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Challenging the Canon: The Fanfiction of the *Harry Potter* series

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Abstract:

This paper evaluates fanfiction as an interpretative genre which brings into question certain aspects of a popular work of art like the *Harry Potter* series. This study draws on Henry Jenkins seminal text, *Textual Poachers* (1992), to further this argument and study how fanfiction has literary value. Jenkins argument that fans are like critics who engage in active meaning-making of the canon is central to this study. To demonstrate that fanfiction brings into question popular tropes, this essay specifically analyses the trope of the orphan child and the Manichean dualism of the good and evil in the *Harry Potter* series. To arrive at the above stated argument I analyze *Seventh Horcrux* by Emerald Ashes, a fanfiction of the *Harry Potter* published on *Fanfiction.net*. This fan text reworks the story, characters, and the genre of the canon which demonstrates that fans produce literature which talks back to the canon and actively bring into question popular tropes in literature.

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> Not until sometime in 2002 did I finally crack and do the thing that people assumed I did daily. I googled Harry Potter.
>
> But I was still utterly unprepared for what I found during that first, mammoth trawling session.
>
> The fan sites were professional looking . . . . And they had ten thousands of visitors. They had forums, message boards editorials, rolling news, fan art, fan fiction, quotes of the day from my book . . . and the shipping wars . . . my God, the shipping wars . . .
>
> At long last I understood what was going on while I was holed up writing, trying to filter my exposure to the Potter hysteria.
>
> **--- J. K. Rowling** (Foreword to *Harry, A History*)

The *Harry Potter* 'hysteria' manifested in two distinct ways in the social sphere. First, fans rushed to secure copies of new instalments, purchased merchandise inspired by the wizarding-world and also wrote to Rowling to not kill their favourite character(s). On the other hand, over the Internet, this hysteria materialized into more creative forms like discussions, fan-theories, fanfiction and other fan generated content like fan videos, and songs.

This essay offers a case study of a fanfiction of the *Harry Potter* series (1997-2007) (also frequently referred to as 'the canon' by fans and in this study), published on the website, *FanFiction.net*. The fanfiction of the Harry Potter series selected here for analysis is Emerald Ashes' *Seventh Horcrux* (2015).

Fanfiction is a significant medium to not just respond to the canon but also to accommodate the fans' concerns with the canon's plot, storyline, themes or the character pairing(s). *Harry Potter* fandom is one of the largest fandoms on the Internet. Ten years after the series concluded, its fanfiction still the tops the charts on two of the most popular fanfiction *publishing* websites -- *fanfiction.net* which has around 7,88,000 fanfiction texts and *archiveofourown.org* has around 1,7,000 published fanfiction of the series on their site. The first question about fanfiction that is put forth by academics is whether fanfiction is of any significance to literary studies? Another larger concern regarding fiction written by fans is whether or not amateur writing makes any significant contribution to literature? These two apprehensions about fanfiction are largely built on the concern that fanfiction is a derivative form of art which make fans liable to the charge of plagiarism. This paper is partially an attempt to answer these questions, and thus, demonstrate that fanfiction is an emerging sub-genre which actively contributes to literature and literary studies by not only providing original reworking of the canon but at the same time critically evaluating and thus, bringing into observation nuances, facets, shortcomings and unexplored territories of the canon.

What is Fanfiction?

The website *Fanlore.org* defines fanfiction as follows:

> Fanfiction (fanfic, fic) is a work of fiction written by fans for other fans, taking a source text or a famous person as a point of departure. It is most commonly produced within the context of a fannish community and can be shared online such as in archives or in print such as in zines. Fanfiction is also written by fans in isolation, perhaps shared with a few friends or no one at all.

The crucial detail that emerges from this definition is that fanfiction is written not with the intention of making profit but to satisfy either the fan's or the fan community's desire for a continued afterlife of the canon. Moreover, fanfiction is also an imaginative evaluation of the canon as it reworks storylines, alters genre, expands subplots, creates new character pairing and/or inserts original characters in already published works of fiction.

Though looked down upon as derivative and considered unworthy of critical inquiry by the upholders of 'high culture,' it is rapidly gaining mainstream recognition. Jenkins (1992) claims that fan cultures "muddies boundaries" between "high and low culture" by elevating popular texts to the level of canonical texts, "as if they merited the same degree of attention and appreciation" (p. 17). Jenkins seminal study of fan cultures, *Textual Poachers* (1992), and Camille Bacon-Smith's *Enterprising Women* (1992) pioneered fan studies, which led to the recognition of fanfiction as a cultural production holding academic and literary value. Francesca Coppa (2017) argues that fanfiction centres on the question of 'what if'. As she further points out, it was Mary Ellen Curtin who first called fanfiction as "speculative fiction" (p. 12).

This study will largely draw upon Henry Jenkins' (1992) theoretical argument that fanfiction is an interpretative form of literature which not only provides an afterlife to the canon but also evaluates the canon's themes, characters, subplots and storyline in creative terms. Jenkins identifies fans as "poachers", a term he borrows from De Certeau, who refers to readers as nomads living on someone else's territory.

Moreover, fanfiction endangers dominant structures of meaning and ideologies that are advanced by popular texts. More often than not minorities are marginalized by popular texts in keeping with the ideologies that prevail in a society. Fanfiction challenges these popular meanings and thus, comes closer to the lived experiences of peripheral groups who lack representation in society and popular fiction. Heterosexuality is one of the most challenged ideologies in fanfiction. Thus, one of the most popular forms of fanfiction is slash. Slash fiction consists of homosexual pairing of male characters; the opposite of slash being femslash. In addition, fanfiction also offers ethnic possibilities as it challenges the dominance of white characters as protagonists in literature. It also offers fanfiction possibilities of queer interpretation of the text, otherwise bound by a white-male- heterosexual worldview.

'Textual Poachers' and 'Fan Critics'

In *Textual Poachers* (1992) Jenkins borrows Michel de Certeau concept of poaching, a form of 'active reading', to understand fan cultures. Jenkins quotes De Certeau where he compares readers to nomads:

> Far from being writers . . . readers are travelers; they move across lands belonging to someone else, like nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write . . . (24)

Moreover, he claims fans do not "passively consume preproduced stories" they "manufacture" cultural products like fanzines, fiction, art, prints, songs, videos, and performances (p. 45). Lastly, Jenkins concludes that poaching is an "art form" (p. 27), which depicts how "popular meaning is produced outside of official interpretative practice" (p. 26).

In this study I employ a comparative framework to analyse how the trope of the orphan child used in the canon and how it is challenged by the fanfiction. The paper provides a study of the depiction of the trope of the orphan child in Rowling's *Harry Potter* series and, subsequently, analyses the fan text *Seventh Horcrux* (2014) by Emerald Ashes, published on the website *FanFiction.net*. The trope of the orphan child was largely popular in 19th century literature and also deployed by Rowling in her series.

By a textual study of these specific fan texts I would like to demonstrate fanfiction is an "interpretative fiction fans construct in the process of making meaning of the popular narrative" (Jenkins 106). Thus, instead of choosing to study the broader aspects of fanfiction I propose to discuss an individual fan text and the interpretation fans bring to the canon. To analyse these fanfiction, I will draw upon the Jenkins' (1992) discussion 'Ten Ways to Rewrite a Television Show' (p. 162). Though Jenkins analysis discusses fanfiction in reference to the media fans of television shows, however, his study can also be used to analyse the fanfiction of literary texts.

Trope of Orphan Child and the Hero and Villain

The generic complexity of the *Harry Potter* series makes it quite open to interpretation for fans. Anne Hiebert Alton in her essay "Playing the Genre Game: Generic Fusions of the Harry Potter Series" draws attention to the this diversity that exists in Rowling's series as the *Harry Potter* books not only fall under the traditionally "despised genres" like "pulp fiction, mystery, gothic and horror stories, detective fiction, the school story, sports story" but also under the more "mainstream genres such as fantasy, adventure and quest romance" (p. 199-200).

Nevertheless, the *Harry Potter* series is best described as a bildungsroman as pointed out by Paige Byam. Byam argues that Harry is a typical orphan of the English novelistic tradition. The figure of the orphan is a common feature of the bildungsroman, a novel about the protagonist's education and development. Orphans in literature typically face hardships under the care of their foster family. Harry lives with his cold-hearted maternal aunt, Petunia Dursley; Jane Eyre lives with her uncle's family and Pip stays with his cruel sister, Mrs. Joe and her husband. Like Pip, Harry too, is deprived of food, and is "enclosed literally" in the cupboard, as Jane is in the Red room, and cut off "psychologically" by his foster family (p. 9). Protagonists in the bildungsroman are usually saved by an outside intervention (for Harry it is the letter from Hogwarts; for Jane it is the Doctor's advice to send her to school and a notice from a city gentleman for Pip) as this phase also coincides with their coming-of-age (Byam).

Harry is an orphan as his parents were killed by the Dark wizard, Lord Voldemort, who also wanted to kill Harry when he was a baby. Harry survived the killing curse because his mother's sacrifice saved him. He now has live with his only relative – an uncaring and unsympathetic maternal aunt, Petunia Dursley. As informed by Maria Nikolajeva, children's literature often presents a protagonist whose parents are dead or absent because it provides "a space that the fictive child needs for development and maturity, in order to test and taste his independence and to discover the world without adult protection" (p. 230). This is true for many protagonist in fiction like Oliver Twist, David Copperfield, Tom Sawyer, and Jane Eyre, who due to this independence and limited adult supervision, grow up to be mature and wise characters.

Harry is a victim of child abuse and bullying while he lives with his guardians, the Dursleys. The Dursleys are typical examples of bad parents who neglect Harry. On the other hand Harry is a perfect choice for the hero as he is the ordinary orphan boy who rises in society due to his virtues. Fantasy serves as a perfect mode for Harry's escape from his dreadful living conditions at the Dursleys. He dreams of a miraculous escape from a world of drudgery, years of neglect from his aunt, and his cousin's bullying. The theme of the orphan is a recurring theme in children's literature and especially common in 19th-century literature as pointed out by John Mullan. However, to this study it is of significance to highlight the ways in which Harry undergoes physical and psychological torture under the Dursleys.

In the first chapter of *The Philosopher's Stone*, Professor McGonagall meets Dumbledore in Privet Drive to deliver infant Harry to the Dursleys care. Her reaction at learning that Harry will live with the Dursleys till he comes of age is as follows:

> You don't mean -- you can't mean the people who live here? . . . Dumbledore – you can't. I've been watching them all day. You couldn't find two people who

> are less like us [wizards]. And they've got this son – I saw him kicking his mother all the way up the street, screaming for sweets. Harry Potter come and live here! (PS 14)

This quote highlights the fact that Dudley will grow up to be a bully. To add to this is the Dursleys inhumane treatment of Harry which exposes the exploitative nature of the Dursleys. The space that Harry occupies in the household highlights his inferior position. In the family photographs in the living room, Harry is conspicuously absent:

> [T]he photographs showed a large blonde boy [Dudley Dursley] riding his first bicycle, on a carousel at the fair, playing a computer game with his father, being hugged and kissed by his mother. The room held no sign at all that another boy [Harry] lived in the house, too. (PS 13)

Secondly, Harry's sleeping place is not a bedroom but the most useless space in the house —the cupboard under the stairs – where dust and insects relegate Harry to the position of a person who is best forgotten. Harry is looked down upon as a non-entity as "the Dursleys often spoke about Harry . . . as though he was something very nasty that couldn't understand them, like a slug" (PS 16).

However, unlike other orphans like Jane Eyre and Oliver Twist who rebel against the authoritative figures by fighting back and asking for more food, the moments of rebellion in the Harry Potter series are quite involuntary until the third book of the series, *The Prisoner of Azkaban*. Though one cannot say that Harry is ignorant or silent about the Dursleys' inhumane behaviour towards him, more often than not he ignores the Dursleys' taunts and stays clear of Dudley because as an orphan he knows he is a dependent and lacks a home and an identity. Thus, no matter how short-tempered and rebellious Harry becomes in the later part of the series, in the first two books, Harry tries to adjust to his inferior position in the Dursley household and never consciously attempts to escape his confinement. The following are Harry's regretful thoughts after he mentions his dream of a flying car to his uncle:

> But he wished he hadn't said anything. If there was one thing the Dursleys hated even more than his asking questions, it was his talking about anything acting in a way it shouldn't, no matter if it was in a dream or even a cartoon – they seemed to think he might get dangerous ideas. (PS 27)

The dream of escaping a brutal reality and rebelling against the Dursleys' neglect do occur in the form of the symbolic marker like the settling free of the Boa constrictor in *The Philosopher's Stone*. Harry's fate is similar to the Boa constrictor, which he encounters in the zoo, as he too is confined to the muggle world which does not appreciate or is mostly unaware of his magical abilities.

> He wouldn't have been surprised if it [the snake] had died of boredom itself – no company except stupid people drumming their fingers on the glass trying to disturb it all day long. It was worse than having a cupboard as a bedroom . . . (PS 28)

As illustrated above, Harry is aware of his imprisonment and dreams of escaping the harsh reality. However, this desire of "some unknown relation coming to take him away" comes true when Hagrid comes to take him to the world of Hogwarts (PS

31).The deployment of fantasy as a mode is of strategic importance to the series. Fantasy is employed in conjunction with the trope of the orphan child. [1] However, before he goes to the wizarding world, Harry's rebellious attitude manifests only in moments when he has no control over his magical abilities:

> Once, Aunt Petunia, tired of Harry coming back from the barbers looking as though he hadn't been at all, had taken a pair of kitchen scissors and cut his hair so short he was almost bald except for his bangs . . . Next morning, however, he had gotten up to find his hair exactly as it had been before Aunt Petunia had sheared it off. (PS 26)

Instances of rebellion like these only manifest subconsciously, and Harry never consciously does anything substantial to escape the Dursleys because he is confined to their house not just by their authority but also by his mother's protective charm. However, after he finds a place in Hogwarts he does not use magic to fight back the Dursleys because of restrictions placed on underage magic and thus, the thought of being expelled from his true home, Hogwarts, comes as a nightmare, which makes him reluctant to fight back when he is locked up by his uncle:

> Countless times, Harry had been on the point of unlocking Hedwig's cage by magic and sending her to Ron and Hermione with a letter, but it wasn't worth the risk. Underage wizards weren't allowed to use magic outside of school. Harry hadn't told the Dursleys this . . . (CoS 11)

Thus, the dynamics of Harry's relationship with the Dursleys remain that of the exploiter and the exploited till the third book, *Prisoner of Azkaban*.

The *Harry Potter* fanfiction, *Seventh Horcrux* (2015) by Emerald Ashes, explores this suppressed rebellious streak of Harry which is manifested only when he is angry and uses magic unintentionally. The parody *Seventh Horcrux* changes the dynamics of the relationship that exists between Harry and the Dursleys. *Seventh Horcrux,* has gained popularity among fans as it portrays Harry as Voldemort and unlike the canon Harry now plays the role of an anti-hero who already knows how to use magic and least cares about his friends. Thus, the fan text tries to actively change Harry's personality.

The fan text begins with the backfiring of Voldemort's killing curse, which he uses to kill Harry. Harry is saved by his mother's sacrifice and part of the Dark Lord's soul is trapped in Harry as happens in the canon, yet the outcome is different. Voldemort's soul overpowers Harry's soul and Harry now becomes Voldemort, a fact that no character in the fanfiction realize.

> Suddenly, I *(Voldemort)* felt a sensation that felt like dying horribly and lost consciousness. My memory of the next few years is rather confused. . .

> That day – October 31st 1981 -- marked the end of my reign and of the First Wizarding War. It also began my second life. This time, I was going to do things a bit differently.

> I am Harry Potter, former Dark Lord. (ch 1)

As Voldemort/Harry travels to Hogwarts, he is already advanced in wandless magic, and his liking for "minions" is still strong (ch 1). In spite of this, the Voldemort's ambitions have drastically altered and instead of the overriding desire to overpower the world, he now wants to become a professor at Hogwarts. Being a parody, Voldemort's desire to conquer the world is mocked by him as a mistake:

> To be honest, I hadn't planned on the whole the Dark Lord thing. It just sort of happened. I had always wanted to be a professor, either of the Defense against the Dark Arts or just the Dark Arts. The latter wasn't exactly taught at Hogwarts, however, and Hogwarts was my true home. My greatest desire was to return to it and live there. Forever. (ch 1)

Thus, Voldemort/ Harry's goal is to save the world by finding his own Horcruxes, and deterring his other self, the real Voldemort, from coming back to life as happens in the *Goblet of Fire*, so that he can become the 'Defense Against the Dark Arts' professor. This fan text thus, changes the characterization of the hero who is the representative of all that is good. Jenkins describes this transformation as the "moral realignment" of the character as the villain is transformed into a hero (p. 168). As he further argues, such versions by the fans "blur the original narrative's rigid boundaries between good and evil" (p. 168).

Seveth Horcrux is a parody of the *Harry Potter* series in which Harry becomes more outspoken, ambitious and also sadistic. Harry's self-serving nature leads to hilarious incidents as he treats Ron and Hermione as his inferiors, spreads rumours about teachers, friends and is always suspicious of Professor Dumbledore. The fanfiction thus, also shifts the genre of the canon by making it a text that lacks the seriousness of the canon.

The text also is also a more explicit narrative about finding an identity and rebelling against authoritative figures, a common theme of young adult fiction. As pointed earlier, Harry rebels against his oppressive guardians only subconsciously, manifestations of which can be found in instances like blowing up Aunt Marge in *Prisoners of Azkaban* or when in The *Philosopher's Stone* Harry causes the glass barrier of the boa constrictor in the zoo to vanish. These moments in the series explicate Harry's suppressed rage against the Dursleys' years of neglect, coldness and bullying by Dudley. However, constituting Harry as Voldemort drastically alters how violence and its configurations are represented in the canon.

Instead of making Harry the archetypal orphan/vulnerable child of the 19th century literary tradition, who suffers at the hands of his cruel guardians, *Seventh Horcrux* depicts Harry as someone who takes his destiny in his hands rather than wait for *deus ex machina,* the letter from Hogwarts. This transformation is brought by a "moral realignment" of Harry's character which makes him an anti-hero who has no moral qualms about using magic on his guardians. One cannot overlook the fact that Harry, now as Voldemort, is aware of his wizard identity unlike the canon, where Harry is ignorant of his wizard future, and thus, lives a life of servitude in the Dursley household. Thus, Harry/Voldemort can now use magic on the Dursley's whenever they mistreat him:

> It all started as I learnt the art of wandless magic. Forget to feed Harry and Dudley's bottle explodes. Insult him and your tongue starts to swell up. Go

> ahead lock him in a cupboard. He will always find his way out and you will somehow find your way in (ch 1).

Eventually, the Dursleys try to abandon Harry in a forest only to find him back at their doorstep. The configurations of the exploiter and the exploited are reversed in the fan text as it is Harry/Voldemort who keeps the Dursleys in dread with his magic. *Seventh Horcrux* makes an attempt to portray an orphan who is successfully able to fight back the physical and mental violence like imprisonment and starvation he/she undergoes under the care of his guardian. Thus, owing to Harry's outspoken nature and rebellious attitude the Dursleys realize that they have to accommodate Harry's needs:

> Thick as they were, the Dursleys eventually realized that the only way to live unharmed was to accommodate to my adesires. It was the childhood I had always dreamt of. (ch 1)

Seventh Horcrux not only alters the character of Harry but also Voldemort. Anne H. Alton draws attention to the fact that the series "adheres to many of the generic elements of quest romance, both in terms of character and pattern" (p. 218). The series contains the figure of the old wise man in the character of Dumbledore; the faithful companions, Ron and Hermoine; comic figures like Fred and George; and aloof characters like Snape. The three defined stages of the quest, namely, *agon* meaning conflict, *pathos* or the death-struggle and *anagnorisis* or discovery also mark the narrative of the *Harry Potter* series (p. 219). As the canon progresses it is revealed that Harry has to hunt Voldemort's Horcruxes, which are parts of his soul embedded in seven objects. However, in addition to Harry's quest, the narrative is also a quest of Voldemort to attain immortality and fight death. Voldemort's quest, however, leads him to commit crimes like the murder his family, classmates and muggle-born wizards.

Emerald Ashes thus, alters the canonical character of Voldemort, who is depicted as the arch-enemy of the protagonist, Harry, as he hinders his quest for immortality. Harry and the Voldemort are juxtaposed in the canon as both are orphans and have a strong desire to gain a place in the wizarding world. Yet their choices set them apart. Harry, the hero, is humble benevolent, and values friendship. On the other, Voldemort is a psychopath whose obsession for gaining power leads him to commit murder and genocide of an entire race.

However, the chief point of departure in the fan text, *Seventh Horcrux*, is witnessed when Voldemort's quest for immortality is altered to a non-violent one: to become a professor at Hogwarts.

> I admit that I had grown weary of being a Dark Lord. It was boring, the Death Eaters were annoying and I had no particular interest in reigning over a nation of mindless sheep. . . . It was perhaps time to discard my previous life. This new identity could open doors that my previous self had foolishly closed long ago. It was time to return to my previous dream: Teaching. (ch 1)

What remains now is a quest to find a vocation that is less violent. Wary of being the Dark Lord, Voldemort's impulse for violence has also die out. Thus, this "moral realignment" of Voldemort also brings to notice the internal struggle of an individual to find a vocation. Voldemort, as related by the fan text, wanted to become a professor but was overcome by his desire to harm people.

Seventh Horcrux also overturns the tradition of the good hero and the evil villain as it conflates the categories of the hero and the villain. The text also asserts the fact that the hero actions can becoming morally ambigous, something clearly emphasized in the fifth part of the series, *The Order of Phoenix*, when Harry becomes the anti-hero as his mind is possessed by Voldemort using legilimency, the art of possessing minds.
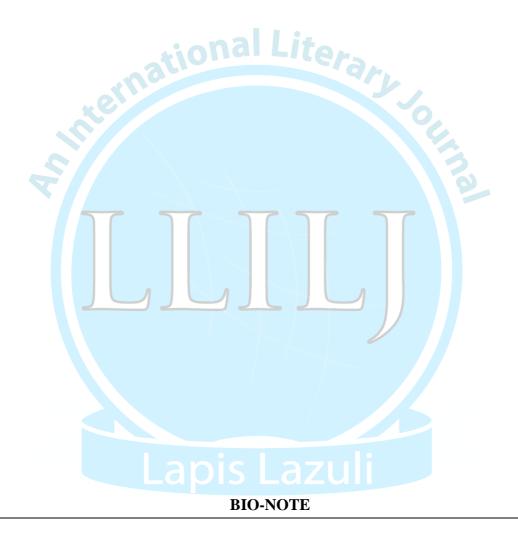
Thus, *Seventh Horcrux* provides a cue to read the novel critically and not approaching the character with a simplistic Manichean view, a common strategy used in children's literature. The fanfiction broadens our understanding by accepting that good and evil can be two sides of the same coin as Harry's and Voldemort's personalities overlap in the fan text.

As illustrated above while transforming the canon, fans simultaneously also offer a critique of the classical tropes in literature like the trope of the oppressed-orphan child and the good-evil Manichean dualism commonly found in representation of the hero-villain. Thus, fanfiction is a form of literature which contributes to literary studies by bringing to the reader's attention the oft used literary devices, tropes, themes that go into the making of the popular work of art. It is a form of literature which enables the reader to become an active agent in "meaning-making." Thus, a possibility of making literature a two-way process is close at hand as fans not only become active consumers of literature but also authors.

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