IS FANFICTION LEGITIMATE LITERATURE?

What is Fanfiction?
A piece of fanfiction is a story based on a pre-existing work, written by fans of that work. Today, fanfiction is most popularly published online and with no charge.

What is Legitimate Literature?
In this research, legitimacy in literature is defined by three criteria; the lawfulness of a work, the recognisability of the work as a proper form or genre of literature, and the serious intent the work seems to present.

Laws: An Author’s Rights
Today, copyright laws and ‘moral rights’¹ exist to protect an author’s ownership over their work. However, a fanfiction writer’s use of copyrighted intellectual property doesn’t break these laws due to fair use policies, which protect transformative works. When considering ownership of the original content, results from my survey found that fanfiction authors don’t entirely believe that they ‘own’ the pre-existing content (see Figure 2), but still can legally interpret existing works with the protection of these fair use policies. Some professional authors disapproved of fans making use of their content without permission, however others saw fanfiction as a useful way to encourage creativity. The success of Japanese doujinshi,² self-published stories that are often based on pre-existing content, shows that fan-created content can even be beneficial to the author, keeping their fan base engaged in the original work.

Genre: The New Folk Tale
Some supporters justify fanfiction as a way of ‘repairing the damage done in a system where contemporary myths are owned by corporations instead of owned by the folk.’³ Fanfiction is seen as the new oral folk tale, a modern adaptation of a genre whose works took from existing stories before they were collected together by such writers as the Brothers Grimm. Unlike folk tales, fanfiction travels not through word of mouth but through the internet and, similarly to folk tales, rarely makes a profit. As shown from my survey results, fanfiction writers create not for profit, but due to a passionate desire to expand on the original text and explore ‘layers and facets’ to the story that the original author was ‘unable to consider or expand upon.’ Fanfiction is recognised by many as a genre that encourages the remixing⁴ of pre-existing content and spreading of stories.

Conclusion
This research concluded that, while fanfiction is disregarded by some professionals, others view it as legitimate in its encouragement of creativity and its comparability to oral folk tales of the past. Its content is also praised, particularly for promoting a more tolerant presentation of LGBT relationships.

Serious Intent: LGBT Themes
The heavy volume of LGBT content within fanfiction suggests that the serious intent of fanfiction as a literary medium is to positively represent LGBT relationships, and stories about male homosexual relationships are typically the most popular (see Figure 4). However, some argue that the presentation of the romantic and sexual lives of gay men by typically female writers is exploitative, comparing it to sexualisation of women in film and especially in lesbian pornography. However, my analysis of examples of fanfiction revealed that fanfiction focuses more on depth of character than sexualisation, aiming to normalise the liberation of males from traditional gender performance. This implies that there is serious intent in the fanfiction community to liberate the LGBT community from traditionally heteronormative gender roles.

References

Photo References
Figure 1 (Left) – Author’s Own, (2019) Harry Potter Book and Fanfiction Site [Photograph].
Figure 2 – Author’s Own, (2019) Pie chart to demonstrate fan’s opinion on where the ownership of fiction belongs.
Figure 4 – Author’s Own (2019) Bar chart to demonstrate fan’s preference on fictional ships.

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