

"I would draw some of the great tales in fullness,
and leave many only placed in the scheme, and sketched. The
cycles should be linked to a majestic whole, and yet leave scope for
other minds and hands,
wielding paint and music and drama.

Absurd."
~J.R.R. Tolkien, letter 131 to Milton Waldman

Transformative Works as a Means to Develop Critical Perspectives in the Tolkien Fan Community

Dawn M. Walls-Thumma
Mythmoot III *[Dawn Felagund]*

Baltimore, Maryland

10 January 2015

"One sees that
the thing which attracted
Tolkien most was **darkness:**
the **blank space**, much bigger than people realise,
on the literary and historical map ..."
~Tom Shippey, *The Road to Middle-earth*

"... it was like this distant world, this Arda, that I'd observed
as though upon a ship offshore was suddenly underfoot;
these characters, whose boldest actions were all that I could discern
from my far-removed vantage point, were suddenly right in front of me.
I could hear their voices,
see the subtle shifts in expression
as they pondered their world and each other.
I'd come ashore; I was among them."

Tolkien Fan Fiction Timeline

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>1916-1917: Tolkien began work on the legendarium 1947: <i>The Hobbit</i> published 1954: <i>The Lord of the Rings</i> published</p> <p>1962: <i>The Adventures of Tom Bombadil</i> published 1965: first [bootlegged] U.S. paperback of <i>LR</i> published</p> <p>1973: Tolkien dies 1977: <i>The Silmarillion</i> published 1980: <i>Unfinished Tales</i> published 1981: <i>The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien</i> published 1983: publication of <i>The History of Middle-earth</i> begins</p> <p>1999: filming begins on Jackson's <i>Lord of the Rings</i> films</p> <p>2001: <i>The Fellowship of the Ring</i> film released 2002: <i>The Two Towers</i> film released 2003: <i>Return of the King</i> film released 2004: <i>Return of the King</i> film wins Best Picture Oscar 2012: release of <i>The Hobbit</i> film trilogy begins</p> | <p>1959: first fan poem published in zine <i>All Mimsey</i> 1960: first fan fiction published in zine <i>I Palantir</i> 1961: Marion Zimmer Bradley publishes Tolkien fanfic first filksong published in zine <i>I Palantir 2</i></p> <p>late '60s: boom in Tolkien fan activity 1969: Tolkien Society founded against hippies' use of <i>LR</i> 1970s: fan activity slows but remains significant</p> <p>1980s: fan activity slows, especially documented fanfic</p> <p>1992: alt.fan.tolkien Usenet newsgroup founded 1995: personal Tolkien-based homepages become popular 1998: earliest Tolkien-based Yahoo! Groups</p> <p>2000: TheOneRing.net founded earliest Tolkien fanfic at FanFiction.net 2001: LOTR Fanfiction Sites webring established first slash archive (Least Expected) founded 2002: Library of Moria slash archive founded Henneth-Annûn Story Archive founded Of Elves and Men slash archive founded 2003: several awards begin for Tolkien fan fiction Stories of Arda archive founded Open Scrolls Archive founded 2004: Middle-earth Fanfiction Awards founded Tolkien Fan Fiction archive founded 2005: Silmarillion Writers' Guild founded 2009: Many Paths to Tread archive founded 2011: Faerie archive founded</p> |
|---|---|

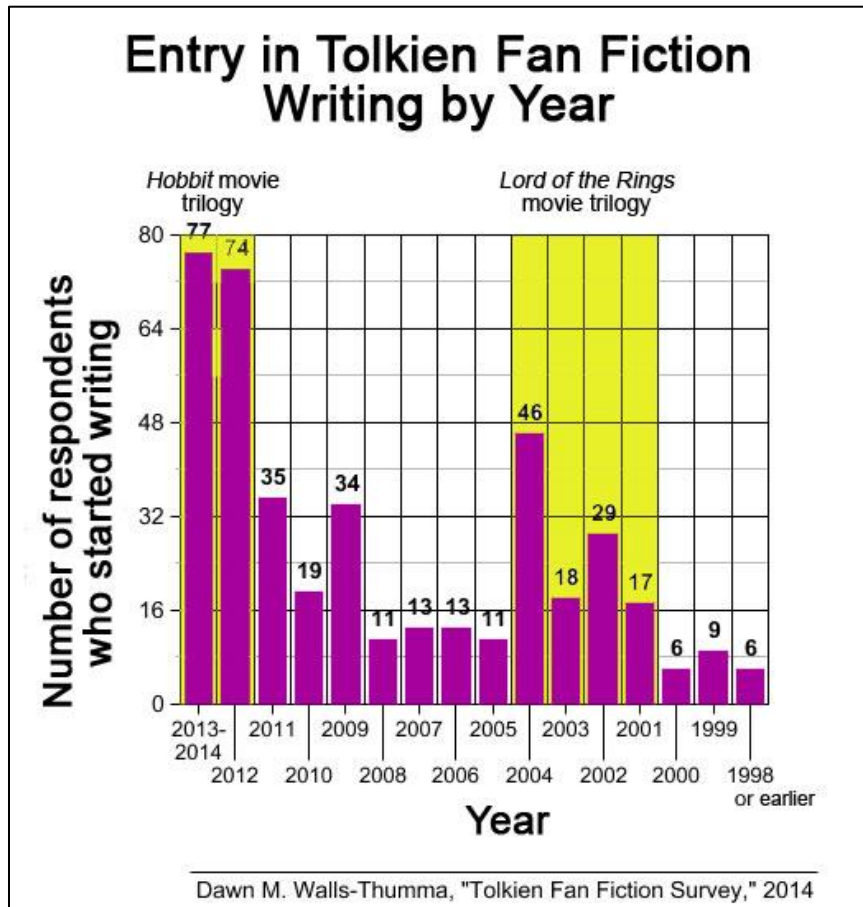
Source: "Timeline of Tolkien Fandom." *Fanlore*. 14 March 2014. Organization for Transformative Works. Web. 6 January 2014.

Tolkien Fan Fiction History: Key Points

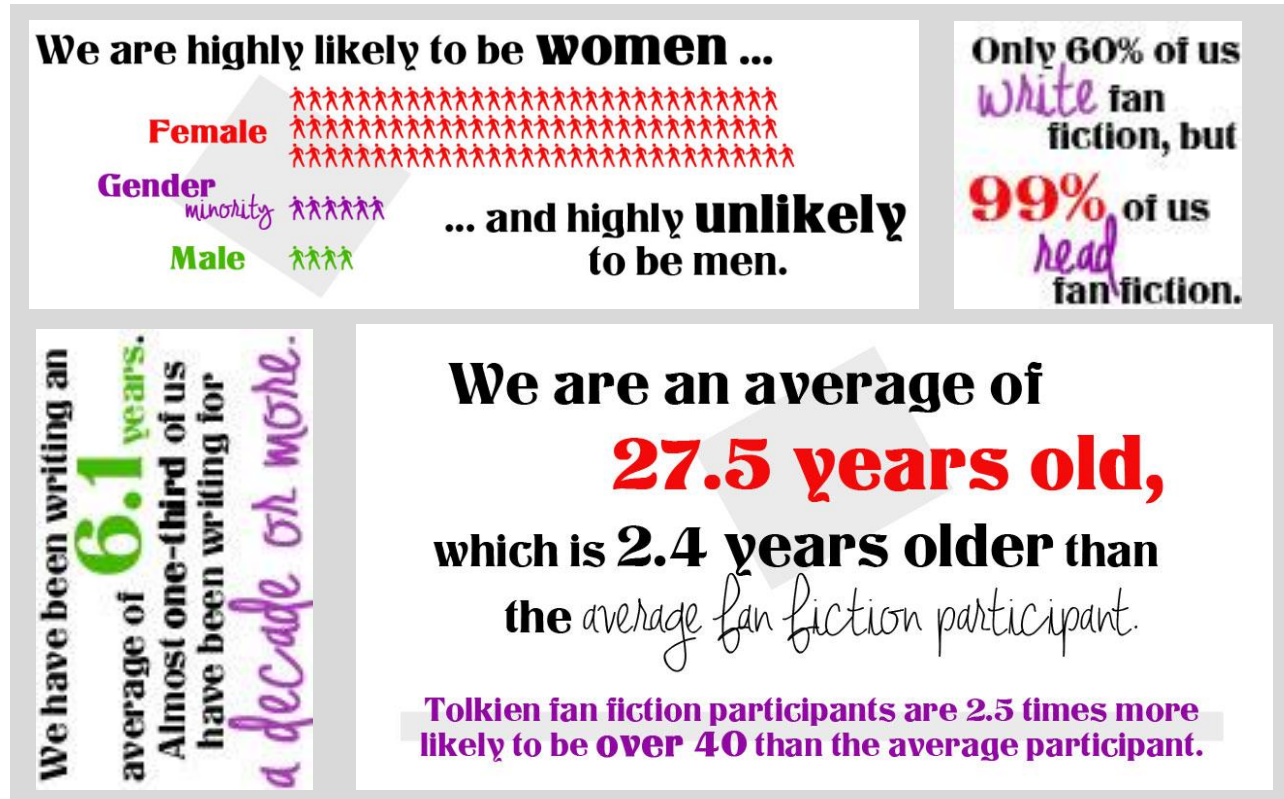
- ❖ After the publication of *The Lord of the Rings*, fan activity and fan fiction production remained a constant presence. Due to space constraints, I could not include every new zine, site, archive, or fan publication to debut on my timeline. I confined myself to notable examples and, in terms of archives, those that were firsts or that remain online today. See Fanlore for a *much* more complete timeline.
- ❖ Fan activity, including fan fiction production, tends to spike following the releases of new texts to a wide audience. Increased availability of *LotR* in the U.S. (because of the Ace Books bootleg) resulted in a spike of fan activity. Both film trilogies produced similar effects. The graph below shows the dates of entry of fan fiction writers who participated in my survey (n = 419). Even ten years after the *LotR* trilogy was released, the effects of those films on the current composition of the Tolkien fan fiction community can be seen.
- ❖ These spikes tend to produce reactionary responses from veteran fans against the popular preferences of new fans. For example, note the formation of the Tolkien Society in response to the "appropriation" of Tolkien's works by the "hippie movement." Note the formation of archives that don't accept slash after the foundation of multiple archives that do.

Bookverse vs. Movieverse

- ❖ Only 0.5% of survey respondents wrote using *only* the films as a source.
- ❖ 73% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the films encouraged them to write fan fiction.
- ❖ The films are a point of entry to Tolkien fanfic for many authors. Authors who used the *Hobbit* films (but not *LotR*) as a source had been writing 4.3 fewer years than the average writer.
- ❖ In contrast, those who listed the *LotR* films (but not the *Hobbit* films) as a source had been writing 1.8 years *longer* than the average writer, suggesting that while the *LotR* films encouraged their initial involvement, they are now bookverse writers.



Tolkien Fan Fiction Writers: Who Are We?



Tolkien fan fiction writers share a lot in common with fan fiction writers in general. We are predominantly (91%) female. (A census of authors on An Archive of Our Own showed fan fiction writers in general to be 80% female, 16% gender minority, and 4% male.) And we are young: Almost three-quarters of us (73.5%) are under 30.

But we are also older than fan fiction writers in general tend to be. We're about 2.4 years older on average, and we have a much larger contingent of writers over 40. We also show remarkable dedication to our fandom. On average, we've been writing over 6 years, and almost a third of us (32%) have been writing for a decade or more. Current media fandoms, in contrast, often enjoy flash popularity that doesn't long outlast the broadcast of the show before authors move on to a new fandom. That's another important way in which we're different: 26% of our authors are monofandom (compared to 13% for fandom as a whole[†]), and of those who write for other fandoms, 65% consider the Tolkien fandom to be their primary fandom.

Source: Data for the fandom as a whole comes from Centrum Lumina, "AO3 Census: Masterpost." 5 October 2013. Web. 6 January 2014. <http://centrumlumina.tumblr.com/post/63208278796/ao3-census-masterpost>. [†]Data on monofandom participation for fandom as a whole comes from personal correspondence with the researcher.

Archives and Fandom Geography

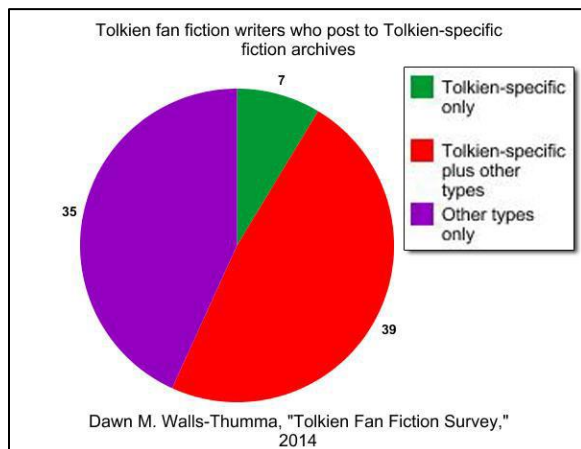
What is fandom geography?

This is a term I coined to describe how the Tolkien fan fiction community organizes itself. Think about your own life: You are doubtlessly part of several physical communities. There's the neighborhood where you live, the place where you work or go to school. You are comfortable in those places; you know people, understand how things work, where things are, and feel comfortable with the customs and culture there. At the same time, there are places where you feel like you *can't* go. Sometimes the barrier is physical – most of us will never see the top of Everest, for example – but sometimes the barrier is cultural or political. You don't feel welcome, comfortable, or safe in those spaces, so you don't go there.

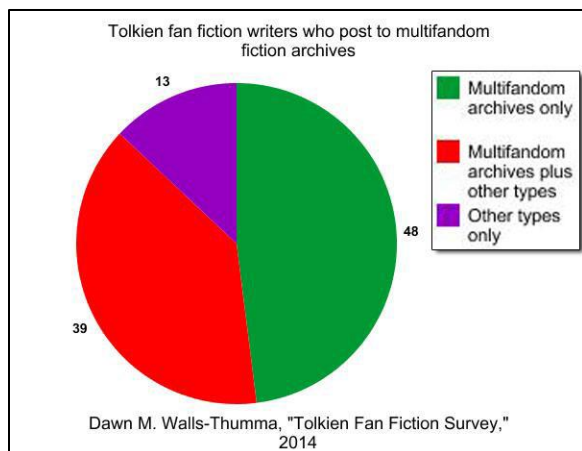
For fan fiction writers, the fandom geography works the same way. You will likely move between multiple sites and archives that are comfortable and familiar to you. In my survey, only 3% of authors posted on just one site. Then there are places you can't post because the effort to get there isn't an effort you want to make at that time. I don't write Hobbit fanfic, for example, so I don't post at West of the Moon because that's a Hobbitfic archive. Then there are places where the site's culture makes you feel unwelcome, uncomfortable, or unsafe. The interaction between where you feel comfortable and familiar and where you don't will determine where, out of dozens of archives and sites, you post your work, read, and interact.

Where we post our work

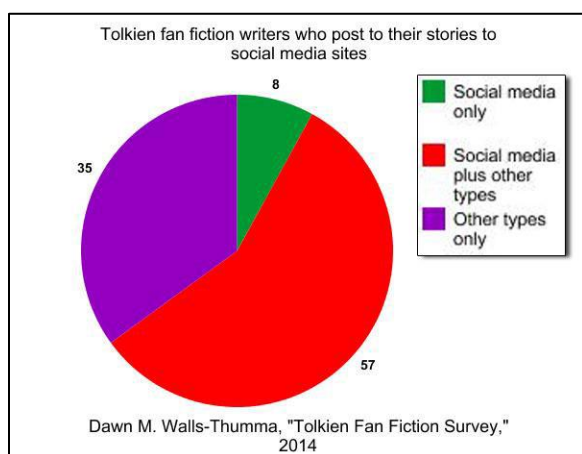
In my survey, I provided a list of sites where Tolkien fan fiction is shared and asked writers to select which sites they use or have used in the past. They could also add additional sites I might have overlooked. I classified these sites into three types: Tolkien-specific archives (e.g., Henneth-Annûn Story Archive, Faerie), multifandom archives (e.g., FanFiction.net, An Archive of Our Own), and social media (e.g., Tumblr, LiveJournal).



Where an author posts her work is closely tied to her age and the length of time she's been writing Tolkien fan fiction. Writers who post *only* to Tolkien-specific archives are the oldest and most experienced writers; they are, on average, 14.3 years older than the average Tolkien fan fiction writer and had been writing for 3.15 years longer than the average Tolkien fan fiction writer.



Writers who posted to Tolkien-specific archives *and* other types of sites were 8.5 years older and had been writing 2.2 years longer than the average Tolkien fan fiction writer. Writers who did *not* post to Tolkien-specific archives, on the other hand, were 3 years younger and had been writing 1.3 fewer years than the average Tolkien fan fiction writer.



This suggests that what I call the "second wave" of Internet Tolkien fan fiction history was indeed the age of the Tolkien archive. But this wave is coming to an end. We are now in the "third wave," when large multifandom archives and social media sites are replacing the smaller, fandom-specific archives of ten or so years ago. My initial hypothesis was that younger and new authors tended to write for multiple fandoms, while older, more experienced authors were monofandom. The data didn't confirm this, however. While monofandom authors were about four years older on average than multifandom authors,

the multifandom authors were actually the more experienced writers by a small amount (6.3 years for multifandom; 5.2 years for monofandom), and both groups authored exactly the same number of stories on average (31).

Perceptions of Home and Hostility

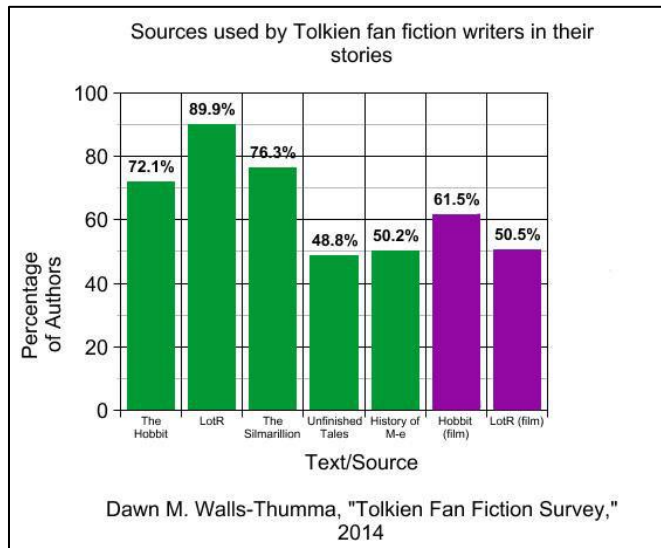
As noted above, where an author feels welcome also motivates where she posts. I asked respondents about where they felt welcome or comfortable online.

- ❖ 65% agreed or strongly agreed that there is a site that they consider a "Tolkien fandom home." Contrary to my expectations, there was no significant difference here based on the number of years they'd been writing.
- ❖ 32% agreed or strongly agreed that there were sites where they felt unwelcome. But an almost equal number (31%) disagreed or strongly disagreed. (37% chose "No opinion/Not sure," one of the questions with the highest number to choose that response.)
- ❖ 26% agreed or strongly agreed that there are sites where they don't post "because I don't agree with the approach writers there tend to take toward Tolkien's books." 32% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Sources

Tolkien fan fiction writers are generally well read and draw from a variety of texts when constructing their stories. As the graph to the right shows, more authors use *The Silmarillion* than *The Hobbit* as a source, and about as many use *Unfinished Tales* and *The History of Middle-earth* as use the *Lord of the Rings* films.

Authors also tend to regard their fan fiction writing as beneficial – though not entirely so – to learning more about Tolkien's world.



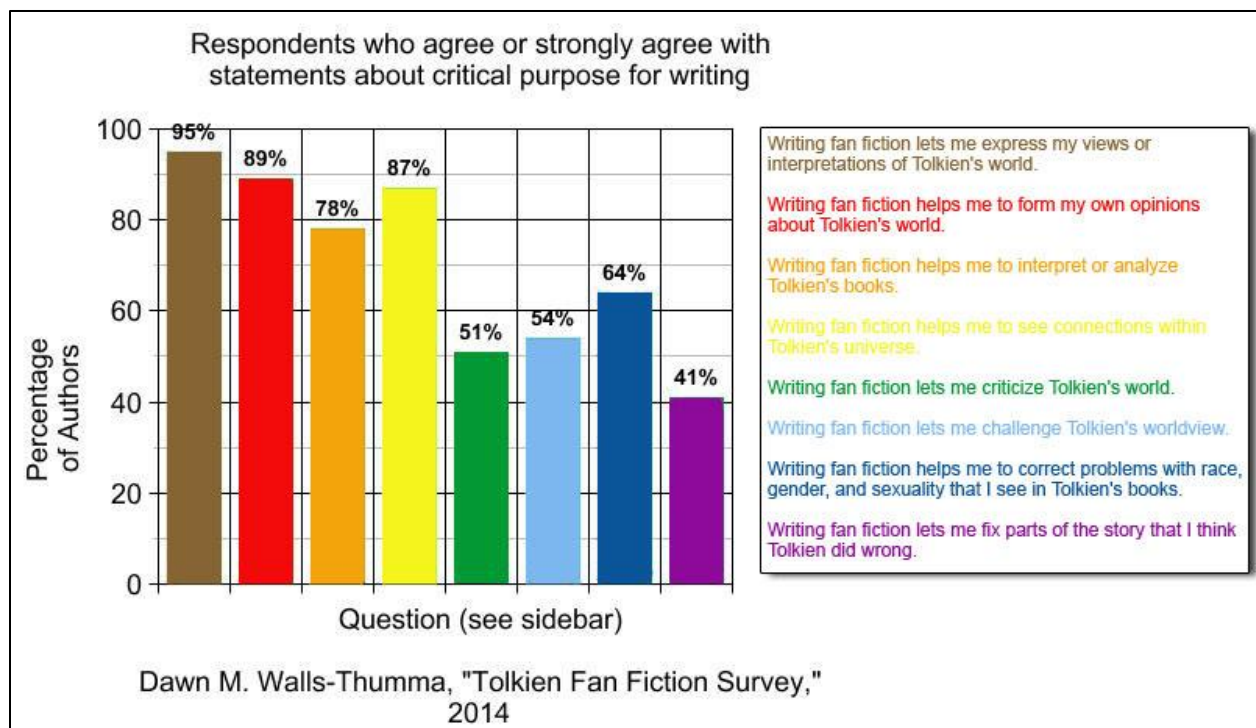
- ❖ 75% of authors who participated in the survey agreed or strongly agreed that, because of their fan fiction writing, they had read books by Tolkien that they would not otherwise have read.
- ❖ 91% agreed or strongly agreed that they had learned more about Tolkien's world through writing fan fiction, and 87% agreed or strongly agreed that they had done research on Tolkien's world that they would not have done but for fan fiction.
- ❖ Writing and reading fan fiction can also spread misinformation about Tolkien's books, however. 40% of authors and 59% of readers agreed or strongly agreed that they had learned incorrect information about Tolkien's world because of fan fiction.



Development of Critical Skills

As one can see above, the reasons for writing fan fiction about Tolkien's books are myriad. One of the most important reasons why Tolkien fans write stories, though, is critical in nature: the ability to develop ideas about the texts; analyze, criticize, and synthesize the texts; and share one's ideas and interpretations with other fans.

I asked a series of eight questions about writers' critical and analytical practices when writing fan fiction. These questions escalated in terms of the amount of analysis required of writers and the extent to which writers were willing to apply their conclusions about the texts to their stories, to the extent of even rewriting parts of Tolkien's story to fix what they perceived as inadequate or erroneous.



- ❖ Most authors not only used fan fiction as a means to analyze, criticize, or synthesize the texts but, as their responses show, were aware of this activity.
- ❖ As analysis shaded into criticism and criticism shaded into giving preference to the writer's view of how Tolkien's world *should* be (versus how he depicted it), the number of fans who agreed decreased.
- ❖ Willingness to criticize and rework the text was correlated with age, with younger fans more comfortable with these uses of fan fiction in relation to the original texts. Interestingly, they were *not* correlated with the years the author had been writing (despite the reasonable likelihood that younger fans had been writing for less time). While more conservative authors wrote slightly longer (likely because of the age difference noted above), this difference was not significant, nor was it consistent.

- ❖ When writers refer to "fix[ing] parts of the story that I think Tolkien did wrong," this process can be more complicated than simply changing the facts of the original texts to something the writer likes more. I also asked writers if they thought it was important "to stick to the facts that Tolkien gave in his books." Of those who agreed or strongly agreed that they used fan fiction to "fix" the original texts, 30% of them also agreed or strongly agreed that it was important to "stick to the facts" while doing so. (9% answered "No opinion/Not sure" to the second question.)

"Organized fandom is, perhaps first and foremost, an institution of

theory and criticism."

**-Henry Jenkins,
Textual Poachers**

Canon Fodder: How authors use the texts to build a canon

Ultimately, it is Tolkien's texts that invite and sustain this kind of deep reading, analysis, and criticism by fan fiction authors. Tolkien's work forms one of the richest and most complicated canons of any fandom. Writers must select from this wealth of very often contradictory and incomplete details to determine the factual basis, or canon, in which they will set their stories.

In *Textual Poachers*, Henry Jenkins states that extratextual information (defined as any information about a text outside the narrative itself) is rarely used in canon formation in media fandoms. This is not the case for many – even most – Tolkien fan fiction writers. Authors consider a variety of factors in forming their canons, and canons vary widely between writers.

| | |
|---|---|
| <p>Intratextual</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ facts within the texts ❖ details about narrators, transmission, etc. of fictional histories and myths | <p>Extratextual</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ dates of composition ❖ manuscript details (typed, draft, etc.) ❖ author details (JRRT, Christopher, etc.) ❖ Tolkien's notes, letters, lectures, etc. ❖ notes/writings by Christopher and other scholars ❖ real world knowledge (medicine, etc.) |
| <p>Social/Communal</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ popular fan inventions/interpretations (fanon) ❖ fandom conventions about appropriate use of texts ❖ popular characters, pairings, scenarios, etc. ❖ feedback from readers on stories ❖ reader requests (gift fics, ficswaps, etc.) | <p>Personal</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ personal experience ❖ personal preference ❖ original inventions (original characters, etc.) |

Survey Limitations

Data on the Tolkien fandom is based on a 20-minute online survey designed and administered by Dawn Walls-Thumma. Data was collected between 24 December 2014 and 1 January 2015. The survey was taken by 742 Tolkien fan fiction readers and writers. Because participants self-selected, results may reflect the opinions and practices of a more committed segment of the Tolkien fan fiction community than reflects Tolkien fan fiction writers as a whole. The survey was also more widely promoted on some sites than others, and other sites – including FanFiction.net – that have a significant Tolkien fandom contingent were not widely reachable at all. As such, the results should in no way be regarded or treated as universal to the Tolkien fan fiction community.

Acknowledgements

I would first like to thank my fellow authors Oshun, Lyra, Robinka, Himring, Tallulah, Dreamflower, Elfscribe, Indy, Pandemonium, Altariel, Scarlet, and Erulisse (one L) for their help with sources and comments on the first draft of this paper. Many thanks to the Tolkien fan fiction community for all their love, support, and wisdom across these last ten wild years. And finally, much love and gratitude goes to my husband Rob, who has unflinchingly supported me since the fateful day when I told him, "I kind of started a writers' group ..."

Visit me online!

silmarillionwritersguild.org
themidhavens.net/heretic_loremaster/
dawnfelagund.tumblr.com/

Questions and comments are always welcome at DawnFelagund@gmail.com.

All data in this handout are from my Tolkien fan fiction survey unless other indicated. This survey will be ongoing until December 2015. I will share the data with any other researcher who is interested; please email me if you are interested in taking the survey or using the data.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License.

[**Legalese to English translation:** You may use any images, data, text, *anything* in this handout or from my presentation. You may redistribute this handout, distribute the images and data from it, use pieces of it, rework it into your own thing, cut it into pieces and use it as confetti at your next birthday party, etc. However, you *must* credit me for any use you make of *anything* in this packet or presentation – that's the "Attribution" part. Please credit Dawn M. Walls-Thumma (or Dawn Felagund if you are using it in a fannish and not academic/professional context). You must also allow others to redistribute, rework, make confetti of your work too, though – that's the "ShareAlike" part – because it's not fair for me to share with you and then for you to get all stingy about sharing any further. Finally, the one thing you *can't* do with this? Make money off of it or anything you make with it. That's the "NonCommercial" part. Not that I have a fancy legal team behind me, but I am buddies with a few sons of Fëanor, and we all know how *they* get when they feel possessive over something. Did you read this far? Thank you! Email me with your favorite character, and I'll write at least a drabble for you about him or her. Thanks for your interest in my work. See you in Middle-earth.]