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"Dirty Stories Saved My Life":
Fanfiction as a Source of Emotional Support

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Bachelor Thesis

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I declare that I have written this Bachelor Diploma Paper myself and on my own. I have duly referenced and quoted all the material and sources that I used in it. This Paper has not yet been submitted to obtain any degree.

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Introduction

If somebody asked me to define myself in three words, most days I would go with fangirl, lesbian and feminist. In this exact order. After years of carefully curating my social media feeds, I am so drenched in fan culture sometimes I forget that most people can watch an episode of a TV-show or read a book and just go on with their lives not sparing it a second thought. Meanwhile, I live-tweet, debate, collect, analyse, theorise, go to conventions, and make fan art. But most of all, I read fanfiction¹—amateur-authored stories featuring worlds and characters from media of all kinds and all levels of popularity, from My Little Pony to Nietzsche’s Zarathustra.

Although argument can be made for earlier instances, first two fandoms² known to actively write their own fiction based on favourite books were Janeites, fans of Jane Austen, and Holmsians, fans of Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes (Jamison 2013, 42). However, the beginning of fanfiction as we know it today starts with the birth of what is now known as “media fandom” and one of its most persistent darlings—Star Trek (Coppa 2006: A Brief History of Media Fandom). Although today media fandom is a loose umbrella term designating fans of television and cinema and other modern popular art forms, it originated as a way to distinguish fans of televised science-fiction, Star Trek particularly, from literary science-fiction fandom. When in 1966 Gene Roddenberry’s epic space opera debuted on TV, fan written stories set in the world he created immediately leaked onto literary sci-fi zine³ scene that has been active since early 1930s. Science fiction fans were generally unwelcome towards this development and the show itself, and so Star Trek fandom soon separated and began rapidly developing on its own (Ibid.).

In the following decade Star Trek fans, most of whom were female, cultivated a whole new genre of fiction that centred on popular characters and their interpersonal relationships. Since then the practice only kept growing and mutating—extending to other shows and movies, adapting to new intellectual property policies, migrating from

¹ Also “fanfic,” or “fic.”

² Fandom is a group of fans of someone or something. Can apply to a particular person or text, as well as a community of fans of popular culture in general.

³ Zine is a self-published magazine.

zines to internet-based archives, and gathering bigger and bigger audience from all over the world (Hellekson and Busse 2014: 5-7). Media fandom of today has long since welcomed male fans, but it is female fans who remain the creative backbone of the community and are responsible for its enormous output (Ibid.). Last July, Archive of Our Own⁴ alone celebrated the four-millionth story uploaded to their website (Blog, N.A., July 20, 2018). It's a passionate community with no clearly defined hierarchical structure, dependent exclusively on circulation of free of charge fanworks, ranging from textual, like fanfiction and fan critique, to visual, like gif sets and fan arts, and beyond.

Just as it was and still is with Star Trek fanfiction, media fandom's focus is largely the emotional and sensual sides of popular narratives. According to fan-collected statistics,⁵ "Romance" is the most popular fanfiction genre (78,8%),⁶ followed closely by:

- Fluff—any lighthearted story with minimal or no sad themes focused on affection between characters (73,8%);
- Smut—stories focused on sexual relationship between characters (73,6%);
- Angst—dramatic, depressive stories usually exploring a negative emotional state of a character (67,4%).

All four genres often have little to no plot. Considering that source materials fanfiction writers (from here on, fic writers) draw from have limited number of characters, and many readers focus their attention exclusively on their favorite ones, fic reading essentially boils down to reading the same love story over and over again. Moreover, according to Kristina Busse, the repetitiveness and thus predictability of these stories goes even beyond same characters:

⁴ Archive of Our Own, commonly known as AO3, is an online repository for fanfiction and other fanworks contributed by users.

⁵ Statistics were been collected by a Tumblr-based fan-statistician centrumlumina in 2013 and only encompasses usership of Archive of Our Own. Percentage is given of a total number of people who responded to their survey. Multiple answers were allowed (@centrumlumina, October 1, 2013). See centrumlumina's full statistics and their review of their methodology and limitations in Appendix A.

⁶ The most popular option in the census is Alternative Universe (80,9%). Alternative Universe is a type of fanfiction where characters of a popular text are put in a new setting. For example No Powers AU means that a character who has some kind of superpowers in a source material is reimagined as a regular human. Since Alternative Universe designates a setting change rather than a "genre" in its literary sense or a mood, I decided to forgo it.

Rather than fearing spoilers, [fic readers] search them out; rather than wanting uncertainty and surprise, they like to know the shape of the story ahead of time, so they can enjoy the particular way it plays out. [...] Readers often look for particular scenarios, wanting a given plot or a given characterization. They may specifically search for them in archives, make or read thematic recommendation posts, or ask for them in a fiction exchange (Busse 2017: 203-204).

It follows then that the unique quality of fanfiction, compared to other cultural texts, is that it guarantees readers the exact experience they are looking for. When opening a fanfic, a reader does not expect to be told a story per se, but to be transported into the story they already know by heart and relive it yet again. This fact implies that fanfiction might have a different function in lives of its readers to the function of other types of fiction. Thus, my general research question for this work is:

What function does fanfiction about the emotional lives of popular characters have in personal lives of its readership?

In order to provide a broader framing for this question, I now briefly examine and define a fanfiction community and its values. Then I explore some of the existing research that discusses potential functions of fanfiction for its readers, with close focus on Henry Jenkins and his seminal work *Textual Poachers* (1992), as well as Alexander Doty's writings about the ways queer media fans can reinterpret popular narratives. Finally, I discuss Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* about romance reading practices in a female community in the 1980s US, which provided the theoretical framework for my research. In the last section of this introduction I utilize Radway's findings to establish and then elaborate my thesis statement for this work.

Fanfiction Community

In order to analyze the phenomenon of fanfiction, one has to understand the community that produces it as well as norms that regulate interaction within it. The foremost differentiation among media fans lies between affirmational and transformational fandoms. This distinction was first established by a fan obsession_inc in 2009, and was later adopted by academics studying fan cultures. In an essay posted on LiveJournal, obsession_inc theorises that media fans can be divided into two distinct groups. The part of fandom that she proposes to call "affirmational" fandom is source material-centric. These fans are primarily interested in the original text and do not desire to transform it in any way, but to "affirm" it by collecting merchandise,

discussing rules of the universe, and so on. Meanwhile, “transformational” fandom views original text only as a starting point, a raw material that can be transformed and used for fans’ own purposes (@obsession_inc, June 1, 2009). Moreover, obsession_inc suggests that affirmational fans tend to be male and transformational fans female (Ibid.). This assumption is usually accepted by scholars as well (Busse 2017: 6; Jamison 2013: 113), as is supported by statistics collected by fan-statistician centrumlumina--in 2013 only 4% of AO3 based fic readers identified as cisgender male (@centrumlumina, [Tumblr.com](https://www.tumblr.com/centrumlumina), October 1, 2013).⁷ Based on my own research and the same statistics, I would also like to add that another significant demographics of transformational fandom are queer fans--only 29% of centrumlumina’s survey respondents identify as heterosexual.

Regarding the cultural background of fanfiction community members, fandom overall is usually understood as a translocal multicultural community due to its online locus (Morimoto and Chin 2017). Age-wise, same statistics from above places the vast majority of AO3 users between 16 and 29 (@centumlumina, 2013), however, I do not have access to the data about Wattpad, Fanfiction.net and LiveJournal demographics.

As a counter culture that provides space for underrepresented community members, fanfiction culture has its own rules that can vary greatly from the popular culture norms. According to Kristina Busse, fanfiction culture is rooted in the ethos of consent and care, which is indicated by the mandatory use of “warning tags” in headers--information blocks on top of each story (Busse 2017: 206-210). Headers (Fig. 1) identify genres, characters, specific sexual activities, and sometimes major plot points, like major character death, or, as in example provided below, suicidal intentions. Their purpose is to ensure that reader knows exactly what they will find in the story and can give an “affirmative consent” to reading it (Busse 2017: 209). For this reason, Busse calls headers a “writer-reader contract” in which an author takes a responsibility for reader’s wellbeing. As she explains:

Where before the warning label was a polite way to warn readers off topics they disliked, the discourse shifted to warning labels as a mandatory requirement to enable readers to avoid potential triggers. [...] If a story does not list clear

⁷ See centrumlumina’s full statistics and their review of their methodology and limitations in Appendix A.

triggers, then the writer consciously refuses to create a safe space and thus endangers traumatized readers (Busse 2017: 204). Naturally, not every member of the community abides by its rules and, as Busse herself mentions, “fandom is not an idyllic utopia of intersectional activism” (Busse 2017: 206). However, it is worth noting that fanfiction community is self-policing and whenever transgressions of its norms do occur they often spark debates that in effect allow these norms to evolve and/or consolidate. Beyond the discourse about the use of warning tags, fans also continuously debate such topics as creation of welcoming space for minorities (Busse 2017: 175); depictions of sexual violence (Busse 2017: 210-211), internal censorship (XX) and others. According to Busse, such discussions contribute to community’s “ethics of care” and also “ethos of consent” (Busse 2017: 206, 211).

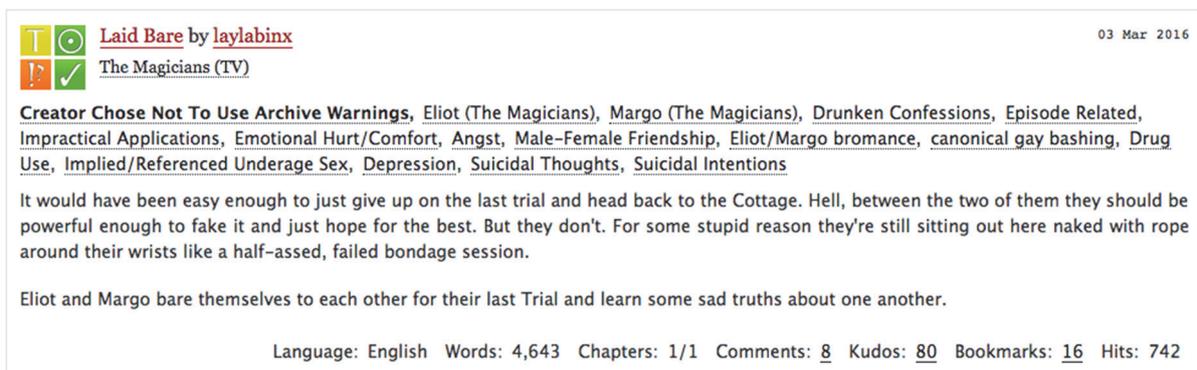


Fig. 1. An example of a header of a fanfiction posted on AO3. In this example author chose not to use AO3’s major tags (orange icon in the top left corner, and again in written form: “Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings”), but provided an extensive list of their own content warnings: “canonical gay bashing,” “drug use,” “Implied/Referenced Underage Sex,” “Depression,” “Suicidal Thoughts,” and “Suicidal Intentions.” Additionally, yellow icon in the top left corner indicates rating of the story (Teen and Up).

Textual Poaching: What Drives People to Create Fanfiction

In this section, I would like to discuss the some theories that analyze reasons for creating transformational works, especially for marginalized and underrepresented groups such as women and queer people. Such creation requires reinterpretation of popular media texts. According to Henry Jenkins, this reinterpretation is often achieved through “poaching,” term that he borrows from Michel de Certeau--an act of appropriating popular media texts for one’s own use (Jenkins 1993: 18-19, 23).

Poaching asserts fans' agency to interpret popular narratives through the prism of personal experience and use them as a basis for their own creations (Ibid.). Jenkins believes that such engagement with the media is caused by the combination of frustration and fascination that fans feel towards popular texts. No matter how well-matched a narrative is to spectator's values and interests, there is always something missing for them in the texts, something that fails to satisfy their expectancies. Fanfiction, among other forms of fan engagement (e.g. theorising), is therefore a direct result of this push-and-pull dynamic between fans and the original narratives. Through reinterpretation fans try to "articulate to themselves and others unrealized possibilities within the original works" (Jenkins 1993: 24). As the main fraction of fanfiction community are female and queer fans, I want to further elaborate what kind of "unrealised possibilities" these two demographics might wish to explore through fanfiction.

Jenkins theorizes that male and female audiences approach popular narratives differently. Referring to a reader-response research conducted by David Bleich, he suggests that men read for "authorial meaning, perceiving a 'strong narrational voice' shaping events" (Jenkins 1993: 110)⁸. Meanwhile, female readers are often less concerned with authorship and "see themselves as engaged in a 'conversation' within which they could participate as active contributors" (Jenkins 1993: 110-111). This mode of engagement is informed by reading practices adopted by men and women in early childhood through socialisation. To discuss this issue he refers to Elizabeth Segel (1986), who argues that gendered reading practices "reflect many of our earliest encounters with fiction, seeming natural precisely because they are deeply embedded within our sense of ourselves and the ways we typically make sense of our cultural experiences" (Segel, cited in Jenkins 1993: 116). While boys spend their childhood reading action-adventure stories, girls read stories centered on relationships. For this reason, girls are culturally preconditioned to pay more attention to the relationships and character development. Furthermore, as girls grow up into the world dominated by masculine narratives, they are taught to adapt and make sense of such stories. In order to reclaim their interests, female fans learn "how to shift attention away from the narrative center and onto the periphery, [...] and thus how to engage more freely in

⁸ Although Jenkins does not use these terms, I would like to note that his belief that male fandom is centered on authorial meaning and female is not is concordant with a current differentiation between a female transformational fandom and a male affirmational one, as was discussed above.

speculations that push aside the author's voice in favor of their own." However, the tension between what women were taught to desire and what they can scavenge from the "periphery" remains (Segel, cited in Jenkins 1993: 116-117). And so women "rework [popular texts] to provide a closer fit to these women's desires" (Jenkins 1993: 117). This process of reworking the original materials can be actualized in a form of fanfiction creation.

Similarly to women, queer people appropriate narratives that are, as described by Alexander Doty, "queered" (Doty 1993: xi). According to Doty, besides narratives that talk about LGBTQ+ people directly, popular texts can be "queered" in three ways: (1) they can be purposefully queer-coded by the producers⁹; (2) historically associated with queer audiences¹⁰; and (3) they can be interpreted from personalized queer reception positions by audience members. In all three cases, queerness is "less an essential, waiting-to-be-discovered property than the result of acts of production or reception" (Ibid.). Furthermore, Doty argues that queer meanings have always been encrypted into stories in one form or another, and can be easily recognised by readers who have certain experiences or are determined to find such meanings. This is especially the case with texts focused on homosocial relationships: "The intense tensions and pleasures generated by the woman-woman and man-man aspects within the narratives of [such] films create a space of sexual instability that already queerly positioned viewers can connect with in various ways" (Doty 1993: 8).

This sexual instability can be read as "unrealized possibilities" defined by Jenkins as one of the key drivers of transformational fandom (Jenkins 1993: 24). Therefore this tension provides space for queer people to create or seek out fanfiction. For example, fantasy TV series *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995-2001) that tells a story of two travelling warrior women is especially known for its popularity with lesbian fans and their sizable fanfiction output (Hanmer 2013: 609). Crime drama *Rizzoli & Isles* (2010-2016) about a female detective and a female medical examiner working in tandem similarly attracted active lesbian fanfiction community (Jansová 2014). Although I cannot draw any conclusions without additional research, it seems to me that

⁹ For example, a main villain character Ursula in a 1989 Disney animation film *The Little Mermaid* was based on an American drag queen Divine.

¹⁰ *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) is famously associated with gay men, who called themselves "friends of Dorothy" in the mid 1900s.

correlation between queer subtext generated by homosocial focus of these shows and the popularity of the fanfiction among their lesbian fanbases is evident.

To summarize, per Henry Jenkins theory of “poaching,” I argue that female and queer fans create and consume romantic fanfiction to actualize female and queer readings of popular texts that are targeted at male heterosexual audiences. However, I believe that functions of fanfiction extend beyond simple appropriation of popular texts with the goal of exploring sides of the narrative that hold an especial interest for a reader. Yet fanfiction studies remain a relatively small branch of popular culture studies and so the academic literature on the subject is limited and fragmented. Many approach it from the perspective of fanfiction as a form of resistance against dominant values. Jenkins himself argues that fanfiction, as well as other fan activities, are the means of reclaiming the agency over culture production (Jenkins 1993: 24; cf. Busse 2017: 55). In another example, authors like Joanna Russ explore “slash,” fanfiction that depicts romantic and sexual relationships between men,¹¹ from the feminist perspective. They claim that such stories allow women to fantasize about “a love that is entirely free of the culture’s whole discourse of gender and sex roles” (Russ 2017: 89; cf. Lamb and Veith 2017: 99; Penley 2017: 183). However, most of the academic literature I examined while preparing for this work does not fully reflect my own experience, or experiences of other fic readers I know personally. My main issue with the literature I read is that most fan scholars (e.g. Jenkins, Busse) do not explicitly differentiate between the producers of fanfiction and the readers (Kaplan 2006: Construction of a Fan Fiction Character Through Narrative). This distinction is important for my research as I intended from the beginning to focus on the readers of fanfiction rather than its producers, and I believe there must be a difference in the way readers and writers structure their relationship with popular texts.¹² For this reason, I do not have a sufficient theoretical foundation, which concerns functions of fanfiction for the readers in the field of fanfiction studies. However, I utilize in this place similar theories as related to other readership communities. Janice Radway’s seminal study of the fans

¹¹ By analogy, “femslash” is a category of fanfiction depicting romantic and sexual relationships between women. Het (derived from heterosexual) is focused on relationships between men and women, and gen (derived from general) depicts platonic relationships.

¹² For example, my research findings suggest that fanfiction writers view characters as tools for telling their stories, whereas readers develop attachment to characters. However, further research is required.

of 1980s romance novels, *Reading the Romance* (1984), proved to be particularly relevant in this regard.

Romantic Fiction as Compensatory Literature

Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* is an in-depth ethnographic investigation of an American small-town community of female romance readers combined with literary criticism of romance as a genre. In her book, Radway analyses the act of reading the romance from a feminist perspective and explores the reasons why a middle-aged middle-class American housewife could develop a strong passion for such novels and what benefits she could derive from reading them. In the 1980s, women as main caregivers were expected to provide extensive emotional nurturance within a patriarchal family yet could not rely on it to receive it themselves (Radway 1993: 94). Radway argues that this made reading romances a form of self-care that allows women to compensate for the needed emotional nurturance vicariously (Radway 1993: 100). Such emotional nurturance is acquired through a process when female readers project themselves on a heroine and adopt her emotions as their own. According to Radway:

In this process a fictional heroine is always confirmed by the romantic and sexual attentions of an ideal male. [...] This attention not only provides [a reader] with the sensations evoked by emotional nurturance and physical satisfaction, but, equally significantly, reinforces her sense of self because in offering his care and attention to the woman with whom she identifies, the hero implicitly regards that woman and, by implication, the reader, as worthy of his concern (Radway 1993: 113).

According to Radway, identification with a novel's heroine allows a romance reader to vicariously obtain nurturance and increases her sense of self-worth that, in this case, is defined as a woman's desirability to men. Moreover, Radway also notes that immersiveness of romance novels and exhaustive descriptions of distant and sometimes historical locations allow home-locked housewives to participate in simulated travelling (Radway 1993: 113). In this way, they get an opportunity to escape for the time being from "the psychologically demanding and emotionally draining task of attending to the physical and affective needs of their families" (Radway 1993: 92). Due to these functions she calls romantic fiction "compensatory literature" (Radway 1993: 95).

Moreover, Radway highlights that romances often feature the transition of a hero from a violent frightening figure into a compassionate partner. As the story unfolds it also allows a reader to learn hero's motivations and backstory that formed his character and conditioned his behavior. By reading such books, a female reader can receive help in handling her anxieties connected to a female experience through empathising with heroine's fears about abusive relationships (Radway 1993: 140). Further explication of male motivations and a gradual development of the relationships between male and female characters into a traditional marriage allows women to relief some of the aforementioned anxieties without betraying a readers' self-image of an American suburban wife and her belief in traditional values (Radway 1993: 141-149). Additionally, women can also engage in believing that a heroine is responsible for a hero's transformation. Thus, romance-reading women tend to adopt this behavior as a set of instructions on how to successfully maintain their heterosexual relationship within a patriarchal society (Radway 1993: 149-151). One can argue that in this case, reading romance novels normalizes gender and sexual oppression against women and reinforces gender norms and power dynamics that exists in the patriarchal and heteronormative society. However, Radway argues that in a way romance reading can also be interpreted as a form of individual resistance against gender inequality, since at the time of reading women allow themselves to prioritize their emotional wellbeing over the caring for their family members (Radway 1993: 14).

Compensatory and Instrumental Second-Hand Experience

Romance as a genre shares a certain number of similarities with fanfiction. The most evident similarity is that both romances and fanfiction focus on emotional and sensual life of its characters. Then, per Radway, most romance heroines and heroes are essentially the same characters (Radway 1993: 63, 77-78, 81-83) following the same standard plot structure from novel to novel (Radway 1993: 134-135). In fanfiction, as I discussed previously, fic characters are the same in more literal sense, although there is some variety, since fans normally read fanfiction for more than one popular text. Structure wise, there is again a little more variety, but a lot of fanfiction still utilises a relatively small number of plot formulas, known in fanfic community as "tropes."¹³

¹³ In fanfiction trope means a common plot device, often used to bring characters together (e.g. 'pretend dating', 'snowed in').

Moreover, I would also like to note that my own experience with fanfiction is not unlike what Radway describes in regard to romances. Like Radway's romance readers I too spend a significant portion of my free time repeatedly reading the same narrative as means of managing my emotional state through escapism and vicarious compensation for emotional experiences not available to me in real life. All together, these similarities led me to conclude that Radway's findings can be adapted as a theoretical framework for the research of fanfiction readership in terms of what functions does fanfiction has in their lives.

In the course of her work, Radway refers to the process of entering a fictional character's mindset and then adopting this character's emotions and experiences as one's own as a "second-hand experience" (Radway 1993: 117). Therefore, I adopted "second-hand experience" (from here on SHE) as a key concept that frames my study. As I discuss above, Radway isolates several functions of such second-hand experience related to romance reading: (1) compensation for the emotional nurturance which they lack; (2) an escape from their daily routines; (3) a safe outlet for addressing anxieties about being a woman in a patriarchal society; (4) an affirmation of traditional gender roles; and (5) a source of usable instructions on how to achieve and manage a successful monogamous heterosexual marriage. As I mentioned before, Radway herself calls romances "compensatory literature" (Radway 1993: 95). But as one can see, some of the listed functions do not "compensate," but rather instruct (function 5) or reinforce reader's beliefs (function 4). For this reason, I decided to leave function 4 on the side, as it does not relate to my research question, and then further differentiate between two subcategories of SHE that are already indicated in Radway: compensatory and instrumental.

I define Compensatory SHE as a tactic¹⁴ through which a reader can acquire certain experiences vicariously through a fictional character they identify or empathise with in order to compensate for something they lack in real life. This type of second-hand experience can vary in the benefits it brings. For example, in a more specific sense, SHE can help to temporarily deal with a trauma by allowing a reader to live through a version of their negative experience with a different, more hopeful, outcome. In a more

¹⁴ In the course of this work I will be referring to compensatory and instrumental SHE as 'tactics.' However, it is important to note that I am using this word cautiously, since the level of intentionality and awareness of employing SHE and benefiting from it varies from reader to reader.

general sense, SHE can help to relieve stress or manage negative emotions by providing a reader with an opportunity to use a familiar fictional character as a vehicle to “escape” into someone else’s life or world.

Another subcategory of the second-hand experience that I explore in my work is instrumental SHE. This is a tactic where readers use fanfiction character’s experiences in order to acquire instructions for navigating their own lives or to improve their emotional intelligence. As such it can, for example, help a reader to manage interpersonal relationships, explore their sexuality, or to help them better understand other people.

One particular type of a situation in which instrumental SHE can be applied is when a reader uses a fictional character they share a certain negative experience with, as a proxy to examine their own feelings and emotions. In such cases, it can be difficult to specify whether the tactic applied is a compensatory or instrumental SHE, as both deal with a reader’s pre-existing emotional state. However, I identify the difference between those tactics in terms of their goals. Compensatory SHE’s purpose is to immediately but temporarily suppress a reader’s own emotional state, and for the time of reading replace it with a fanfiction character’s emotional state. This type of SHE does not resolve a root cause of a reader’s state and has no lasting effect, requiring repetition. Meanwhile, my research indicates that in some cases SHE helps readers to confront their feelings more directly, and to analyze them in order to improve the situation. Below are quotes from two fic readers that suggest this approach:

I have very low intrapersonal intelligence [...] so reading fic sometimes has me crying and *processing things* I didn't even know [were] bothering me (Survey respondent 22, 2018; emphasis added).

A character in canon¹⁵ was afraid of heights and [I made a request to write a story where] they were so because they had the compulsion to jump. The responses and stories people posted [...] were very moving and helped me *examine that feeling* (Survey respondent 12, 2018; emphasis added).

The choice of words—“process things,” and “examine that feeling”—implies that unlike in the case of compensatory SHE, these readers do not aim to compensate for an experience they for some reason cannot have in real life. Nor do they wish to temporarily escape their problems. Instead, their goal can be defined as an active

¹⁵ In the fan community, canon is an original literary or media source.

attempt to learn how to improve their emotional wellbeing in a long run. According to my hypothesis, in such cases the need for reading fanfiction narratives connected to a reader's problem dissipates as soon as this problem is resolved, or as a reader moves onto a next stage of dealing with it (e.g. professional therapy). Due to the difference in the objective achieved through this tactic of processing emotions instead of overriding them, achieved through this tactic in comparison with compensatory SHE, I classify the former cases as instrumental SHE.

To summarise, fans can better their emotional state through reading fanfiction by using two tactics. Firstly, they can temporarily supplant their preexisting emotional state and/or compensate for the lack of certain experiences through compensatory SHE. Secondly, they can use fanfiction to confront their problem more directly and to process it via instrumental SHE. Additionally, instrumental SHE can also act as a source of education about various situations and emotional states. It is also important to note that compensatory and instrumental SHE can overlap. For example, a reader might be trying to understand and instrumentally manage their feelings regarding past trauma, while simultaneously compensating for an inability to achieve a happy ending in their current state.

In this paper I am utilising the described concepts of compensatory and instrumental SHE to explore fanfiction as a source of emotional support and informal education about interpersonal relationships for a reader. To do so I will examine a wide variety of cases of fanfiction readers collected through ethnography and autoethnography by looking at them from the perspective of second-hand experience. The main body of this paper is separated into two Chapters: Compensatory SHE and Instrumental SHE. A portion of Chapter 1 is dedicated to my autoethnography, where I use a detailed account of my personal experience to provide in-depth analysis of how compensatory SHE can be a vital tool in managing high level of emotional distress. In the second part of Chapter 1, I turn to ethnographic data to complement my experience and to further examine how different fic readers can utilise their second-hand experience from reading fanfiction to cope with a wide variety of negative personal and emotional experiences. This part of Chapter is organised in accordance to the type of benefit readers acquire through compensatory SHE: (1) Resolution of Past Traumas I; (2) Compensation for Basic Emotional Needs; (3) Escaping Reality; (4) Eschewing Gender Inequality. Chapter 2 is ethnography based and addresses Instrumental SHE

and its benefits for the fanfic readers. It is divided into five subsections: (1) Resolution of Past Traumas II; (2) Safe Space for Emotional Exploration; (3) Relationships Management; (4) Safe Space for Sexual Exploration; (5) Normalization of Queer Experience.

Methodology

As I state in the introduction, my general research question for this work is “What function does fanfiction about the emotional lives of popular characters have in personal lives of its readership?”. This question was informed by my ten years long experience with reading fanfiction, as well as academic interest in popular and fan cultures that I have been cultivating over the course of my study in the program Humanities and Liberal Arts. The particular focus on fanfiction as a source of emotional support, however, undergone a series of transformations.

This topic was initially informed by my acquaintance with the work of Janice Radway and a reflexion on my personal relationship with fanfiction that was inspired by her work. My first thought was to conduct a similar study with fic readers, in order to see whether fanfiction primarily serves as a source of emotional support to its readership as well. To test that idea I reached out to a friend who is also an active fanfiction consumer and invited her for a preliminary unstructured interview during which we discussed Radway’s work and compared our experiences with fanfiction. In the course of our discussion, it became apparent that while Radway’s theory can indeed be applicable to fanfiction readers, her methodology cannot, since fanfiction readership is not as homogenous as romance readers, and includes different demographics with a wider range of interests and needs. For this reason, I decided to discard this strategy and turned to existing academic literature in the field of fandom studies for further directions.

Initial review of several academic anthologies concerning fanfiction, as well as Jenkins’ *Textual Poachers* showed that not many scholars discuss fanfiction from the perspective of emotional support. This discovery led me to consider rescoping my research to include other potential functions of fanfiction, like reclamation of agency in construction of cultural narratives. I conducted my data gathering on that basis, as is reflected in my interview schedule (Appendix A) and my survey questionnaire (Appendix B). However, since the basic analysis of collected data showed significant support towards my initial hypothesis that fanfiction can provide readers with a type of emotional support, I scaled down to the original idea, and upon further reflection extended it to include informal education in the area of interpersonal relationships.

Investigation of such a nuanced and inherently subjective topic as one's emotional life asks for a qualitative approach, as it prioritizes in-depth understanding of lived experience and insider's perspective (Punch 2005: 238). Moreover, qualitative research offers a wide variety of methods that I incorporated into my research in order to provide triangulation between different types of data, and thus also tracing of different layers of meaning and perspectives. This further enabled me to garner the "thickest" description possible of fanfiction reading (Geertz 1973: 6). In this paper, I rely on ethnographic data gathered through autoethnography, semi-structured interviews with several fic readers, open ended online survey, as well as online archival research.

Autoethnography as a Research Method

A part of this thesis is dedicated to autoethnography—a qualitative research method used to analyse a particular phenomenon that foregrounds the researcher's personal experience and connects it to a wider cultural context (Manning and Adams 2015: 188). According to Jimmie Manning and Tony E. Adams, in conducting autoethnography, researcher's main goal is to explore on a deeper level how people "make sense of mundane or notable life events" (Bochner and Ellis 2006, cited in Manning and Adams 2015: 189) by engaging in an honest and nuanced "self-reflection" (Ibid.). Autoethnography thus is a source of rich insider data that allows a researcher to identify, make explicit, and analyze complex processes that inform our cultural experiences (ibid.).

My main incentive for using autoethnography in this work was concern that since a person's emotional life, which is the main subject of my research, is informed by often deeply intimate personal experiences, people might not be willing to share an open and detailed account of their experiences. Autoethnography in this respect proves to be particularly valuable, as it relies on a researcher's intent to provide readers with a full and in-depth account of the experience and thus willingness to be frank. Another advantage of using personal experience for a research is noted by Rose Richards, who argues that autoethnography can be seen as "a form of emancipatory discourse" when it gives voice to misrepresented and marginalised members of a society (Richards 2008: 1724). This is especially relevant not only for my autoethnography but my research as a whole, since fanfiction reading community has long been ridiculed

and disregarded both by media industry and other fans (Busse 2017, 181). By disclosing and closely analysing deeply personal issues that motivate my mode of engagement with popular texts and my choices of reading materials, and then combining it with ethnographic data, I hope to present a complex portrait of a fanfiction consumer, that subverts the stereotype of a “crazy fangirl” that has been repeatedly used against me and my fellow fic readers.

However, autoethnography as a method has also certain limitations and risks. Firstly, the potential sensitive nature of the information presented in autoethnography may invoke unpleasant feelings in readers (Bochner and Ellis 1996, cited in Mendez 2013). From my personal experience of working on this paper, I also want to add that it was particularly hard to find the balance in the amount of contextual information as related to my personal experiences I had to provide in order to make my autoethnographical report thorough yet not excessive. Furthermore, unlike ethnography which analyses multiple insider perspectives, autoethnography is preoccupied with only one. In this thesis I counteract this limitation by combining both, autoethnography and ethnography.

The final aspect of autoethnography that needs to be addressed is ethics. Manning and Adams state that a “key ethical concern” in autoethnographic research is “relational ethics”—concern for people implicated in a researcher’s account of personal experience (Manning and Adams 2015: 206). In this paper I refer to my relationship with a former romantic partner. I have received her consent for sharing information about our relationship after explaining in detail the nature of this work. Moreover, I decided not to disclose her name and instead refer to her by a randomly chosen letter in order to protect their anonymity.

Although autoethnography was an unknown and difficult tool for me to use, analyzing my own experience gave me a clearer understanding of Janice Radway’s theory and concepts I am borrowing from her, as well as helped me to better interpret my informants’ experiences, as I share many interests and concerns with them. By presenting my case early in Chapter 1 I aim to ground theory in a detailed account of a my experience and thus to provide readers with a deeper understanding of the concept of second-hand experience, before introducing a wide variety of its application by other fic readers. I also hope that in-depth analysis of my experience helps to accentuate how several aspects of one’s personal life can come together in motivating

a reader's choice of a text, and how the chosen text in its turn can affect a reader's emotional state on multiple layers. However it is important to stress my autoethnography is nevertheless only complementary to the ethnographic data. For this reason this paper can be labeled a social-scientific autoethnography (Manning and Adams 2015: 191).

Ethnography

Ethnographic data for this thesis was collected through semi-structured interviews, online survey with open-ended questions and archival research. I would like to remind that my ethnographic research was designed to envelop all potential functions of fanfiction. Here I will only discuss questions and tags that contributed the most data in regard to fanfiction as a source of emotional support and informal education in the area of interpersonal relationships.

In the course of two month I interviewed six fanfic readers: one personal acquaintance, a person I met online when conducting archival research on AO3, and four people who responded to the leaflets I spread at the Prague Pride parade. It is a small sample, but a diverse one: three people identify as members of the LGBTQ+ community, one interviewee is a male, and two interviewees come from the anime fandom instead of the media fandom. Since only two of my informants have permanent residence in Prague, I conducted the interviews in different formats. Two of them took place in person, while the rest was managed online: three via Skype and one via instant messaging system of Twitter. In the later stages of my research, I conducted an additional unstructured interview with a queer male about his experiences with reading fanfiction. The interview took place online on the instant messaging system of Tumblr.

I organised my interview schedule (Appendix A) into two parts. First one examines my interviewees' history of fanfiction reading and what they prioritize when looking for a fanfic to read. Some of the questions in this section were:

- 1) What is special about the fictional couples you like to read about?
- 2) Is it important for you that fic has a happy ending?

- 3) Do you ever read fics exploring dark themes like sexual assault or violence?
If yes, why do you think you enjoy them?

Through these questions I attempted to prompt participants to reflect on their choices of reading materials and to consider the reasons why they make these choices. Upon establishing a participant's *motivations* for choosing a story, I could naturally direct the discussion towards their *objectives* when choosing a story and thus a story's *function*. By approaching my true subject matter indirectly I hoped to incite more elaborated and thoughtful responses as well as avoid biased data. This strategy was inspired by Radway who used similar questions in her questionnaires for a romance reading women (Radway 1993: 236).

The second part consisted of two sections: slash fanfiction and “fanfiction versus real life.” The first section is dedicated to stories of male homosexual romance, that I deemed important to discuss separately due to the prevalence of slash in fanfiction. Like in the set of question discussed above, by discussing stories focused on male homosexual romance with people who prefer it to other types of narrative, I was hoping to establish a link between reader's motivations and objectives. I designed two separate sets of questions for queer and non-queer respondents. The latter section was designed specifically to inquire about fanfiction reading as a source of emotional support. Some of the questions in this section were:

- 1) Have reading fics ever helped you to work through some situation in your personal life? If yes, could you please give an example?
- 2) In your personal opinion, why do you read fanfiction?

As one can see, these questions address the subject of my research most directly, and for this reason they were reserved for the end of the interviews in order to avoid influencing respondents throughout the rest of the interview..

Going further in my research, I understood that the amount of time I spent organising, conducting and processing only 6 interviews was disproportionate to the amount of usable data I collected this way. For this reason, instead of continuing this research strategy, I created a short anonymous open-ended online survey using Google Forms tool. This survey was then disseminated on Tumblr with the help from a popular fan-statistician *centrumlumina*, who kindly agreed to promote it on her blog (<https://centrumlumina.tumblr.com>). Altogether 59 people responded. I chose the

questions based on my experience with interviews focusing it on the questions that incited the most elaborated responses: “Have reading fanfiction ever helped you to cope with/work through real life problems?” and “Why do you think people read fanfiction? Why do you?”.

Another research method I employed is an online archival data collection. The important aspect of this type of data is that, unlike interviews and the survey, it is unaffected by the actions of a researcher (Kozinets 2010: 104). Additionally, this type of data was particularly valuable for this work as it is unprompted thus showcasing what readers themselves regard as worthy of reflexivity and discussion in fanfiction culture. Data related to my research question were picked out manually.

I started my work on AO3, which is currently one of the most popular websites for fanfiction. I searched AO3 for fan essays using the tags ‘meta’ and ‘essay’ and found six works concerning gender and female sexuality representation in mass culture and normalization of the LGBTQ+ narratives through fanfiction. Beyond that I also conducted archival research on Tumblr. I decide to research Tumblr because this microblogging platform is especially favoured among many media fans, including fanfiction readers. It is here that fic readers discuss their fanfiction experiences, exchange recommendations and communicate with favourite authors. In order to collect data more easily, I set up a separate blog to archive posts relevant to my research. Since Tumblr users have a distinct style of communication that involves gif images and videos, using the platform to collect data via reblogging, as opposed to saving screen captures of posts to my computer, allowed me to keep these types of data intact. I tested a number of fanfiction related tags and settled on tracking ‘fanfiction discourse’, ‘fanfiction meta’ and ‘fandom life’, since they were relatively popular, and but not overused, which made the data relevant to my research easy to find. Combined with data I collected from blogs I followed previously to the research, which includes the official blog of AO3 and two blogs dedicated to fanfiction culture, it was enough to compile over a hundred of posts connected to my research question.

Conducting ethnographic research online raises an important ethical question that is yet to reach a clear consensus within academia (Williams, Burnap, Sloan 2017: 4, 11). On one hand, most data in online spaces such as Tumblr and Archive of Our Own are in open access. Tumblr, a microblogging platform, in particular offers users an option to make their blogs private, suggesting that users who decide otherwise expect to be

observed by strangers. From this perspective Tumblr and similar social media websites should be treated as public spaces, making consent, confidentiality, and anonymity not required (Ibid.). However, recent research shows that this approach is discordant with how the majority of social media users themselves regard this issue (Williams, Burnap, Sloan 2017: 11). For example, according to the research conducted on twitter.com, another microblogging platform, most Twitter users do not perceive their online communications as public, and expect to be at least asked for the consent if their content is to be shared (Ibid.). For this reason, most ethic guidelines (e.g. The Association of Internet Researchers, British Sociological Association, Kozinets 2010) recommend researchers to adapt their work according to the situation, especially when working with vulnerable communities who can suffer from public exposure (Ibid.; cf. Kozinets 2010: 150-151).

For the reasons listed above, I approached Tumblr users whose posts I use in this paper and requested their consent after detailing what type of work I am using them for. However, the instant messaging system of Tumblr is not popular among the usership and many people do not read their incoming messages and for this reason could not be reached. In the cases, when the consent was acquired, I left usernames and personal data intact. In cases when the consent was not acquired, usernames were changed. Such users can still potentially be identified in the few cases where I quote them directly, but given the low risks and public status of data minimum concealment seemed appropriate (Kozinets 2010: 154). Additionally, the blog I created to archive data is public and has a short description of its purpose (<https://stasiktriestofinishuniontime.tumblr.com>). Therefore, after receiving an automatic notification about a “reblog,” any user whose post I archived could see how it will be utilised and message me if the need arose. The situation with AO3 is more nuanced for two reasons. First of all, AO3 does not have any private messaging feature so there is no possibility to request consent. Secondly, most AO3 data used in this work come from essays and podcasts, that not only are expected to be read and scrutinized by public online audiences, but also deserve to be credited (Kozinets 2010: 153). Due to these reasons, I decided to keep usernames and other personal data of the essay authors. However, in the case of data acquired from the comment sections of the essays, usernames of commenters were changed to provide minimum cloaking.

Positionality and Limitations

As I stated earlier, I am an active member of fan community and habitual fic reader. Due to my insider position I comfortably operate with fanfiction terminology and fandom slang, which allowed me to easily communicate with my informants. Additionally, since fanfiction community is often misrepresented by the media, my insider status contributed to creating a more open and safer environment for communication. However, my insider position also leads to certain limitations of this research. Firstly, since in the course of research I often utilised my personal connections within fan community, my work is limited by specific fandoms I am part of. No fandom is completely alike and the ones I am basing my research on are largely English speaking, Western, female, young, AO3 and Tumblr based, and politically left leaning, which is not representative of all social groups reading fanfiction. Furthermore, as I mentioned before, fanfiction community is often ridiculed by the media and non-reading fans. That might have caused to provide an overly positive biased representation of fanfiction readers and their reading practices, and prevented me from approaching my subject from a more critical perspective. Finally, being an active participant of the community I am researching means I often might not have recognized behavioral patterns and views that appear “natural” to them (Duranti 1992: 20).

Chapter 1

Compensatory Second-Hand Experience:

The Painkiller

In 2013, I found myself depressed, struggling to overcome unrequited feelings for a former classmate, and deeper and deeper in *Les Misérables* fandom¹⁶. As I look back at the correspondence with a close friend, I can see that my obsessive reading of *Les Misérables* fanfiction can be interpreted as a coping mechanism:

Author: I do have a theory why fanfiction is so popular—same reason people try to heal a broken heart with romantic comedies. *Because maybe she couldn't love me, but at least Grantaire gets the boy, you know? I need that.*

Friend: Maybe I just feel differently about unrequited love. Love doesn't have to end in a relationship—I was happy when we saw each other, so it's not like it was a waste of time.

Author: I don't think it was a 'waste of time.' And yes, okay, love doesn't have to end in a relationship. But damn, sometimes long-term feelings for another person can become a part of you. "Forever together—forever apart," you know? And *sometimes I just want to read a story like mine that ends happily* instead of all this mess. (personal communication, December 9, 2014; italics added)

Les Mis fanfiction continued to consume my every spare minute for over two years until I slowly settled back into my normal reading patterns. Today, reading fanfiction for me acts as a way to relax and destress at the end of the day. I read under 55,000 words a week¹⁷, I am open to most fanfic tropes¹⁸, and rotate between a number of fandoms depending on which characters I miss the most. But whenever my emotional state turns to worse, my searches again become more specific and the amount of time I spend on AO3 increases.

In this Chapter, I discuss compensatory second-hand experience, which I define as a tactic that provides readers with a temporary solution for managing their emotions or

¹⁶ *Les Misérables* is a historical novel by Victor Hugo (1862). The fandom envelops its musical adaptation and a 2013 film adaptation. It is commonly referred to as *Les Mis*.

¹⁷ Length of fanfiction on AO3 is estimated in the word count. For comparison, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* is 76,944 words long.

¹⁸ In fanfiction trope means a common plot device, often used to bring characters together (e.g. 'pretend dating', 'snowed in').

an opportunity to escape their reality for the time of reading. In order to illustrate how SHE works in practice I first resort to autoethnography and analyze my personal experience in this regard. Using my experience as an example allows me to garner more detailed and in-depth information about these processes, which I could not get from interviews with informants. I then proceed with further exploring the spectrum of ways both tactics are employed by fanfiction readers through the discussion of the ethnographic data. In the course of my research I managed to compile different cases of compensatory SHE into several groups in accordance with the possible functions of reading fanfiction: (1) temporary resolution of past traumas, (2) compensation for emotional experiences a reader lacks in real life, (3) and the temporal escape from one's reality. The structure of the ethnographic part of this Chapter corresponds to these groups, with the additional sub-section focusing specifically on escaping the sexism and heterocentrism/queerphobia ingrained in the dominant culture(s).

This Chapter is based on the autoethnographic and ethnographic data, the latter of which I gathered through interviews, a survey, and an online archival research. Tumblr data were collected through several blogs I follow online, as well as tags 'fanfiction discourse', 'fanfiction meta' and 'fandom life.' AO3 essays analysed for this Chapter were found using 'meta' and 'essays' tags. Most of information, however, I gathered through anonymous survey, and in-person and online interviews. Survey questions created for this research were open-ended and went as follows: "Have reading fanfiction ever helped you to cope with/work through real life problems?" and "Why do you think people read fanfiction? Why do you?". I asked the same question in my interviews, along with several questions asking interviewees to compare fanfiction narratives to their lives.

Reading *Les Misérables* fanfiction

Les Misérables is a classic historical novel by Victor Hugo. It is over one thousand pages long, considered as a part of French literary canon, and for the most part follows the life of ex-convict Jean Valjean in the early 19th century France. Valjean's journey is rooted in themes of redemption, politics, familial love, justice and religion. However, these adventures are not the main reason why *Les Mis* attracts significant numbers of

its creative fan base, considering that out of 18,485 *Les Misérables* fanfics on AO3, over 16,000 do not include Valjean as a main character.

Out of many characters populating *Les Misérables*, one group proved to have a special appeal to female and queer audiences that constitute the largest segment of the fanfiction community.¹⁹ This group is Friends of the ABC, a student club participating in the Paris Uprising of 1832 and led by charismatic and fiery Enjolras. He and Grantaire, a cynical art student struggling with depression and alcoholism, make up one of the most popular fandom pairings²⁰ known as Enjoltaire. Both in the original novel and its adaptations, their relationship is antagonistic, but with homoromantic undertones. According to the original narrative, Grantaire secretly harbors romantic feelings for Enjolras, but is unable to share his beloved's optimism and belief in the success of the revolution, which they are both a part of. Enjolras, in his turn, is focused exclusively on the club's political goals and seems to hold nothing but disdain for the local drunkard. Their storylines come to a close together, when the revolution fails and the two men are executed by a firing squad while holding hands.

In its fan reinterpretation, Friends of the ABC is a modern day²¹ human rights activist group, as well as a circle of close friends. Fic authors tend to keep all the canon elements of Grantaire and Enjolras's relationship intact, but develop it further to a happier resolution where these men learn to overcome their differences and form a couple.

In this section, I will discuss reading *Les Mis* fanfiction within the context of my personal experience and use it to exemplify in detail how SHE can provide a particular type of emotional support. In order to do that, I will first describe plot points of *Les Misérables* that are relevant to this inquiry, and briefly introduce its characters. I will proceed with drawing parallels between *Les Mis* fanfiction and my own romantic

¹⁹ According to statistics collected by fan-statistician centrumlumina, only 4% of fic readers identify as cisgender male, and only 29% identify as heterosexual (@centrumlumina, [Tumblr.com](https://www.tumblr.com/centrumlumina), October 1, 2013). See centrumlumina's full statistics and their review of their methodology and limitations in Appendix A.

²⁰ Pairing is a couple of characters believed to be in a romantic relationship. Most pairings have a special name—either portmanteau of characters' names or their special attributes (e.g. "Drarry" for Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy from Harry Potter franchise; "Sugarless Gum" for Marceline the Vampire Queen and Princess Bubblegum from the animated series Adventure Time).

²¹ In *Les Misérables* fandom, fanfiction about contemporary interpretations of *Les Mis* are as popular, if not more, as the original novel/musical. This might be due to the fact that, unlike contemporary fiction, historical fiction requires additional research.

relationship. Then I will summarise one of the *Les Mis* fanfics and discuss which of its elements made my compensatory SHE from reading it especially beneficial for mitigating my distress related to the aforementioned relationship. In the last segment I will introduce the concept of parasocial relationships and will look at it from the perspective of SHE.

Enjoltaire Fanfiction and My Quest for Closure

In 2009 I enrolled into a Russian art school and met H., a fellow student. In the first few month of our acquaintance we became friendly and I quickly developed romantic feelings for her. Due to being in the same year of our study program, we shared all classes and spent most of our time in the same group of students. In the course of two years of communicating with H. on a regular basis, her behavior towards me ranged from friendly and inviting to hostile. Our relationship ended when she ceased our communication without explanation and started to ignore my presence in classes. Two months later I quit university and never saw her in person again.

By the time I entered *Les Misérables* fandom in 2013 my feelings for H. evolved into a mix of strong infatuation and an intense resentment for denying me an articulated rejection of my romantic advances and thus a chance to move on. At the same time I was struggling with depression, self-hatred and self-destructive behavior. Although the relationship with H. was not, and could not be, a cause of my worsened mental state, I nevertheless saw its resolution as a key to finding peace. As a real resolution was not available, due to H.'s refusal to speak with me, I sought to compensate for it through other means, in particular by reading Enjoltaire fanfiction. In order to analyse which elements of Enjoltaire story made fanfiction reading useful as a form of SHE an invaluable tool in daily management of my emotional state, I refer to the story that ignited the conversation I quoted in the vignette from the beginning of this Chapter, *these things take time* by sonhoedesrazao (2013) and connect it to my relationship with H..

Like a lot of fanfiction, sonhoedesrazao's story has a minimal plot. Instead, author focuses on the development of her characters' feelings for each other and additionally Grantaire's struggle with alcohol addiction, depression and low self-esteem. sonhoedesrazao begins her fanfic with laying out facts pre-established both in canon

and fanon.²² In the first chapter, told from Grantaire perspective, we learn that Grantaire is in love with Enjolras, and believes his feelings to be unrequited. A reader also sees the first open verbal confrontation between the two characters regarding the rally Enjolras is organising. Moreover, author reveals that Grantaire enjoys observing Enjolras' furious outbursts and goads him into verbal fights on purpose, despite suffering from the heartbreak afterwards.

After the fight Enjolras approaches Grantaire with a peace offer and soon the two men start corresponding and spending time together apart from their mutual friends. In Chapter four, however, their newfound friendship is threatened. Grantaire arrives drunk to a party, and they have another argument that quickly derails into personal accusations—Grantaire accuses Enjolras of being a spoiled child of rich parents, while Enjolras calls Grantaire an alcoholic. This particular confrontation is important because it is told from Enjolras' perspective, and so allows a reader to understand how Enjolras feels during his arguments with Grantaire. Unlike Grantaire, for whom fighting with Enjolras is a form of masochistic entertainment, Enjolras compares his own rage with sickness. Although he sees how his sharp words affect Grantaire, his desire to “figure [Grantaire] out, tear out of him everything he really thinks” overpowers him (sonhoedesrazao 2013). At the same time, he regrets everything he is saying and wishes his friends would stop him.

After apologizing to each other on the next morning, Enjolras and Grantaire make an agreement—Grantaire will try to cut back on alcohol and Enjolras will support him in this endeavour. In the following chapters the two start spending most of their free time together and grow close. They also cease arguing about the rally, and instead utilize their differing views and backgrounds to strengthen the speech Enjolras will deliver there. In the process Grantaire learns that he can only fight his addiction if he opens up to people close to him and allows them to help. In the final chapter of the story, Enjolras kisses Grantaire and proclaims his love to him, and in return, Grantaire confesses that he has been in love with Enjolras “for years,” and that he has been initiating their arguments on purpose to get his attention (Ibid.).

Although this particular story is the only one I read more than once, most of the fanfiction about Grantaire and Enjolras I read follows the same structure: (1) Grantaire

²² In the fan community, fanon (derived from 'fan canon') is any characters' or universe's attribute that is widely accepted by fans but has little or no basis in original text (canon).

is in love; (2) he goads Enjolras into arguments; (3) Enjolras can not control his temper and their fights turn personal; (4) they either decide to try to become friends or are put into a situation where they are forced to cooperate; (5) they grow close; (6) Grantaire discloses his previously concealed feelings for Enjolras; (7) Enjolras reciprocates; (8) they become a couple. There are several aspects of this type of narrative, combined with Grantaire and Enjolras' personalities that made Les Mis fanfiction perfect for mitigating my distress in relation to H.

Being a queer artist myself, I primarily identify with Grantaire. I also believe our personalities to be somewhat similar. Additionally, both of us struggle with similar mental health problems, and both of us spent many years loving people who could not love us back. For this reason it was his point of view that I normally accepted when reading Les Mis fanfiction, and his eventual happiness that concerned me the most. Reading about Grantaire "winning the boy" and entering a relationship based on openness and mutual respect, was a marvellous fantasy that I wanted to experience over and over. However, just this fantasy alone could never compensate for the resolution I sought in full measure.

As I shared previously, one of the main stressors about my relationship with H. was that at its core, it was a conflict. I did feel love for her, but I resented her in the equal measure. And no matter how painful it is to love unrequitedly, hating unrequitedly is more so—if you suppress negativity long enough, it will eat you on the inside. What I needed was a catharsis and then cleansing, even if imaginary, and that is when Enjolras comes in. In a thoughtfully written fanfic like *these things take time* Enjolras' rage is immense, cruel and entirely out of his control. I know this rage. I also know the frustration at oneself that comes with it. Watching Enjolras first express "our" anger and then overcome it, when he and Grantaire learn to communicate better, allowed me to symbolically gain control of my emotions. At the same time, watching him to fall in love with Grantaire helped me to momentarily negate my anger entirely and instead remember how good being in love normally feels like.

To summarise, Enjoltaire fanfiction allowed me (1) to relieve the resentment I held towards H., (2) to symbolically gain control of my emotions, and (3) to vicariously participate in a fantasy where years of loving from distance eventually lead to happiness. Taken together these effects of what in this thesis I term "second-hand experience" gave me an opportunity to compensate for the resolution of my conflict with H. and as a consequence temporarily grant me a feeling of closure and

peacefulness. Reflecting on this experience now, it appears that *Les Mis* fanfiction was the most effective tool in countering emotional distress I was experiencing at the time. This is evident from the amounts of time I dedicated to the reading about Grantaire and Enjolras at that time, as well as the fact that I was not reading any other type of literature, including fanfiction from other fandoms. The fact that I read a story after story with minimal intervals in between also shows that this help, while effective, was also extremely short-term and required constant repetition. Both of these facts are concordant with Radway's findings about women's romance reading habits (Radway 1993: 117-118). Furthermore, my personal communications from that period that I quote in the beginning of this chapter also show that I was aware of using fanfiction as a way to compensate for the lack of a resolution in my relationship with H..

After over two years, my reading patterns stabilized along with my overall mental health--I started to read fanfiction more rarely, and stopped focusing on *Les Mis* exclusively. However, I proceeded to pay most of my attention to reading about couples whose relationships, like Enjoltaire's, can be classified as 'enemies to friends to lovers'--a fairly standard formula often used in romantic fiction, be it a fanfic or a romance novel. This was true until I had a chance to confront H. and find my resolution in real life in 2018. This fact confirms that my preoccupation with such narratives was directly connected to my relationship with H.. Today I still read fanfics about such couples, due to my affection for the characters, as well as the popularity of this formula, but I also introduced other types of relationships into my reading rations. At the same time, Enjoltaire fanfiction lost its appeal to me, and for now only brings out negative memories.

In the course of this work I will discuss several cases of compensatory SHE similar to mine in that they temporary provide readers with an imaginary resolution for their traumas. However, it should be noted that in no way this similarity makes them identical to mine. My experience of reading Enjoltaire fanfiction was complicated by the state of my mental health at the time and my general tendency for obsessive behaviours. This is not necessarily a case with other fic readers, who in their turn may have other factors beside past trauma that inform their reading choices. I will return to the subject of fanfiction as means of dealing with a trauma twice more, first in this Chapter (p. 36) and then in the context of instrumental SHE (p. 47). But first I want

explore my experience with *Les Mis* fanfiction from a different, more positive perspective.

Les Amis²³ as Parasocial Relationship

The second aspect of *Les Misérables* fanfiction that has a positive influence on my emotional wellbeing is connected not to Grantaire's relationship with Enjolras, but rather to their friend circle. As I mentioned earlier in this Chapter, Grantaire is a part of a student revolutionary group that is often reimagined as a modern day human rights activist group. Les Amis, as they are fondly called by the fans, are close-knit and co-dependent—they live, work, and spend most of their free time together. For this reason, even though they are not the main focus of the fanfiction I read, Les Amis are an ever present constant. Since I have been reading *Les Misérables* fanfiction for over six years and spent a significant amount of time in their company, I developed a strong attachment to them comparable to my attachments to people around me. Scholars call such bonds parasocial relationships.

The concept of “parasocial relationships” was developed in 1956 by sociologists Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl. They noticed that “new mass media”—television, radio, and films—gave audience an illusion of face-to-face interaction with actors. According to their findings, this type of interaction can lead to the development of one-sided relationships on the part of an audience. Although aware that their bond with a performer cannot be reciprocated and is, essentially, illusory, spectators still experience emotions and attachment they would in any other relationship (Horton and Wohl 2016: 215).

Over the years, the phenomenon of parasocial relationships was further scrutinized by many other scholars. Although functionally parasocial relationships are fully equivalent to social, studies seeking to confirm that parasocial relationships can act as a substitute for ‘real’ social relationships failed to do so (Cohen 2003: 191-192). However, they can have a positive effect on somebody's life if combined with social relationships. For example, one study argues that parasocial relationships can help

²³ Les Amis is *Les Misérables* fandom's shorthand for Friends of the ABC, derived from its original form in French, Les Amis de l'ABC.

people struggling with low self-esteem to improve it (Derrick, Gabriel and Tippin 2008: 275).

In my case, my general parasocial relationship with Les Amis combined with more specific experiences I derive from reading fanfiction about them via compensatory SHE helps me in two ways. First of all, it allows me to compensate for prolonged social bonds. In the last nine years I lived in three different cities. I am also introverted and often do not have energy to meet with my friends regularly. As a result, while I am satisfied with my social life, most of my friendships do not last long and are shallow. Bonds with fictional characters, on the other hand, do not depend on my location and regular availability. Where, when and for how long we 'hang out' depends entirely on myself. For this reason my parasocial relationships are more long-lasting and intimate than my social ones. Having this type of a bond with Les Amis and other fictional characters gives me a sense of belonging and stability that my social relationships cannot. Additionally, the SHE I derive from fanfiction helps me to counter loneliness when I change my location or when my energy level is low.

Additionally, through reading fanfiction about close and co-dependent groups of people I satisfy my desire to have a large family. After my grandfather, grandmother, and uncle died when I was six, my immediate family and I lost contact with other relatives. If before we would regularly meet in a group from 10 to 20 people, suddenly my family was reduced to three—my parents and a newborn sister. The desire to have a large interconnected network of close personal relations stayed with me throughout my teenage years and early adulthood. Inability to create such network myself or become a part of pre-formed ones was negatively affecting my feelings of self-worth, while at the same time making me underappreciate people around me.

Through reading about Les Amis and other fictional friend-groups, I can compensate for the lack of such a group in my life. Since I feel 'friendship' towards each of thirteen members²⁴ of Les Amis, reading about them symbolically makes me a silent fourteenth member of the group. Through SHE via central character of a fic, I can also derive more concrete experiences associated with being a part of a friend group. Using Grantaire as a proxy, for example, I can experience a specific event while

²⁴ Modern interpretations of Les Amis de l'ABC that can be found in fanfiction often include original novel's female characters who have personal connections to some members of the original group, such as Cosette, who is a love interest of one of the students.

simultaneously getting support from a large number of people each of whom can provide a different perspective on the situation and a different style of assistance. Having an easy access to this type of experience through SHE allows me to focus my energy in the real life only on friendships I can and do have, instead of longing for something I do not. As a result, I form healthier relationships with other people and become more content with the friendships I have. Overall these effects has a positive effect on my feeling of self-worth that to me is tied to my ability to function socially.

To summarise, fanfiction about Les Amis provides me with a feeling of belonging and stability, as well as helps to combat loneliness. Furthermore, it also allows me to gain an experience of being a part of friend circle and thus maintain my feeling of self-worth. It is worthy to note that in this case identification with a central character of the story is not required. While the majority of fanfiction I read in this fandom is focused on Grantaire or Enjolras, stories told from the perspective of other members of Les Amis work equally well. This brings me to a conclusion that while identification with a character can be helpful for readers in certain situations, it is not required in order for them to benefit from SHE.

Furthermore, I should also mention that this type of compensatory SHE will not be discussed separately in the ethnography-based section of this Chapter. Although my research shows that most readers do indeed form parasocial relationships with the fanfiction characters, only two reported experiences that can be interpreted as compensatory SHE. One survey respondent stated that reading fanfiction about strong sibling bonds gives them a chance to vicariously experience that kind of relationship, as their own relationship with siblings is more shallow (Survey respondent 54, 2018). Another fan mentioned that that reading about characters facing the same problems as them makes them feel “less alone” in their struggle (Survey respondent 8, 2018). In this case reading fanfiction can be interpreted as an attempt to compensate for support group. Additionally, parasocial bonds as a source of a sense of belonging and stability

Dreaming of Better Life: Happy Endings, Affection and Gender Equality

In this section, I explore an array of ways in which fic readers utilise their compensatory SHE from reading fanfiction in order to improve their emotional states. This section is

structured in accordance with the possible benefits of reading fanfictions as perceived by the fanfiction readers themselves: (1) short-term resolution of past traumas, (2) compensation for emotional experiences reader lacks in real life, (3) temporal escape from one's reality, and (4) avoidance of gender inequality inherent in patriarchal societies and popular narratives.

Resolution of Past Traumas I

One of the main benefits of compensatory SHE for fanfic readers as identified in the course of my work is temporary resolution of a past trauma. In the case of one of the respondents to my survey (see Appendix B), fanfiction helped him to recover from the trauma associated with sexual abuse:

Fanfic writers are willing [to] get into the dark, depressing, horrific details, and then pull you back out of them and leave you with a hopeful ending. I'm sure reading fics like that helped me recover from my trauma more than most people would think (Survey respondent 49, 2018).

As can be inferred from this quote, this fanfiction reader uses fanfiction reminiscent of his experience of sexual abuse in order to subdue his stress related to this trauma and gain hope. A motive of sexual violence and abuse is also one of the key themes Janice Radway also explores in her work with regard to women's romances. She describes a process similar to what is reported by the respondent above—first a reader experiences a sexual violence by proxy and then is led to a hopeful ending. However, the nature of its effect seems different in these two cases. According to Radway, in romance such hopeful endings do not serve to heal previously experienced abuses, but to rationalize sexual violence making it acceptable as a necessary step towards successful romantic relationship and marriage within a patriarchal society (Radway 1993: 140-149). Yet in the case of a fanfiction reader from above, the experience of the “hopeful ending” after the immersion into the traumatic situation similar to his, allowed him to combat the trauma from the abuse he has already suffered from in the past. Note, that unlike romance readers, he is not trying to normalize abuse, but oppositely confirm his experience as abnormal and traumatic by seeking stories where sexual violence is described in “depressing, horrific details” (Survey respondent 49, 2018). This proves that the two cases, while similar on the surface, have radically different underpinnings. Nevertheless, I do believe that Radway's interpretatio can be relevant for fanfiction reading, especially in the segments of fanfiction community that

I did not reach in the course of my research. This theory is supported by the immense success of E. L. James' 2013 former *Twilight* (Meyer 2006) fanfic²⁵ *Fifty Shades of Grey* (Busse 2017: 142), that has been heavily critiqued for romanticizing abuse (Bonomi, Altenburger and Walton 2013: 741-742).

Meanwhile, the experience described by a fan above is somewhat similar to my own. As discussed in the autoethnographic part of this Chapter, in order to mitigate my emotional distress over an unresolved conflict with a love interest, I sought out fanfiction that reminded me of my own situation but concluded with a 'happy ending.' Such fanfiction provided me with an imaginary resolution of the conflict and thus helped to override my distress and anger related to this conflict with the feeling of closure and peace.

This value of reading fanfiction in helping to cope with a past trauma was also noted by other respondents. One fan who was raised in the abusive family reportedly read "a lot of 'back for the holidays' fics where the character(s) stand up for themselves finally or just realize how much they've outgrown where they grew up" (Survey respondent 18, 2018). Here again fanfiction provides reader with a fantasy of a resolution of a conflict that they evidently at the time could not yet achieve in real life. Other informants are more vague about the nature of their trauma, but note the hopeful ending of fanfiction about experiences similar to theirs are beneficial for their emotional wellbeing (Survey respondents 20 and 50).

While some respondents indicate that such fanfics had a long-term effect in regard to their trauma, this is not concordant to my own experience. However, long-term effects from reading fanfiction can occur in the cases of instrumental SHE when people use fanfiction to analyze their feelings rather than supplant them. And as I say in the Introduction, compensatory and instrumental SHE can co-occur. For example, the reader who struggles with the aftermath of growing in the abusive environment, noted that reading fanfiction was "inspirational" and also helped them to understand that they are not responsible for being mistreated (Survey respondent 18, 2018). I classify this particular effect of reading fanfiction as instrumental SHE and will discuss similar cases in the next Chapter.

²⁵ Some fic writers succeed at publishing their fan work as original novels after changing characters' name and other details that connect their fanfic to its source material. This practice is known within fanfiction community as "filing off the serial numbers."

Compensation for Basic Emotional Needs

Besides allowing readers to temporarily resolve their emotional distress in regard to past traumas, fanfiction can also vicariously provide readers with emotional experiences they wish for but do not receive in their daily lives, and thus make their reading of the text compensatory. For example, one of the most common issues compensatory SHE from fanfiction can make accessible to its readers is the experience of care and affection. As aestheticofanartist notes on Tumblr, she “reads fan-fiction so [she] can feel the love and affection that [she is] not getting [in her real life]” (@aestheticofanartist, October 08, 2018). Another user, ellipsical-elle, mentions that they do not only read a certain fanfiction but a specific chapter when “[they] need to be kissed, [they] need to be held, [they] need to be seen” (@ellipsical-elle, August 12, 2018). On the similar note, interviewee Lana shared that she reads fanfiction because her life “lacks any passion” (personal communication, 2018). This example shows that readers not only use fanfiction as a mean of compensating for the lack of positive experiences they are not getting in real life but also that they are self-aware about doing so.

A further ethnographic research on Tumblr shows that users are indeed self-reflective about employing fanfiction reading for receiving emotional support and affection. Such consciousness can be found not only in written comments but also in the visual content available on Tumblr.



I really like this meme, guys

#mpf #whump memes #whemes #is this a pigeon? #(this actually is my coping mechanism tho)



5 months ago, 66,606 notes

Fig. 1. Meme “Is this a pigeon” with a young man titled “My desire to be cared for by another human” pointing at a butterfly titled “Hurt/comfort fics” with a subtitle “Is this a coping mechanism?”. The text below a picture reads “I really like this meme, guys” and has the following tags: mpf, whump memes, whemes, is this a pigeon, and this actually is my coping mechanism tho (@mypoorfaves, July, 2018).

As one can see in the Figure 1, the author identifies their need (“desire to be cared for by another human”) and a solution to satisfy it in the form of reading fanfiction stories (“hurt/comfort²⁶ fics”). In addition, the author includes an analytical note about this process as being a form of ‘coping mechanism’ and a tag “(this actually is my coping mechanism tho)”, which shows a high level of self-awareness about this compensatory function of fanfiction and hints at its intentionality.

²⁶ Hurt/comfort is a genre of fanfiction in which a characters is hurt in some way, and is being cared for and supported by another character.

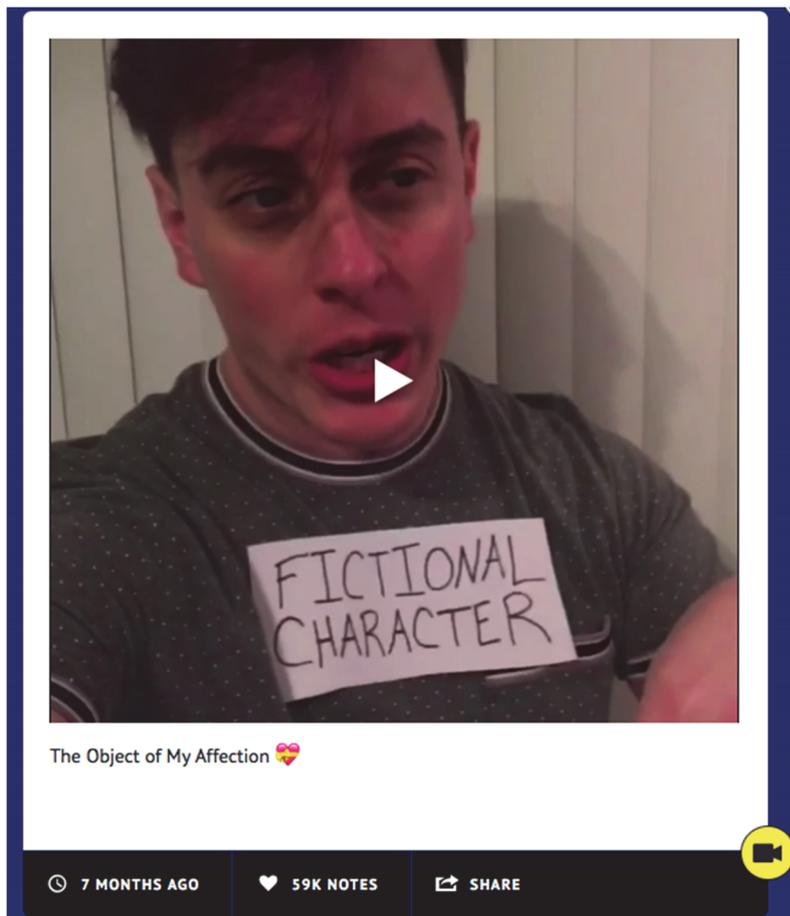


Fig. 2. Screenshot of a video showing Thomas Sanders with a label “fictional character” plastered to his chest. A text below it reads “The Object of My Affection” (Thomas Sanders, @thatsthat, September, 2018, <http://thomassanders.com/post/177108038652/the-object-of-my-affection>).

Similarly to the first illustration, Figure 2 shows a screenshot from a video in which a viewer can see a person labeled as a ‘fictional character’ and an added explanation below that says that a fictional character in this video is an ‘object of [author’s] affection.’ In the video Tumblr user Thomas is having a conversation with an undefined fictional character. Below is a transcription of what is he saying in the video:

“Fictional Character: I feel it’s important to stress — I’m not real.

Thomas: Tsch! Shut your beautiful precious adorable mouth and let me derive every bit of my happiness from all the moments you’re happy!

FC: You mean in the fictional work I’m featured in?

T: Yep. And all the works I’ve written²⁷ you into. [shows a notebook]”

²⁷ Thomas is a prominent queer YouTube comedian. Although he is vocal about being a fic reader, to my knowledge he does not publish fanfiction, in the least not actively and/or under his name. For this reason, I am interpreting this video from the context of Thomas as a reader and do not actively establish difference between readers and writers.

(Thomas Sanders, @thatsthat, September, 2018).

This video too demonstrates not only that fanfiction readers and writers alike might “derive every bit of [their] happiness” via their SHE through favorite fictional characters, but that those readers and authors self-consciously employ this tactic for their emotional comfort. Additionally, both posts received a significant amount of response—at the time of writing mypoorfaves’ post has over 60,000 notes²⁸ and video by Thomas over 59,000. This implies that compensatory nature of fanfiction in regard to providing readers with more general emotional experiences like affection and nurturance is a community wide knowledge. My research does not show the same level of awareness in regard to other functions discussed in this work.

Escaping the Reality

The research I conducted for the purposes of this work also indicates that compensatory SHE provides readers with an opportunity to break away from the dullness, sadness, and stressfulness of their everyday life. One of my interviewees, Lana (26, bisexual), who has been a fic-reader for 19 years, describes how reading fanfiction represents for her an “escape from reality” and a way to “to widen one’s horizons” since “in fanfiction more [fantastical] things are possible than in real life” (personal communication, September 5, 2018). It is important to clarify that in Russian “widening one’s horizon” (“rasshirit’ gorizonty”) means exploring the unfamiliar.²⁹ Lana’s claim about the role of fanfiction reading is supported by another interviewee (Tereza, 22, heterosexual), who similarly mentions that even though she does not consider her life necessarily as “boring”, she still likes to sometimes leave her reality for a more eventful fanfiction world because of “all the drama and action plots” (personal communication, September 3, 2018). Lana and Tereza’s examples show that reading fanfiction can act a countermeasure against boredom, since it allows readers to experience worlds and events they believe to be more exciting than their own realities.

Meanwhile, some readers show a slightly different attitude. One survey respondent for example, shared the following: “[Fanfiction] takes me away from the real world and

²⁸ Notes include likes and reblogs.

²⁹ Interview with Lana has been conducted in Russian.

basically, saves me. It's the light when everything else feels dark" (Survey respondent 2, 2018). This finding is also reflected in the data gathered during my research on Tumblr. For example, kurosmind claims that fanfiction provides an opportunity for "escapism" and space for those who do not want "to remember all [of the] time how awful the world is" (@kurosmind, 2015). In these two cases escapism helps readers to combat depression or, perhaps, anxieties about living in a modern society.

It is also noteworthy that in 19 out of 53 responses to my online survey, respondents use the word "escape" or "escapism" to describe fanfiction and its effects. The commonality in the use of these terms by both anonymous and not-anonymous respondents indicates that 'escape' from reality is one of the key roles of the fanfiction for them. In her research, Radway notices that romance readers also use the word "escape" to describe their motivations for reading romance fiction. She then elaborates that "silent reading requires the reader to block out the surrounding world and to give consideration to other people and to another time", which gives the reader an opportunity to "deny the present" and the problems demanding her attention (Radway 1993: 92). In such case, in addition to providing a reader with an opportunity to escape the reality, "silent reading" can also be interpreted as a form of protest as it includes reclaiming of the space and agency by a reader.

Eschewing Gender Inequality

In the course of my research, I identified one specific problem fanfiction readers are trying to "escape," or rather just avoid through their reading activities. It is gender inequality that they find as inherent in society and in popular cultural narratives. My research shows that female fans try to eschew gender inequality in two different ways.

Firstly, they can read fanfiction that puts female characters into the center of the action and give her the agency that is traditionally granted only to male characters. One Tumblr user millennialfangirl reflects how in her teens, fanfiction allowed her to experience romance and adventure differently than in dominant culture texts: "In the [fanfiction] stories I read, [...] I experienced a world where anyone could be themselves, where the women made history, and where the boys were the ones falling [in love] head over heels. It was such a gift to have that at such a vulnerable and impressionable age" (@millennialfangirl, August 15, 2015). As one can see, this

reader used fanfiction to break from gender norms imposed on her by the patriarchal norms of the dominant society and instead fantasize about world where such norms were reversed.

More commonly, however, fanfiction readers seem to avoid insufficient and/or flawed representation of women as well as gender inequality by eliminating the factor of femaleness altogether through slash.³⁰ As YourLibrarian (heterosexual) writes in her essay published on AO3, she finds female characters in pop cultural texts, including in published romantic fiction, “enormously irritating in the way that they don't react in the least as [she] would expect (or would do) [in real life].” (YourLibrarian 2018) Additionally, she finds it impossible to “ignor[e] the real world consequences of [female characters’] behavior because [she] ha[s] lived life as a woman.” (Ibid.) Reading slash, she concludes, allows her “to choose who to identify with” depending on character’s actions and not their gender (Ibid.). Thus, reading slash fanfiction allows this reader to avoid narratives that present stereotypical gender roles she does not identify with. Moreover, YourLibrarian notes that “two men [in a romantic relationship] will almost always be on a more equal footing than a man and a woman. [...] And what some slash readers are very attracted to are symbiosis and equality” (Ibid.) This comment shows that fanfiction centered on queer men allows female readers like YourLibrarian to vicariously live through a relationship in which romantic partners are fully equal and unburdened by differences in male and female experiences.

This type of avoidance of the gender inequality has been analyzed by fanfiction scholars Patricia Frazer Lamb and Diana L. Veith who theorize that at the heart of slash fanfiction is the belief that ‘true love’ can exist only between equals (Lamb and Veith 2014: 99). According to them, the patriarchal society does not allow for full equality in male-female relationships and impedes equality in female-female relationship due to the “cultural dictum of female passivity” (Lamb and Veith 2014: 102). Moreover, referring to Lillian Federman and Simone de Beauvoir and echoing YourLibrarian, they add that “men’s and women’s experiences are so different that each sex views the other as the ‘other’—and that, consequently, true psychological

³⁰ According to a Tumblr-based fan-statistician centurumlumina, 89.7% of respondents to her survey reported reading slash fanfiction, 50.7% het, 49.4% gen and 44.1% femslash (@centurumlumina, October 1, 2013). Since 2013, there has been a rise in femslash fanfiction, but I did not found new statistics. See centurumlumina’s full statistics and their review of their methodology and limitations in Appendix A.

intimacy can be found only with someone of one's own sex" (Lamb and Veith 2014: 112). For these reasons they conclude that the only type of a narrative that can provide an illusion of a romantic relationship that is not governed by gender is the one involving two men (Lamb and Veith 2014: 102; cf. Russ 2014: 86).

Conclusion

In this Chapter, I discussed a variety of situations in which fanfiction can act as a source of emotional support via compensatory SHE, that I define as a tactic used by readers to vicariously gain experiences unavailable to them in real life. In order to do so I conducted autoethnography, as well as analysed the data gathered through in-person and online interviews, an anonymous survey, and an archival research on a microblogging platform Tumblr and a fanfiction archive AO3.

The autoethnographic part of the research revealed that fanfiction reading can be used in four ways. First of all, compensatory SHE from reading fanfiction about a situation reminiscent of my own provided me with an opportunity to achieve an immediate yet a temporary closure for an unresolved interpersonal conflict mixed with unrequited romantic feelings. In this case, repeated reading of fanfiction effectively helped to subdue an intense emotional distress for a prolonged period of time. Furthermore, a combination of compensatory SHE and parasocial relationship—a one-way bond with fictional characters, helps me to combat loneliness when I do not have any capability to reach out to my friends. Additionally, my parasocial relationships with fanfiction characters give me a sense of belonging and stability that my social relationships do not. Lastly, I use fanfiction to compensate for a lack of an experience of being a part of a friend circle, which I strongly desired from a young age. Being able to gratify this desire through SHE also allows me to build healthier social relationships. Since my feeling of self-worth depends to a degree on my ability to function as a social being, this case of SHE positively affects my self-esteem and thus my overall emotional state.

Further data show that this tactic is used by other fic-readers to compensate for a variety of experiences, ranging from highly specific, like standing up to manipulative parents, to more general, like gaining affection and nurturance. Fanfiction reading is also often used by readers as a way of "escape" from stress and boredom of their

lives, as it allows them to temporarily forget about their troubles and vicariously participate in the lives and worlds of their favorite characters. There is also a distinct value for women who seek a healthier and more accurate representation of female experiences in art and media, or who, in the case of slash readers, might employ fanfiction to experience the world and relationships based on equality and acceptance.

My research shows that compensatory functions of fanfiction reading extend further than those proposed by Radway in relation to romance reading. Unlike publishing authors, fic-writers are not motivated by profit and thus do not aim to attract mass audience.³¹ As a result, unlike traditional romance writing for women, fanfiction can offer a greater range of narratives, and thus fulfill a much wider spectrum of needs of a much more diverse audience. This makes fanfiction reading especially beneficial for people who do not see themselves represented in mass culture as, for example, male victims of sexual assault or members of the LGBTQ+ community.

³¹ As characters and settings used in fanfiction are usually copyrighted and thus cannot be used for financial gain, fanfiction is strictly non-profit.

Chapter 2

Instrumental Second-Hand Experience:

The Guidebook

Author: Why do you personally think people read fanfiction? Why do you?

Respondent: I use fanfiction as escapism for sure! When I'm lonely I turn to fic, when I'm sad I turn to fic, when I'm frustrated I turn to fic. I can't really process my own emotions very well cause I have very low intrapersonal intelligence (I have no idea what feelings I'm feeling like, ever) so reading fic sometimes has me crying and processing things I didn't even know was [sic] bothering me (Survey respondent 22, 2018)!

Respondent: The stories I read make me question the way I think and that is sometimes hard, true, but after that only two things can happen: either I change for the better or I reaffirm what I've doubted (Survey respondent 50, 2018).

In this Chapter, I discuss the second type of the second-hand experience—instrumental SHE. This is a tactic where readers use fanfiction character's experiences instrumentally in order to analyze their emotional experiences. Additionally fanfiction can be a source of instructions for navigating readers' lives, or a safe way to explore various situations and emotional states as an form informal education. As such it can, for example, help reader to manage interpersonal relationships, to explore their sexuality or to better understand what other people are experiencing in their lives. This Chapter is structured similarly to the previous one, with the exception of autoethnography that I do not employ here. During my ethnographic research I compiled data that can be organized into several groups of functions that are achieved via instrumental SHE by fic readers. These groups are: (1) "resolution of past traumas II," where I discuss readers who use fanfiction to analyze their traumatic life experiences; (2) "safe space for emotional exploration," where I look at reading fanfiction as a way for the readers to safely explore a variety of negative experiences and emotions; (3) "relationship management," in which I talk about fanfiction being used by readers as a source of guidance in building relationships with other people; (4) "safe space for sexual exploration," where I discuss erotic fanfiction as a source of

informal sex education; and (4) “normalization of queer experience,” in which I discuss fanfiction as a source of positive representation of queer lives that allows readers to accept their sexual and gender identity.

My analysis of instrumental value of fanfiction is based on the data I gathered from fanfiction readers through interviews, online survey, and a research conducted on Tumblr and AO3. Tumblr data were gathered through blogs of my fellow fic readers, the official blog of Organization for Transformative Works (@trasformativeworks), and tags ‘fanfiction discourse’, ‘fanfiction meta’ and ‘fandom life.’ AO3 essays I will be analysing I found manually through ‘meta’ and ‘essays’ tags. I will also be looking at a discussions that unfolded in the comment sections to these essays. Answers to the survey used in this Chapter were provided to the same questions as in the previous one: “Have reading fanfiction ever helped you to cope with/work through real life problems?”. The interview questions were likewise the same.

Resolution of Past Traumas II

According to many fic readers, fanfiction can help to process negative emotions and fears. In the case of Emilia (26, heterosexual), reading fanfiction about a character she relates to, helped her to “work through” her fear of hospitals. She believes that fanfiction can give people in this way "a safe platform" to engage with negative feelings they may otherwise try to repress (personal communication, 2018). This claim is supported by an example of one of the online survey respondents who reports that reading fanfiction helped them with long-repressed emotions about "really nasty" divorce of their parents (Survey respondent 32, 2018).

In addition to that, the case of podcaster Lockeia Stone shows that fanfiction can also help to endure an ongoing traumatic experience. As she recounts in her podcast on AO3, at the age of 11, reading fanfiction about army pilots was her only way to process the fear that her father, likewise an army pilot, might not not return back from war (Stone 2017). As I discuss in the first Chapter, cases such as Lockeia Stone’s cannot always be easily classified as compensatory or instrumental SHE. For example, in her podcast Lockeia notes that in the fanfiction she was reading, the army pilots would always safely return home, “something [she] dearly wished [her] father would one day do” (Ibid.). From the perspective of compensatory SHE this can be interpreted as an

attempt to temporarily participate in the fantasy where her father is coming back from a war unharmed. However, as she states herself, this fantasy was not her main objective: “Through the lens of the Gundam Pilots coming back home to their loved ones [...], I was able to process emotions that I, an eleven year old girl, had no one else to process with” (Ibid.). As one can see, instead of just escaping her fear through fantasy, she utilised fanfiction reading as a mean to process and understand that fear. Furthermore, the finality in her statement (“was able to”) implies that she was successful in this endeavour. For these reasons I understand Locke’s case, and other cases listed above, as instrumental SHE.

Safe Space for Emotional Exploration

Besides helping readers to process their preexisting emotional states, fanfiction can also serve as a safe space for exploration of negative emotions or hypothetical life situations that might help a reader to psychologically prepare for them. In this regard, one of my interviewees, Tereza, disclosed that she prefers fanfiction with “intense bad endings” (personal communication, September 3, 2018). She stated that she sees her life as “too perfect” and that she hopes that experiencing “hopeless” scenarios by proxy will help her to prepare for “[the] bad times that have to come one day” (Ibid.). So, unlike other respondents from previous section, Tereza is not trying to process a specific fear that stems from her past experiences. Instead she endeavors to mentally prepare herself for a variety of difficult and potentially traumatic situations she might encounter later in her life.

Another interviewee, Lana, reported that fanfiction helps her better understand people around her and their lives:

[By reading fanfiction,] You can live through some things that didn’t happen in your life [like depression, loss of parent or bullying]—things that you didn’t experience, but the author writes fanfiction based on their own experience or an experience of their loved ones. That means they take this issue seriously and with knowledge. And you’re not reading some super smart article about depression, but through fanfiction you can assimilate [this information] better (personal communication, September 5, 2018).

This comment shows that by reading fanfiction the respondent was able to develop her knowledge and understanding about specific emotional experiences of others, such as bullying, without living through them. In this case fanfiction acts as a source

of informal education. However, a more important point made by Lana is that fic authors mostly write about what they personally experienced and for this reason fanfiction feels more relatable than “some pretentious articles” (Ibid.). Several more respondents expressed a similar belief in ‘genuineness’ of marginal voices in fanfiction writing and fanfiction’s educational quality. It shows that fic readers appreciate fanfiction because it provides them with an emic perspective on various situations, and as such is more valuable than official sources of information.

Relationships Management

As I discussed previously, Radway’s women employ heroines’ experiences from romance novels as a guide for successful management of their heterosexual marriages (Radway 1993: 149-151). My research shows that some readers use fanfiction for this purpose as well. One survey respondent connects their previous propensity for reading romantic fanfiction with the fact their parents never formed a “healthy committed romantic relationship” after their divorce (Survey respondent 54, 2018). This fan believes that romantic fanfiction attracted them because they had a "subconscious need to see that sort of relationship modelled [successfully]" (Ibid.). Stories they read helped them understand what approaches and skills are required for a long-term relationship, and how to apply them to their own life, something they could not learn from the example of their parents (Ibid.).

Two other respondents explained how reading fanfiction helped them to manage their relationships when they were struggling with mental illnesses. One reader disclosed that reading fanfiction about depressed characters opening up about their feelings to a friend helped them to gather courage and reach out to their own friends and get help for their own problems in this way (Survey respondent 40, 2018). Additionally, the same respondent continued, reading about depressed characters regaining joy and “getting the most they could out of living” inspired them to take up hobbies they used to have before depression (Ibid.). In this case a reader uses fanfiction instrumentally in two ways, as an instruction to communicate their problems to the people they are close to; and as inspiration to be more active. Another respondent shared an experience about managing their mental illness and interpersonal relationship through reading fanfiction: “I have been suicidal in the past and seeing characters be sad when their friend characters are suicidal makes me remember what I would be doing to my

friends and family. Reading the emotions of these characters somehow hits me in a way talking to my loved ones can't always [sic]" (Survey respondent 13, 2018). Contrary to the previous case, this reader does not employ fanfiction as a direct instruction on how to act. Instead, they currently use it as a way to better relate to the feelings of their family and friends and to adjust their behavior in order to avoid causing suffering to them. In this particular case, this appeal to empathy also helps a respondent to combat suicidal ideation.

Safe Space for Sexual Exploration

Furthermore, my research indicates that instrumental second-hand experience can also be derived through reading sexually explicit fanfiction. Such fanfiction can be used as a "free handbook" on sexual relations or as a way to vicariously explore various forms of sexual intimacy (@millennialfangirl, August 15, 2015). According to Kath Albury, there has been a moderate number of studies of commercial pornography as a source of informal sex education, but universal consensus on what exactly pornography teaches is yet to be achieved. While it has been noted that pornography can be a significant source of education for LGBTQ+ people, its effect on cisgender heterosexuals is criticised for "eroticis[ing] inequality" with respect to gender (Albury 2014: 117). Similarly, the examples from my research below show that not only fic readers too perceive erotic fanfiction as informal sex education, but believe it to be more positive in terms of representing sexuality than the erotic or pornographic media of the dominant culture.

For example, millennialfangirl reminisces on her Tumblr blog that in her youth, reading fanfiction helped her to learn "all about the birds and the bees, and that a woman's pleasure was important too" (@millennialfangirl, August 15, 2015). Moreover, the interviewee Lana holds the following opinion about the advantages of representation of female sexuality in fanfiction over the one in mass culture, in this case not pornography, but TV series:

Obviously, they do not show pornography in [TV] series, whereas in fanfiction they can write whatever. But still, how do they usually show heterosexual sex scene [in TV series]? He slips inside of her and doesn't touch her in any other way but she [...] already shakes from an orgasm. [...] What kind of view on sex does it provide teens with? First a girl watches such things in large amounts and then she thinks that something is wrong with her. [...] In fanfiction there is at least

something [...] more representative of actual sex (personal communication, September 5, 2018).

From these examples I can infer that reading erotic fanfiction can act as a source of sex education for female readers since it often puts a woman's sexual satisfaction at the forefront. Additionally, according to these readers, unlike mass cultural narratives fanfiction about heterosexual couples often provides a more realistic representation of what is required from woman's partner for her to achieve an orgasm and have a fulfilling sex life.

However, as the case of another young woman shows, even erotic fanfiction about queer males can serve as a way for young women to explore their sexuality. As AO3 user Eldsjl explains her affinity for slash fanfiction, in her teenage years she felt curious but uncomfortable about sex and for this reason tried to avoid identification with characters in erotic fiction. Erotic slash fanfiction allowed her to maintain comfortable distance between the described sexual acts and herself, since, unlike her, characters she was reading about were male-bodied (Eldsjl, December 13, 2015, comment on Blumenstern 2015).

Moreover, sexually explicit fanfiction featuring can be an essential source of sex education for queer people. This holds especially true for queer women and transgender/nonbinary people, who not only have limited access to official sex education but also are often misrepresented in commercial pornography. Pornography featuring same-sex female couples and transgender women is largely targeted at heterosexual men (Phillips 2006: 153-154; Scanlon 2016: 3). At the same time, pornography featuring transgender men and genderqueer people is practically non-existent. While queer feminist pornography that can offer non-fetishising representation of these minorities became more widespread in the last decade (Ryberg 2015: 162), it remains potentially hard to access for teenagers.

In addition to providing basic sex education to young queer and female readers, interviewee Lana also suggested that reading erotic fanfiction can be a good way to vicariously explore specific sexual practices (e.g. BDSM practices, role playing) one might not be comfortable to attempt or even discuss with other people in real life (personal communication, September 5, 2018). On a related note, AO3 user Emillia argues in her essay that second-hand experience from erotic fanfiction can be helpful for "survivors of sexual [...] trauma who dare to explore this emotional intimacy but are

not ready yet to engage in the physical” (Gryphon 2018). It follows that reading sexually explicit fanfiction can be used by readers as a way to vicariously explore various forms of sexual intimacy without harm or awkwardness it might ensue in the real world.

Normalization of Queer Experience

In this last section of this Chapter and thesis, I discuss fanfiction as a rare source of positive representation of queer experience. Many queer characters in popular texts today are presented as tragic figures. For one example, a 2018 drama film *Boy Erased* directed by Joel Edgerton follows a young man forced to enter a gay conversion therapy program. Another 2018 drama *Girl* (directed by Lukas Dhont), tells a story of a young transgender ballerina suffering from gender dysphoria that culminates in the exceedingly violent scene where the main character cuts off her own genitalia.³² While this type of stories can be good in terms of raising awareness and nurturing tolerance in non-queer audiences, a heightened focus on this type of narrative creates a cultural gap of narratives in which queer people are allowed to live happily, or, at the very least, experience tragic events that are not tied solely to their sexual and/or gender identity. Fortunately for queer fans, this is the gap that fic writers are more than happy to fill. Unlike mass culture, slash fanfiction portrays queerness as something mundane, a simple matter of having a same sex partner. When redefining popular characters as members of LGBTQ+ community, it does not suddenly start to portray them as victims, but rather focuses on them as they originally are—individuals with rich personalities and pasts, presents, and futures that are not defined by queerphobia. As such it can help readers struggling with acceptance of their sexual and gender identities to see queer experience not as a life sentence, but just one aspect of their identity compatible with leading a happy and fulfilling life. One survey respondent stated following on this matter:

Representation for transgender men in published books or other media forms] was virtually non-existent when I started reading fics. It was powerfully validating to read about my favourite characters as trans, and see them experience the same things as me. It was also great to read gay romances where the gay part wasn't the focus

³² This movie is particular is representative of how differently the same movie can be perceived by queer and non-queer audiences. *Girl* has been celebrated by critics worldwide and received several prestigious awards. Yet it was harshly critiqued by trans and queer writers for being potentially harmful for transgender viewers (Romano 2018).

of the story. For it to be shown so casually [...] was huge in helping to normalize and destigmatized being gay for me while I came to terms with my sexuality and gender identity (Survey respondent 49, 2018).

As one can see from this quote, reading fanfiction can be essential for younger members of LGBTQ+ community as it provides positive representation of queer experiences not found in popular texts, in this case experience of transgender homosexual men. For this fan, the representation was important by itself as it validated their personal experience and identity. Secondly, as I discuss above, fanfiction portrays queerness as something mundane and normal. This "casualness," as it was put by this fan, normalized and destigmatized for him homosexual identity and thus helped him to accept his sexual and gender identity. This claim is supported by Tony (23, gay), who said that he started reading slash fanfiction long before he "came out even to [him]self," and it helped him to accept his homosexuality and to come out to his friends and family. Similarly, fanfiction reportedly prompted one Tumblr user to recognise herself as a bisexual (@hazelbaum, April 19, 2016).

Conclusions

In this Chapter, I explored reading fanfiction from the perspective of instrumental second-hand experience. Instrumental SHE is a tactic through which readers can use fictional character as a proxy to try to better understand their experiences or experiences of other people, or as a form of informal education. My analysis was based on the data gathered through in-person and online interviews, an anonymous online survey, and an ethnographic research on a microblogging platform Tumblr and a fanfiction archive AO3.

According to my research fanfiction readers can utilise instrumental SHE in four ways: (1) to process their own negative emotions regarding a past or ongoing trauma; (2) to improve their emotional intelligence in order to better empathise with other people or prepare for a potential future trauma; (3) to explore their sexuality and vicariously experience various sexual practices; (4) to normalize queer experience and accept own sexuality.

Conclusion

In this paper I attempted to shed the light on the positive impact fanfiction has on the lives of readers, especially those who are traditionally marginalised by the society and popular culture. To do so I examined how fanfiction can provide readers with various types of emotional support, as well as guidance in their personal struggles and informal education. My analysis was based on autoethnography, ethnography of online spaces (Tumblr, fanfiction archive), in-person and online interviews, and an anonymous online-survey. Since much of my research was informed by the fandoms I personally socialise in, my sample was largely restricted to politically left leaning Western female fans in their 20s. I analysed and interpreted the data through the theoretical framework provided by Janice Radway's 1984 ethnographic study of romance-reading women. Then I discussed my findings via concepts of compensatory and instrumental second-hand experience which I developed based on Radway's work—tactics which the readers utilize in order to address their personal and emotional struggles.

Once again, according to my classification, compensatory SHE is “a tactic through which a reader can acquire certain experiences vicariously through a character they identify or empathise with in order to compensate for something they lack in real life” (p. 15); and instrumental SHE as “a tactic where readers use fanfiction character's experiences as a source of instructions for navigating their lives, or a safe way to explore different situations and emotional states as an form informal education” (Ibid.). As shown by my research, in cases of dealing trauma the line between these two types of SHE can be blurry as the two often overlap. Additionally, my research findings suggest that fanfiction readers are usually more aware of utilising their readings in a compensatory manner rather than instrumental. Alternatively, it can be assumed that compensatory SHE is simply more common as it provides immediate feeling of satisfaction and relieve. This theory is supported by the fact that some of the respondents compared reading fanfiction to addictions. Finally, while I chose to title this work “Fanfiction as a Source of Emotional Support,” it is important to note that some applications of instrumental SHE described here extend beyond the realm of emotional support.

In my autoethnographic analysis I demonstrated that reading fanfiction can have multiple functions. My experience also showed that a single text and its specific elements can serve several unrelated purposes at once.

Firstly, in my autoethnography I juxtaposed the relationship of *Les Misérables* characters Grantaire and Enjolras (Enjoltaire) to my unrequited feelings for another woman, H.. In this case, reading fanfiction allowed me to: (1) vicariously compensate for the resolution I needed after H. ceased our communication with no explanation; (2) mitigate my negative feelings towards her; (3) symbolically gain control over my emotions; and (4) participate in a fantasy where long-term feelings for someone concluded with a 'happy ending.' Elements of the Enjoltaire fanfiction that were particularly helpful were: (1) strong identification with Grantaire due to our similarities in character, occupation and affinity for self-destruction; (2) partial identification with Enjolras, due to our shared problem with anger management; (3) the initial premise of the narrative, in which Grantaire harbours unrequited feelings for Enjolras, which parallels my own situation; (4) the progression of their relationship from hostility to friendship to romance.

Then I discussed compensatory SHE from the perspective of my parasocial relationship to fictional characters. Using again *Les Mis* fanfiction as an example I illustrated how reading fanfiction helps me on two more levels. First of all, my relationship with Les Amis is deeper and older than most of my social relationships and so can provide me with a feeling of belonging and stability in the way the latter cannot. Reading a fanfic about the Friends of ABC also demands less energy than spending time with real people, which is especially helpful due to my introverted nature. Therefore on a more general level SHE from reading fanfiction allows me to combat loneliness. At the same time, on a more concrete level, SHE from reading fanfiction about close-knit friend groups allows me to have an experience of being a part of such a group myself. As I have been trying to become a part of this type of network since teenagehood, having an opportunity to compensate for this experience via SHE allows me to focus on individual friendships rather than a search of a group.

My ethnographic data show that compensatory SHE is linked to emotional support most directly, and, as mentioned above, readers often utilise it for this purpose consciously and intentionally. Via compensatory SHE readers can vicariously acquire a variety of experiences they for some reason cannot gain in real life. These

experiences range from highly specific, like standing up to manipulative parents, to more general, like gaining affection and nurturance. It can help to cope with a trauma, to combat loneliness and isolation, or to simply override a reader's negative emotional state after a stressful day. Moreover, fanfiction reading allows fic readers to temporarily forget about their troubles and instead vicariously participate in the lives and worlds of their favorite characters. This way fanfiction allows readers to the "escape" stress, boredom, and anxieties of their lives. Additionally, through fanfiction they can experience a world without gender inequality that is embedded in the dominant culture. It must be noted, that while compensatory SHE is an effective tool in reducing emotional distress and maintaining one's emotional state, its effects are short lasting. Compensatory SHE's objective is not to solve a reader's problem, but rather to imagine it solved or eliminated entirely and then immediately feel relieved.

Unlike compensatory SHE, instrumental SHE allows readers to address their problems more directly. Submerging themselves into a mindspace of a character dealing with a problem similar to theirs, for example, parents' divorce or a fear of hospitals, helps readers to process and to better understand their otherwise repressed emotions regarding that problem. In this case, reading fanfiction can have a therapeutic value, and has more lasting effects. Furthermore, fanfiction can also provide readers with a safe space to explore negative emotions and experiences they have not yet lived through, with two potential objectives: to prepare themselves for the future adversity, or to better understand experiences of other people. While the latter has more to do with the emotional state of readers' loved ones, the former can help readers to counter their anxieties and to secure a sense of control over their lives. Finally, reading fanfiction can help readers struggling to accept their sexual and/or gender identity and to normalize queer experience.

A small portion of this paper also explored functions of fanfiction that are not necessarily linked to reader's emotional state, but can provide a reader with an informal education about interpersonal relationships. Firstly, erotic fanfiction can act as an informal sex education both for maturing adolescents and for other people interested in exploring various sexual practices. This is especially important for queer readers, who often do not receive formal sex education and are misrepresented in commercial pornography. Moreover, fanfiction readers can receive a guidance on how to navigate different relationships or situations. For example, one respondent shared

that reading fanfiction about depressed characters being supported by their friends inspired them to seek help from their own friends family.

As I discuss in the methodology, in the course of my research I also explored other potential functions of fanfiction, in particular resistance and community. Even though I decided against including these aspects in my work I would like to share some of my preliminary findings. In regard to resistance, my research suggests that some fans use fanfiction to resist dominant cultural and social values, especially connected to LGBTQ+ and gender representation. As for community, inspired by my autoethnographic findings, I looked into how much fans' parasocial attachment to popular characters informs their fanfiction reading. My data show that many fic readers indeed see fictional characters as their peers, personal friends, and even family members. Fanfiction seems to have at least two functions related to fans' parasocial bonds with characters: (1) it helps readers to sustain their parasocial bonds, since it allows them to 'meet' characters whenever they wish; (2) fan stories examine characters from various perspectives, focusing on aspects of their personality underdeveloped in the original text and so allowing fans to get to 'know' characters better. I believe both of these sides of fanfiction reading have rich potential and deserve further research.

Given the lack of academic literature in this area, fanfiction as a source of emotional support likewise could be explored further. Although I avoided using this term in this work due to my insufficient background in psychology, my research indicates that SHE can be helpful in managing one's mental health. Several of my respondents connected compensatory SHE with depression and one spoke of its help with posttraumatic stress disorder. Personally, I would be particularly interested in how compensatory SHE from reading fanfiction and other types of immersive literature (e.g. romances) can benefit people with borderline personality disorder and emotional void that often accompanies it (Kreisman and Straus 2003: 145-146). Furthermore, a more in-depth look at instrumental SHE as a form self-therapy is required. I did not gather enough data on the subject to make, but there is some possible value in dramatizing one's own traumatic experience through SHE in order to observe similar trauma from the outsider's perspective and to process the emotions externally.

Another aspect that deserves further research is literary comparison of fanfiction to other types of fiction, and how the difference contributes to its role as emotional

support for readers. The particular attention should be paid to: (1) the writing style—similarly to romances (Radway 1993: 187-208), the writing in fanfiction seems to be more valued for its efficiency in guiding a reader through a narrative, than for its elegance or inventiveness; (2) the fact that fanfiction writing repurposes information already accumulated through the original sources and other fics. Both of these aspects of fanfiction allow writers and readers to bypass in-depth world and character building and instead focus on exploring characters' feelings. Finally, it is also noteworthy to mention that I from the start limited my research to fic readers, and the relevance of fanfiction as a source of emotional support for fic writers remains unexplored.

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Appendix A

Interview Schedule:

BLOCK I

1. Fandom:

- a. Could you please describe your involvement with fandom?
 - Are you a creator, do you have a fan blog or maybe you just talk about it with your friends a lot?
 - Do you ever participate in any offline activities?
- b. What does being a part of the fandom mean to you?
 - Community
 - Imagined Community
 - Culture
 - Extension of the text
- c. Do you ever participate in online/offline activities as ficreader specifically? Perhaps you discuss fics with friends, actively comment on ao3 or interact with writers on tumblr, maybe there's an online community you're a part of...

2. Reading patterns:

- a. Could you describe how did you start reading fanfiction? How old were you, did you find it yourself or did somebody recommended it to you, how did you feel reading it...
- b. What kind of fanfiction do you read the most?
 - Slash/Het/Multi/Femslash/Gen
 - Genres
 - Tropes
- c. Do you read fanfiction for every shows/books/etc. you like? If no, what is it about particular texts that inspires you to read a fanfic for it? Could you please give me an example?
- d. What are your top 3 OTPs? What is special about them?
- e. How would you describe your relationship with your favourite characters? How do you feel about them?
- f. Good plot and style of writing aside, what makes a good fic? What makes a bad one?
- g. Is it important for you that fic has a happy ending? If yes, why?
- h. Do you ever read dark fics? If yes:
 - What kind?

- Do you ever seek them out on purpose?
 - Why do you think you enjoy them?
- i. Where do you usually find fics to read?
 - j. What do you usually look at when you are looking a fic to read? Tags, word count, etc.
 - k. Could you roughly estimate how much and how often do you read fanfiction?

BLOCK II

3.1 Slash & straight women:

- a. What attracts you in slash pairings?
- b. Do you ever read het or femslash? If no, why?

3.2 Slash & lgbtq+:

- a. What attracts you in slash pairings?
- b. Do you ever read het or femslash? If no, why?
- c. Do you think ficwriters make a good job at writing lgbtq+ characters?
- d. Does it bother you when ficwriters rely on stereotypes? Does it affect your fandom experience?
- e. Do you feel more represented in fanfiction than in mass media?

4. Fanfiction vs source material:

- a. How is fanfiction you usually read different from the original text?
- b. Do you ever read fanfiction to 'fix' something in the original, be it fixit fics in particular or just fics that extend/diverge from canon?
- c. Do you think reading fanfiction affects how you perceive/interpret the original text? Do you think it adds to your enjoyment? If yes, could you describe how?
- d. Have you ever been in a situation where reading fanfiction was necessary for you to fully enjoy the text? If yes, could you describe it?
- e. Have you ever tried to write a fic yourself?
 - If you are an active writer, could you describe how you first came to writing fanfiction? Also, could you describe the last time a specific development in a show inspired you to write a fic?
 - If you write for yourself only, could you describe what exactly can inspire you to write a fic? Could you describe the last time you wrote/wanted to write one? Could you describe the last time a specific development in a show inspired you to write a fic (disregarding whether or not you wrote it)?

5. Fanfiction vs mass culture:

- a. Do you read other literature beside fanfiction? What kind?
- b. Have you ever tried reading romances or romantic YA? If no, why?
- c. Do you feel like reading fanfiction is different from reading commercially published novels, especially romances and YA?

- d. Could you describe in what mood/situation you would go for a fic and in which for a novel? And what do you hope to get out of both.
- e. What would you say are the advantages and disadvantages of fanfiction compared to the narratives you see in commercial pop cultural texts?
- f. Would you say fanfiction is doing better than mass culture at:
 - Diversity
 - Gender representation
 - Romance/sexuality

6. Fanfiction vs real life:

- a. Would you say that the situations characters usually go through in fics — like emotional experiences and relationship problems, not fighting demons or whatever your preferred setting is — are anything like what you or your friends go through in real life?
- b. Would you say fanfiction characters resemble people you know in any way?
- c. Have reading fics ever helped you to work through situations in your personal life? Like it could be an actual help or just a quick fix that doesn't solve the problem but helps to cope. If yes, could you give an example?
- d. In your own personal opinion, why do you read fanfiction?

Appendix B

Online Survey:

1. How would you describe your relationship with characters you like to read/write stories about? Can you compare it to other types of relationships in your life?
2. What would you say is your relationship to people sharing your fandom and ship? Do you feel a connection?
3. Have reading fanfiction ever helped you to cope with/work through real life problems?
4. Do you think reading fanfiction is political in any way? Do you think fanfiction can have a positive effect on official mass culture?
5. Why do you think people read fanfiction? Why do you?

Appendix C

Statistics collected by Tumblr user centrumlumina:

Blog Post 1

Limitations and Uses of the Data

This post is part of the AO3 census data analysis.

While a lot of people are very excited about this survey, it's important to understand that this way of looking at things has a lot of limitations. This post outlines what it is and isn't sensible to say about this data.

Limitations

Although the survey only required respondents to be users of AO3, many people expressed confusion over whether or not those without accounts were included in this definition - they were, but some may have assumed the survey was not relevant to them, leading to that group being underrepresented. Similarly, those who use the site infrequently are more likely to have excluded themselves.

While Tumblr use was not a listed factor in participation, the fact that almost all advertising for the survey took place there means that the vast majority of respondents are probably Tumblr users. In terms of access, there was also a major self-selection bias - only those willing to fill out the survey can be included, which may over-represent certain groups with a greater interest in these kinds of statistics.

When it comes to a group as broad and unstructured as fandom, it is impossible to draw up a full list of the population in order to select a random sample. The viral spread of this survey through social networks - mainly via Tumblr reblogs - means that this data cannot be assumed to be representative of any larger population. It is impossible to know which groups may have been over-represented because the survey was spread more rapidly among groups of friends with a certain demographic.

All of this means that the survey data cannot be used to draw definitive conclusions about fandom in general, or even the AO3/Tumblr users it focuses on.

Uses

However, these limitations do not make the survey useless.

Most knowledge of fandom demographics is currently based on anecdotal evidence;

Number of daily responses



ge number of respondents
y corresponds to over 100
ived wisdom, this offers a

cant, then they should not
ing bias is one possible
easoning to shut down all
ssion. Challenging results
nate hypothesis is equally

However, it is also important to remember that any unexpected results need further research to verify them before they can be established as a widespread phenomenon. There will be more discussion of areas for possible future research later in the analysis (@centumlumina, September 30, 2013).

Blog Post 2

This post is part of the AO3 census data analysis.

The total number of respondents to the survey was 10,005.

At the end of the survey time period, AO3 had 212,125 registered accounts. While many of these will be inactive, the survey was also open to those who used the site without an account; thus, it seems reasonable to assume that the total number of those eligible to participate was of the order of magnitude of 200,000 people.

The respondents to this survey therefore represent a considerable fraction of AO3 users - somewhere in the region of 5%.

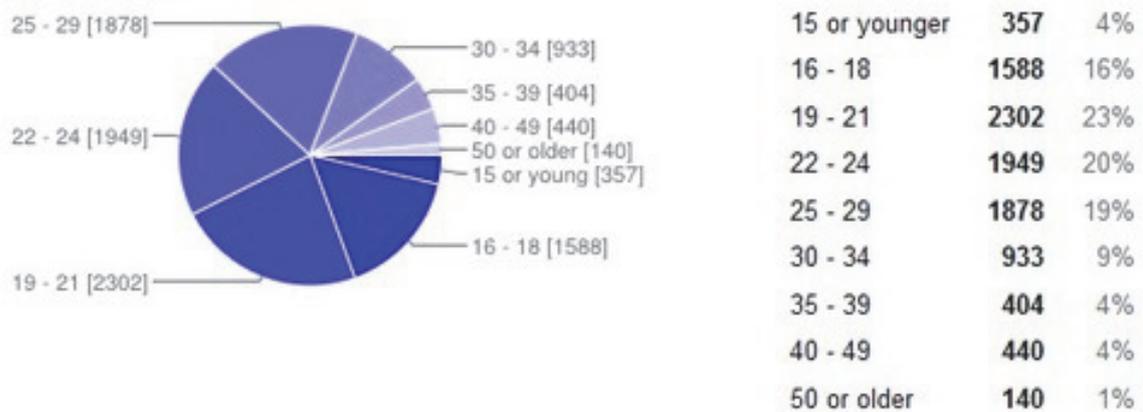
The following graph shows how the number of reponses varied with day. This survey was open to responses from 24th-30th September 2013, starting and ending at 10:30pm BST (@centumlumina, September 30, 2013).

Blog Post 3

Age

This post is part of the AO3 census data analysis.

How old are you?



N.B. The above percentages refer to % of total responses to this question, and sum to 100%.

Question

This question was phrased as 'How old are you?' There were no additional instructions. Users could select one option from the given list.

Responses

The responses were selected with the following frequencies:

- 15 or younger - 357 respondents. 3.6%
- 16 - 18 - 1588 respondents. 15.9%

- 19 - 21 - 2302 respondents. 23.0%
- 22 - 24 - 1949 respondents. 19.5%
- 25 - 29 - 1878 respondents. 18.8%
- 30 - 34 - 933 respondents. 9.3%
- 35 - 39 - 404 respondents. 4.0%
- 40 - 49 - 440 respondents. 4.4%
- 50 or older - 140 respondents. 1.4%

14 respondents (0.1%) did not respond to this question.

In order to calculate the distribution of each result, the values for each group were approximated as the point midway between the lowest value for that group and the lowest value for the one above it, i.e. 17.5 for 16-18, 20.5 for 19-21 etc. The estimated values for the first and last groups were 12 and 60 respectively.

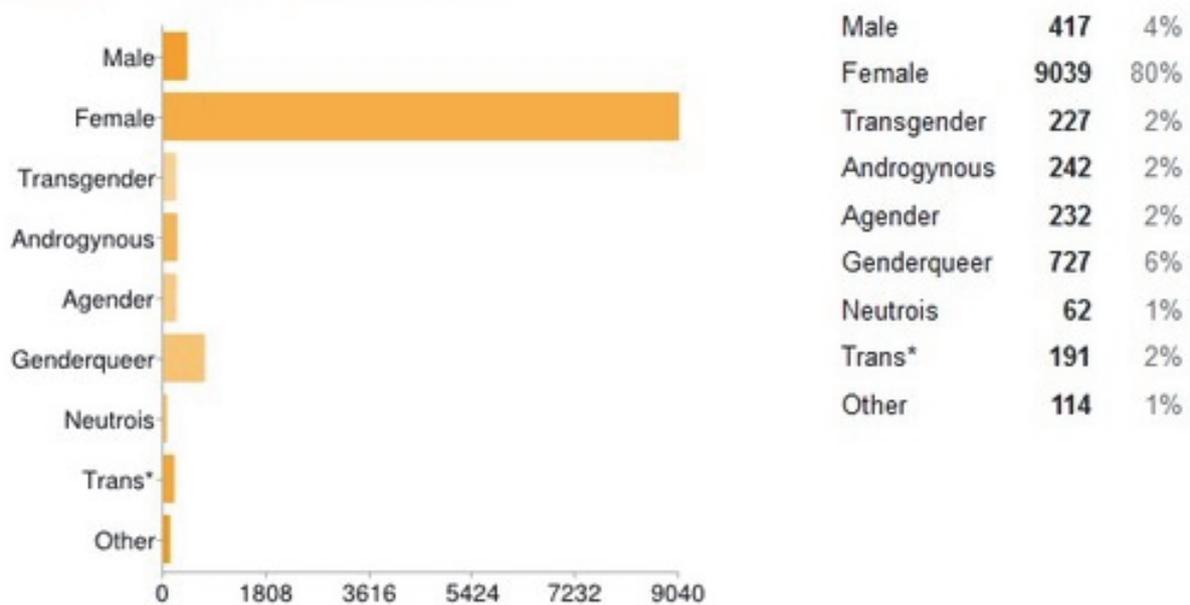
By this method, the mean age of the respondents who answered this question was 25.1 years old, and age had a standard deviation of 8.2 years. The median age was in the range 22-24 years (@centumlumina, September 30, 2013).

Blog Post 4

Gender

This post is part of the AO3 census data analysis.

What gender(s) do you identify as?



N.B. The above percentages refer to % of total responses to this question, and sum to 100%. Percentages shown below refer to the % of total survey participants unless otherwise specified.

Question

This question was phrased as ‘What gender(s) do you identify as?’ and was accompanied by the instructions “Check all which apply.”

Responses

The responses were selected with the following frequencies:

- Male - 417 respondents. 4.2%
- Female - 9039 respondents. 90.3%
- Transgender - 227 respondents. 2.3%
- Androgynous - 242 respondents. 2.4%
- Agender - 232 respondents. 2.3%
- Genderqueer - 727 respondents. 7.3%
- Neutrois - 62 respondents. 0.6%
- Trans* - 191 respondents. 1.9%
- Other: Textbox - 114 respondents. 1.1%

21 respondents (0.2%) did not respond to this question.

A total of 11251 boxes were checked, or an average of 1.13 per response. 9088 respondents (91% of those who replied) checked only one box. The most boxes checked by a single individual was 8.

ETA: As discussed here, 896 respondents selected multiple boxes, accounting for a total of 2163 responses. Of those 896 people:

- 229 selected Male (25.6%)
- 538 selected Female (60.0%)
- 203 selected Transgender (22.7%)
- 207 selected Androgynous (23.1%)
- 160 selected Agender (17.9%)
- 508 selected Genderqueer (56.7%)
- 52 selected Neutrois (5.8%)
- 178 selected Trans* (19.9%)
- 88 selected Other (9.8%)

Other

Of the 114 respondents who chose to enter text in the 'Other' box, there were some noticeable trends. Below is a list of the ideas and/or words which appeared in some variation in 5 or more of the entered responses:

- Genderfluid (36 responses)
- Non-binary (12 responses)
- Bigender (10 responses)
- Do not have a gender identity (8 responses)
- Questioning/uncertain of gender identity (8 responses)
- Transsexual/MTF/FTM (5 responses)

Criticism & Feedback

Several respondents thanked me for allowing for options outside of the male/female binary. The ability to choose multiple identities and the ability to enter their own text were often cited as appreciated features.

However, some respondents felt that the inclusion of the “transgender” option was ill-informed, especially as there was no corresponding option for “cisgender”. 3 respondents used the Other box to specify their cisgender status. A couple more felt that “transgender” was too broad a term, and suggested that separate options for FTM and MTF would have been more inclusive.

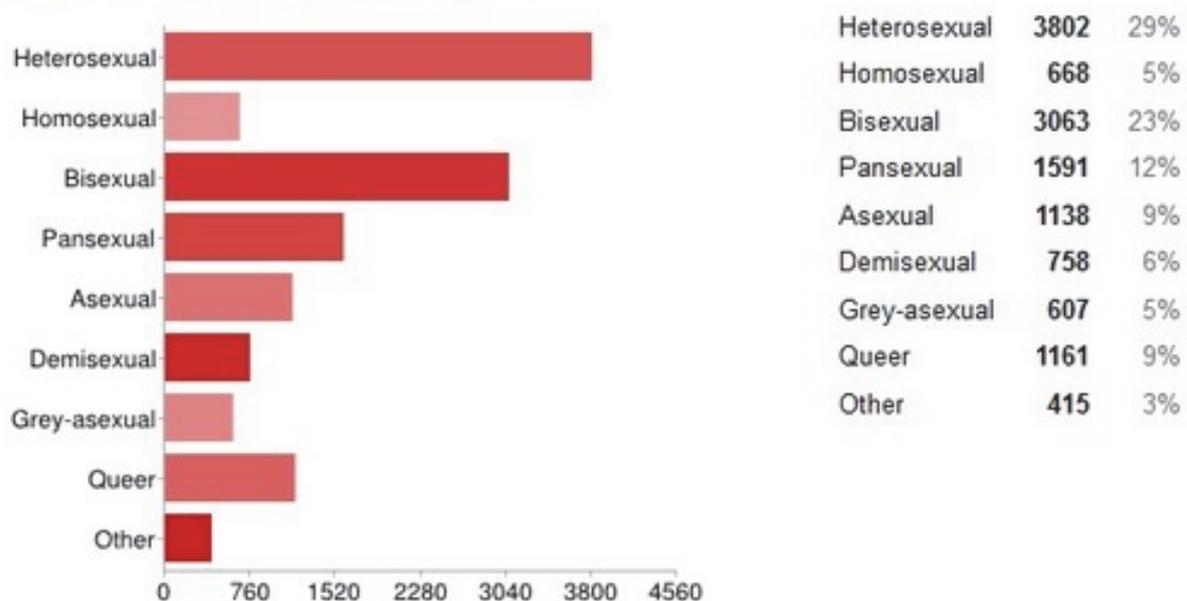
I apologise to anyone who felt this question did not allow them to fully describe their gender identity (or lack of one) in a way they were comfortable with (@centumlumina, September 30, 2013).

Blog Post 5

Sexuality

This post is part of the AO3 census data analysis.

What sexuality(s) do you identify as?



N.B. The above percentages refer to % of total responses to this question, and sum to 100%. Percentages shown below refer to the % of total survey participants unless otherwise specified.

Question

This question was phrased as “What sexuality(s) do you identify as?” It was initially accompanied by the instructions “Check all which apply.”

After approximately 4,000 responses, an additional instruction was added reading “If you feel your romantic orientation is an important part of your sexuality, please enter it in ‘Other’.”

Responses

The responses were selected with the following frequencies:

- Heterosexual - 3803 respondents. 38.0%
- Homosexual - 668 respondents. 6.7%
- Bisexual - 3063 respondents. 30.6%
- Pansexual - 1592 respondents. 15.9%
- Asexual - 1138 respondents. 11.4%
- Demisexual - 758 respondents. 7.6%
- Grey-asexual - 607 respondents. 6.1%
- Queer - 1161 respondents. 11.6%
- Other: Textbox - 481 respondents. 4.8%

N.B. The numbers here differ slightly to those on the diagram for two reasons. Firstly, during processing some values entered in Other which matched one of the preset options may have been read as that option. Secondly, there is an unexplained discrepancy of approximately 60 Other respondents, which I believe is due to issues with the Google form (used to generate the diagram) processing punctuation entered in the textbox.

76 respondents (0.8%) did not respond to this question.

The most boxes checked by a single individual was 6. A total of 13271 boxes were checked, or an average of 1.34 per response. 7393 respondents (74.5% of those who replied) checked only one box.

2536 respondents selected multiple boxes, accounting for a total of 5878 responses.

Of those 2536 people:

- 737 selected Heterosexual (29.1%)

- 257 selected Homosexual (10.1%)
- 1261 selected Bisexual (49.7%)
- 840 selected Pansexual (33.1%)
- 558 selected Asexual (22.0%)
- 602 selected Demisexual (23.7%)
- 469 selected Grey-asexual (18.5%)
- 826 selected Queer (32.6%)
- 328 selected Other (12.9%)

Other

After some initial confusion (see Criticism & Feedback), respondents wishing to specify romantic orientation were asked to do so via Other. 228 respondents did so, with the following frequencies:

- Panromantic (82 responses)
- Biromantic (54 responses)
- Aromantic (34 responses)
- Homoromantic (29 responses)
- Heteroromantic (26 responses)
- Demiromantic (4 responses)
- Grey-aromantic/greyromantic (4 responses)

The following themes/words were frequently used, appearing 10 or more times in the 481 responses entered:

- Questioning/Uncertain/Don't know (98 responses)
- Do not identify with a sexuality (26 responses)
- Heteroflexible (16 responses)
- Lesbian (15 responses)
- Bi-curious (11 responses)
- Fluid (10 responses)

Criticism & Feedback

As with the gender question, several respondents expressed gratefulness for the range of options available and the flexibility of the question design in allowing them to express their sexuality.

However, I received some criticism for the lack of clarity regarding romantic orientation. No romantic orientation question was provided as I anticipated low response rates, and wished to minimise survey length. After several people contacted me asking how best to specify a romantic orientation - the main options suggested being through selecting the relevant sexuality, or through the textbox - I added a note to clarify the preferred format.

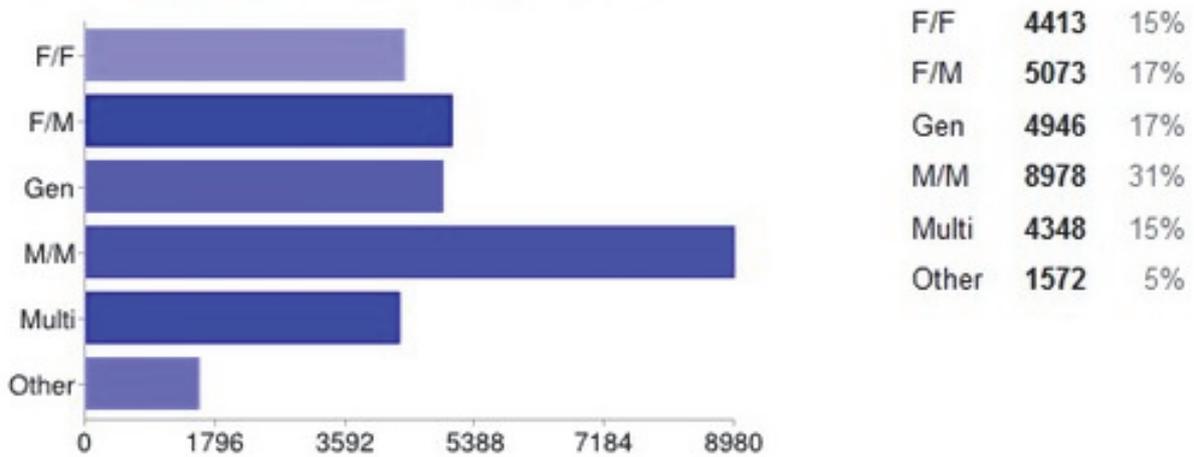
There was also a single suggestion that Bisexuality and Pansexuality should have been combined to a single option. However, the differing response rates for the separate options suggest that most users do not see them as synonymous, so I stand by the decision to separate them (@centumlumina, September 30, 2013).

Blog Post 6

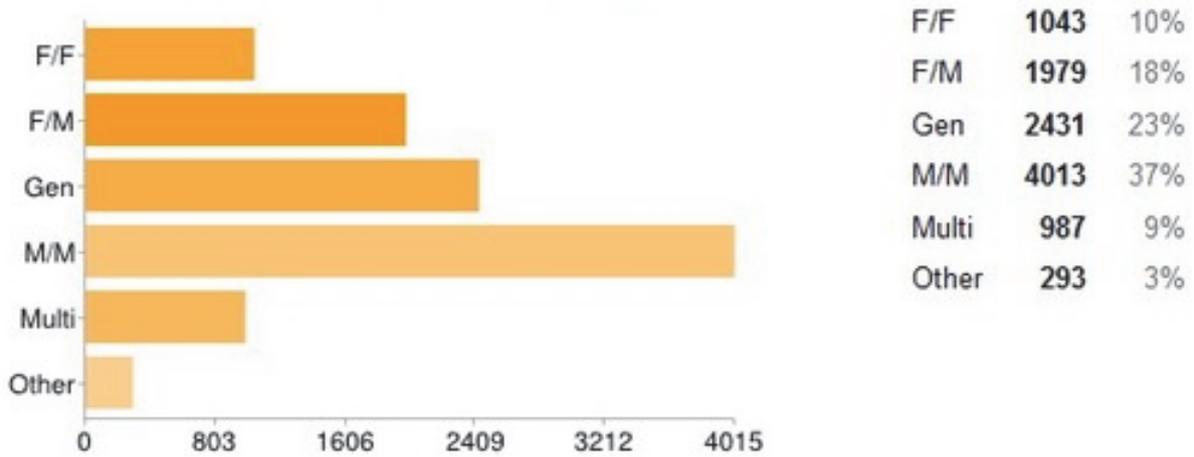
Categories

This post is part of the AO3 census data analysis.

What category(s) of work do you prefer to read?



What category(s) of work do you typically produce?



N.B. The above percentages refer to % of total responses to this question, and sum to 100%. Percentages shown below refer to the % of total survey participants unless otherwise specified.

Question 1

This question was phrased as “What category(s) of work do you prefer to read?” and accompanied by the instructions “Check all which apply.”

Responses 1

The responses were selected with the following frequencies:

- F/F - 4413 respondents. 44.1%
- F/M - 5073 respondents. 50.7%

- Gen - 4946 respondents. 49.4%
- M/M - 8978 respondents. 89.7%
- Multi - 4348 respondents. 43.5%
- Other - 1572 respondents. 15.7%

N.B. 'Other' here refers to the name of an AO3 category. No write-in responses were permitted.

61 respondents (0.6%) did not respond to this question.

A total of 29,330 responses were given, or an average of 2.95 per response with a standard deviation of 1.61. The median number of responses was 3, and the mode was 1, which was selected by 2406 of the respondents (24.2%)

The 2406 people who selected a single response were broken down as follows:

- 98 selected F/F (4.1%)
- 162 selected F/M (6.7%)
- 81 selected Gen (3.4%)
- 2003 selected M/M (83.3%)
- 57 selected Multi (2.4%)
- 5 selected Other (0.2%)

Question 2

This question was worded as "What category(s) of work do you typically produce?" and was accompanied by the instructions "Check all which apply. If you do not archive your works on AO3, skip this question."

Responses 2

The responses were selected with the following frequencies:

- F/F - 1043 respondents. 10.4%
- F/M - 1979 respondents. 19.8%
- Gen - 2431 respondents. 24.3%
- M/M - 4013 respondents. 40.1%
- Multi - 987 respondents. 9.9%

- Other - 293 respondents. 2.9%

4866 respondents (48.6%) did not respond to this question.

There were a total of 10,746 boxes checked, or an average of 2.09 per response with a standard deviation of 1.16. The median number of responses was 2 and the mode was 1, selected by 1974 respondents (38.4%).

Of the 1974 people who selected a single response:

- 72 selected F/F (3.6%)
- 201 selected F/M (10.2%)
- 308 selected Gen (15.6%)
- 1342 selected M/M (68.0%)
- 23 selected Multi (1.2%)
- 28 selected Other (1.4%)

Ratios

The ratio of readers to writers should correspond roughly to level of demand for works of that category. Between these two questions, the total ratio of respondents was 1.94 and the ratio of responses was 2.73.

- F/F - 4.23
- F/M - 2.56
- Gen - 2.03
- M/M - 2.24
- Multi - 4.41
- Other - 5.37

Limitations

The responses given for this question were self-reported and do not necessarily reflect the respondent's usual behaviour.

For comparison purposes, the proportion of total AO3 works in each category is as follows:

- F/F - 5.0%

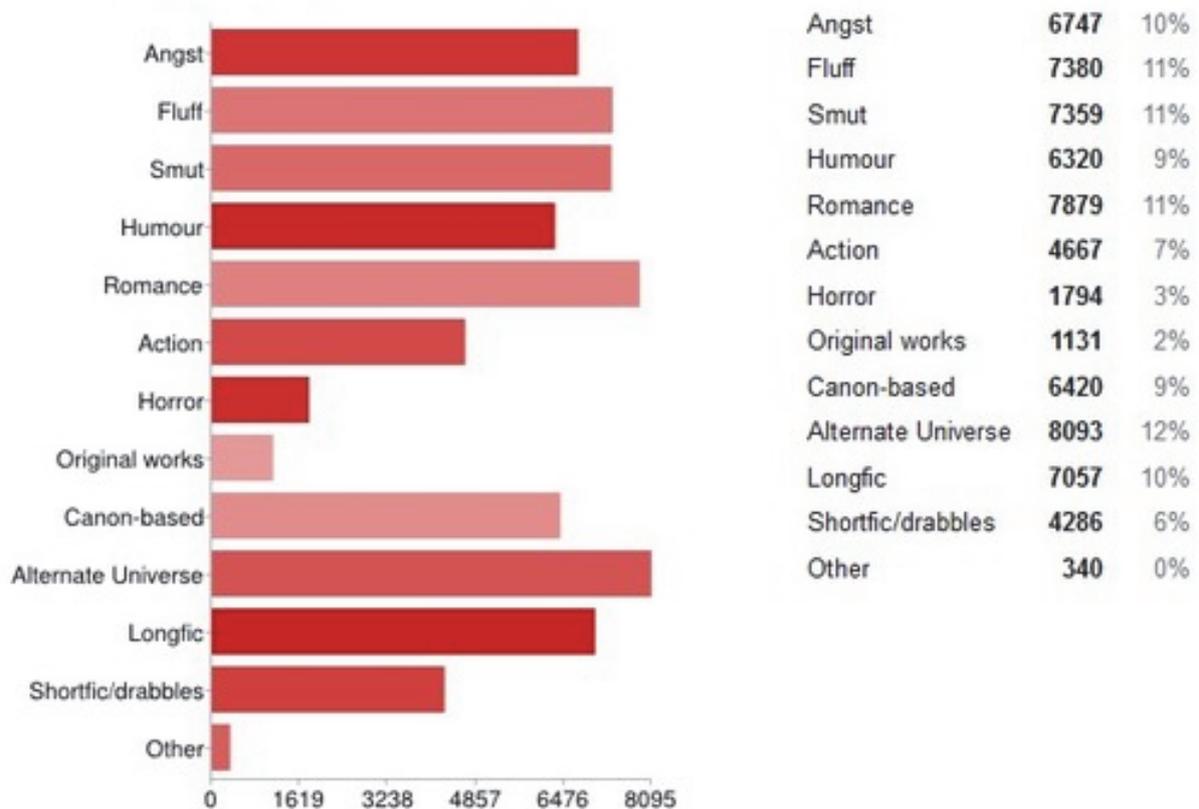
- F/M - 22.1%
- Gen - 26.4%
- M/M - 49.9%
- Multi - 4.1%
- Other - 1.8% (@centumlumina, September 30, 2013).

Blog post 7

Genres

This post is part of the AO3 census data analysis.

What genre(s) do you prefer to read or produce works for?



N.B. The above percentages refer to % of total responses to this question, and sum to 100%. Percentages shown below refer to the % of total survey participants unless otherwise specified.

Question

This question was phrased as “What genre(s) do you prefer to read or produce works for?” and was accompanied by the instruction “Check all which apply.”

Responses

The responses were selected with the following frequencies:

- Angst - 6747 respondents. 67.4%
- Fluff - 7380 respondents. 73.8%
- Smut - 7359 respondents. 73.6%
- Humour - 6320 respondents. 63.2%
- Romance - 7879 respondents. 78.8%
- Action - 4667 respondents. 46.6%
- Horror - 1794 respondents. 17.9%
- Original works - 1131 respondents. 11.3%
- Canon-based - 6420 respondents. 64.2%
- Alternate Universe - 8093 respondents. 80.9%
- Longfic - 7057 respondents. 70.5%
- Shortfic/drabbles - 4286 respondents. 42.8%
- Other: Textbox - 357 respondents. 3.6%

82 respondents (0.8%) did not respond to this question.

The mean number of responses was 7.00 with a standard deviation of 2.38 responses. Both the median and the mode number of responses was 7, which was selected by 1510 of the respondents (15.2%). The maximum number of responses given by a single respondent was 13.

2705 respondents selected five or fewer responses, accounting for a total of 10,874 responses. Among these 2705 people:

- 1273 selected Angst (47.1%)
- 1251 selected Fluff (46.2%)
- 1408 selected Smut (52.1%)
- 875 selected Humour (32.3%)

- 1446 selected Romance (53.5%)
- 481 selected Action (17.8%)
- 152 selected Horror (5.6%)
- 75 selected Original works (2.8%)
- 903 selected Canon-based (33.4%)
- 1522 selected Alternate Universe (56.3%)
- 957 selected Longfic (35.4%)
- 447 selected Shortfic/drabbles (16.5%)
- 84 selected Other (3.1%)

Other

The following trends appeared in more than 5 of the 357 write-in responses:

- Hurt/Comfort or Whump (105 responses)
- Crossover (40 responses)
- All/Everything/Anything (32 responses)
- Drama (15 responses)
- Crack (14 responses)
- Mystery (11 responses)
- Character study (11 responses)
- Casefic (9 responses)
- Fanart (9 responses)
- Dark fic (7 responses)
- Kink or BDSM (7 responses)
- Friendship (7 responses)
- Podfic (6 responses)

Limitations

This question shows the respondents' perceptions of their own preferences, but may not necessarily reflect their actual behaviour. The write-in responses will be severely

under-represented as users were not prompted to remember them (@centumlumina, September 30, 2013).