Original Paper

Functional Character in Fan Fiction: A Case Study of *The Lord of the Rings*' Alternative Universe Fan Fiction *For Every Evil*

(Note 1)

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Abstract

From Henry Jenkins onwards, fan fiction study has walked pass almost 30 years and has covered a relatively large field including feminism, queer theory and mass culture, but many scholars still seem to miss the point that fan fiction is firstly a literary text and thus leave its literariness unexamined. In fact, with a high intertextuality and a "poacher" nature, fan fiction can serve as an ideal text to narratology study. This paper, through conducting a case study of The Lord of the Rings' alternative universe fan fiction For Every Evil, is attempting to unfold fan authors' literary talent in constructing functional character in the text and use it as a way to deliver personal interpretation to the canon. By applying characters' known behavior as a method to resolve instability in fan fiction narrative and complete its narrative progress, authors who write alternative universe fan fiction show that this kind of "amateur" writing is worth a closer literary review. It is hoped that through the analysis, the literary merit of fan community can be better recognized, and fan fiction can be treated more as a genre rather than a cultural phenomenon in the future.

Keywords

functional character, alternative universe fan fiction, The Lord of the Rings

1. Introduction

Fan fiction study, nowadays, is no longer a strange term in academic field thanks to the flourishing of fan-created text on the Internet. Since the mid-80s, many researches have been conducted on various fan texts, but because of its "unrestricted" nature (Tosenberger, p. 185), there are still many texts that have seldom been covered in the past 30 years, and the genre of "alternative universe" (AU for short) writing is one of them. By removing characters from their original setting and giving them new identities, alternative universe fan fiction provides its authors a broader stage to show their creativity in narrative experimentation than other homodiegetic fan works. Thus, a closer look at the narrative device of AU fan fiction is worth conducting in order to better understand the literary merit of fan community.

2. Method

From *Star Trek* to *Harry Potter*, science fiction/film/television and fantasy novel are usually considered as the most welcome source text among fan writers, and these two specific contexts have become the center of fan fiction critics in the last three decades because of their phenomenal effect among a wide range of people, leaving other texts barely untouched. This paper will deliver a case study of *The Lord of the Rings* alternative universe fan fiction *For Every Evil*. The canon (Tolkien's original trilogy and Peter Jackson's Oscar winning film altogether) was once the spotlight of English fan fiction writing after the films came out, and *For Every Evil* has received a high reputation since its publication on fanfiction.com and become one of the representative AU *The Lord of the Rings* fan fictions for its outstanding portrayal of the life of the medieval characters in the 21st century. By studying how the known characters' behavior contribute to the AU fan fiction narrative, this thesis wishes to treat AU fan fiction text as a proper literature text, and unfolds modern fan authors' talent in innovating the field of narratology through the application of functional character as a method to deliver their interpretation about the source text.

3. Discussion

3.1 Why Character Counts

Most fan authors, as Henry Jenkins points out, start writing fan fiction mainly out of their love towards certain characters and wish their story could never end: "[Fans] stretching its boundaries to incorporate their concerns, remolding its characters to better suit their desires" (p. 159). For those who read this kind of story, it is the same desire that drives them to examine the text almost word by word and actively leave comments to the author to exchange ideas. Thirty years ago, Jenkins also concluded ten ways for fans to "remold" their favored characters, but as time goes by, some of the approaches become more dominant than others and are more appreciated by the fan community, revealing modern fans' preference in interpreting and reconstructing the canon in the age of the Internet. Slash, a

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reconstruction of characters' romantic relationship from heterosexual to homosexual, is still as popular as it was in the 1990s for it can always fulfill female audience's desire of writing or reading stories about equal love; the PWP (Plot, What Plot) text, or fan pornography, serves as another important agent to satisfy fans' explicit taste to observe characters' sexual behavior; the gerne of Crossover fan fiction allows fans to pair characters from different canon together so as to see how they would interact with each other; the newly emerged ABO (Alpha, Beta, Omega) text in the recent decade reveals fans' ambition to express their political, social and cultural concerns in reality through placing characters in this animal-originated setting; finally, the Alternative Universe genre extends characters' story line into a new, seemingly unrelated realm, providing answers to fans' wonder about those "What if…" questions.

No matter how fans' taste change, their reading and writing activities are all generated from their interest towards canon's characters. In order to preserve the joy as much as possible, certain rules have been set in fan community regarding the boundary of fan fiction writing. Although some critics argue that fans tend to "choosing (choose) something to emphasize and others to play down, filtering the characters and the concepts through their own perceptions" (Jenkins, p. 181), fan fiction writers still try their best to claim fidelity to the source text, especially in characterization. Except the AU text, fan fiction's setting, timeline and characters' identity are all directly borrowed from the canon; if the characters are in the alternative universe, their behaviors are also restricted to the known pattern in the original text. If the characters' action had gone too far from the canon, readers would usually leave little mercy to authors of this kind and criticize them severely (with the exception that the author warn the readers with "OOC" mark that the text itself is created for the sake of altering original characterization). Therefore, it is a common understanding among fan community that fan fiction characterization should remain loyal to the canon.

With this characteristic, fan fiction is no doubt a perfect demonstration of literary intertextuality, and it is nearly the first direction scholars find to transfer the attention of fan fiction study from taking it as a sub-culture production to seeing it as a new literature form. From the time of Saussure, it is widely recognized by many literary critics that "the signs deployed in any particular text have their reference not to objects in the world but to the literary system out of which the text is produced" (Allen, p. 11). When readers encounter certain character's action in the reading process, they will not refer to its direct representation in the physical world, rather they will think about the similar characterization in the literary and cultural system. This intertextual feature generates a unique way for readers to decode the meaning of the text. Barthes, with his "connotative meaning of the text", suggests that characters are built upon a set of recurrent "semes" (Allen, p. 84), and when readers interpret the connotative meaning of these semes, they can make sense of the special quality and the "depth" of the characters. This hermeneutic code, defined by Barthes, finds itself a good representation in fan fiction texts. As the "textual poacher" (Jenkins, 1992, p. 24), fan fiction authors would create little meaning in their writing

without the reference to the source text, and with sufficient knowledge of the canon, fan fiction readers will constantly keep the canon's semes in mind to decode the character's behavior. Therefore, the recurrent characters' action in the fan text deserves a further examination if its literariness is going to be better understood.

In recent years, fan fiction is indeed treated more as a literary text rather than a mere online cultural phenomenon like as it was in the 1990s, and the academic field circle is paying more and more attention to its textual details and narrative device. In 2015, Maria Lindgren Leavenworth published an essay about her research on the paratext of fan fiction in *Narrative*, marking a huge leap in the study of fan fiction's textuality. Other critics also contribute a lot in the close reading of fan fiction text. Abigail Derecho defines fan fiction as an "archontic literature", emphasizing highly on its intertextuality and engagement with the source text; Mafalda Stasi conducts a textual analysis on slash fiction using the model of the palimpsest, suggesting that fan fiction is a product of collective authorship within fan community; Deborah Kaplan examines fan authors' ways of characterization in three different fan fictions, unfolding the complex conversations between fan fictions writers, readers and the canon (Hellekson & Busse, pp. 61-152). Dedicated as they are, these scholars mainly focus on the specific narrative devices fan authors use to interact with the source text, and have not yet touch upon the function of characters' known action in generating fan text's narrating progress. Alternative Universe fan fiction, with its features of radical appropriation in terms of setting and loyal reference in terms of character construction, is suitable to serve as a medium to reveal the narrative function of appropriated characters.

3.2 Action Comes First

When it comes to the canon, little doubt will be given to the popularity of *The Lord of the Rings* among English speaking countries, but it is the same popularity that prevents this trilogy from receiving the kind of academic attention like other more "sophisticated" works do. Though scholars like Rose Zimbado and Tom Shippey never cease to dedicate themselves to Tolkienian study during the latter half of the 20th century, it was not until the release of Peter Jackson's films that Tolkien's novels really started to shine upon literary critics. From then on, many philosophical merits other than the mythology and epic tradition of Tolkien's writing has been dug out, and to many people's surprise, the seemingly "naive" trilogy has proved itself valuable to various academic discussions. Classical themes like religion, gothic motif and the nature of evil have been widely discussed, and other more "modern" methods like feminism, eco-criticism and queer study have also been applied to the text (Bloom, p. vii). However, very few Tolkienian study has touched upon the discourse level of his writing except Mary Bowman who explored the metanarrative aspects of *The Lord of the Rings* and had her article published in *Narrative* in 2006, leaving a blank in understanding Tolkien's way of constructing the long epic tale. Thus, a closer look at the characters' structural relationship would be a good beginning to fill in the blank.

There has been a long-time debate in narratology study about what constitutes the "personality" of characters. Structuralist narratologists like Vladimir Propp and A. J. Greimas firmly believe that only actions can grant characters with meaning, while many other critics like Forster, Virginian Woolf and Martin Turnell hold the idea that it is the description of characters' inner world that provides the story with aesthetics (Shen, pp. 54-56). Both of the stands have good reasons and well-developed theoretical framework to support their arguments, but when it comes to certain literature gerne, it is natural that one of them is more considerably suitable than the other in analyzing the text. Propp delivers his groundbreaking "functional character" theory based on his analysis of the Russian folk tale, therefore, it is better to see characters in the similar text as "actant" rather than to treat them as "people". Originated from German folk tale *Das Nibelungenlied*, it is clear that characters in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* carry different functions on their way to finish the task, and a structural examination on their relationship can help to unfold the depth of this "childish" story from a new perspective.

According to how characters participate in the narrated action, Propp and Greimas identify them as a different category of "actant" in narration. Refining Propp's typology of seven general roles in narration, Greimas further generalizes a total of six actants in the narrated event: Subject, Object, Sender, Receiver, Helper, and Opponent, and their relation with each other can be summarized as follow: "it is entirely centred on the object of desire aimed at by the subject and situated, as object of communication, between the sender and the receiver – the desire of the subject being, in its part, modulated in projections from the helper and opponent" (Herman, Jahn & Ryan, p. 1). In *The Lord of the Rings*, the events are all generated from the desire for the One Ring from different parties, so it is reasonable for characters to fall into the six categories of actants: the fellowship of the ring as the Subject, the Ring as the Object, those who commanded by the dark lord Sauron being the Opponent and those allied with the fellowship are simultaneously the Sender, Receiver and Helper. With the contrast of "keeping the Ring" and "destroying the Ring" being the main binary opposition in the story, characters' actions are all circling around the two power poles, and thus their relation is settled and can easily be applied to another setting, which makes the canon perfect for AU fan fiction writing.

What should be paid most attention to is the structural relationship within the fellowship for it not only inspires most of the fan creations, but also reflects Tolkien's idea about what true hero means. The fellowship, consisting of four hobbits, two human, one wizard, one elf and one dwarf, is form because of the common goal of destroying the Ring and safeguard the peace of the middle-earth, but besides the goal, each of them has their own different purposes in the journey and thus create a complex relationship among the nine: Frodo, the hobbit ring-keeper, is the main carrier of the task and the other eight are all supposed to be his helper, but he is also the object of others' desire because of the Ring; the human Boromir always wants to bring the Ring back to his city as a weapon to defend Sauron, and as a threat to Frodo, he is tragically killed by his desire though he realizes his mistake at the final moment; another human Aragon acts as the most reliable helper to Frodo at the beginning, but he also carries his

own task of restoring his identity as king of all mankind and it ultimately leads him to depart with Frodo; the wizard Gandalf serves as the guidance in the group, but he cannot share any of Frodo's burden other than pointing out direction, not to mention that his own "death" prolongs the action of the fellowship; although the elf Legolas and the dwarf Gimli seldom jeopardize their partners, the fact that their races dislike each other still casts an unstable factor over the task. Therefore, in the fellowship, no one can act as the real helper except Frodo's three hobbit companions Sam, Merry and Pippin. Sam, as Frodo's loyal gardener, is the only one who is not corrupted by the Ring and is more heroic than Frodo by preventing him from becoming another Ring-slave; Merry and Pippin are usually considered as foil characters and their journey looks dull compared with others' adventure, but without their actions, the fellowship would definitely break apart (the nine people are separated into different ways on the journey, but the search for Merry and Pippin keeps bringing them together except Frodo and Sam who march to Mount Doom alone) and the task of destroying the evil would never be achieved. Acting as the mediator, the characters' structure requires the three hobbits to be comic, gentle and emotional. By arranging the most important role to the "little fellow" who shows barely no traces of traditional heroic merit like the masculine Beowulf and those glorious fighters in heroic literature, Tolkien attempts to rewrite the figure of hero from those physically powerful ones to those who possess a strong mind and moral courage. For him, the ability of delivering moral choice is more important than physical strength, and the new heroic figure represented by the hobbits answers exactly to the call of exterminating gender stereotype in the post-war era.

With this interesting character structure in the source text, there is no wonder that *The Lord of the Rings* fans are passionate in examining how characters would interact with each other in other contexts. On the world's largest fan fiction archive website archiveofourown.org (AO3 for short), alternative universe writing accounts for the second largest number among all *The Lord of the Rings* fan fiction. These fan authors, while keep focusing on the relation between the fellowship members, are more willing to retell their adventure from the perspective of the elf prince Legolas thanks to the outstanding portrayal of this figure in Peter Jackson's film. Some may say that this change of narrative focalization is a violation to Tolkien's idea of heroism because elves are described as powerful fighters in the trilogy, but when one considers the fact that their appearance are androgynous and they "are not known for their physical prowess" (Enright, p. 171), fans' choice of making Legolas the center of the narration is their way of paying tribute to Tolkien's philosophy. *For Every Evil*, written by an American fan Mirrordance, is one of the well-received *The Lord of the Rings* AU fan fictions featuring the life of the fellowship, especially Legolas in the 21st century. In Mirrordance's story, Legolas is a policeman in Los Angeles, Aragon a doctor, Gimli a hacker, and the hobbits are innocent college students. Though the characters possess new identities in a modern setting, their actions strictly follow the behavior pattern in the canon, and the readers are expecting to see them behave in this way. Thus, the narrative progress in *For Every Evil* is mainly pushed by characters' known behavior, and it would be inspired to see why

this explicit narrative pattern can attract so many devoted people.

3.3 Textual Analysis: Functional Appropriation, Authorial Narrative Progression and Critical Interpretation

In *For Every Evil*, Mirrordance tells a story about reincarnation, self-discovery and how to do with the second chance. A businessman, Grissom Warrington, recovers his memory as Grima Wormtongue in the middle-earth on his trip to Britain and decides to rewrite history by searching for the likely ruling Ring and killing all the reborn fellowship members. Legolas, the immortal elf who remembers all, senses the danger and starts to take action as a policeman to save the world as well as protect his friends who know nothing about their past. Although the theme of reincarnation grants the characters the same identity as they are in the source text, for most of the time their ancient self is asleep and their knowledge about the world is completely modern, therefore *For Every Evil* is still a typical AU fan fiction, in which characters' identities are changed while their narrative function remains the same.

Though alternative universe story requires a brand-new setting, in order to stay loyal to the source text and preserve characters' function as much as possible, there are some certain rules within almost all fandoms for fan authors to follow while writing alternative universe story. For starters, the characters' new identities will normally have some connection with their original ones. In *For Every Evil*, Aragon's reincarnation Adrian Aarons is a doctor, which echoes the magic power of the human king's "healing hands" in Tolkien's trilogy; the hacker Jimmy Goran's profession has a strong implication to the dwarf Gimli's excellent digging skill in the ancient time; Bob Baggins, as an archaeologist in the modern world, possesses the same adventurous spirit as his former self, the learned hobbit Bilbo Baggins does. These similarities set the tone for characters' development, forbidding the characterization in AU fan fiction to be astray from the source text. The readers, with abundant background knowledge of the canon, would spot out the similarity immediately and are eager to see how the old characterization would fit in the new setting. In this way, the motivation of reading and writing characters' known behavior is created, and thus guarantees the base of functional appropriation in AU fan fiction creation.

Compared with other writers who only borrow characters' names in AU fan fiction writing, Mirrordance goes a step further in her appropriation by intentionally imitating Tolkien's plot and narrative structure. One may call it lack of innovation and a possible plagiarism, but this writing strategy allows her text to be more suitable than others' in analyzing how functional character works in AU fan fiction narration. As it is analyzed above, characters' actions are more important than their psyche in *The Lord of the Rings* because of the trilogy's folk tale origin; therefore, borrowing canon's narrative structure while writing AU fan fiction is a way to test whether their actions are solid enough to preserve the same function in different context. In the author's afterword, Mirrordance acknowledges that her initial drive to write this fan fiction is to answer the question "what if the characters are here", and in the story she makes her claim obvious to readers: "People were never randomly thrown together,

he understood that. And especially, *most especially*, not the likes of them" (*FEE*, ch.5). Like Tolkien, she divides characters into binary opposition and creates a journey for the bright side to finish so as to achieve the great purpose. On the journey of defeating Wormtongue, the structural relationship within the fellowship remain mostly the same as the canon because of the consistent characters' action: when Aragon is asleep inside Adrian Aarons, Legolas takes charge of everything just like Aragon does in *Lord of the Rings* so the team could always have a leader to look upon; as a former dwarf and now a high-tech criminal, Jimmy Goran still has a very complex relationship with his supervisor Horace Harding, an Interpol as well as the rebirth of the elf soldier Haldir, and the team could not perform at its best until the two become real friends; though the hobbit identity remains nearly silent in their body, the three college students Philip Took (Pippin), Mark Brandy (Merry) and Sam Granger show great courage in protecting their friend Finn Baggins (the reincarnation of Frodo) in the final stage of the task, and Finn, remembering little if his past, once again holds the fate of all lives on earth by deciding whether or not to destroy the evil treasure. From this arrangement, it is clear that action always comes first in AU fan fiction writing; it is characters' behavior, not the "people" that concerns fan authors of this kind, and no matter how different the context is and how strange the characters appear to be, AU fan fiction will remain loyal to the canon and persuade the reader as long as the author pays close attention in following the original characters' function.

However, like other narratives, fan fiction exists not only for satisfying the author's own eagerness to be a god in the fictional world by arranging characters' action, but also for "generates, sustains, develops and resolves" the interests of his or her authorial readers, which leads to the need of resolving "instabilities" in fan fiction's narrative progression (Phelan, p. 15). Phelan proposes two kinds of instabilities in narrative, with the first one created by the story and the second by the discourse. In the case of AU fan fiction, the main kind of instability is the one within the story and between characters, the one which "created by situations, and complicated and resolved through actions" (Phelan, p. 15) because, as it is mentioned above, characters' actions are the first concern for both AU fan fiction readers and authors. In *For Every Evil*, Mirrordance knows her authorial readers well enough to use this kind of instability as the main force to motivate her narrative progression. As a reincarnation story, the main instability in *For Every Evil* is the awakening of characters' memory, and its readers, like any other AU fan fiction reader does, are eager to know in what kind of situation would the characters perform as they are in the canon and how their identity and relationship would be restored. By making the characters' old identity asleep at the beginning, Mirrordance sustains the instability until all major characters (the fellowship) appear, and then develops it by creating certain conditions for characters to meet if they want a full awakening, like physical contact with the person or thing that makes a drastic change in their former life. In this way, more parallel actions can be planted in the AU story and readers would get more excited in the reading process as they recognize the intertext. At the same time, the major characters' awakening process also serves as the turning point of the story. For instance, the L. A.

policeman Brad's Boromir-self becomes conscious when he meets the four former hobbits face to face, and the change of his identity instantly creates another instability in the narrative for the author to solve, that is, whether or not he has to die as he does in the canon in order to secure the success of the team's task. Finally, all instabilities are resolved through characters' intertextual action, like Boromir's self-sacrifice, Sam's intimate protection towards Frodo, and Aragon's fight as the leader of the whole team. With the evil side being defeated, almost all characters restore their former self, and their relationship is more solid than ever before.

Besides echoing the canon, fan authors also find a chance of expressing their personal interpretation about the canon's story and discourse in AU fan fiction narrative progression. Although both the author and readers know how the characters would perform as the narrative goes on, the fictional world provides enough space for author to discuss the necessity of "repeating" the same behavior before the characters conduct the key action. In Mirrordance's story, Adrian Aarons keeps refusing to waken his former king identity and perform his duty because "I live in the *now world*… And I find that nothing here matters to me anymore than that I find them beautiful" (*FEE*, ch.14). The new, modern context in *For Every Evil*'s alternative universe setting grants the characters a second chance to alter their previous fate; they have the right to choose to remain "ordinary" because it is reasonable to presume that the 21st century does not need these middle-aged heroes to save the world. Though unsurprisingly, all characters take the old path in the end, it is in this discussion that the nature of these heroic characters is revealed: the embracing, responsible attitude towards their destiny is exactly what distinguishes them from other people. Another interpretation within the narrative progression is whether certain characters have to die in order to complete the narrative function. In Propp's analysis of Russian folk tale structure, there must be some disastrous events that happen on the Helper (usually the death of the Helper) so the hero can reach his epiphany and finish the task (Shen, p. 46). In *The Lord of the Rings* canon, Boromir is the one who dedicates his life in protecting the hobbits, so when it comes to his second life in *For Every Evil*, everyone tries to keep him away from danger so he would not die again, but they also have doubt in altering his fate, including Boromir himself: "what if me being here… What if it changes thing?... If I have to die for us to win, I don't mind" (*FEE*, ch.27). Boromir's words reveal the author's hesitation regarding characterization. On the one hand, she is aware that the main reason for the existence of fan fiction is to compensate reader's loss in then canon, so there is no chance for her to arrange Boromir's death again; on the other hand, she also worries that the change in character's fate would alter his function, therefore the meaning of him being in the narrative would be gone. By putting Boromir into the situation of serious injury but later survives with the help of modern technology, Mirrordance delivers her interpretation to character's function in narrative: as long as the sacrifice action of "helping" exists, characters do not have to die so as to preserve their function; it is the action, not the ending that matters in functional characterization.

From the case of *For Every Evil*, it is obvious that the appropriation in alternative universe fan fiction is not a mere reflection of the source text; rather, it is a dialogue between fan authors and readers on the one hand and the canon on the other. The key actions which resolve the instability in AU fan fiction narrative progress are all known to the authorial readers. This feature does not spoil their joy of reading the story; on the contrary, it arouses their excitement because it fits the requirement of intertextuality in fan fiction composition. Being in the same fan community, fan fiction readers know well how to "pick up on all the signals in the appropriate way" (Phelan, p. 5), and fan fiction author seldom fails them in giving them enough "signals" to explore the text. When action becomes the top concern, it is reasonable to alter characters' fate and make up for fans' emotional regret for their favored "people" in the canon. In this sense, this kind of explicit narrative progression in AU fan fiction is an ideally authorial one, providing both the author and the reader a safe ground to fulfill their literary pursuit.

4. Conclusion

The virtual space has helped fan fiction as well as other fan artifacts gain recognition among a wide range of people and become an indispensable part of online culture. Because of that, scholars are more concerned with the cultural merit of fan fiction composition, leaving the fictional text itself nearly untouched. In fact, for fans who write and read, online fan fiction is more of a utopian space for them to get away from the limitation in reality and be the "author of their own" regardless of their age, gender and race, and there is no need for them to hide their talent like they do in daily life. The case of *For Every Evil* in this thesis proves that literacy is not the privilege of those "classic" names; the voices from the "amateurs" are also worth paying attention to. As more studies in its literariness being conducted, it is hoped that in the near future, fan fiction will be mentioned more as a "gerne" than as "cultural phenomenon" in the academic field.

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