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What About Us: Creating Queer Representation in Fanfiction

James Warwood

kh182853@umconnect.umt.edu

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Title: What About Us: Creating Queer Representation in Fanfiction

Abstract:

The literary canon chiefly consists of the work of heterosexual, cisgender, white men with primary characters who often fill the same mold. The result is an enormous swath of mainstream literature, film, and television shows that are completely devoid of LGBTIQ representation. Works in the last five years have tested the waters of openly queer primary characters, but such representation is, on the whole, far from comprehensive. Many readers of fiction – especially young, queer-identified readers – have taken it upon themselves to create their own representation by writing fanfiction. A subcategory of the fanwork (a genre which includes the reboot, retelling, pastiche, and homage), fanfiction is the product of a fan taking an original text and rewriting it, often through the lens of their own experience. Fanfiction is posted in online archives where other fans have open access to read and share the new work. It is an unauthorized and therefore generally delegitimized form of fanwork, but fanfiction does serve two very significant purposes: it allows fans to engage with a text on a more relevant level as well as creating an opportunity for queer representation where previously there had been none. The phenomenon of rewriting characters as gay or transgender – or making existing subtext overt – is a form of reader engagement that is often overlooked in academic circles. This paper explores the role of the fan in 21st century fanfiction culture and the space that is created for queer fans. I will draw examples primarily from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's works featuring Sherlock Holmes, an extensive series that has been through innumerable fan adaptations – both authorized reboots as well as fanfiction – since the detective's introduction over a century ago. By juxtaposing an original Doyle story with an episode of the BBC's television show *Sherlock* (a modernized telling of canon Sherlock Holmes adventures) as well as a specific work of fanfiction, I will demonstrate how fans queer a source text in order to create LGBTIQ representation. The creation of such representation allows queer youth identify themselves within the context of mainstream media providing them a space where they can celebrate their budding identity free from harassment.