consciousness. We should argue that the value of a human-written book is that it was written by a living being that chose to throw their soul into a conversation that began when we started writing on the walls of caves. Fan fiction is the training ground in which academics will learn how they must become champions of human creativity.

In her 1974 novel *The Dispossessed*, Ursula Le Guin wrote "you cannot take what you have not given, and you must give yourself. You cannot buy the Revolution. You cannot make the Revolution. You can only be the Revolution. It is in your spirit, or it is nowhere" (add citation). If English departments are to survive, we have to be the Revolution against the growing idea that creative humans can be replaced. Why will the worst fan fiction story ever written by a human being always surpass the best story ever written by a machine? Simply because a human wrote it. Literature scholars have to embrace this idea because it represents the only future in which all creatives are not replaced by machines. That must be the common purpose between all participants in the grand literary conversation. English graduates should become salespeople, yes–and our product is human creativity for its own sake.

IX. Seizing the Utopia

I have described how literature is history, myth, and fable all at once. I have illustrated how fan fiction is merely the modern expression of our ancient human desire to expand on the stories of others. We should be shocked and outraged that works of fan fiction are not a significant part of our literary canon, particularly because scholars of literature could take so many vital lessons from authors and readers of fan fiction. English departments are under siege from multiple directions; in addition to the fear of replacement by artificial intelligence, we also have to be wary of political partisans that seek to prevent literature scholars from reading and teaching particular books.

Marketing departments and corporations will not save English departments unless it ever becomes profitable for them to do so. And set against the span of history, or even against the history of higher education, English is a young discipline. There is no certainty people will still want to become scholars of literature twenty years from now. If we maintain the current status quo of encouraging English majors to become lawyers and marketers and advertisers, that uncertainty leans more towards unlikelihood. If the English major can become anything, then the English major is nothing. We have become the conflicted Modern protagonist, stuck in the past and unable to focus long enough to see all the existential threats to our way of life.

Fan fiction can show us the best hill to die on. If there are still English departments thirty years from now, it will not be because we all became salespeople and social media managers. It will be because we erased the unhelpful lines that divide copyright-protected literature from fan-written literature. We have to become passionate protectors of human creativity, not nebulous promoters of practically useful skills. An

English major will never be a better lawyer than someone who chose pre-law as their major; they'll never be a better marketer than the marketing major. People ask if becoming an English major will make them money, but they would be better served asking if it will make them happy and fulfilled. Practicality will not save the humanities, because the study of stories will never be practically useful.

If we embrace the full story of literary expression, and if we look to fan fiction's guiding stars of creativity and democracy, then we can become the best scholars of literature. The pursuit of an English major should not be a punchline, where you have to explain how learning about literature might help you become another cog in the machine so long as no one more qualified wants to be the same cog. Instead, English majors ought to be proud defenders of human storytelling. Bringing the world of fan fiction fully into the literary fold is the first step in this necessary evolution. We must encourage the idea that narrative responses in the form of fan-authored stories are no less important or less worthy of analysis than our familiar critical responses.

We have to reject the inherent self-doubt suggested by the overwhelming assurances that English majors have useful skills beyond reading, talking, and writing about works of literature. Fan fiction authors have no such doubts; they do what they do out of pure passion and love for the craft, and I know this same passion exists in the hearts of literature scholars. Fan fiction can teach us to broadcast this passion without shame or reservation. We need to develop the confidence to draw a line in the sand and stand behind it; to be able to declare there is inherent worth in our exploration of stories. This is a continuity of craft that has its origins in words scratched on cave walls, and its present terminus in the writing of books by machines. Fan fiction authors are the heirs to

this legacy of literature, and scholars of literature could help bring greater recognition to this truth. Academics need to return to their roots, to spend time in the primordial ooze of messy fan storytelling. We need to be willing to get our hands dirty in these trenches where millions of unknown authors are sharing their fan fiction.

Storytelling existed before capitalism, before copyright laws and intellectual property. That some of us are granted the privilege to dedicate our lives to such study is a testament to how far we have come as a species. Fan fiction shows us beyond a shadow of a doubt that humans will create and share stories purely for the sake of creating and sharing stories, even if there's not a penny of profit to be made in it. This revelation is an unacknowledged miracle and the foundation of a utopia that fan authors and literature scholars can create together.

All we need to do is shatter the mirror dividing our worlds, without even needing to burn away the idea of copyrighted single-author works. Another miracle is that we humans can do both–we've already been doing both, for decades. This is not a binary choice. It is only the choice between letting society decide if what we do is useful, or making that decision for ourselves. It is the choice between being apologetic about our purpose or standing up in defense of the cave people scratching on their walls and all the works of fan fiction that followed from such scratchings.

Our utopia is here; it's been here, waiting for us, for a long while–but with every passing day it becomes more clear that the world will not wait kindly for English departments to wake up and recognize they are drowning. Fan fiction is a hand reaching down to pull us up from the choking waters; the only true choice is to either die with our old ways or evolve into something that can endure the trials of a new age. Why do fans

read and write fan fiction without any hope of making a living off of it? Why do scholars

spend their lives studying literature? We give our precious attention to stories for the

same reason that we grow flowers; the world is a little brighter because they are here, and

the world would be darker if they were to vanish.

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