

Fan Fiction: Through the Years

Eleanor Stamer

In this article, Stamer discusses the history of fan fiction, explores the history of fan-based writing, and its place in the mainstream media today, as well as how it has evolved through other genres.

We all have that one show or book series that we love, but the ending was just horrible and needs to be fixed (looking at you *Game of Thrones*), or maybe you're curious as to what would happen if a character had made a different choice, or maybe you want a continuation of events. That's what fanfiction allows us to do, it allows us to write the story we want and bring our thoughts into the world that we have come to love so much.

I'm sure a lot of you are aware of what fanfiction is. Maybe you've read some, written some, or you know what it is because *Fifty Shades of Grey* was created from fanfiction and became a best seller. But what you might not know is that fanfiction has been around for a long time and because of that fact, fanfiction is also a great vehicle for discussing trajectory.

Trajectory is a term the ISU Writing Program uses to help us understand how texts move around the world, how they can move through the production of the work, and even more importantly, how texts move between different spaces and amongst different people (ISU Writing). Fanfiction is a great example of the complicated trajectories that texts can have as the same text is taken up by different people and transformed in

so many ways. Each creator has their own approach to a text which means the trajectory can change from person to person. Now, to understand these trajectories a bit more we need to go through the history of the craft, so hold on as I take you on a journey of fanfiction throughout the years.

What is Fanfiction?

I know, I said I was going to take you through the history of fanfiction but first I want to establish *what* it is for anyone who may not know, or anyone who just needs a refresher. **Fanfiction** is, as the name suggests, fictional writing created by fans; it can span in detail and length from a few sentences of a short scenario, to an entire novel (remember *Fifty Shades?*). However, many consider fanfiction to be a genre (a product with certain conventions), when really, it's more of an **activity system** because this is a literacy that people can actually engage with. It starts with characters or events from movies, books, TV shows, or even leaving fiction behind being about bands or specific actors. There are genres within fanfiction as people can create "imagines" which are short stories, or there can be longer novels, role-playing games, and even some artwork and animation.

Another thing to consider when defining fanfiction is the idea that fanfiction is created by amateurs and that it's not-for-profit. Fan fiction is typically not-for-profit because of the copyright issues that can, and do, arise, but fanfiction writers have created workarounds for both of these genre characteristics. Some have developed professional reputations out of their work in fanfiction and have found ways to profit from writing that started out in that space.

Dante and Shakespeare

I probably threw you off a bit with that heading, didn't I? Dante and Shakespeare wrote fanfiction? They did! Or at least a version of it. I feel as though many of us tend to associate fanfiction with more current senses of being published in online formatting and that it mostly came with the age of the Internet, but it started long before that.

Beginning with Dante, he was an Italian poet and philosopher who lived in the Middle Ages. His name might sound familiar if you've ever heard (or were forced to read) *Dante's Inferno*, which is the first part of his larger work, *The Divine Comedy*. You'll see that in *The Divine Comedy*, the main character of the entire story is Dante, the writer himself, and the plot follows him through

the underworld, purgatory, and heaven where he is first led by his literary idol Virgil, and then by the dead love of his life, Beatrice. People he despises and those he admires are included in the various books, where he gave them fates that he thought they deserved, and if all of that doesn't *scream* "self-insert fanfiction" I don't know what does. The YouTube channel, Overly Sarcastic Productions, explores who from Dante's life make appearances in *The Divine Comedy*, so I highly recommend that channel if you are interested in learning more.

Moving on to good old William Shakespeare... You might be a little surprised to hear that a lot of Shakespeare's plays could be considered a form of fanfiction. Now Shakespeare was writing in the time before copyright, so it wasn't uncommon for people to copy characters or even entire plots. Shakespeare is one of those people who would draw on other fictional works as he created *Romeo and Juliet*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Othello*, *As You Like It*, and *The Winter's Tale* (Brown, et al). Shakespeare also drew inspiration from historical events, real people, and legends like with *Richard III*, *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Hamlet*. Now before the Shakespeare lovers freak because "Shakespeare wrote fanfiction," keep in mind that he still wrote plenty of original content, and with all the changes he made to some of these stories (like with Richard where he makes him the villain), they are still original. So, you can continue to say that Shakespeare is an important and original creative artist. What this does is help show the trajectory that literature has. There are so many texts throughout history, like with Shakespeare's works, that are connected to the themes and characters that have been taken up and mediated by others.

Powers of Darkness

Now this example of fanfiction is one that I recently discovered, and maybe you heard about it from this tweet that showed up (Figure 1).

This story is the Icelandic version of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. The Icelandic story is entitled *Makt Myrkranna* (Powers of Darkness) and it was "translated" a few years after *Dracula* was published in 1897. The book was translated by Valdimar Ásmundsson, and under his direction it diverged significantly. Scholars knew that the text existed, but what they didn't know was that it was actually a whole separate story. An article from *Smithsonian Magazine* says



Figure 1: Tweet discussing *Powers of Darkness*.

that Hans Corneel de Roos (a Dutch author and historian) was working through the translation and saw that,

... patterns emerged: many of the characters had different names, the text was shorter and had a different structure, and it was markedly sexier than the English version ... “*Dracula* received positive reviews in most newspapers of the day ... the original novel can be tedious and meandering ... *Powers of Darkness*, by contrast, is written in a concise, punchy style; each scene adds to the progress of the plot.” (Eschner)

There is still a lot of mystery surrounding this version of *Dracula* and scholars are still exploring its origins.

From the 19th to the 20th Century

Moving forward to the 1960s, we are getting closer to the incarnation of fanfiction that many of us are familiar with. But before we get there, we arrive at a time where the fandom interaction was popularized and really defined by the *Star Trek* craze. How did they participate in these fandom interactions? They did this through **fanzines**, which are a kind of magazine created by fans for fans. The first *Star Trek* fanzine was *Spockanalia* (1967) and it contained some fanfiction. After *Spockanalia*’s success, there were many other fanzines that followed suit (Verba 1). These fanzines would be sold at conventions or mailed to fans as a way to help spread and share the love of *Star Trek* with other fans. But this wasn’t the end of fanfiction for the *Star Trek* fandom.

In the early 1980s, a publication of *Star Trek* books was started under a subsidiary of Simon & Schuster called Pocket Books. These books are not written by Gene Roddenberry, the original creator of the *Star Trek* series, but they were written by fans who wanted to add content in order to create more explanation for character backgrounds or to continue the adventure. Now, these fan authors couldn’t do *whatever* they wanted with the characters. Pocket’s novels are required to be consistent with the on-screen canon, and CBS Consumer Products approved the outlines and manuscripts of each novel (“Pocket Books”). The books also aren’t allowed to make major character changes, like killing off a character or giving them a promotion that they don’t have within the canon. However, they are allowed to give explanations for how, when, why some of these events take place. Once the television series ended though, there was more room for creative liberties to be taken, and Pocket has published ninety-seven novels that follow this formatting (Wikipedia) (Figure 2).



Figure 2: A few of the books that have been published under Pocket Books.

Fifty Shades, After, and Wattpad

Finally, we have arrived in the present day, where we find our more common iteration of fanfiction. The Internet made fanfiction more widely known as a genre that is able to spread across the world in an accessible way. It is at this point that we can bring in the term transmedia when discussing fanfiction. **Transmedia** is, “a narrative that extends beyond multiple media forms that also plays to the strength of those forms” (Heick). This explains how it is an activity system as it can be interactive, and it offers opportunities for crowdsourcing (Heick). While the *Star Trek* novels did have this opportunity for crowdsourcing as fans were writing the stories, online fanfiction is able to do this in a much easier way. There are many fanfiction writers who, when they feel like they are running out of ideas to move the plot forward, will ask their readers to suggest ideas and share inspiration. There is a much faster response time and feedback through internet comments than we had with print publication. Here, fellow fans can influence the story as it is being written, which plays into transmedia as this allows quick improvement and fan approval.

This idea of transmedia explains the different ways that fanfiction has evolved past simple text. Fanfiction also functions in the form of role-playing games and chat rooms, artwork or animations, and even small movie projects and TikTok skits. Each of these different forms brings something new to the original text and can heighten the other genres as they may interact with each other.

Transmedia and trajectory also played huge roles in the creation of the E L James novel *Fifty Shades of Grey*. The novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* started off as a *Twilight* fanfiction called *Master of the Universe*. James wrote this story on the web under the name Snowqueens Icedragon, and for the most part the two stories are very similar save the name changes for Edward and Bella to Christian and Anastasia—this was changed for pulling-to-publish reasons, which just means that any recognizable elements like character names or city names were changed to avoid copyright laws (Eakin). This story was picked up by publishers who saw the success of it in the digital realm and chose to bring it to print.

A similar situation happened with Anna Todd's fanfiction on Wattpad called *After* which is about the boyband One Direction. In 2014 she received a book and movie deal with the changed names of characters. The book was published in 2014 and the movie *After* was released in 2019 with a sequel, *After We Collided* in 2020. The plot follows the story of Tessa and Harry (Hardin in the published version), and many have described the plot as very close to *Fifty Shades*, though it does not have the S&M aspect, just the roller coaster ride of their relationship (Fleming). Wattpad and other fanfiction sites like *Fanfiction.net*, *Quotev*, *Archive of Our Own*, and others have garnered these huge readerships. The former general manager of Wattpad, Candace Factor, has discussed the huge built-in fanbase that the book and movie had thanks to Wattpad readers, and how they expect to see more blockbusters and bestsellers coming from their platform.

Where Does This Leave Us? What is the Future?

If Candace Factor's words are true, I think that we will start seeing more and more fanfiction writers stepping into the greater literary world and becoming professionals who make a profit from their writing. Fanfiction websites have allowed the genre to grow and expand even further than before. The path was formed and paved by many fanfiction writers, and now hopefully we can see more of these authors being acknowledged for their amazing writing. If you've disliked fanfiction, or thought it to be childish, hopefully this has given you pause, and maybe even a reason to give it another try. Not all fanfictions are the same, and some of them might really surprise you. If you do decide you want to give fanfiction a try, I suggest starting with *fanfiction.net* or Wattpad, but don't be afraid to find other sites and other vehicles of fanfiction besides the written kind. Happy reading!

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Eleanor Stamer graduated in May 2021 from ISU; she was in the publishing studies sequence and was one of the editor interns for the *GWRJ*. When she isn't reading or writing her own fanfiction, she's probably watching Netflix or reliving her One Direction phase.