

# Technology and Literature Teaching

## *Using Fanfiction to Teach Literary Canon*

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**Abstract:** Digital technology has created major changes in how people read and write literary works. Fanfiction, as one of the recent phenomena in digital literature, can actually be used to help teachers teach literary canon that is usually very challenging, especially for EFL learners. This paper reports a study on the use of fanfiction in teaching literary canon to the first semester undergraduate students of an English literature program. It delineates the processes involved in the teaching of literary canon using fanfiction, starting from planning, implementation, to evaluation through close-reading and literary analysis tests, observations, and interviews. The findings show that students who have interest in writing are greatly assisted in understanding the literary canon assigned with the writing of fanfiction. However, for students who do not have much interest in writing, using fanfiction does not really help them. Instead, they feel it is more burdensome, for besides having to understand the work, they are also required to write and expand the work in the form of a fanfiction. Nevertheless, both students with and without interest in writing enjoy the teaching and learning process, as they can read various pieces of fanfiction to the literary canon and gain better understanding of the canonical literary works through the group discussion and collaborative works. Fanfiction thus can be made an alternative to teaching literary canon to EFL learners.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of technology has drastically changed the practices of reading and writing literature. Free flow of information and easy file sharing and dissemination have made literary works become even more accessible by internet users worldwide. It has also been easier for readers to find online reading communities with whom they may share their similar interests in certain books, authors, or genres. One of such online reading communities takes a step further by re-writing the work of their favorite authors, which goes by the name of fanfiction. Fanfiction has increasingly gained attention from the academics. What started as a marginalized activity, especially in comparison to academic literary practices (Yatrakis, 2013), has now become an established literary genre (Fesenmeier, 2015; Nillan, 2010), notwithstanding its much debated legitimacy in the danger of breaching the copyright.

With its establishment as a literary practice and part of the academic activities, many attempts have been made to define fanfiction. Thomas (2011)

defined fanfiction as “the stories produced by fans based on plot lines and characters from either a single source text or else a ‘canon’ of works.” Fanfiction may borrow the plot, characters, etc. from various media: electronic, printed, or online (Thomas, 2011). In other words, fanfiction has taken the literary fandom into a new level of creativity.

Investigation of fanfiction has also become commonplace, treating it as a new phenomenon in the reading and writing culture (Silén, 2012) and in literary practices (Yatrakis, 2013; Eero, 2014). Other researchers chose to focus on the fanfiction writers, both as individuals and communities (Lee, 2011). Some other researchers sought to prove that fanfiction has some benefits for the improvement of children’s writing (Jenkins, 1992, 2004), for literary analysis in secondary school if combined with other writing tools (McWilliams, et al., 2011), for literary analysis, creative writing techniques, and language development of undergraduate EFL students (Sauro and Sundmark, 2016), and for creative writing processes of ESL secondary school students (Schattenherz, 2016).

As the literature suggests, fanfiction has been employed as a tool for literary analysis and to improve students' creative writing at secondary school and college levels. Herein, the present research would like to enrich the existing fanfiction studies by investigating whether fanfiction can also be used to teach literary canon to undergraduate students. As adolescents or young adults, undergraduate students are known to be internet and technology savvy. On the other hand, literary canon is notorious among EFL/ESL students to be "outdated", really difficult to learn, (Carter and Long, 1991), and does not only challenge students with higher linguistic abilities, but also with a good grasp of history, culture, and other relevant background knowledge (Chang, 2003). Hence, it will be interesting to see whether literary canon that is "outdated" and "toilsome" can be successfully taught using the most updated and technologically savvy tool from the internet, namely fanfiction.

## 2 METHOD

In order to investigate the possibility of using fanfiction to teach literary canon to undergraduate students, the present research involved 28 undergraduate students majoring in English Literature, taking the introductory course to literature. They were freshman of the age between 17-18 years old who were not really familiar with English literary canon. The students were selected on the basis of convenience, as the researcher was teaching those students. In addition, the objective of the research is in accordance with the course objectives. Consent was obtained in the beginning of the semester from all of the students. The research was conducted in the following stages.

*Preliminary survey.* Before conducting research, a survey was carried out to find to what extent the students knew about or used fanfiction and whether they were familiar with English literary canon. The results of the survey were made the basis to determine whether the fanfiction research could be undertaken or not. (The results of the preliminary survey are discussed briefly in the results and discussion section)

*The work selection.* The survey further revealed that the students had only heard about literary canon from the teacher. Hence, in the first meetings of the classes, the researcher delivered lectures on literature, English literature, and English literary canon. Students were then asked to browse a list of literary canon writers and their works on the internet and collaboratively decide which work they would like to

study for the class. The genre of prose, in this case short story, was chosen. The 28 students were divided into 4 groups, and each came up with different works selected. In the process of selecting the work to write about, the students were encouraged to read the biography of the writers and their works, and choose the most favorite writer along with his or her writing. This process is important in order to raise strong interest in and like for the work that is necessary for writing fanfiction.

*The fanfiction writing.* All students in the class were required to read the four selected short stories, but each group only needed to write a fanfiction for their selected story. Hence, a total of four short fanfiction stories were obtained. Before beginning the fanfiction writing, students were taught about fanfiction, especially how to write one and the types of fanfiction to choose. Some models of fanfiction were provided as well. The students were free to write in one style or combine several ones. The fanfiction was then uploaded into the forum in spot.upi.edu, in order to be read by other groups. The students were to read other groups' fanfiction and comment on them individually.

*The assessment.* In order to assess whether students had better understanding of the fanfiction they read, a close reading test combined with questions on analysis of literary elements was given before and after the fanfiction writing. The test consists of 30 multiple choice questions and five essay questions on three short stories. Discussion of literary analysis of the works was also carried out throughout the processes to observe whether students had increased understanding of the works they have read in terms of content and analysis of literary elements. Finally, interviews were carried out to find students' opinion of the use of fanfiction in learning literary canons.

## 3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the research show that fanfiction has the potential to be used in teaching literary canon to undergraduate students. There are some measures to take in order to implement this particular method, namely students' familiarity with fanfiction, students' self-selected work to write about, students' enthusiasm in reading and "fanfictioning" the selected work, teacher's careful guidance and clear explanations of the fanfiction tasks, and an appropriate forum facilitating the sharing, reading, and discussion of the fanfiction. These aspects are further elaborated in the sections to come.

### 3.1 Building Undergraduate Students' Understanding of Fanfiction and Literary Canon

The results of a preliminary survey show that all of the students already knew about fanfiction. Further investigation reveals that 8 (28.57%) of the students came to know fanfiction while browsing on the internet and they had the experience of reading several pieces of fanfiction. More than half or 16 (57.14%) of them heard about fanfiction from friends or relatives and had read one or at least two pieces of short fanfiction. The rest of the students, or four of them (14.28%), had only heard about fanfiction but never had the experience of reading it.

The results of the survey confirmed the argument that undergraduate students who are mostly technologically savvy are quite familiar with fanfiction, as one of the most popular platforms of online reading and writing. Thus, teaching literature to them using fanfiction is considered appropriate, as also shown by other similar studies (McWilliams, et al., 2011; Sauro and Sundmark, 2016; Schattenherz, 2016; Thomas, 2006). With students being familiar with fanfiction, the researcher gained more confidence in using this emerging literary genre to teach English literary canon.

In the next step, the teacher taught using the methods of lecturing and modeling about types of fanfiction based on Jenkins (1992). Over the ten types of fanfiction Jenkins classified, namely recontextualization, expanding the series timeline, refocalization, moral realignment, genre shifting, cross overs, character dislocation, personalization, emotional intensification, and eroticization, the teacher chose to introduce only the first three types. This selection was made on the basis of time efficiency and suitability to the syllabus and the goals of the course as a whole. The fanfiction models provided help improve students' understanding and assist them in planning what to write.

Another preparation needed for teaching literary canon using fanfiction is concerned with knowledge and understanding of English literary canon, and literary canon in general. Hence, the teacher gave a lecture to lay the foundation of the topic, which is in accordance with the general objective of the course the students were taking. To further familiarize students with English literary canon, the teacher assigned them to make their own survey by browsing on the internet. Due to the large number of students taking the class and participating in the research and in order to motivate the students, the teacher divided them into groups. The students were also assigned to

read several works of their interest and pick one as their most favorite. In order to create a sense of strong likes or "fandom", the teacher asked the students to do some research on the author's background and other relevant information related to the work selected. A week after, the students presented the results of their survey. The works selected by the students include Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado," Chopin's "Desiree's Baby," Roald Dahl's "The Landlady," and W. W. Jacob's "The Monkey's Paw." The next process is the writing of fanfiction based on the four selected canonical short stories.

### 3.2 Improvement in Students' Understanding of the Literary Canon

In general, it can be stated that the students improve their understanding of the canonical short stories assigned. The improvement can be seen in the increased average score of their close-reading and literary analysis tests before and after the collaborative fanfiction writing, namely 44.5 and 74.5, respectively in a 100 scale. Teacher's observations further reveal this improvement, as the students are able to answer her question, become more engaged in the group and classroom discussion, and show more enthusiasm in the teaching and learning process as a whole. Interviews were also conducted in order to gain more explanations about how the students improve their understanding and how they think fanfiction has helped them. These improvements will be elaborated in the rest of the paragraphs.

In the first two weeks, the students were assigned to read the selected short stories at home and discuss them in the classroom with their groupmates and the teacher. A close-reading and literary analysis test then was given in the following week. An average score of 44.5 was obtained, which is less than satisfactory. Upon closer investigation, the students who scored lower than or equal to the average score had several reasons for their unsatisfactory performance. Some of them admitted that they did not have the motivation to read the short stories. They were further discouraged by the difficult grammatical structure and vocabularies contained in the text. On the other hand, students who had quite good knowledge of grammar and vocabulary encountered difficulties in understanding the story due to their lack of background knowledge, such as historical events, people, and places mentioned in the story and the culture involved. Van (2009) attested to this difficulty, noting that in addition to linguistic barriers,

literary canon poses students with challenges to understand the cultural, political, and historical references.

However, the difficulties should not be made an excuse not to teach literary canon at all. Ferradas (2009) argued that the benefits of teaching it worth all the challenges it poses. Some of the benefits include “meaningful (and memorable) contexts for new vocabulary and structures, “procedural abilities to interpret discourse,” “access to new socio-cultural meanings,” and stimulation for “the imagination, as well as critical and personal response” (p. 27). Considering these benefits, the teaching of literary canon becomes necessary, and hence the teacher is obliged to be creative in motivating students to learn the canon.

In the subsequent week, the students started reading and collaboratively writing the fanfiction to their group’s selected work and uploaded it into the column of “forum” in spot, a web-based academic platform provided by the university in which the research took place. Each student was required to comment on the other three fanfiction stories made by the other groups. The comments may range from corrections on punctuation and grammar to feedback on the content level. This particular assignment is to make sure that the students read the fanfiction written by other groups.

Another close-reading and literary analysis test was conducted after the process of collaborative fanfiction writing. The questions were essentially the same, but they were modified from the first test in order to avoid duplicity. The average score for the second test was greater than that for the first one, namely 74.5; in other words, there was a 30 point of increase as a whole. This increased average score shows that the students have better understanding of the literary canon after they join in group fanfiction writing. Interviews disclose that students gain a lot of benefits from the group discussions they had during the process of fanfiction writing. They have become more attentive to details as well, as they were required to expand the story.

Finally, improvement is also observed in students’ literary analysis. They have more in-depth understanding of the literary elements of plot, character and characterization, and point of view after practicing writing the fanfiction. This is so, because the three types of fanfiction that the students made largely use the three literary elements. The groups who made recontextualization of their short story modify the plot of the original story to create additional events that explain certain characters’ attitudes or actions left unclear in the original version.

Hence, their understanding of types of plot techniques, such as flashback, in media res, etc. is deepened. They also learn more about character and characterization. The groups that expand the series timeline of the original short stories become well-versed in the literary elements of character and characterization, as they explore the characters’ backgrounds unexplained in the original work. Finally, the groups working with refocalization of the original short stories have more understanding about point of view and/or focalization, as they shift the point of view or focal point from the protagonist to the antagonist. This result confirms the results of previous research on how fanfiction can be used to teach literary analysis (McWilliams, et al., 2011; Schattenherz, 2016). In addition, albeit not the focus of the current study, students’ creative writing is also facilitated through the collaborative fanfiction writing assignment, as is the finding of Silén (2012) and Schattenherz (2016).

On the other hand, the problems encountered during the implementation of fanfiction writing in teaching literature are concerned with students’ lack of interest in writing. Not all students are fond of writing, especially the male students. Thomas’ research (2006) attests to the tendency that girls tend to be more avid writers of fanfiction than boys. In addition, although the teacher was able to make sure that the students read the fanfiction written by other groups by requiring them to comment on the fanfiction, due to the large number of students involved, she could not make sure all students participated in the writing. The students insisted, though, that all members of their groups at least contributed to the understanding of the original story and how to expand it as fanfiction. Hence, overall, the students benefit from the teaching of literary canon using fanfiction, ultimately from the discussions of work with other members of the group, and they enjoy reading the fanfiction written by other groups.

## 4 CONCLUSIONS

Teaching literary canon is always difficult and challenging, yet EFL teachers cannot avoid teaching this especially to undergraduate students because this is part of the subject in English literature. Undergraduate students who are mostly technologically savvy and active users of the internet can be motivated to learn the literary canon using the medium they are mostly familiar with, the internet. Hence, fanfiction is appropriate for the purpose.

The research has further shown the appropriateness of using fanfiction in teaching literary canon as proven by the improvement experienced by the students in their understanding of the works. Their increased average score in the tests and better understanding in using literary elements become the proof of the appropriateness of using fanfiction to teach literary canon. However, it should also be pointed out that the students may benefit solely from reading the works repeatedly and discussing them with their friends, not necessarily from the fanfiction writing itself. Hence, a design of experimental group and control group with statistical measurements will be needed to further confirm the effectiveness of fanfiction writing method in improving undergraduate students' understanding of literary canon. Another drawback of this research is the large number of students involved in the classroom that made it quite impossible to make sure all members of the group participated in the writing of the fanfiction, especially because the writing was mostly done as homework assignment. Thus, future research is suggested to include a smaller number of students to ensure students' participation.

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