

# Fanfiction “Slash” Representation (\*Abridged)

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## Introduction

For some people, consuming media is not the end of their engagement with that universe. After the book is closed, they take it upon themselves to continue the story, pondering what was not said and what could have been. Reading and writing fanfiction (sometimes written as fan fiction, fan-fiction, fanfic, or simply fic) is an ever-growing hobby. Fanlore (n.d), a wiki project run by the Organization for Transformative Works, defines fanfiction as “a work of fiction written by fans for other fans, taking a source text or a famous person as a point of departure.” In its simplest form, fanfiction is the fan-written stories which borrow characters or settings from an existing media source. These fan-authored works have the power to challenge societal norms such as heterosexuality, cisgenderism, and traditional masculinity.

Fanfiction can either build upon what is already in the source material and add to it, or flip things entirely and reimagine the fictional characters and circumstances in a completely different light. Mikaella Clements (2018), for *The Guardian*, quotes Neil Gaiman as writing that “the most important question an author can ask is: ‘What if?’” Clements states that writing fanfiction is an extreme example of asking oneself this question.

Asking “what if” and challenging norms is a pillar of social activism. Authors of fanfiction are rebelling against popular culture as it is presented to them, by making radical changes to “canon” (the official or authoritative sources of facts within the media). Many people, in these acts of rebellion, find themselves reimagining what it might be like if things were a little more gay. The prevalence of this “slash” fanfiction in fandom communities demonstrates a dissatisfaction with representations of LGBTQ+ experiences (or lack thereof) in popular media. By depicting LGBTQ+ relationships in this medium, fanfiction authors create their own representation for underrepresented communities within popular culture.

A popular and dominant work that fanfiction is based on is the *Harry Potter* series. The underlying themes of the Harry Potter books lend themselves well to being read with social activism and queer studies in mind. The books hold many messages that resonate with queer dialogues, and as Hampton (2010) describes: “Harry Potter’s much-touted anti-normalcy rhetoric has been read by both fans and academics as a welcoming environment for exploring queerness in a heteronormative culture” (p. 91).

## A (Very) Brief History of Fanfiction

Before the internet made channels of communication easier to access, fanfiction was typically self-published in fan-made “zines.” The earliest of these began decades before the internet became commonplace. Star Trek fan-zines detailed their imagined adventures for Kirk and Spock, including the popular Kirk/Spock relationship fanfiction. However, “those who wished to write and distribute slash were subject to the whims, preferences, and limited resources of zine editors” (Tosenberger, 2008a, p. 188), which meant that fan-authored works

were limited by what was the most popular, and were less accessible than they would later be with the internet.

The advent of the internet made big waves in fandom communities worldwide. According to Tosenberger (2008a), it led to more users, particularly young users, being able to participate in fan communities:

The Internet cut out the middlemen; anyone, of any age, with a computer and a modem could obtain access. The rise of Potter coincided with the mainstreaming of the Internet, and this combination of a source text aimed at young readers with advanced communications technology enabled young fans not only to access slash, but also to write and distribute their own. (p. 189).

The internet made it dramatically easier for fans to share their views about popular media. Worldwide access meant that fans from varying backgrounds could share their perspectives and there were no longer as many restrictions on the type of content available to fans. Online fan communities opened communication channels between fan authors and their readers, allowing people to provide feedback and have a back-and-forth dialogue about aspects of fandom. This opened the doors for a more diverse discussion on inclusion and representation.

### **Queer Representation in Published Media**

Queer representation can be loosely defined as instances where queer characters and themes are shown within media. However, it is also important that representation be done in a manner that accurately portrays queerness and is not presented with a negative societal stigma. In traditionally published media, while queer representation is a growing trend, it is still a small portion of the broader fictional landscape. Duggan (2017), in discussing Harry Potter fanfiction, compares fan authors to mainstream media: “Their nuanced, varied, and transformative approaches to same-sex desire make glaringly visible the lack of varied LGBTQ representation in commercially published YA texts” (p. 39).

Queer representation is often presented in such a way that their experiences center around struggles and strife within an oppressive space. Very rarely are queer characters presented without comment, happily enjoying their lives and simply experiencing healthy relationships. In fact, often when queer and other minority characters appear in media, they are presented in tragic scenarios (for example, a gay teen being relentlessly bullied). The underrepresented characters are also the easiest for writers to let go of, when creating excitement dictates that a character should die: “The leads are usually too important to take out, so storytellers choose from the ranks of supporting characters. And that’s where people of color, women and LGBTQ characters most often can be found” (Ryan, 2016).

### **Gender and Sexuality in Harry Potter**

While the Harry Potter books do not contain any references to homophobia or sexism, there are no characters that are identified as being queer in any explicit way within the text. Pugh and Wallace (2006) examine each character presented in the texts, and no queer relationships seem to exist anywhere within the wizarding world that J. K. Rowling has painted for us: “Among the hundreds of major and minor characters in the series, not one is identified as homosexual or in any manner marginalized by heterosexist prejudices” (p. 263). The lack of visible queer characters in the books is notable, as the Potter cast is otherwise diverse,

populated by a variety of magical creatures and beings. Pugh and Wallace argue that this omission “erases a substantial population of characters needed to depict a convincingly twenty-first-century world” (p. 264).

Rowling has, since the publication of the final book in the series, revealed additional information about non-heterosexual characters in the Potter universe. The seventh book briefly explored the history of renowned wizard, Professor Albus Dumbledore, headmaster of Hogwarts. Within the text, Rowling revealed that the well-respected wizard was once close with Gellert Grindelwald, a dark wizard with which Dumbledore eventually duelled and defeated. Months after the book’s release, Rowling revealed to the press that yes, Albus Dumbledore was gay (Tosenberger, 2008b). Fans of slash fanfiction, practiced at reading between the lines for queer subtext, were unsurprised by this announcement: “Slash fans are always on the lookout for hints of homoeroticism in the source text that can be spun into a story” (Tosenberger, 2008b, p. 200). However, this revelation did not come without criticisms from the public and scholars.

Pugh and Wallace (2008), in a postscript to their earlier article, criticize Rowling for outing Dumbledore outside of the novels directly, and argue that her disclosure does not necessarily provide evidence of an inclusive wizarding world:

If Dumbledore’s homosexuality was not important enough to include within the narrative trajectories of the seven novels, mentioning it after the series ends comes a bit too little, too late. Gays are second-class citizens in the Harry Potter world if the defining feature of their difference is hidden from view, and Rowling’s after-the-fact declarations cannot eclipse this two-tiered world of her fictions, in which heterosexuality is celebrated and homosexuality is silenced. (p. 191)

### Queer Readings of Harry Potter

Queer theorists often read texts with a critical eye, analyzing works closely for underlying assumptions, problematic language, and omissions (Barker, 2016). The act of queer reading is a different way of engaging with a text. According to Barker, queer reading “is often called ‘queering’, as it frequently involves rendering a text queerer by reading it in a certain way.” Fans of slash fanfiction are actively queering their popular culture media. LGBT scholar Alexander Doty (1993) asserts that queer readings are not just a way for fans to make changes to the text, but to actualize what is already present:

Queer readings aren’t “alternative” readings, wishful or willful misreadings, or “reading too much into things” readings. They result from the recognition and articulation of the complex range of queerness that has been in popular culture texts and their audiences all along. (p. 16)

There are many popular queer readings from the Harry Potter series that are frequently used in fanfiction and other fan discourse about queerness in the wizarding world. Fan interpretation of the Dumbledore/Grindelwald relationship, before it was declared official by Rowling, was one such example. Tosenberger (2008a) describes another common queer reading of the text:

Harry’s discovery of his wizard nature is akin to a coming-out narrative—he escapes from a literal closet, and his relatives’ horrified reactions bear a striking resemblance to the language of homophobia, especially in the way they hurl about words like “abnormality” ... as weapons. (p. 199)

The Dursleys are figures in the Potter books that consistently uphold normalcy above all else, from the very first line of the series: “Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much” (Rowling, 2000, p. 7). The reader is led to dislike the Dursleys, who antagonize Harry about anything unusual that may happen (or, alternatively, anything “queer” that may happen).

### **Queer Representation in Fanfiction**

Within the realm of fanfiction, queer content is much more prevalent than within other media. On the popular fanfiction hosting website Archive of Our Own (AO3), users are able to tag works according to the relationships depicted in them. A 2013 survey by user toastystats demonstrated the overwhelming number of stories (42.6%) tagged with “M/M”, as compared to the number of stories tagged with “Gen” (typically signifying stories that feature no romantic or sexual relationships; 21.3%), or “F/M” (15.4%).

Fanfiction authors have several advantages over traditional published media authors when it comes to having opportunities to portray queer characters and experiences in their works. The internet provides these fan authors with a means of publication outside of the formal publishing process, meaning there are significantly less limitations imposed on works of fanfiction. Fanfiction “operates outside of the institutional paradigms that control children’s and YA literature” (Tosenberger, 2008a, p. 188), allowing fan authors significantly more freedom of expression. Fan authors are free to write about any type of relationship they choose, without fear of rejection and thus the inability to share their work.

### **Queer Fanfiction Authorship**

Due to the predominance of women in fandom (centrumlumina, 2013), many scholars study slash fanfiction from a feminist perspective. According to Tosenberger (2008a), “it is unsurprising that most fandom scholarship presents slash as a potential site for women to resist the dominant ideologies of patriarchal, heteronormative culture” (p. 189).

In general, fanfiction is perceived by society as being lesser to traditionally published works, creating many “false dichotomies” between fanfiction and fiction: “paid vs. unpaid, licensed vs. unlicensed, serious vs. frivolous, skilled vs. unskilled, professional vs. amateur, online vs. offline” (Gunn, 2017, p. 11). Fanfiction is considered as necessarily unskilled and unoriginal work, as the authors are borrowing someone else’s intellectual property, rather than creating their own. Some writers on this topic purport that this “inferior” perception is in part due to the fact that it is women who are writing fanfiction. This is derived from a historical tendency to reject things that women are interested in - “because fandom is the province of young women and, culturally, we find young women terrifying” (Grady, 2016).

Why choose to write slash fanfiction, specifically? In a small survey of slash writers conducted by MacDonald (2006), one respondent stated that “I get frustrated reading literature which ignores the existence of queer people. Writing slash gives me a chance to respond to that exclusion, and I’ve never been a passive reader” (MacDonald, 2006). When it comes to Harry Potter specifically, those respondents describe how they were drawn to this particular fandom because of the potential offered by what Rowling leaves unsaid: “You have to admit, there are an awful lot of single men and women hanging about in the Harry Potter universe.”

## **Other Observations**

Literature on the subject of queer fanfiction predominantly centers around portrayals of gay male relationships in slash fanfiction. These types of stories have been studied and analyzed extensively by scholars of queer theory and women's studies. However, there is less information available in academia when it comes to portrayals of F/F relationships in fanfiction ("femslash"), and lesser still about queering texts by imagining characters as transgender or genderqueer.

Fan statistics demonstrate a general increase in the total proportion of sexualities portrayed in fanfiction beyond gay males. The percent of fanfiction works portraying asexuality or aromanticism more than tripled from 2012 to 2017 (toastystats, 2017). In general, younger audiences are becoming more diverse (centrumlumina, 2015). This leaves a significant gap that could be studied further to determine the further effects of changing demographics. Tumblr user centrumlumina (2015) asks "why is it that there's no evidence of a shift in tastes to reflect the different outlook of this new group of young, LGBT+, ethnically diverse fans?" These are the types of questions that future studies could help answer, as the landscape for fan studies has shifted dramatically even in the short years since the Potter fandom exploded online.

## **Conclusions**

Fanfiction is an extremely interesting cultural phenomenon, and has been subverting ideas of traditional media consumption. The massive community of slash fanfiction readers and writers online suggests that there is an audience for transformative fiction that defies the "straight until proven gay" paradigm of popular culture. Despite the negative connotations associated with fanfiction as a genre, fans continue to produce it and consume it with abandon. The lines between fanfiction and published fiction are blurring. An increasing number of formally published authors have been extolling the virtues of fandom (Clements, 2018).

Fanfiction is a medium that any person with an internet connection has access to, for publication or consumption. Fan writers can put their queer readings of text into their own words, and share these ideas amongst other fans. Fanfiction holds an immense power when it comes to subverting and responding to culture. As Lev Grossman (2011), author of the bestselling *Magicians* trilogy, puts it:

Fan fiction is what literature might look like if it were reinvented from scratch after a nuclear apocalypse by a band of brilliant pop-culture junkies trapped in a sealed bunker. They don't do it for money. That's not what it's about. The writers write it and put it up online just for the satisfaction. They're fans, but they're not silent, couchbound consumers of media. The culture talks to them, and they talk back to the culture in its own language. (para. 3)

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