

FANFICTION AS ‘TEXTUAL POACHING’: RECONFIGURING FANFICTION IN LITERARY PRODUCTION AND PARTICIPATORY CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

This philosophical reflective paper examines the legitimacy and cultural value of fanfiction within contemporary literary discourse, questioning its position in relation to the established literary canon. Beginning with an exploration of the practices of reading and writing fanfiction as forms of ‘labor’ within fandom, the study acknowledges the skepticism and dismissal that often surround its worth. These practices open broader inquiries into how value, legitimacy, and participation are determined in literature. Drawing on Frank Raymond Leavis and Andrew Milner’s theories of the literary canon, Raymond Williams’s Cultural Studies, and Henry Jenkins’s concept of participatory culture, the paper reflects on the historical role of institutional gatekeeping in canon literature, where certain texts were privileged as morally and culturally superior while others were excluded. In contrast, fanfiction emerges as a democratized form of literary production, enabling diverse voices to reconfigure familiar narratives, subvert dominant ideologies, and address social issues overlooked in mainstream literature. Through a qualitative approach that combines close reading and extensive library research, this paper highlights fanfiction’s intertextual and transformative qualities, emphasizing its capacity to generate community, nurture identity, and foster critical literacy. Rather than dismissing fanfiction as marginal or derivative, the analysis demonstrates how it destabilizes hierarchical notions of literary value, revealing literature itself as a dynamic cultural practice rather than a fixed canon. This study argues for recognizing fanfiction as a vital form of contemporary storytelling and cultural labor, one that challenges conventional boundaries of legitimacy in literary criticism and reimagines the possibilities of cultural participation.

Keywords: fanfiction, literary canon, participatory culture, textual poaching, values

INTRODUCTION

Fanfiction (or fanfic) is a form of writing where fans of an original work, such as books, movies, TV shows, video games, or even celebrity personas, create new stories using existing characters, settings, or plotlines (Jenkins, 2012). These stories are not authorized or licensed by the original creators or celebrities, but are produced by fans to explore alternative narratives or continue a beloved story. Fanfiction, in this sense, is an act of transformative work that reflects the fans’ engagement with the text (Duggan, 2022; Jenkins, 2012).

These fans come from diverse backgrounds and often form online communities where they share, read, and critique each other's work. Many fanfiction writers are amateurs who write out of passion, though some may be aspiring professional authors (Jenkins, 2012). The diverse backgrounds of fanfiction writers reflect a democratization of literary production (Kidd, 2023). Unlike the traditional literary canon, where authorship is often limited to a privileged few, fanfiction offers anyone with an internet connection the opportunity to become an author/creator. This diversity also broadens the range of stories and perspectives represented in literature, often challenging mainstream

representations (Duggan, 2022; Kidd, 2023).

Fanfiction exemplifies the democratization of literary production by lowering traditional barriers to authorship and fostering grassroots creative agency. Adawadkar and Chutia (2025) argue that digital platforms such as Wattpad and Archive of Our Own enable ordinary fans to author, distribute, and in some cases monetize works derived from canonical texts, thus shifting literary power away from established publishers and elite gatekeepers. Kustritz (2025) emphasizes that fan communities historically marginalized in mainstream discourse harness online infrastructures to produce and circulate narratives that reflect their identities and desires, effectively challenging canonical norms about what stories are worthy of attention. Fanfiction spaces themselves as cultural heritage sites, where collective memory, narrative practice, and shared interpretation preserve and reimagine literary forms in ways that resist institutional definitions of legitimacy (Kustritz, 2025; Pilati et al., 2025). Fanfiction is not simply a hobbyist practice but part of a broader shift in literary culture: one in which readers become authors, meaning is co-constructed, and authority over storytelling becomes more distributed.

Fanfiction is predominantly published online on free and open-access platforms like Archive of Our Own (AO3), Fanfiction.net, and Wattpad. These platforms are often free and user-friendly, allowing writers to reach a global audience. Social media sites like Tumblr and Reddit are also hubs for fanfiction discussion and sharing. The accessibility of fanfiction platforms challenges the traditional publishing model, where gatekeepers such as writers and literary critics decide what gets published and deemed worthy of literary merit. With fanfiction, the internet becomes a space where the boundaries between author and reader blur, fostering participatory culture and bypassing institutional control over what constitutes 'legitimate' literature (Moore, 2024). Platforms like Archive of Our Own, Wattpad, Fanfiction.net, and Tumblr influence how self-insert fanfiction texts are tagged, categorized, and circulated, demonstrating that the digital space functions not only as a site of distribution but also as a structuring environment for identity performance, community interaction, and cultural norms (Moore, 2024; Sapuridis & Alberto, 2022). Consequently, fanfiction exemplifies the dual role of the digital sphere as both a mode of creative narrative expression and a mechanism for subject formation.

Fanfiction has gained increasing legitimacy as a form of creative expression in the digital era. Once dismissed as derivative or juvenile, fanfiction is now recognized as a participatory cultural practice that fosters critical thinking, literary engagement, and community formation (Carvalho, 2024; Ghosh et al., 2023; Magnifico & Jones, 2025; Risch, 2023). Fanfiction exists within a networked and transliterate space where readers and writers co-construct narratives, remixed from the existing or original texts (Magnifico & Jones, 2025). These digital genres challenge

traditional literary hierarchies by positioning fans as 'everyday writers' who participate in meaning-making beyond official literary circles. In fanfiction, readers become authors, using narrative reconfiguration to express alternative perspectives and identities and to critique canon texts. At this standpoint, the legitimacy of fanfiction also lies in its historical and structural parallels to mythic storytelling. Sharapkova (2024) compares fanfiction to classical myth, noting that both are built on communal re-tellings of foundational narratives and exist in 'canon-based' ecosystems that evolve through collaborative storytelling, such as changing the gender of a known legendary character. The canon in myth was maintained and expanded by mythographers, much as fanfiction writers reinterpret source material. This comparison reveals fanfiction not as a departure from literary tradition but as a continuation of it.

In educational and self-improvement contexts, fanfiction has shown substantial benefits. Risch (2023) argues that it improves writing skills, fosters critical engagement with texts, and empowers marginalized voices (Cheng & Frens, 2022; Wang, 2024). Platforms like Archive of Our Own (AO3), which won a Hugo Award in authorship, offer readers an inclusive and dynamic literary space. Moreover, writing fanfiction cultivates an awareness of audience, narrative structure, and intertextuality, all key skills in academic and professional writing.

Additionally, as Carvalho (2024) demonstrated through her analysis of (im)politeness in the Darvey fandom on Fanfiction.net, fan communities use fanfiction and its commentary spaces to construct social identities and manage community dynamics. These interactions not only reflect complex digital literacy practices but also highlight fanfiction's role in fostering affective and intellectual engagement among readers and writers. Therefore, the legitimacy of fanfiction in these cases is supported by its rhetorical complexity, educational value, historical continuity, and sociocultural significance. Far from being a fringe activity, fanfiction is a vital mode of contemporary storytelling and literacy. At this point, the values attributed to fanfiction began to be critically interrogated. Is fanfiction inherently of lower value than traditionally published literature? If so, what type of value is in question: artistic, moral, cultural, or economic? This line of inquiry led to reflection on the persistent perception that fanfiction lacks legitimacy. If fanfiction is widely perceived as illegitimate, does this also imply that it is seen as possessing lower cultural or literary value?

The legitimacy of fanfiction has long been contested within literary and cultural studies. Although historically marginalized, recent scholarship has increasingly challenged these assumptions by highlighting fanfiction's potential as a site of creativity, identity formation, and critical engagement (Gonzalez-Vidal, 2024; Santa María et al., 2022; Saputri & Lammertz, 2024; Silberstein-Bamford, 2024). Fanfiction constitutes a form of activism

in which marginalized voices archive, reshape, and reclaim dominant narratives. Thus, to dismiss fanfiction as illegitimate is to overlook its capacity to produce alternative knowledge and challenge canonical authority.

It is posited that literature serves a dual purpose: it operates both as a vehicle for personal reflection and as a critical medium through which readers explore values, subjectivities, and socio-political concerns. Both dimensions deserve equal recognition within the framework of literary valuation. The traditional literary canon, as scholars have increasingly noted, is not a neutral arbiter of quality but a product of historical power structures and institutional gatekeeping (Southern, 2024).

Training in literary studies equips students to analyze both the intrinsic elements (such as style, form, and narrative) and extrinsic dimensions (such as ideology, readership, and production context) of a text. From this standpoint, questions of legitimation are central to the interpretation, valuation, and circulation of literature. The evaluation of literary merit cannot be reduced to abstract aesthetic judgments alone; rather, it must account for how texts engage with discourses on gender, race, class, and sexuality (Jenkins et al., 2013; Oulton, 2024). For example, the critical analysis of romance and chick-lit genres has revealed how these works, often dismissed as trivial, both reproduce and subvert gender norms (Mißler, 2022; Span, 2022).

This raises further questions: What evaluative frameworks can literary criticism use to distinguish between works perceived as of higher or lower value when they all engage with similarly pressing social issues? How can such assessments remain equitable and reflexive? Moreover, where does fanfiction fit within this evaluative landscape?

Situating fanfiction within the broader discourse of literary and cultural value necessitates a paradigm shift, away from hierarchical distinctions between 'high' and 'low' culture and towards a recognition of fanfiction's role in participatory cultural production. As Hylland et al. (2025) emphasize, digital cultures demand new models of legitimacy and labor recognition, particularly in contexts shaped by user-generated content. These emerging labor forms demand new models of recognition that account for invisible or algorithmically optimized contributions to value creation, such as what they term "platform-specific labor economies." For instance, in fanfiction and content creation, legitimacy is not conferred by professional institutions but by peer networks, community tagging systems, and algorithmic visibility. Fanfiction, in this sense, can no longer be viewed as marginal or derivative, but rather as an emergent literary form that calls into question the boundaries of authorship, originality, and value itself.

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive

approach grounded in close reading and extended library research. As a work of literary and cultural analysis, the methodological framework centers on analytical interpretation and extensive research in digital libraries. The goal is to examine how fanfiction as a cultural and literary practice disrupts, challenges, or reconfigures the traditional notion of the literary canon.

The primary method employed is close reading of foundational and contemporary theoretical texts concerning the literary canon, cultural value, and fan cultures. This includes canonical literary criticism, such as the works of Leavis, and later reinterpretations by scholars like Andrew Milner and Raymond Williams. Leavis' concept of the 'Great Tradition' is scrutinized as a foundational moment in canon formation, with particular attention to his emphasis on moral seriousness and high culture (Gregor, 1985). These readings are further contextualized through Milner's engagement with the canon in relation to Marxist and cultural materialist critiques (Milner, 2004), which, in turn, are connected to Williams' redefinition of culture as "a whole way of life"

In addition, this paper draws upon extended digital library research to incorporate academic literature on fanfiction, particularly the theory of textual poaching articulated by Henry Jenkins (2012). The textual poacher theory is used to position fanfiction as a site of readerly agency and participatory culture that challenges authorial authority and institutional literary hierarchies. By synthesizing these bodies of literature, the study constructs a layered argument that moves from the concept of canon formation, through cultural studies perspectives, to fanfiction as a form of resistance and cultural production. The methodology thus combines a historical-conceptual reading of canonical literary theory with an interdisciplinary approach that bridges literary criticism, cultural studies, and fan studies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The concepts of 'canon' and 'value' have long shaped the study of literature. Canon, traditionally understood as a selective body of texts recognized as culturally and morally significant, is closely tied to institutional authority and historical processes of legitimation (Milner, 2004; Williams, 2022). Value, meanwhile, operates as the criterion through which these texts are judged, whether moral, aesthetic, cultural, or educational, and thus determines their inclusion in or exclusion from the canon (Gregor, 1985). When considered through the lens of cultural studies and participatory culture, particularly Jenkins' notion of 'textual poaching', the stability of the canon and its values becomes unsettled. Fanfiction, as a transformative and participatory practice, engages directly with canonical works, simultaneously affirming their significance and destabilizing their authority (Jenkins, 2012). This raises questions about

how fanfiction might be positioned in relation to the canon: is it merely parasitic upon 'high' literature, or does it constitute a form of cultural labor that generates its own value? While this discussion does not seek to resolve whether fanfiction possesses literary value in the same sense as canonical works, it interrogates how fanfiction reconfigures both concepts, revealing the canon not as fixed but as a living, contested site of cultural negotiation. The analysis is divided into four parts: discussion of value and canon, literature relevance to contemporary cultural studies, fanfiction as textual poacher, and fanfiction as literary critic.

In 1948, Leavis, an author and literary professor in Cambridge, England, wrote a book titled *The Great Tradition* about what he considered the greatest work of literature ever written. In his book, he appraised the works of Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, and Joseph Conrad, all because he believes they constitute the great tradition of the English novel and are thus worth critical discussion and scholarly analysis at a university (Gregor, 1985; Richardson, 1999). Leavis then continued his argument by seeing the group of the great of literature as a revaluation and the creation of what he called an 'organic community' that preserved high values and ideals (Gregor, 1985). Many people have criticized his ideas about revaluation, pointing out that his judgments of other works he has not mentioned before have changed and have been added to the 'classic', but are not great enough, similar to what he thinks of Dickens. So, in the end, he came to the conclusion that literature is about arranging and mapping out values based on what keeps the 'organic community' morally upright (Gregor, 1985). Despite many critics' accusations of subjectivity, Leavis' strategic position as a respected literary critic and columnist on literature placed him in a position of conflict of interest (Richardson, 1999).

So, is moral value the only factor that determines whether a work of fiction is highly valued? Apparently, Leavis's judgments of a particular author and their works shifted over time as the author published new works. This applies to his assessment of D. H. Lawrence following the publication of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Leavis changed his positive appraisal of Lawrence, mentioning that literature should have 'moral hygiene' that would contribute to the 'life' of society, the same notion as what he meant by 'organic community' (Richardson, 1999). As a result, he does not support literary works that he believes contradict the majority of moral intuitions, such as sexual expression, hostile attitudes toward the status quo, and self-harm.

Leavis' theory of the valuation and revaluation of literature forms the foundation of contemporary literary criticism, in which scholars make judgments based on value and regard literature as cultural material infused with values. However, this period was characterized by a somewhat utopian mindset in which a consensus existed among influential figures that literature held great importance, which was later understood as 'canon'. For Leavis, canon literature served as a repository of shared human values to be

'felt life', which suggests that it is morally upright and suitable for life lesson material. Meanwhile, intellectuals viewed it as a powerful source for social and cultural discourse. In either case, canon Literature, distinguished as big 'L' Literature that is considered to possess high value, has traditionally occupied a central position in cultural discourse and educational curricula, especially within schools and universities (Leerssen, 2024; Sajjad et al., 2025; Williams, 2022). This privileged position is not solely the result of aesthetic merit, but rather the outcome of historical processes of cultural gatekeeping and institutional validation.

As Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital suggests, certain literary works accrue symbolic power through their association with dominant cultural values and institutional recognition, becoming markers of 'high culture' that signify belonging within elite educational and social fields (Reed & Johnson, 2023). These texts are frequently legitimized through formal education systems, which institutionalize them as canonical knowledge, reinforcing hierarchical structures of cultural legitimacy and access. The valorization of canonical literature is further sustained by academic institutions that operate increasingly within marketized and managerialist frameworks, where traditional cultural capital is repurposed to maintain competitive prestige (Oliveira et al., 2025). Consequently, the inclusion of these literary works in curricula reflects both their cultural capital and the evolving logic of neoliberal higher education, wherein canon formation is influenced not only by scholarly tradition but also by institutional performance metrics and ideological alignment.

Canon literature holds a profound impact on education and personal growth, serving as both a cultural cornerstone and a catalyst for critical reflection. Classical works, from Homer to Jane Austen, not only transmit historical knowledge and artistic value but also shape intellectual development and ethical consciousness. According to Polák (2025), genres like epic, tragedy, and philosophical dialogue offer insights into universal human experiences, such as heroism, suffering, and moral conflict that continue to influence literary and philosophical thought today.

In the classroom, canonical texts invite students to engage with enduring questions and diverse perspectives. Literature's ability to offer a "glimpse of an individual's perspective" is valuable when discussing social justice issues and the multiple perspectives of individuals (Altun, 2023; Ferran, 2023). They emphasize that it is not only what we teach from the canon, but how readers approach literature that fosters empathy and critical literacy (Altun, 2023). This aligns with Edward Said's critique of Orientalism, which pushed readers to recognize how canonical literature often reflects and challenges power structures and representation (Al-lawama, 2024). Similarly, Bollini (2024) asserts that reworking canonical literature through innovative pedagogical strategies fosters metacognition, allowing students to reflect on their

own learning and cultural positioning. This enhances not only comprehension but also intercultural dialogue and personal identity formation. Complementing this, Wang and Webb (2024) emphasize the importance of culturally diverse educational practices, such as incorporating Chinese music, to promote inclusive and responsive pedagogies that reflect the pluralism of modern classrooms. Moreover, canonical literature continues to serve as a powerful medium for addressing contemporary concerns. In response to the #MeToo movement, Stecher (2023) illustrates how canonical and modern texts alike can be leveraged in literary studies to interrogate gendered violence and promote inclusive pedagogies. She emphasizes the value of “centralizing the texts, knowledge, and experiences” of marginalized communities. Ultimately, the canon, when taught with a critical and inclusive lens, not only preserves cultural heritage but also cultivates analytical thinking, empathy, and civic awareness, which are core components of personal and educational development.

So, how can literature be made relevant outside of the academic setting? Our realities are not utopias; they are more than just good or bad images, and they do not always offer a clear lesson. What about other realities? Can we talk about the bleakness of reality in literature while still experiencing ‘felt life’?

Literature remains relevant outside academic settings when it resonates with the diverse, complex, and often difficult realities people face (Wahyuni et al., 2024). Rather than presenting utopias or simplistic moral tales, literature can reflect the ‘bleakness’ of the human condition while still offering what James Baldwin termed ‘felt life’, a sense of emotional authenticity and lived experience. Literature enables readers to confront discomfort, question dominant ideologies, and find solidarity in shared struggles.

Children’s literature, often dismissed as simple, can offer profound reflections of reality, especially when it includes multicultural texts that affirm diverse identities. As Martin and Spencer (2020) argue, such literature can “highlight salient categories of difference, give voice to those historically silenced... and explore systems of oppression”, making it a tool for emotional and intellectual liberation. These stories, though not always optimistic, allow readers to process trauma, resist injustice, and imagine alternatives. Dunham et al (2025) advance this idea through the framework of Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies (CSP), arguing that literature should not reduce cultural knowledge to a bridge toward normative standards. Instead, literature should sustain and celebrate multicultural identities and multilingualism. This framework also develops students’ ability to analyze and resist systemic inequities happening around them. Teaching literature beyond the white gaze, as Toni Morrison advocated, means resisting dominant ideologies and honoring lived experiences as valid and rich in their own right.

This relevance also extends to pedagogy. As Ciampa and Reisboard (2021) found, culturally relevant literature allows urban students to connect personally to texts, promoting deeper engagement and

comprehension. Teachers reported that using ‘mirror books’ helped students explore their own identities and challenge dominant narratives that exclude or misrepresent them. Outside academia, literature can fuel empathy, spark dialogue, and affirm the humanity of those on society’s margins. In doing so, it invites readers not only to witness but to feel life in all its contradictions: joy and grief, resilience and rupture.

In 1996, Andrew Milner presented an analysis of literature as a form of value in the chapter "Literature, Culture, and the Canon" from his book *Literature, Culture, and Society*. In this work, Milner explores the concept of the ‘canon’, drawing connections to Leavis’ notion of great literature. Milner critiques the excessive use of the term ‘canon’ in literary studies, arguing that the texts commonly labelled as canonical are often viewed as authentic and inspired in ways that other works are not (Milner, 2004). Milner also noted that the term ‘canon’ originates from the understanding of ‘sacred’ texts, such as the Bible, whose content is regarded as holy and indisputable. He suggests that this is incomparable to Leavis’ idea, which identifies certain works as ‘great literature’ and has subsequently been interpreted as forming part of the literary canon. Milner further argued that literary studies, one of them is English literature, perceive themselves as the study of great literature, with the primary objective of establishing value judgments within their subject matter. This approach allows literature to be considered as part of the academic curriculum, where the process of valuation is fundamental and central to the discipline.

Milner began by talking about the ‘great tradition’ and canon before shifting the topic to ‘culture’ and how our understanding of it has evolved over time. English literature served as the foundation for Milner’s theory that separates literary analysis from discussions of culture. But can we really do that? English literary professors Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart proposed a principle in the 1960s that encompasses all forms of culture and embodies four meanings: an individual’s mental habits, a society’s intellectual development, the arts, and a group’s entire way of life (Milner, 1996). English literature had previously focused on a ‘high’ literature; William believes that cultural studies, by redefining culture, will be important in defining the shift in the arts and the humanities. This is because, while traditional literary studies define literature as a timeless aesthetic category and a canon, cultural studies will likely view cultural value as socially constructed.

Thus, in the context of the relationship between literary criticism, as discussed by Leavis, and the cultural studies paradigm, we can address not only the ‘utopian’ ideals of literature but also works grounded in and reflective of reality. Furthermore, even texts with overtly moral undertones should be considered worthy of critical analysis and discussion. And now, how do we understand and value fanfiction from the cultural studies paradigm?

Contemporary cultural studies originated

from literary studies through a straightforward shift: moving from an exclusive emphasis on high literary texts within the canon to a broader, more inclusive focus on all cultural texts, including those considered popular, like fanfiction (Milner, 1996). Contemporary cultural studies, as it centers more on popular culture, increasingly argues for its inherent value, promoting cultural populism. This raises the question of cultural politics in the field. Cultural studies have embraced political radicalism, aligning with working-class socialism and later with movements like feminism, multiculturalism, and ecocriticism. Milner then argues that values do not exist independently but are tied to the act of valuing. In contemporary cultural studies, valuing literature is shaped by how different types of writing are socially processed and constructed by writers, readers, publishers, and critics. Therefore, value is defined by what specific people prioritize in particular situations, based on certain criteria and purposes.

After reading Milner's analysis of the shift from Leavis' focus on high literature to Williams' more inclusive cultural studies, questions arose about whether the valuing of popular culture, such as fanfiction, reflects an increasing tendency toward greater context-boundness and segmentation, shaped by specific purposes. While some fanfictions may not match the complexity or distinction of works like Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, it does not mean they cannot address similar social and political issues or exhibit the same depth in plot and characters as the more established literary works do.

What is the proper way to view and talk about fanfiction as popular culture, then? What viewpoint can we bring to the discussion of fanfiction in an academic context? Or even so, conduct research on it? Jenkins' theory of textual poaching, as introduced in *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* in 2012, describes how fans actively engage with media texts by appropriating, reworking, and reinterpreting them for their own purposes. Instead of being passive consumers, fans become producers of meaning, engaging in a form of cultural production that Jenkins likens to 'poaching', where they 'steal' elements of a text to create something new, often outside of the control or approval of the original creators (Jenkins, 2012).

Jenkins borrows the term 'poaching' from Michel de Certeau, who used it to describe how everyday people resist dominant cultural forces by using elements of those forces in ways that serve their own needs (Jenkins, 2012). For Jenkins, fans poach narrative elements, including characters, settings, plots, etc., from media texts, remixing them to create their own works, such as fanfiction, fan videos, fan art, and other participatory culture forms. Fans frequently disseminate their creations, including fanfiction, within communities known as fandoms. These communities are typically not isolated or exclusive; rather, they tend to be open and egalitarian. However, engaging in their discussions often requires a certain level of

niche knowledge. Jenkins' ethnographic studies of science fiction fandom reveal power dynamics among its members. However, this aspect is not the primary focus of the current paper and may be addressed in future discussions.

Jenkins's concept of 'textual poaching' provides a powerful framework for understanding fanfiction as a practice that resists the fixed authority of canonical texts. Wilson (2021) demonstrates how the metaphor of poaching, rooted in de Certeau's theory of everyday practices, positions fans as cultural agents who seize narrative elements from dominant institutions and rework them into new, unauthorized forms. This act is not mere theft but a creative reappropriation, akin to how medieval and early modern writers reshaped inherited texts. In this sense, fanfiction destabilizes canonical authority by foregrounding readers-turned-writers' agency, revealing literature as a contested space where ownership and meaning are continually renegotiated. Such practices highlight that canon formation itself is not absolute, but subject to ongoing reinterpretation by interpretive communities.

Textual poaching, as theorized by Jenkins, is vividly enacted in fanfiction practices where readers re-appropriate canonical texts and inscribe their own interpretations. Matlas (2024) demonstrates this process in canon-compliant fanfiction, where writers reorganize narrative structures, insert additional scenes, and employ linguistic strategies to establish 'proximity' with both source material and readership. These practices exemplify poaching: authors simultaneously reaffirm commitment to canon while asserting interpretive agency, destabilizing the boundary between consumer and creator. For instance, fanfiction that centers queer or trans interpretations of *Harry Potter* characters demonstrates how writers reshape canonical portrayals and plotlines, such as reimagining relationships or challenging gender norms, to create narratives that counter the original author's framing, thereby re-appropriating the text to embed alternative social and political perspectives (Duggan, 2022). In such cases, textual poaching is not an act of subversion alone but a means of constructing legitimacy within fandom, positioning the fan-writer as a co-creator in dialogue with the original text.

Extending this, Subin and Joseph (2024) argue that fanfiction communities transform textual poaching into a collective cultural practice that mitigates isolation and fosters solidarity. By rewriting narratives and reimagining communities, fans do not merely borrow from the canon but repurpose it to cultivate inclusivity, explore marginalized identities, and generate new cultural myths (Brottrager et al., 2023). Fanfiction's poaching practices challenge elitist literary hierarchies by providing accessible spaces where marginalized voices articulate social concerns. This perspective underscores that, as textual poaching, fanfiction not only negotiates meaning against canonical authority but also reconfigures the cultural and social function of literature itself.

So, how can we use the cultural studies

paradigm to understand fanfiction as a form of textual poaching? Cultural studies emphasize the audience as active participants rather than passive consumers of media. Jenkins' theory of textual poaching aligns with this perspective by illustrating how fans engage with media texts creatively and critically. Fans appropriate and reinterpret narratives, asserting their agency in the process of meaning-making. This challenges traditional notions of authorship and authority, reflecting the cultural studies paradigm's interest in power dynamics within media consumption.

The cultural studies paradigm is also concerned with how fans reconstruct and negotiate meaning within specific cultural contexts. Jenkins argues that fans 'poach' elements from media texts to develop their own interpretations and meanings. For instance, fans challenge heteronormative readings of relationships in original works by producing slash fiction that examines same-sex relationships between characters (Brottrager et al., 2023; Salcedo González, 2025; Wang, 2024). Additionally, fans reconstruct and explore the narrative from the perspectives of minor characters, which may provide alternative viewpoints on the plot (Brottrager et al., 2023). This participatory culture enables fans to articulate their perspectives, often as a counter to dominant narratives that may marginalize specific identities or viewpoints.

Cultural studies recognize that texts do not exist in isolation but are part of a broader web of intertextuality, in which meaning is derived from relationships among texts. Jenkins' notion of textual poaching embodies this idea, as fans draw on various cultural artifacts to create new works that reference and transform existing narratives. This process of intertextuality fosters a dialogue between original texts and fan creations, enriching the cultural landscape. In adaptations of Sherlock Holmes, fans create works that reference not only the original texts but also modern interpretations, such as the BBC series *Sherlock* (2010-2017). This intertextual play allows fans to comment on the evolution of characters and themes over time, reflecting cultural shifts in society.

Jenkins' theory highlights how fan communities form around shared interests, enabling individuals to connect with others who share their passions. This communal aspect of fan culture reflects cultural studies' interest in how media consumption shapes group identities and social interactions (Khaeriyah & Natsir, 2024; Lüders et al., 2022; Sutrisno, 2023). Online platforms, such as Tumblr or Archive of Our Own (AO3), provide spaces for fans to share their works and connect with others, fostering a sense of belonging. These communities often engage in discussions about representation, diversity, and inclusivity within their fandoms, highlighting how cultural production can reflect and shape collective identities (Khaeriyah & Natsir, 2024; Lüders et al., 2022; Sutrisno, 2023).

Cultural studies criticize the hierarchies present in cultural production and consumption, often focusing on the politics of representation. Jenkins' concept of textual poaching challenges the notion that

media creators maintain sole ownership over their narratives. By reclaiming texts, fans assert their right to reinterpret and redefine cultural products, thereby resisting dominant ideologies and institutional power. Fan works such as fanfiction, remixes, 'fansubbing' (translation and subtitling done by amateurs or fans), and videos often address critical social issues, such as gender inequality, racial representation, and body politics, providing alternative narratives to those endorsed by mainstream media (Jiang & Doherty, 2024; Oulton, 2024; Wang, 2024).

Yodovich (2022) emphasizes that feminist fans, in particular, engage in this type of reinterpretation not only for pleasure but as a negotiation of identity and values within patriarchal and exclusionary fandom spaces. In this sense, textual poaching is not merely derivative; it is a form of cultural activism that allows fans, especially marginalized groups, to reimagine narratives that reflect their own experiences and ethics (Haas & Tussey, 2023; Llewellyn, 2022). This aligns with the participatory culture framework, in which fan production serves both as a critique and an extension of existing media. As Piva (2022) explains, fan texts circulate in digital spaces that blur the lines between producer and consumer, enabling collaborative and transformative meaning-making. Furthermore, Sezen (2023) suggests that fan adaptations of imaginary media artifacts (like books or screen props) can function as 'diegetic portals,' expanding fictional universes and allowing fans to insert themselves into the narrative framework, both materially and ideologically. Textual poaching, therefore, exemplifies the cultural logic of participatory media in the digital age, in which audiences generate new knowledge and identities by rewriting texts that once excluded them.

More recent studies highlight fanfiction as a legitimate form of textual poaching, in which fans engage in creative reinterpretations of media texts as acts of resistance, reinterpretation, and meaning-making (Kiefer & Fernback, 2024; Sari et al., 2025; Sharapkova, 2024). Fanfiction continues to function as a grassroots response to dominant media narratives, allowing marginalized voices to challenge and rewrite cultural texts. Sari et al. (2025) show how Indonesian K-pop fans operate as prosumers, both producers and consumers, by actively reconstructing cultural texts through fanfiction and fan art, asserting creative autonomy in a system that often undervalues their labor. This participatory act blurs the line between consumption and production, aligning with Jenkins's view of fans as cultural agents who contest media authority by poaching textual elements for personal and collective reinterpretation (Ghosh et al., 2023). Kiefer et al. (2024) furthers this by examining fanfiction as a space of embodied resistance, particularly for queer and female-identifying fans. In her analysis of the *Sex Education* fandom, fanfiction serves as a means to fill educational and representational gaps left by mainstream institutions, making it an informal yet powerful form of peer-based education. Similarly, Sharapkova (2024) argues that fanfiction not only

rivals commercial literature in textual complexity and reader engagement but also exhibits distinct patterns of literary quality that disrupt traditional hierarchies of cultural value. Thus, fanfiction remains a critical mode of textual poaching in the digital era, reshaping both narrative authority and cultural legitimacy.

The practice of textual poaching in fanfiction is not only reworking and reinterpreting text but also monetizing it in ways that challenge traditional authorial and legal boundaries. For example, Stevenson (2025) explores the legal dimension of fanfiction works that are not merely derivative but transformative under existing fair use doctrine. Stevenson identifies narrative, formative, and substantive elements that courts might use to assess whether a work is sufficiently transformative to justify commercialization or profit, especially when fan creators come from marginalized communities that have historically had limited recognition. This legal framing reinforces the idea that fanfic authors are not simply consumers, but agents who engage in creative reappropriation—poaching canonical material to produce works with new meaning and value.

Another dimension of textual poaching emerges in educational contexts. Furthermore, Stanko and Kolegaeva (2024) examine how students who write fanfiction reframe canonical plots and characters in order to develop greater skills in narrative structure, character development, and literary techniques (such as foreshadowing, irony, etc.). Their qualitative analysis reveals that fan writers do more than mimic: they experiment with alternative endings, shift point of view, and invent original scenarios—all practices that reflect the poacher's transformative reshaping of source material. Thus, through pedagogical strategies, fanfiction becomes a site where textual poaching is taught, encouraged, and valued, rather than merely seen as misappropriation.

So, can we actually put fanfiction in the same position as the canons? Critics of Jenkins' participatory culture theory argue that it downplays the importance of critical standards and intellectual rigor. By embracing popular culture and fan-driven interpretations, some fear that Jenkins' model dilutes cultural and artistic value, potentially elevating fanfiction and amateur content to the same level as traditionally canonized works (Jenkins, 2012). However, this critique overlooks the evolving nature of culture and how cultural engagement itself has shifted in the digital age. Jenkins' theory does not dismiss the value of rigorous critical analysis but rather expands the scope of what constitutes meaningful cultural participation. Moreover, participatory culture is not inherently uncritical; fan communities often engage in deep, thoughtful discussions about the media they consume, offering alternative readings that can challenge dominant interpretations. In fact, participatory culture fosters critical thinking by encouraging fans to question authority, engage in dialogue, and develop their own interpretations.

Fanfiction and the notion of 'textual poaching',

as conceptualized by Henry Jenkins, challenge the rigid boundaries of the literary canon (2012, p. 17), especially when juxtaposed with the views of Leavis. Leavis advocated a strictly curated literary canon, emphasizing a body of texts deemed culturally and morally valuable by academic and literary elites (Richardson, 1999). He argued that only a select few works had the power to shape the moral consciousness of society, emphasizing their 'greatness' based on certain aesthetic and cultural standards. However, with the advent of fanfiction and Jenkins' idea of the reader as an active participant in the construction of meaning, the idea of what constitutes 'high' literature is destabilized.

Jenkins, in his concept of the textual poacher, highlights how fans engage with texts by appropriating and transforming them. In fanfiction, readers-turned-writers do not merely consume literature; they actively reshape narratives, characters, and settings, often crafting entirely new stories (2012, p. 14). This engagement demonstrates that the literary canon is not an immutable entity but can be reinterpreted by non-elite voices. Through fanfiction, these fans disrupt the traditional power dynamics upheld by Leavis and his contemporaries, in which literature was passed down by authorities rather than shaped from below.

Grant's (2025) study of the *Danny Phantom/Detective Comics* crossover fandom illustrates that the distinction between canon (authoritative texts) and fanon (community-generated lore, in this case, is fanfiction) is not only permeable but also actively contested. Rather than simply filling narrative absences, fan writers intervene in the text by renegotiating meaning, reconfiguring character identities, and constructing crossover narratives that destabilize the primacy of authorial intent. In this sense, fanfiction operates as a form of textual production that challenges the assumption of canonical authority and validates fandom as a space of literary legitimacy. Complementing this perspective, Magnifico (2025) situates fanfiction within the framework of "remixed social genres," emphasizing its significance for understanding digital authorship in contemporary culture. Through practices of appropriation, transformation, and genre subversion, fan writers complicate conventional notions of textual stability and singular interpretation. Taken together, these analyses frame fanfiction not as derivative but as a critical mode of literary practice, one that redistributes interpretive power and redefines the boundaries of canonical discourse.

Mannard's (2023) examination of 'playful literacies' highlights the ways in which fanfiction functions as a site of creative experimentation that extends beyond simple rewriting to include imaginative engagements with genre, character, and narrative context. These practices cultivate a sense of communal belonging while enabling writers of diverse ages and backgrounds to explore narrative voice, identity construction, and emotional authenticity. Such dynamics not only transform the source text but

also contribute to a reconfiguration of broader literary conventions. When considered alongside Grant's (2025) analysis of canon and fanon and Magnifico's (2025) theorization of fanfiction as a remixed social genre makes it evident that these forms of literacy are neither peripheral nor trivial. Rather, they constitute significant modes of cultural production that contest hierarchical structures within literary discourse. Fanfiction thereby emerges as a vehicle for marginalized voices to exercise interpretive agency, embedding alternative moral, cultural, and identity frameworks into established texts. Collectively, these perspectives shift the work of literary criticism from an exclusive concern with textual ontology: "what literature is"—toward a recognition of its sociocultural dimensions—"who literature is for, by, and about."

Fanfiction illustrates that canonical texts are not stable but are continually reinterpreted across different communities. Kang (2024) demonstrates that character representations vary significantly across fan groups, with readers reshaping semantic, relational, and even gendered traits to align with their cultural values and community practices. Such variations highlight how canonical characters are not fixed literary entities but are open to ongoing negotiation in participatory spaces. Similarly, Linsley (2024) argues that fanfiction does more than extend canonical narratives; it actively reconstructs them. Her analysis of *Dramione* fanfiction in the *Harry Potter* fandom shows how readers-turned-writers generate alternative literary trajectories that effectively replace the canonical text within fan communities. Taken together, these findings suggest that fanfiction is not a derivative form of literature but a dynamic site of reconstruction, where canonical authority is destabilized and remade through collective interpretation and creative practice.

The concept of textual poaching within the cultural studies paradigm can be viewed as a method of falsifying the traditional literary canon. In the digital age, fanfiction serves as an accessible platform that democratizes literature by allowing anyone with internet access to engage in literary creation. This freedom undermines the exclusivity of canonical texts. Textual poachers reinterpret canonized works, and in doing so, they question the legitimacy of the canon itself. Their reinterpretations, by subverting the meaning or intent of the 'original' text, suggest that the authority of the canon is neither fixed nor universally accepted.

Furthermore, the proliferation of digital spaces like fanfiction forums, social media, and platforms like Archive of Our Own (AO3) facilitates this challenge. The internet offers a decentralized space where fan communities can flourish without institutional validation. This widespread access has changed how literature is produced and consumed. While the traditional canon relied on formal publishing and academic approval, the internet enables a participatory culture where everyone has a voice. Through fanfiction, entire communities reinterpret the canon in ways that reflect diverse perspectives, including those

historically marginalized in canonical literature, such as LGBTQ+ communities or racial minorities.

The falsification of literary canon through fanfiction is not a deliberate or malicious process, but rather a natural outcome of technological advancements and wide-open access to literary creation. As Jenkins notes, textual poaching is an act of love for the original text, rather than a rejection of its value (Jenkins, 2012). However, this act of creative engagement inherently destabilizes the hierarchical nature of literature as Leavis envisioned it. The literary canon, in its traditional form, depends on maintaining a fixed body of texts that are deemed culturally significant. Fanfiction disrupts this model by offering alternative narratives and interpretations, thereby challenging the exclusivity of canonized texts.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, fanfiction and textual poaching, facilitated by the internet and social media, do falsify the traditional literary canon, but in a manner that democratizes literature. By allowing readers to become writers, the internet has shifted the boundaries of literary value, moving it away from institutional gatekeeping and towards a more participatory and inclusive model. What Leavis viewed as the 'great tradition' of literature is now open to reinterpretation and reappropriation by a broader audience, fundamentally altering the relationship between readers, writers, and the canon.

Fanfiction operates as a vivid manifestation of participatory culture by enabling readers not only to consume but to transform and expand upon canonical narratives in community-oriented ways. Ghosh and Aragon (2024) show how online fanfiction platforms legitimize 'lurking' (i.e., silent participation) as a valid mode of engagement, while informal mentorship and community feedback systems foster transitions to more active participation. This supports the notion that participatory culture thrives not only through visible works but also through social practices that cultivate community norms and supportive spaces. Complementing this, Yang and Pianzola (2025) propose a systematic ontology to map how fan communities reconstruct fictional character attributes across cultures. By juxtaposing canonical traits with those reinterpreted by fans, they reveal how participation involves not just writing fanfiction but reshaping identity, character, and meaning within literary worlds. Kang (2024) similarly analyzes how different fan communities (e.g., Reddit, AO3) alter the semantic associations of characters, in forms such as foregrounding secondary characters, modifying character traits (including along gendered lines), and thus collectively redefining which traits are deemed central or peripheral in narrative worlds. Furs (2025) offers further evidence that fanfiction is deeply embedded in participatory culture by exploring how fans not only consume but also actively contribute to narrative worlds, leveraging platform affordances

and community feedback. Furs (2025) documents how fanfiction writers use interactive features, such as comments, tags, and revision histories, to negotiate communal norms of acceptability and creativity. These features do more than facilitate peer review: they enable iterative composition that reflects the fandom's collective values, tastes, and identity markers. This aligns with other studies (Ghosh & Aragon, 2024; Yang & Pianzola, 2025) which show fans as co-creators in meaning-making, where narratives are not fixed but dynamically reshaped by communal interaction. Thus, participatory culture, by showing the mechanisms through which the audience becomes writers, how power over narrative is shared, is not simply assumed by traditional authorship, but earned through social, technical, and affective labor within fan communities.

Henry Jenkins' theory of textual poachers and participatory culture offers a powerful counter-narrative to the conservative literary canon model advocated by Leavis. Jenkins democratizes cultural production, allowing fans and everyday participants to contribute to and reshape cultural narratives, thereby challenging traditional hierarchies of cultural values. While Leavis sought to enshrine a fixed set of 'great' works as the pinnacle of human achievement, Jenkins embraces the fluidity and diversity of contemporary cultural engagement, recognizing the importance of popular culture and the agency of audiences. As media and cultural landscapes continue to evolve, Jenkins' theory offers a more inclusive, dynamic, and relevant framework for understanding cultural participation in the 21st century.

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