

Fanfiction

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Fanfiction as literacy practices in rainbow Rowell's "Fangirl"

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ABSTRACT: Fan identity is frequently associated with negative connotations, such as weird, obsessive loner, passive consumer, and fanatic. However, fans nowadays are not passive consumers. They engage in literacy practices, one of which is producing fanfiction. This paper explores identity reconstruction in fanfiction through Cath Avery, the main character in Rowell's *Fangirl*. Using New Literacy Studies as a lens and the concept of figured worlds, this paper argues that fanfiction enables Cath to reconstruct her fan identity into a more positive and creative one as she becomes a well-known writer in cyberspace. Moreover, fanfiction serves as empowerment for Cath through a separate identity in her personal life. The result shows that the literacy events in the novel reveal the identity reconstruction of Cath Avery. She creates a new-figured world of a fan into a more positive one from the literacy events and practices. It can be concluded that Cath confronts her negative positional fan identity and figures out her figurative identity through fanfiction as her literacy practices.

1 INTRODUCTION

Fandom today is not a passive community as it is mainly represented before. Instead, they produce creations to participate in the texts they have read. Fans create many kinds of artifacts, such as fan art, fanfiction, fansubbing, etc. These creations of fans show that fandom engages with literacy practices, for instance, the activity of reading and writing fanfiction. The term fanfiction refers to the fan's creative writing and literacy practice (Bahoric & Swaggerty 2015; Kelley 2016) that borrows characters, plots, settings, and other elements from the original text (Thomas 2011). Fans publish their fanfiction in the fanfiction forums or blogs for free. Thus, the activity of writing fanfiction is voluntary.

Although fans these days show that they are also creators through their literacy practices, the term 'fans' still carry negative connotations. The original word of a fan abbreviates from the word 'fanatic', which means "religious and political zealotry, false beliefs, possession, and madness" (Jenkins 1992). Fans are often stereotyped as obsessive, loners, lack of control, and passive consumers of popular culture texts (Grossberg 1992; Jenkins 1992; Jenson 1992). The media represent them as obsessive, freak, and weird people who have a deep attachment to their favorite celebrities or famous figures. We can see that fans are often positioned in the negative characteristics made by society. In other words, the identity of fans tends to be labeled with negative characteristics for a long time.

Unlike previous studies, this paper aims to explore how fanfiction can reveal and reconstruct Cath's fan identity in Rowell's *Fangirl* by using figured worlds theory from the lens of new literacy studies. In fact, the representation of literacy in the novel and other popular culture texts can reveal the identity of the characters (Williams & Zenger 2007). However, the representation of a fan's identity and literacy practices are rarely found in literary work, and the concept of figured worlds still needs to be researched in literature.

1.1 *Literacy and figured worlds*

Holland and her colleagues propose a theory of identity called figured worlds based on Bakhtin, Vygotsky, and actor-network theory. Figured worlds are just imaginary, 'as if' worlds that an individual and others collectively form. Shortly, figured worlds are the imaginary realm where people are assigned to some actions and outcomes (Holland et al. 1998). These actions are valued by others based on social and cultural constructions.

Two concepts of identities are introduced in these worlds, namely positional and figurative identity. Positional identity refers to the identities that are assigned to people by others. In other words, these identities tell people related to their positions in the lived world. Since they are connected to power relations, these identities might put people in an unfavorable position by giving them negative characteristics (Holland et al. 1998). For example, fan studies scholars have found several negative stereotypes of fans like obsessive, loner, weird, fanatic, and passive consumers (Grossberg 1992; Jenkins 1992). These positional identities of fans surely position them negatively in society. Imagine that fans are poorly treated by society, for instance, being bullied, just because they show their identity as a fan of something or someone.

However, identity is not about being assigned specific characteristics by someone else. People can figure out their identities ⁴ using figurative elements related to culture, which Holland et al. call figurative identity (Holland et al. 1998). To contest the negative positional identity, Holland and her colleagues suggest the use of cultural artifacts. They can be objects, narratives, symbols, and so on that have collective meanings in society. Once people use cultural artifacts, they can prove to other people that they are not what people thought about them before.

There are also figured worlds of literacy. People can be identified by their writing, being literate or illiterate, and what they read (Bartlett & Holland 2002). Here, cultural artifacts are essential in building the relationship between identities and literacies (Bartlett 2005). Cultural artifacts in literacy include pens, books, stories, creative writings, and so on. The student might use a book to confront her positional identity as a stupid student into a talented student. It is the same with a fan who might use her fanfiction or fan art to contest the negative labels as a fan.

1.2 *Literacy and identity in popular culture*

Literacy and identity connect with each other. We can see it from the concept of Discourse proposed by Gee. According to Gee, Discourse is an 'identity kit' that people are socially recognized for following specific instructions like how to talk and write (Gee 1990). People practicing literacy might reveal whom they are based on what they read and write. It shows that literacy is connected to identity. Not only are they connected, but there is also an area called 'literacy and identity' studies.

Fandom refers to a group of people with the same interests. Fandom as popular culture can relate these two elements through fans' literacy practices in cyberspace, namely writing and reading fanfiction. Like the old literacies, literary and fandom scholars have found that fanfiction can be considered a "valuable literacy practice" (Leigh 2020). By creating fanfiction, fans can negotiate the identities they want to show the readers. Identities, in this sense, are not specified into gender, sexuality, or race but how they want to represent themselves through these literacy practices.

For instance, Korobkova and Black's research on One Direction fans' literacy practice show that they want to represent themselves differently on Wattpad as their fanfiction platform (Korobkova & Black 2014). Instead of identifying as a fangirl with a negative stigma, one participant negotiates her identity as a serious writer. The identity of a 'serious writer' has more favorable characteristics and a sense of empowerment for an individual.

In another research, Black found that fanfiction can be used to identify some particulars identity and community (Black 2006). Fans can promote their heritages and communities by putting these elements on their fanfiction characters, settings, and even plots. The author notes that one of the fanfiction elements also shows the authors' identities that they want to share with their readers (Black 2006). It can be concluded that there is some participation among fans in the fanfiction forum, and each of them can play specific roles.

Kelley (2016) observes a fanfiction writer called Chivalric on a Harry Potter fanfiction website named *Sycophant Hex*. She argues that fanfiction can depict the writer's identities from race, gender, class, sexuality, and language to nationality in the online space. Moreover, she also finds how *the Sycophant Hex* website and other fanfiction communities break the stereotype of authorship, which says that authors tend to be lonely and someone who gets the original idea from drinking a coffee. Instead, this website identifies itself as a "personally-engaged community" that never stand alone (Kelley 2016).

2 METHODS

This study will analyze a young adult novel, *Fangirl*, by Rainbow Rowell. It seeks the identity reconstruction of the main character named, Cath Avery. To understand more about the nature of literacy, New Literacy Studies (NLS) will be used as the lens since the main character uses her literacy practices to reconstruct her fan identity. Thus, the theory of figured worlds will be employed to find this issue.

A close reading of the novel collects the data. The first data shows Cath's literacy events and practices by writing fanfiction. The second data is Cath's identity. To analyze the data, the researchers look at the causality relationship between the data in order to know the identity reconstruction process done by Cath, both in cyberspace and in her personal life. Moreover, the theory of the figured world will also be used to know the identity reconstruction of the main character.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Identity reconstruction in cyberspace

According to Black (2008), fanfiction sites that rely on virtual space provide fans with a way to negotiate their new identities. Fans can present themselves without being forced by someone else. They usually create new online identities by using a pseudonym or pen name. This is what Cath does in cyberspace. As a fan of the Simon Snow book series, Cath Avery engages a lot in the fandom practice. She does not only read the whole series but also creates an account in the fanfiction forum called FanFixx.net. Under the name of 'Magicath' as her online identity, Cath is the author of many fanfictions. She currently writes a fanfiction series called *Carry On*, which tells about the characters' journey from the *Simon Snow* series. By using a pseudonym in the fanfiction forum, Cath tries to represent her new identity in cyberspace.

The first literacy event depicted in the novel is writing an author's note in the fanfiction forum. An author's note is a post that the author writes to inform her readers regarding her fanfiction. It can be the information about the latest chapter that she wants to post or just a general chat to interact with her readers. In this event, she is seen to apologize because she cannot upload the latest chapter of *Carry On*. She has some personal matters in her personal life. The literacy event is depicted below.

"Hey guys, she typed. Sorry about yesterday. First day of school, family stuff, and so on. Today might not happen either. But I promise you I'll be back in black on Tuesday and that I have something especially wicked planned. Peace out, Magicath." (Rowell 2013)

According to her note above, besides apologizing to her readers because of the delay, there is an identity reconstruction. A fan's identity is often represented as an obsessive who does not have a personal life. A fan is someone who only cares about her/his idols. However, from her author's note, Cath tries to negotiate that fan also has a personal life outside her fandom life. She still prioritizes her personal matters from how she writes, *"first day of school, family stuff, etc."* Thus, we can see there is a new world of a fan. What people see a fan as an 'obsessive loner' is her positional identity. However, she confronts it through the author's note which can be considered an artifact.

"Cath opened her FanFixx account and paged idly through the comments. There were too many to respond individually, so she posted a general, 'Hey, everybody, thanks—too busy writing to write back!' then opened up the draft of her most recent chapter" (Rowell 2013)

After writing an author's note, Cath continues to write and check the latest chapter of *Carry On*. This is the literacy practice that she always does in her life. In the fandom context, she is doing a fan culture, namely writing slash fanfiction of her favorite book characters. Slash fanfiction refers to the fan production of fictional love stories with same-sex characters (Jenkins 1992). It can be proved through this citation below.

"It's not just for him," Baz said, running his long fingers over his mother's name. "It's for Watford. It's for the World of Mages." (Rowell 2013)

These two literacy events that happen at the same time reveal her identity reconstruction in cyberspace. Since she receives many comments, we can see that Cath's identity in the fanfiction forum is a famous writer because her fanfictions get five thousand hits for one chapter (p.51). Moreover, the total number of visitors on her page is counted as more than thirty thousand visitors just in one day.

Here, Cath creates her figurative identity as a famous fan and writer in the fandom. However, Cath does not immediately accept that identity. Instead, she tries to negotiate that she is more than just a weird fan through her literacy practice in cyberspace.

"Reagan wouldn't believe-or understand-that Cath wasn't just a Simon fan. She was one of the fans. A first-name-only fan with fans of her own. If she told Reagan that her Simon fics regularly got twenty thousand hits . . . Reagan would just laugh at her." (Rowell 2013)

The narration above proves that Cath is a famous writer in the Simon Snow fandom because her fanfictions get twenty thousand hits. Her fans even make and sell a t-shirt based on *Carry On* fanfiction. She also has a celebrity status in the forum since she has her own fans through her online identity as a Cath. It means Cath 'self-authors' herself with this identity both as a fan and a writer. She creates her own figured identity as a famous writer who has her own fandom. Her new identity in cyberspace confronts the negative identity of a fan, such as a weird person, like what her roommate says about her.

Moreover, Cath also represents herself as a creative writer with the fact that her fanfictions receive some awards like *"Tastes Like Canon"* and *"Best in Snow"* (Rowell 2013). These awards prove Cath's fanfiction and writing skills cannot be underestimated.

The literacy practices and events in cyberspace which are writing author's notes and fanfiction, reveal that fans nowadays are not passive consumers. Fandom studies scholars like Jenkins have shown that fans are not passive consumers anymore. However, they actively participate in responding to the media they consume, or this is what he calls participatory culture (Jenkins 1992). Cath produces a lot of creative works in the forum, meaning she does participatory culture in the fandom. In the context of the figured world, Holland and her colleagues call it figured identity (Holland et al. 1998), which means Cath negotiates her fan identity as an active consumer through her literacy practices in the fandom.

3.2 Identity reconstruction in personal life

Cyberspace might create a different identity for someone in real life. This is what happens with Cath Avery. While Magicath has a prestige status or identity as a well-known fanfiction writer in the fandom, Cath is just a girl who lacks social life because of her traumatic events in the past. In the novel, it is seen that Cath tends to be anxious about everything that she has to do in real life. She also has a traumatic experience of being abandoned by her mother, so she lives with her twin sister and her father. In the university, her twin sister, who used to write Simon Snow fanfictions with her, does not want to live with her anymore. Thus, she relies on her fandom life as an escape from her real life. Here, her literacy practice, writing fanfiction, helps her to forget her problems in real life.

Fanfiction as identity reconstruction is seen in her personal life as well. Cath has a new friend in her dorm, Levi, who will be her boyfriend. They are close to each other because of Cath's fanfiction. She reads her fanfiction aloud to her boyfriend, Levi. The activity of reading aloud is the next literacy event depicted in the novel.

"I do like the story. And I like the way it relaxes you. You never finished reading me the rabbit one, you know. And you've never read me any from Carry On." (Rowell 2013)

Fanfiction not only relaxes Cath's mind in this case but also shows that she can create a new relationship. Since the identity of a fan is often stereotyped as a loner who only cares about her/his favorite figures, Cath confronts this stereotype by using her fanfiction. In this case, she uses fanfiction as a tool to interact with Levi. Although Levi is not as familiar with fandom as Reagan, he still enjoys listening to Cath when she reads him some of her fanfictions.

Fans who have the same interests usually interact with each other in cyberspace and real life. There is also the moment when Cath meets one of her readers in the cafeteria. In this scene, they interact because Cath wears her *Carry On* t-shirt while eating in the cafeteria. They discuss Cath's fanfiction without knowing that Cath herself is the author. It feels empowering for Cath. However, in this sense, an opposing identity exists between a famous fanfiction writer and an ordinary student.

"... I know that Magicath wouldn't exist without GTL. But now, I think I love Magicath more. Like she might be my favorite author. And she's never even written a book ..." (Rowell 2013)

Since there is a talk or discussion about literacy in the scene, the narration above can be considered a literacy event. The event of talking about fanfiction above reveals empowerment because of literacy. Cath's fanfiction attracts many people, including the girl she meets in the cafeteria. That girl even says that Magicath might be her favorite author. Her online persona even steals the popularity of the real author of *Simon Snow* the series, Gemma T. Leslie (GTL).

However, this empowerment only stays for her Magicath identity. In her personal life, she is just an ordinary student and a fan since she does not reveal her online identity to other people quickly. Thus, Cath, in this scene, realizes how strong the impact of fanfiction is on her life. Although she never writes a book using her real name, her online persona gets the spotlight. This is what Cath Avery cannot achieve in her personal life.

Because she cannot overstep the celebrity status of Magicath in her personal life, she still negotiates her figurative identity as a skillful writer in college. Cath joins a Creative Writing class with a remarkable admission. The fact that she gets the privilege to join the class shows that Cath has outstanding skills as a writer outside her fandom life.

Some literacy events are depicted in her college days, such as writing assignments in her Creative Writing Class. There is a moment when she submits her fanfiction for the class assignment. Her professor accuses her of plagiarizing Gemma T. Leslie's works. This is

where Cath negotiates her fan's identity as a skillful writer by uttering, "... *I know how you feel about fanfiction, but that's what I want to write. That's where my passion is. And I'm really good at it.*" (Rowell 2013). Because of her literacy practice in the fandom, writing fanfiction, Cath figures that she has a skill in writing fiction stories.

Fanfiction offers its author to explore various genres through creative works. Some research shows how fanfiction can upgrade students' writing skills in school (Bahoric & Swaggerty 2015; Leigh 2020). This skill can be a tool to reconstruct Cath's identity in her personal life. Although she has difficulty doing the final assignment in the creative writing class, in the end, she can achieve the status of a skillful writer using her real name.

Furthermore, on the novel's last page, it is portrayed that Cath's fiction story in the creative writing class wins the "Underclassmen Prize" (p.460). Without her literacy practice in writing fanfiction in the fandom, Cath will not achieve this status in her personal life. Therefore, she portrays that a fan can be a skillful writer outside the fandom life, rejecting the fan's positional identity.

4 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, there is a relationship between literacy and identity. From the novel, Cath Avery successfully builds a positive fan identity. By writing an author's note in her account, she shows her figurative identity as a fan who still prioritizes her personal matters. She is also depicted as a well-known author because more than a thousand people read her fanfictions. By writing fanfiction, she gets a celebrity status that she cannot achieve in her personal life. Cath has her fandom, a group of people who like her fanfictions. It also shows that she is an active consumer.

Cath also feels the empowerment she receives from her literacy practice related to fanfiction. In her personal life, she is seen getting closer to her boyfriend through the literacy event of reading aloud. She also encountered her fan in the cafeteria, revealing that she is a famous writer. Lastly, on the last page, she writes a fiction story under her real name. In this literacy event, she gets a prestigious award in her college. It portrays that she is a skillful writer both in the fandom and personal life. Furthermore, these events in cyberspace and personal life reveal that Cath creates a new-figured world as a fan. She confronts her negative positional identity and creates her figurative identities through fanfiction as her literacy practices.

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