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## THE PRACTICE OF WRITING FAN FICTION: A FAN FICTION WRITER'S TUTORIAL

## Abstract

The aim of this article is to define fanfiction as a cultural phenomenon rooted in the literary field and created by readers in relation to works published and recognized by the audience itself. Fan confabulation, dreams and planned intrigue is supported by techniques created by the use of new media and aesthetics expressing a desire for brevity, and on the other hand – communication ecstasy. Fanfics creation may be a unique literary experience which also includes debates and discussions as well as the exchange of information on literary forums and chat rooms. It forms a part of the sphere of cultural participation mediated by the media.

Key words: fanfiction, practice of writing, media, new media, readers

The practice of writing fan fiction and tutorials for fan fiction writers is situated in its broadest of contexts by the creation of fan fiction published on the Internet. It applies to the reception which the texts receive from the pop culture circle, often under the sign of the bestseller. These "steps" can be seen as the practice of reading and writing about the works published and recognized amongst the readers. The effects of fansite interpretive work exceed the wildest of expectations. Amateur short stories, poems, video clips which somehow spring up around the original work, complement it, function as errata or an afterword. Fansite text takes the quality of an individualized presentation of source reception and demonstrates its importance for the fan. It turns out that the prototype stirs the imagination

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to such an extent that one has to "rewrite" it anew, deepen the selected plots, unveil some mystery, change the viewpoint, accept a perspective of a supporting character. The author of fan fiction wishes to live the story once again but on his own terms, which creates a contextualized reading of the original.

The work within fan fiction is proof of creative and critical reading at the same time (Jenkins 2008, 12.09.2013). Its results – fan fiction stories, in the sense of – proof from reading, are posted on literary forums and in blogospheres. Fans – both authors and critics, have developed their own vocabulary to talk about them. In many of the comments it is visible how strongly the legitimacy of the text and its implied opposition to the source text is negotiated as well as how complex conditions a fan fiction text must meet. This complexity is nothing new. It is the transposition of the rules of the real world, on the correct, i.e. communicative writing, to the virtual world.

Fans of heroes from popular books (*Harry Potter* by JK Rowling and Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight*) and their stories, fans of the TV series, Japanese cartoons (anime) and comics (manga), video games, movies or current media phenomena (such as, for instance One Direction boys band or Justin Bieber) create their own completion, to participate personally in the events depicted in a favorite fictional world. They take handfuls of resources from pop culture combining the plots from various cultural texts, giving resistance to patriarchal visions of the world, opposing the mainstream ways of reading works.

Agata Wlodarczyk and Marta Tyminska perceive *fan fiction* as a literary and cultural phenomenon (Włodarczyk, Tymińska 2013, 12.09.2013). Also Przemysław Czaplinski, characterizing the community of fiction fans (Czapliński 2013), draws attention to the awakened cultural activity of the fandom. He combines its achievements with "poaching" (Jenkins 2007: 45), which has developed the skills of "grabbing the mass text " to create an alternative group of fans and most importantly, it created methods and tools to transform what is ready and set in "unfinished, incomplete, requiring creation" (Czapliński 2013, 12.09.2013.). Fans remake mass culture into their own mold trying to find the benefits for self-expression in it and recognizing the possibility of showing the power of their own imagination. They unscrupulously pirate, sometimes gracefully, sometimes awkwardly, violate the original text.

Fan confabulation, dreams and planned intrigue is supported by techniquess created by new media and aesthetics expressing a desire for brevity, and on the other hand – communication ecstasy. They become a pop-

ular form of expression and "infect" the ideas about literariness, creating a type of literature and reading what Mary Hopfinger calls "literary communication" (Hopfinger 2010: 47). This type of communication indicates the relationships of participants in the dialogue (in our sense – fans), their active participation in the media and literary culture (Internet access and writing fan fiction as coexistence) as well as in communication (multiple relationships on the Web). For the purposes of our argument communication presented by the researcher of the new media of communication will be called a fansite. I am going to introduce the requirements of such communication, showing the action of so called fans' analysis and the work of a beta-reader on the websites gathering fansite prose.

Anna Soczawa, a very young, only twelve years old (at her debut) writer, once said in an online interview: "I never tried to write by force. I was waiting for inspiration to come by itself and if it took too long, I attempted with fan fiction which always helps me" (Soczawa 2012). This confession, in various forms, appears as a topic on the forums devoted to amateur textual production. To simplify this, the most common tip and encouragement is this: if you do not know what to write, fan fiction can help you with ideas for "creating living characters" and "rapid action" (Schmidt 2008, 12.08.2013). Lively and enthusiastic audience reactions are usually transmitted in the form of an encryped entry, such as "Great .^.^ Quickly write 4 part. x]]]". Emoticons depicting cyber speech fulfill an ornamental as well as a rhetorical function and are posted in the comments to some fan fiction. Readers' waiting for the next chapters of the story written anew is the best motivation for continuing their work.

Fanfics creation may be a unique literary experience which also includes debates and discussions as well as the exchange of information on literary forums and chat rooms. It forms a part of the sphere of cultural participation mediated by the media. According to one of the online guides there are two factors which aid survival in the world of fandom: firstly, to write well and secondly, to create both an interesting and recognizable character – one that is compatible with the original (The Brat Queen 2013). Ironically, it might be summarized as: the first and the last step are the most difficult ones. Principles of text composition, knowledge of spelling rules and punctuation as well as the linguistic and stylistic correctness are rarely the strong points of fan fiction writers.

A text must meet various requirements in order to be placed on a proper site collecting fan fiction. Website administrators set the rules by themselves and they are often biased and therefore harm the linguistic or stylistic accuracy of fan fiction. The selection of texts as well as the control of them is not very good. A proofreader (called a beta-reader) attempts to bring law and order into the world of prose. Such a person is responsible for the text analysis for linguistic errors. Higher standards of grammar and style, therefore, depends on the skills of the proofreader. "Pirated academies of writing" suggest there are eight principles in order to create a good piece of fan fiction<sup>1</sup>.

The first step (1) is the choice of a book, movie or TV series which stirs the imagination<sup>2</sup>. Step Two (2) concerns accurately rethinking of the construction of the presented world. One should keep in mind the principle that recipients of fan fiction are fans who are generally very familiar with the original characters, the source plots which we may want to parody and sometimes turn into a travesty or pastiche<sup>3</sup>. We must therefore rely on the characteristics of the created character on accessibility and read the canon of work, unless the story is set in an alternate world, but even there, if we use the canonical form of the work, which for example does not have legs, we should not write that the character "was kneeling" or "had his or her feet cold" (Leavell [Ms. Nitpicker] 2002, 12.09.2013). These are errors that even the best writers have not avoided. Moreover, fans know other people's amateur stories very well, hence the principle of a fanfictioner, both a passive reader and an active writer, is to read and comment. That also leads to learn from the mistakes made by others, from "ruined" and inept stories posted on the Web (Schmidt 2008, 12.08.2013). We should refer at least to some of the "ff" of the genre chosen by us (e.g. slash) because a lot of stories (many of the "paired" crafted characters and plots) have already been exhausted. Fanfics should not be duplicated - and cannot be "overwritten" because it defeats the purpose of fan fiction entertainment.

The fundamental principle is to include work which is appropriate to the fandom, hence an important role is assigned to searching for plots and formig an analysis. It is also important as to who will be the recipient: young people or adults. In the latter case, works which contain erotic scenes must be denoted.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> How to Write a Fanfiction, http://www.wikihow.com/Write-a-Fanfiction, [02.06.2013]. cf. L. Gasowska, Moda na fan fiction, czyli jak fan tworzy fikcję i jak jej używa, [in:] Mody w kulturze i literaturze popularnej 2011.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> "It can be anything – from your current favorite paperback novel to the old TV cartoons you used to watch as a child", *How to Write a Fanfiction, http://www.wikihow.com/Write-a-Fanfiction.* 

<sup>3 &</sup>quot;Remember – people read fanfiction because they are fans of the original work, and they would like it to be accurate to the original work – otherwise known as «canon» fanfiction", Ibidem.

Step three (3) is the selection of a character that we want to "fanficate". This can be a hero borrowed "at a source", but we can try to change its characteristics, in other words, we can build the so-called *out of character* (OOC in the language of fandoms – these acronyms frequently occurring in "fans' speech" are a contribution to the thesis about the digitization of communication on the Internet) (Kamińska 2011) – someone nice will become cruel or we can introduce a completely new, imaginary character – original character (in the language of fandoms – OC). At this stage, one should avoid the creation of a type of great Mary Sue who can expose the writer to expressive criticism.

Step four (4) is to think about the content of a fanfic. Questions which create a fan's text can take the form: "What if\_\_\_ is not dead?", "Why \_\_\_feels this to \_\_\_?", "What would happen if \_\_\_ married \_\_\_? We can set the story in our times, in the past or in the future, thus, adding new facts, changing the canon, we build an alternative world (an alternative universe, in the language of fandoms – AU).

Step Five (5) – is to form the mood of the story. This principle might be understood as generating a background in which everything will be presented, additionally it will allow the text to direct its interpretation. Of course it all depends on the creator of *fan fiction* as to whether it will be dark or joyful.

Step Six (6) – "Start writing!" This tip means preparing a plan or at least a sketch of the plot and selecting the viewpoint, whether we are going to engage emotionally in the story and choose the creation of a first-person narrator or whether we will tell the story as an event by keeping a distance.

Step Seven (7) – self-correction, and/or using a beta- reader is one of the best methods. One should always make sure that the story is written well which means answering the question as to whether we edited spelling and grammatical errors. The practice of publishing grammatically or stylistically underdeveloped stories on the Internet is frowned upon. Sometimes it is sufficient that the work submitted for online publication is checked by a friend or another writer who might have a good, critical look at the whole text. An additional tip is: always listen to the two types of comments to your fan fiction: those which are extremely flattering as well as those which are disapproving.

Step Eight (8) – publication in the fandom. The author of the "eightsteps" tutorial *How to Write a Fanfiction* reminds writers that fanfics exist because there are fans who want to read them, therefore, it is a good idea to sign your work. It is in accordance with a rule: "now that you put effort into writing this, be responsible" (Leavell 2002, 12.09.2013). If fanfic is good, then comes the creation of a writing brand and its reputation in an amateurs' production.

These skills are useful in any type of critical reading and analysis, including academic exegesis of the literature. Writing fan fiction on the Web arouses interest in literary analysis and comments which can more or less be considered professional streamline the text's editing and facilitate its edition. Their reading imposes the idea of participation in the (un)ordinary workshops of creative writing. Unfortunately, the practice of fan fiction also permits so-called scribblers.

It is hard to argue with the thesis that a significant part of fan fictions is a literary "waste", but if only the reader or the pragmatically oriented author are willing to devote some time for searching, then they can find examples which surprise – even leave behind professionally published works. Moreover, it must be remembered that the appearance of what may be considered general ("all fanfics are graphomania") and herding (how one can be moved by the "scribbling of a school-girl" or by the view of a pink unicorn kicking in the moonlight as a *fan art*), will lead every phenomenon to banality.

When expanding the tutorial, we learn about the existence of other, non-negotiable basics such as this, that the spelling of the name of the main character should be fixed (Schmidt 2008, 21.08.2013)<sup>4</sup>. Further, that the description must be attractive and appealing with its richness of detail. One of the tips is: "Readers do not know what is going on in your mind. The more adjectives you provide, the more they will «see» what you think" (Schmidt 2008, 21.08.2013). On English websites there is a piece of advice to post information before the text that we do not expect financial payments for "ff" written and published on the Web.

Another piece of advice relates to the linguistic construction of fanfics of which in this field there are indeed the most failures. Some fanfics are simply impossible to be read out by sensitive recipients. Lazy and ignorant authors will be quickly reprimanded or even excluded from the circle of "ff" writers, but bad rumors that they are ungrammatical and misspelled "nonsense" will remain.

Many tips apply to the construction of a dialogue which should be learnt from the masters, not the other fans. Characters should speak a liv-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> "Give each character a name that starts with a different letter of the alphabet. This helps the reader keep them separate. A useful technique for this is to write the alphabet vertically down a sheet of paper and create a last name starting with each letter. Repeat this process for first names. If you run out of letters you've got too many characters" (Schmidt 2008: 4).

ing language, they cannot be as if made of "paper". While giving tips to the authors who are the beginners of "ff", they warn:

"Remember that in real life we use many abbreviations and slang and seldom we give long and heavy lectures in fancy terminology to our interlocutors" (Schmidt 2008, 21.08.2013). Besides, one should use correct and complete sentences. Sentences vary in length. Keep long ramblings for "people sitting in the evening by the fire" but when we create the sequence of fights or a chase, we need to add variety and boost our story with single, short sentences which depict uncertainty and rapid action (Schmidt 2008, 21.08.2013).

It is good to pay attention to two simple messages which are presented to the participants of the network workshops who write fan fiction: "Do not tell us what happened – show us" and "Avoid telling us too much" (Schmidt 2008, 21.08.2013). The first piece of advice is about a construction of a dialogue and the description of an action<sup>5</sup>. If our hero is to play the role of an intermediary, we must provide readers with the knowledge on what was his reaction to the news about the mission, show his feelings and present them through facial expressions or body language. The reader must know the answer to the question whether the hero had any doubts about the participation. The author should know what the character will tell when he arrives at the destination. Should he bring something from there? Will he be armed? Is he going to have a long conversation there? Is he angry, amused or worried? "Give us the whole scene instead of a few summarizing sentences" (Leavell 2002, 12.09.2013).

In Polish fanfics there are often blatant phrases such as: "[ ... ] Brownhaired [LG] could not resist and grabbed [Naruto – LG ] the front of his T-shirt", "blonde's mouth [LG] slammed on her neck with gentle kisses and marked it with red dots from time to time" (Rebelos). The nouns which refer to the color of the heroes' hair are an awkward attempt to avoid repetition and reference to significant elements of the canonical story from which the protagonists were taken or they are a calque (a loan translation) from the English language such as "the small brunette said look at the blond" (Ritszka and Hoshi) and then in translation their authors miss the linguistic feeling because, as Ms. Nitpicker would write this, (in Polish this phrase would mean "Ms. Seeker Holes in the Whole" or "Mrs. Biting"): "And since when blond hair has any importance when you want to show your feelings?" (Leavell 2002).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> "Don't TELL us what happened –SHOW us, with dialogue and action", J. Leavell [Ms. Nitpicker], *How to Write Almost Readable Fan Fiction*.

If a fanfic takes place in a haunted house, "one doesn't have to devote a few pages to the description of its four walls"<sup>6</sup>. Readers usually ignore boring and long passages. Let the atmosphere of terror increase with the plot development and the found secret documents relating to the act of home ownership, mysterious e -mails, silent phone calls, chats with the neighbors will tell more about the place than the static written presentation on a number of pages, as it is advised by Ms. Nitpicker on the page bearing a suggestive title which can be translated in this way: How to write almost good fanfics or How to write almost readable fan fiction (in the original: *How to Write Almost Readable Fan Fiction*). We also learn that you should write in such a way so that the story is understood. You should avoid the arguments of the Old Testament as who was whose son. And of course you have to remember that dialogues are good "scissors" for a description that is too long (Leavell 2002, 12.09.2013).

A scenes feature should be constructed in such a way so that the reader knows where and when the hero is and at what time the action takes place. If the scene is set in an old warehouse, it is good to write how to get there and give details which appeal to our senses, which would remind us of the tips given to the Masters of Games in RPG s: What smell do we feel? What sounds do we hear? What do we see?

The meanings of words which are not understood should be avoided. At one of the meetings with Ewa Białołęcka, who is engaged in the *fan fiction* movement, gave an example of such a writing, when the hero of the story "has wrapped up tightly with ottoman "has actually cropped up". Probably at home, "he rests on a mantle", as Białołęcka summed it up.

Ms. Nitpicker warns us against mixed metaphors and similes which perplex, although at the same time it is recommended to move away from cliché phrases: "as white as a ghost", "as white as a sheet". The author of a set of guidelines deals with samples of failed metaphors: "the eyes that were like coals, casted ominous lightings" (Leavell 2002, 12.09.2013). He jokingly asks whether anybody has ever seen "a storm in the rack on the grill?" (Leavell 2002, 12.09.2013). One should also avoid descriptions in which the hero, though "stands still" is waving his hand. In the narrator's statements one should also be careful with the words which only sound smart. If "an opal eye" is to glance at us, it is good to make sure if it was not better to write just about blue eyes.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> "We live in fast-paced times where action is valued over description. Use action phases to describe instead of adjectives which just tell", (Schmidt 2008).

In the English language such an overblown style is called *purple prose*. If the story reads like a romance with lots of tousled hair, crimsons, deep sighs and looks, sulky mouth and eyes full of tears, certainly "the style is of purple color" (Leavell 2002, 12.09.2013). A quasi-baroque style of *purple prose* abounds in sentimental rhetorical figures, it does not avoid exaggeration, pathos and draws attention with flowery sentences and verbal ornamentation.

Fan fiction guides just repeat what is traditionally taught at schools. Writing should always be logical and coherent (a writer should not attack the reader's attention with "a sword from behind", as it is stated in a Polish tutorial *About Characters Description*, since each event has its cause) and he should not demonstrate general knowledge. Authors involved in the promotion of fan fiction often share information about a real police investigation or the rules prevailing in a real emergency room at the hospital, which helps to avoid the records that the hero shot in the heart and dead from a quarter suddenly woke up and fired at enemies (unless he is a zombie). The pages including the tips often post not only links to spell-checkers and grammar dictionaries but also to the dictionaries of the police or medical slang, the history of the Middle Ages "in a nutshell".

The writer needs to choose a point of view (POV – point of view, a common abbreviation used by fanfic writers), a specific character and stick to him in the presented scene. Traditionally speaking, it is he who enables us to look at the world through the character's eyes. Juggling with the points of view in prose (like overusing the passive voice) this introduces a general confusion and the text becomes "unbearable for reading". When "we become" Bella from *Twilight*, when we think and feel like she does, and if for a moment (in the same scene) we are moved into the world seen through the eyes of Edward, it is a nuisance for our reading memory. The addressee of such confusedly constructed scenes cannot familiarize with neither the one nor the other character since he does not remember anything of what they think, feel and see.

Typically, novice authors usually receive advice not to publish a story on the Web if they are not going to finish it. If we do not have an idea for an ending, we should not even start writing because it is as if one has promised children gifts for Christmas and has deceived them by "canceling Christmas" (Leavell 2002, 12.09.2013). Hence, practical and yet another linguistic and compositional advice is: "Sketch a plan of a whole, then you

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> *O opisywaniu postaci*, http://piorem-feniksa.blog.onet.pl/2,ID300034991,index.html [12.05. 2012].

can actually use the present tense" (Leavell 2002, 12.09.2013). The sequels are also inadvisable before completing the story since you do not have to shred the plots excessively.

"You have to read" – most of the tips that introduce beginners of fan fiction into the world of digital fanfic stories which can be summarized in this way. You do not have to read classics but something more than the presentation of a film on the Filmweb and a summary of a TV series. People who introduce beginners into writing "ff" ensure that "what you read, looks at you", so if we read clumsily written fanfics, we will be bad writers.

Practicing fan fiction, fans – creator and fans – critics come in a variety of modes: they praise, reprove their writing samples, share tips on the composition of "ff", analyze the language of the originals playing, with a smaller or greater freedom, the role of literary theorists (nonetheless, their quality and level are highly diverse, although sometimes it goes beyond information from secondary school.

The possibility of free amateur production corresponds to an artists' "desire", satisfies the needs of self-realization and provides cultural development. In order to create culture, you no longer have to be a traditional musician or a writer. A lot of its objects derive from people who simply think unconventionally and are often guided by their emotions in relation to some existing product of culture, they have not received formal artistic education but yet they act creatively. It is achieved owing to a number of technologies which enable them "to make movies", "to make music" and to distribute their "achievements". Although the type of work in which these comments have been posted enforces the use of quotation marks as conceding that these are not, however, Great Works and Achievements, Movies and Music in the academic sense, nonetheless they deserve recognition since they are a manifestation of amateur culture, in the circle of which there are the living ideas of democratization, equality, egalitarianism, shared fun and carnival that are distractive from the deadly serious Reflections upon the Importance and Interpretation and equally serious sums received for Their Creation. It brings to mind an old right to mint coins in the kingdom. Only kings had such power and roughly from the early twentieth century, "each owner of Edison [phonograph brand – LG] or aeolian [pianola brand]" (Lessig 2008: 37–39).

These observations are confirmed by a smart thesis by Gregg Gillis who argues that we live in a "remix culture", or "In the times of appropriation when every primary school pupil has Photoshop and he can down-

load the image of President George Bush and freely "convert" his face and then send its alteration to his friends" (Lessig 2008: 37–39). The practice of fan fiction is the essence of free culture of which the concepts have been convincingly laid out in a book by Lawrence Lessig. Ensuring that freedom is an important legal aspect when we think of fan fiction. According to Lessig, the creation of fan culture cannot be prohibited.

The existence of fan fiction tutorials is not merely a contribution to the thesis that Web 2.0 triggers creativity and certifies directly predominant "originality" and widely understood amateur "manufacturing". Users are becoming creators of online communications (Olcoń-Kubicka 2010: 129–132). They create the content of the pages, categorize them ("tag" the content) using keywords – they create their own names and unexpert categories by the *fanspeak*<sup>8</sup>. They exchange opinions on particularly valuable resources. They create knowledge (fanon) in a dynamic way, but from the bottom up, they decide what is valuable (the Facebook "Like").

The practice of fan fiction is logging in to the culture of participation which "the guides for writing" try to regulate. Participation blurs the line between the consumer and the producer. Manufacturers give consumers space so that they can create their own product. It sounds optimistic, although Andrew Keen is right when he presents this type of culture as an amateurishness, mass culture vulnerable to manipulation (Keen 2007). The scholar predicts a collapse of culture based on professionalism in which the truth disappears (good and beauty have landed on a scrap heap a long time ago), in which "intellectual theft and plagiarism lead to a disgrace of the idea of original authorship and intellectual property" Olcoń-Kubicka 2010: 129).

All stories prove one truth: humanity is a narrative genre, as Paul Levinson says. We differ from others by the fact that we are able to weave a plot with ourselves, what is more, we differ in the types of stories that we create. The material is everything that the external environment provides us with. If external stimulus is not enough, we add our expectations, more or less relevant concepts that are sufficient to complete the story (Levinson 2007: 47). Their detailing occurs due to the existence of literary experience in which allusions, both direct and indirect, play an important role. Looking at the literariness as at a mode of our internal phantasmatic life, it is somehow reminiscent of the fun in recalling to mind the specific

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> E.g. OOC, POV, AU.

scenes from your favorite movies and processing their storylines (Janion 1991: 181). A story understood in such a way will never end. In the world of electronic media it has been accepted that the last version of a narrative is always true and the best but what if it is still the same story but told in a different language?

Electronic media are helpful and unusual as it is another tool to meet the need of storytelling, creating "new" stories, repeating the well-known ones and their transformations. Thanks to various games and with the support of personalization techniques, we may have the impression that we are the participants of the stories. Finally, as Anna Martuszewska puts it, it is a substantial element of the affinity of new media with literature (Martuszewska 2007: 34). It is a vast area for potential plots and the many possible ways of their presentation, which are created with the aid of means from many arts using computer technology.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Fan fiction as a form of literature in its own right may have reached a watershed point, fueled in recent years by two factors: the seemingly bottomless devotion of fans of the Harry Potter and Twilight series, and technology. *Is Fan Fiction Ready to Go Mainstream Thanks to Fifty Shades of Grey?* http://www.tor.com/blogs/2012/03/is-fan-fiction-ready-to-go-mainstream-thanks-to-fifty-shades-of-grey [retrieved: 03.06.2012].

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