

**“Some people write fanfiction as love letters to canon. This is hate mail”:
Negotiating authorship and reader agency in *Avengers: Endgame* Fix-it
Fics.**

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Sammendrag

This masters thesis engages with the concepts of the author, the reader, canon, text and paratext, in the context of fanfiction as a literary genre. The study of fanfiction furthers explorations of the concept of the author and reader as seen through a post-structuralist lens following Roland Barthes's and Michel Foucault's texts regarding authorship as well as a fan theory lens, championed by Kristina Busse and Katherine Tosenberger, in their writings explaining authorial ethos and models of fandom interpretation. To do so, I will be analysing twelve fics that belong to the Fix-It Fic subgenre in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) fandom, specifically relating to the movie *Avengers: Endgame* (2018). Evaluating these pieces and how their authors use characters, space, storylines, and tropes to challenge preconceptions regarding authorship, intertextuality and reader-writer figures and asks new questions that allow us to adapt theory to contemporary texts.

Key Words: authorship, fanfiction, fix-it fic, fan studies, paratext.

Sinopsis

Esta tesis sitúa los conceptos del autor, el lector, el canon, el texto y su paratexto en el contexto de fanfiction como género literario. El estudio del fanfiction permite una exploración del concepto del autor y del lector a través de una lente posestructuralista, usando los textos de Roland Barthes y Michel Foucault enfocados en la figura del autor, así como desde la perspectiva de los *fan studies*, acorde a Kristina Busse y su ethos autorial y al modelo de interpretación del fandom de Katherine Tosenberger. Con este fin, voy a analizar doce fics que pertenecen al subgénero Fix-It Fic dentro del fandom del Universo Cinemático Marvel (MCU), concretamente centrados en *Avengers: Endgame* (2018), y voy a relacionarlos con las teorías literarias ya mencionadas. Evaluar estos textos y cómo sus autores usan los personajes, el espacio narrativo, el argumento y los

tropos para desbancar preconcepciones sobre autoría, intertextualidad y la figura del lector-escritor abre nuevas avenidas para la teoría literaria y produce nuevas cuestiones que nos permiten adaptar la teoría a textos contemporáneos.

Palabras clave: autoría, fanfiction, fix-it fic, fan studies, paratexto.

Disclaimer

The primary texts studied in this thesis are known to include foul language and colloquial writing practices, such as loose punctuation and capitalisation, spelling mistakes and other phenomena. To preserve the text as it is presented, when citing I will keep such particularities as to not interfere with the text, so please be mindful when encountering citations and know that this is not due to a lack of formatting knowledge on my part, but an element of the primary texts that is worth maintaining.

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I have been told, time and time again, that writing is the loneliest profession of them all. I used to believe this wholeheartedly and brace myself for the hours of writing when not a single soul would join me in my act of creation. Luckily, during the writing of this thesis, I have discovered that this does not need to be the standard; finding people, fellow students that are in the same position as you, creates a bond that goes deeper than sitting together in a room, complaining about citation styles and text availability. Their presence has allowed me to work incessantly through ups and downs, and they have been a major driving force in the completion of this thesis. Therefore, I would like to thank my friends—the ones I made here at the University of Bergen and those I left back home, who, despite the distance, always had time for a call. You have provided me with a company I deeply appreciate, light-heartedness in the darkest moments and the drive to keep going. Alma, Ambra, Cornelius, Eva, Laura, Marta, and Saskia, I hope my presence while writing has been as motivating and hopeful as yours has been to me.

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Introduction

“Tens of thousands of years ago, when the human mind was young and our numbers were few, we were telling one another stories. And now, tens of thousands of years later, when our species teems across the globe, most of us still hew strongly to myths about the origins of things, and we still thrill to an astonishing multitude of fictions on pages, on stages, and on screens—murder stories, sex stories, war stories, conspiracy stories, true stories and false. We are, as a species, addicted to story. Even when the body goes to sleep, the mind stays up all night, telling itself stories.”

Jonathan Gottschall

Literary scholar Jonathan Gottschall defines humans as “Storytelling Animals” in his book of the same name. Complex, interrelated stories are common throughout history: folkloric tales, themes, responses, inspiration, and the genre that evolved to be fanfiction. Stories about stories are a given; it is the principle of intertextuality, as described in 1966 by Julia Kristeva, and it embodies one of the most distinct traits about humans; interconnectedness, which translates to community. No parent is a stranger to their children disagreeing with a bedtime story (But why is the princess getting married? Where is the dragon from? What about the knight that helped the witch?), and that natural curiosity, which forces the teller to come up with further explanations in the form of stories, is the basis of many genres, but especially fanfiction. *Fanlore*, an encyclopaedia dedicated to fan works and fan communities, defines fanfiction as a “*work of fiction written by fans for other fans, taking a source text or a famous person as a point of departure*” (Fanlore). Just how much fanfiction encompasses is a debated topic, as illustrated by this meme, arguing that, depending on the criteria, fanfiction extends further than the confines of the written word.


Fanfiction Alignment Chart	Context Purist Fanfiction must be produced as part of a fan community	Context Neutral Fanfiction can be any explicitly transformative or derivative work	Context Radical Fanfiction can be any work with clear derivative elements
Medium Purist Fanfiction must be a fictional prose narrative	 Fan stories are fanfiction	 Wide Sargasso Sea is fanfiction	 Twilight is fanfiction
Medium Neutral Fanfiction can be any narrative medium	 Fan comics are fanfiction	 West Side Story is fanfiction	 Willow (1988) is fanfiction
Medium Radical Fanfiction can be any medium	 Fanvids are fanfiction	 Michelangelo's David is fanfiction	 You'd butter believe it! is fanfiction

Figure 1. debate on the definition of fanfiction, exemplified by a meme taken from <https://penny-anna.tumblr.com/post/641563169854275584/thoughts>.

As one can see, following the axis specifications, all the examples discussed fall under the definition of fanfiction, even though some need a bit of background information to be understood as such. For instance, *Wide Sargasso Sea* is considered fanfiction due to the fact that its author Jean Rhys, without any affiliation with Charlotte Brontë, wrote the backstory of a character from *Jane Eyre*. Due to the need for clarification that some of the squares would need, and due to space and time constraints, I have chosen to focus solely on works that fall under the context purist-medium purist square in this chart, and that means written stories, produced from and for the targeted fandom. The only qualm I have about the definition of fanfiction is that there is fanfiction in poem form, as addressed in this thesis, but otherwise, I will use this chart to delimit my field of research, form-wise. As for content, I have chosen a prolific fandom that has relevant weight in modern pop culture and of a magnitude that allows me to choose a niche to develop according to literary theory, and that is the *Marvel Cinematic Universe*, often referred to as *MCU*. As this is still too big a field to study in its entirety, I have chosen to focus on one of the movies that belong to the MCU (*Avengers: Endgame* [2018]) and a genre that I feel is

both relevant and useful to explain according to post-structuralist theory and allows me to give special attention to the figure of the author, the reader, and the connection between canon and fan texts, which is the *Fix-It Fic*, with the corpus I will study being taken from the most important page dedicated to the sharing of fanfiction, *Archive Of Our Own*, shortened to *AO3*.

All of these concepts will be explained and analysed in this thesis, as well as contextualised, because I am aware that this is a relatively recent and niche topic to study, and I am aware of the importance of proper contextualisation for an optimal understanding of this thesis. Let us start, then, by describing fanfiction as a genre, contextualising the website I used, the Marvel Cinematic Universe and the subgenre of *Fix-It Fic*. After this, there will be an introduction to the corpus and the theoretical framework, marking the texts I intend to use and exposing the theories according to which I will be analysing the texts. The goal and thesis statement that drives this thesis will be explained below.

Aim and scope of this thesis.

There is a lot of theory around fanfic, mainly coming from fan studies, a multidisciplinary field that focuses on media and community analysis, but very little research is used to apply literary theory to the texts themselves. I am taking that step to add weight to the argument that fanfiction is literature, giving it a place among other established literatures by treating it the same way—applying established theory to a given text. I want literature scholars to pay attention to fanfiction because it is not only the jurisdiction of media studies; as a written text with a creative goal, we as literary scholars must also consider it.

Evaluating these pieces and how their authors use characters, space, storylines, and tropes to challenge preconceptions regarding authorship, intertextuality and *reader-writer* (a term developed for the purposes of this thesis) figures opens new avenues for theory and asks new questions that allow us to adapt theory to contemporary texts. Fix-it fic is especially useful for this because it reflects the receptor of a text—that is, the fans—’s reaction to a text and gives every fan the power to adapt the content they are given into what they want it to be.

Therefore, fanfiction, and more specifically, its sub-genre Fix-it fic is useful to further the conversation around authorship, intertextuality, and character studies in literary circles. The two currents that support this claim best are post-structuralist texts regarding the figure of the author and intertextuality, and reader response due to their emphasis on the role of the author, the reader, and the text in context. The authors of such texts, namely Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Julia Kristeva, have impacted scholarship for many years; their ideas have been adapted to various fields, among which, fan studies, and it is this adaption that I will use to address the primary texts. Fan study scholars such as Kristina Busse, Catherine Tosenberger and Lesley Goodman will be used due to their elaboration and adaption of the previous author’s works on the field of fanfiction.

By analysing the fanfics chosen, I will show that Fix-it fic is a prime example of how internet-based literature furthers theoretical research and exemplifies theory within the text but also around the figures of the reader, the author and the canon. I argue that the figures of the author and the reader as we know them in previous literature merge and create a new identity in the shape of the fanfic writer due to them having to belong to both groups by definition, with the division between the two becoming blurred. To be a fanfic writer, said writer must have been in the position to receive the canon media and interact with it, be a fan of the same, and then produce a text that takes the canon as a starting

point. This recontextualization allows for a post-structuralist revision of the author-reader that, by extent, can be applied to all of literature due to the intertextuality that, in principle, connects all works in history. Moreover, the choice to study a larger volume of shorter pieces is also a break from the studies of canon, where two or three bigger texts are usually discussed. This evolution, from centralised large texts to smaller, more localized texts points to the specialisation and diversity of fanfiction, and it is my aim in making this choice to reflect the different approach to literature that this emerging genre brings its readers—to offer a wider variety of content to appeal to wider audiences.

What is fanfiction?

The genre of fanfiction is massive, spanning anything one can be a fan of; due to this size, studies of it have to be extremely delimited to be successful. During this thesis, different terms will be applied to refer to the texts of the genre, and so a clarification is due. Fanfiction, or fanfic for short, refers to the genre and the collection of texts that are part of it. To refer to single pieces, fic is the most accepted version. While there are different spellings of the terms—FanFiction, fan fiction, FF, Fan-Fiction—I have chosen *fanfiction* and *fic(s)* because they are the most extended version and because they are supported by academics from the start of the field and still being used nowadays.

Said academics, such as Jenkins (by many considered the father of fan studies with his essay “*Textual Poachers*” written in 1992), Fatallah, Thomas or Pugh describe fanfiction as a piece of writing influenced by a previous work. Due to this textual nature, it seems predictable that literature academics want to study this new genre popularized by the *World Wide Web*. Nonetheless, a faction of conservative academics claims that fanfiction is not and cannot be considered literature on a myriad of argumentative grounds. This position is based on the *Romantic* view of originality as a marker of aesthetic quality (Tosenberger 2014), which proposes two directly opposite concepts quality-wise, *Art* and

Folklore, in which Art (Understood as the Western canon, the body of high literature, philosophy and art that shaped the dominant culture in the West) is “better” because it is original, and folklore is valuable only because of its lack of originality (regarding the many versions of the same story that obscure its origin) presumably allowed them to survive through the ages (Tosenberger 2014). This distinction is intended to be qualitative, giving preference to one over the other. Given this model, it is interesting, if not predictable, that during the nineteenth century Folklore became linked to the Romantic due to its “simplicity” and “purity,” connecting popular stories to notions of childhood and immaturity. This sentiment is still prevalent in criticism such as Harold Bloom’s *The Western canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (1994). In it, Bloom coins the term *School of Resentment*, referring to “those who wish to overthrow the canon in order to advance their supposed (and non-existent) programs for social change” (Bloom 1994), or, in other words, those who wish to enlarge the canon by adding authors independently of aesthetic value or impact in literature. The titular hate mail that Fix-It Fics show the canon fits within this school. The recipient’s value of the canon does not have to be positive and readers have a right to have their opinions and react accordingly, which is not something Bloom allows regarding the canon. This theory fails to account for the societal structures that prevent such works from entering the canon, such as sexism, homophobia, or racism and those that facilitate a work to be more highly considered over others. In short, what he does in this work is deride marginal views in favour of *the powers that be*. In fact, Bloom is the perfect example of established critics gate-keeping literature from anyone that does not fit in their chauvinist ideology. On the success of *Harry Potter*, Bloom had to say:

“I hope that my discontent is not merely a highbrow snobbery, or a nostalgia for a more literate fantasy to beguile (shall we say) intelligent children

of all ages. Can more than 35 million book buyers, and their offspring, be wrong? Yes, they have been, and will continue to be for as long as they persevere with Potter. [...] A vast concourse of inadequate works, for adults and for children, crams the dustbins of the ages. At a time when public judgment is no better and no worse than what is proclaimed by the ideological cheerleaders who have so destroyed humanistic study, anything goes. The cultural critics will, soon enough, introduce Harry Potter into their college curriculum, and The New York Times will go on celebrating another confirmation of the dumbing-down it leads and exemplifies.” (Bloom, 2000)

What is so wrong with diversifying the literary field? Bloom believes that the only reason to study literature is because of its aesthetic value chosen, of course, by people like him. This mono-lens fails to include the human experience of anyone that does not share the ideals of the societal elite. The diversity of reasons to study a text and the myriad of lenses through which this can be done make the field as rich as it is. If only one perspective, whichever, were to be considered as the true basis of worth, much nuance would be lost to elitism. What Bloom fails to acknowledge is that, just because a writing is popular and does not have him as the intended target, that does not make it uncultured and unworthy of study. His attitude on this extends to any marginal work and any criticism of his beloved canon that does not suit his views.

Catherine Tosenberger rightfully criticizes his cultural purism over the popularity and success of a “children’s text” such as Harry Potter among adult readers, arguing that, while children’s literature is written for children, since the writers are adults, it is an adult project that merely uses the children as a vessel for their fantasies and desires (Tosenberger 2014). The same argument can be used as to why fanfiction is not agreeable to critics who share the opinion of Bloom: since the writing is intended for a group that

the canon does not deem important enough (in this case, the gendered, overwhelmingly female audience that enjoys fanfiction), it is irrelevant theory-wise. I am certain that the elitism displayed by Bloom has been a major reason for the lack of research on fanfiction as a marginal genre, a fact that is only now being remedied thanks to the democratising goal of the internet.

While some proponents of fan studies have hailed 1920-1930s science fiction magazines as the origins of fanfiction, others argue that clear links can be drawn with oral and mythic traditions that display a collective interpretation (Thomas, 2011). Whichever the advent of the genre is, fan cultures experienced a boom thanks to the internet, which is still expanding nowadays, welcoming a more general public into what once was a “nerdish” experience, often shared in a significantly smaller, more local and private scale. Casual fans have access to fan communities and their fanfiction production, a scenario that was impossible without a communication facilitator such as the internet.

Given that the preferred medium of communication on the internet is the written word (Think about social media such as *Twitter*, *Tumblr* or *Reddit*; instant messaging services such as *WhatsApp*, *Telegram*, or even email and text messages) over live one-to one communication, it is not a surprise that writers of many backgrounds have found a space on the World Wide Web where they can develop and share their writings. With this sudden expansion of communication, the fan communities that would meet up in a friend’s living room to discuss the last episode of *Star Trek* had their ranks inflated with people all over who also participated in their interests and wanted to share theories, writings, art and ideas about a given movie, tv show, book and more. Many places with such a goal were created, and during the writing of this thesis, the most important platform for sharing fanfiction is Archive of Our Own.

What is Archive of Our Own?

The creation of this platform illustrates the evolution of read-write fanfic-centric platforms during the existence of the internet. Its creation can be seen as a response to the attempt by start-up *FanLib* to profit off fanfiction and its popularity, since many fans were wary of a third party (outside of readers and writers of fanfiction) being the middleman to the texts that were the centre of their communities. There had already been instances of the sites that hosted fanfiction being eager to make profit by way of the traffic and publicity that fanfiction created while abandoning the authors whenever legal troubles arose (usually, copyright-related) or taking the side of the corporation. For a more detailed, although not academic explanation of the *Livejournal* debacle that instigated the creation of AO3, Reddit user *u/iwasonceafangirl* sums up the situation in a post under *r/HobbyDrama*, which will be cited in the bibliography.

Another reason for mistrusting third parties was the indiscriminated censorship of certain kinds of stories. 2001 saw the ban of *real-person-fic* (RPF) on *Fanfiction.net*, and in 2002 a ban of all NC-17 content (This rating, established by the *Motion Picture Association of America's Rating Board*, states that the material labelled NC-17 stands for “No one 17 or under [is] admitted;” it indicates that the material contains sexual, violent or otherwise adult themes.) followed. For an explanation of the 2002 and 2012 Purges on *Fanfiction.net*, see the Fanlore article cited in the bibliography entitled “FanFiction.Net's NC-17 Purges: 2002 and 2012”. These policy changes, which lead to many fics being lost overnight and many people kicked out of their communities, highlighted the need for fans to be in control of their creations. This sentiment of needing a space separate from external influence echoes Virginia Woolf's *A Room Of One's Own*, which defends the need for a space where the female author can write freely, and makes fans, a mainly feminine

population, direct descendants of this line of thought, being displayed in the name of the Archive.

These concerns were the starting point which brought LiveJournal user *Astolat* to call for “An Archive of One’s Own” in 2007, in which fans had full control and protection for their works and identities. Thus, in 2009, Archive of Our Own was born as an open-code, volunteer-driven archival site “by fans to serve the interests of fans (Works)” where the community that other websites failed to provide them was created.

The *Organization for Transformative Works*, the non-profit responsible for creating and maintaining among others, Archive of Our Own (from now on, referred to as AO3; the acronym is a shorter version of AOOO, the actual acronym of the words, but to make it simpler it was shortened to three characters to reflect the A and the three Os in the name, hence AO3 [2009]), FanLore and *OpenDoors*, claims in the AO3 *About* page (“Archive of Our Own Beta: About the OtW”) that it was born as a response to the need for a space that served the interests of fans and that was based on three pillars that guarantee the continuous fulfilling of this goal. One of the most involved and vocal users involved in the conceptualisation of AO3 was *Astolat*. This user has a long career in online fandom infrastructure and promotion, starting in 1994 and still being active as of January 2023. Among her contributions to Fandom, there is the creation of *Vividcon* (a convention for *vidding*, which according to FanLore is the act or process of creating a fan-oriented video or “fanvid” using live-action TV or movie footage set to music) in 2002, the rare fandom gift exchange fanfic challenge *Yuletide* in 2003, and the most important for this thesis, the idea of “An Archive of Our Own” in 2007 and its subsequent creation in 2009.

The stipulations she considered necessary for the archive to succeed were the following:

- “run *BY fanfic readers FOR fanfic readers*”

- *with no ads and solely donation-supported*
- *with a simple and highly searchable interface and browsable quicksearch pages*
- *allowing ANYTHING—het, slash, RPF, chan, kink, highly adult—with a registration process for reading adult-rated stories where once you register, you don't have to keep clicking through warnings every time you want to read*
- *allowing the poster to control her stories (ie, upload, delete, edit, tagging)*
- *allowing users to leave comments with the poster able to delete and ban particular users/IPs but not edit comment content (ie, lj style)*
- *code-wise able to support a huge archive of possibly millions of stories*
- *giving explicit credit to the original creators while clearly disclaiming any official status” (astolat)*

These specifications describe why I chose to study this website in particular, but I will elaborate below.

What I have found most valuable in the use of AO3, apart from the tagging system, is the option for authors to leave Author's notes at the start of the chapters and End Notes at the end. At first, I wanted to focus primarily on the tagging system, but the notes have proven to be useful for understanding the motivations, requests, and opinions of the author, and have become a primary point of interest of this thesis. Therefore, as the corpus analysis shows, the para-text, both in tag form and author's notes, takes special importance regarding the text itself but also its place within the fandom and literature, and helps contextualize the new figure of the author-reader that is principal to fanfiction, and, by extension, to any creator that falls under the umbrella of fan studies. In short, as Olivia Riley states in the introduction of her own paper discussing AO3, “*the study of that site*

and its community provides the most interesting insight into modern fanfic culture”.
(Riley 2015)

I am interested in the proposed control given to the author regarding their work since, traditionally, for their publication, authors depended on publishing houses and other external institutions. The fact that anyone with an internet connection can post anything on the internet has been hailed as a democratizing force and a win for freedom of speech in many places (Laidlaw 2015). This freedom, however, is at risk if a third party (that is, not the author or the site) polices which works can or cannot reach the public according to their own metrics. Therefore, the importance of the non-profit aspect is stressed, since one of the reasons Archive Of Our Own was created was to avoid censorship and profit by corporations.

Following the theme about control and freedom of speech, the fact that anyone can comment but the author can ban users displays the boundaries of freedom. In other words, a user can comment whatever they want, that is their freedom, but if the author wishes to, they can block the user so that their content is not available to them anymore. At the same time, for transparency's sake, the author can delete sensitive or offensive comments, but not edit the contents. This way, they are not editing someone else's words. The author cannot manipulate someone else's words for their benefit or the other persons detriment. Everyone's authority over their words is enforced. The concern over the size of the archive points out the expectations of the creators and the magnitude of the foreign communities, even years ago.

The stress on crediting the canon creators, while again highlighting the importance of the author figure, was also mentioned due to copyright law, which has been used traditionally in this context, as a method for the canon authors to maintain power over their works by

suing and dissuading the fanfiction authors that attempt to use the works for their own creative merits.

The ease of navigation is also a valuable characteristic of the website to me as a researcher, as well as for fans; The fact that I can specify what I am looking for among a sea of texts that may not fit my needs makes the search for a corpus that much easier; if this search were based on other websites, such as Tumblr, Livejournal (Often shortened to LJ) or Fanfiction.net (often shortened to FF.net), the only possible grouping would be by author, since personal pages are where authors post their work, or fic recs, which depend of the person who curates the selection according to their subjective taste. This implies that in order for me to be aware of the existence of the work I would have to know of the author beforehand, and this limits the amount of works I would have access to.

More generally, I chose AO3 among other options because of the many benefits it presents, but also because of other websites inconveniences. Tumblr.com, for instance, is also notable in terms of fan spaces. Why was it not chosen then? First of all, while it is true that Tumblr hosts many fanfic authors, it was not created for fanfic in the same way Livejournal was, but as a blogging platform. The fact that Tumblr has been used by fan communities is a byproduct of the Internet, not its primary goal. Additionally, it is a common joke and a known fact in and outside of Tumblr that its user interface is glitchy, cumbersome and unpredictable. When compared to this, the choice of AO3 appears natural.

While the pages mentioned above (fanfiction.net, livejournal.com, and tumblr.com) house a bigger repository of works, mainly due to their longer run, my focus is a fandom that was created and rose in popularity after the advent of AO3, and it is safe to assume that any work belonging to the fandom can be found there, chronologically speaking. By this I mean that there are no two spheres of fandom writings posted in different websites

due to one being created while the fandom was progressing, as is the case of fandoms such as Harry Potter; the longevity of this fandom means that many of the writings produced during the most popular years of livejournal.com are hosted there, and at the time it did not make sense to post them in other websites. The decline of this website involved many writers migrating to other domains, and not every writer would have imported their writings to the new domains, maybe because they considered them dated, because they lost access or because they were not a part of the fandom anymore. The chronology of the fandom chosen matches AO3's, therefore, I do not see the need to search other websites for older remnants of a fandom that did not exist earlier than its creation.

Still on the topic of access to new material, the fact that AO3 does not depend on corporations means that there will not be any censorship that may skew my data or corpus. If the choice were made for me by another entity that interposes itself between the writer and the researcher (the author of this paper), the experience, study and content would not reflect the literary tendencies otherwise showcased on the internet as a whole, but rather a capitalism-approved cut-out picture that answers to the whims of profit instead of the fans that are, at the end of the day, the creators and enjoyers of this art. I also chose to follow this path because it is true to the motives that created AO3, especially the autonomy which allows the author to have complete control over their work.

While it is necessary to discriminate the works that will or will not make it to the corpus somehow due to the sheer volume of stories, I have chosen the texts with metrics as impartial as possible.

Due to the length requirements of this thesis, I have delimited the corpus I will work with to a total of between 90.000 and 150.000 words, since that is the average length of a novel. The reason I am not making it higher is because since I am also discussing the MCU

narrative spanning over 10 years, I fear I may not have enough space for a comprehensive and coherent analysis. Three search parameters were used to choose the texts. The first of these was “Complete works” so that there are no big modifications on the texts as time goes on; it makes no sense to work on a text at one point in time if the narrative evolves as the text expands, because the state of the text will not be the same, even though a characteristic of fanfiction is that it is often left unfinished. The second parameter was “English Language” due to this thesis being written to fulfil the requirements for a master’s degree in English. As AO3 is not an English-exclusive archive, ie. fanfiction can be written in a multitude of languages, I felt that applying this parameter would be appropriate for an English-thesis. The third and final requirement was for texts to belong to the “Marvel Cinematic Universe” fandom, followed by “fix-it” in the tags and its associated tropes. Despite this, the corpus of works turned too many works to discuss individually, with a total of 7522 works. Due to this, I have taken the liberty to choose the texts according to how well I can use them to illustrate my argument.

The final list of works, which will be included in the annex of this paper for ease of access, is as follows:

- *An Ass in the Hole* by wynnesome
- *chaos theory* by slylyaddictedtostories
- *Collecting Kisses* by inkinmyheartandonthepage
- *home with you* by natalie_nebula
- *I will see them when I leave here* by ageofgeek
- *I’ll Make Peace With Time* by akasharpiegirl
- *Lake house stay* by Skyrocket25
- *little hands, reaching forward* by natalie_nebula
- *Meet you up there (where the path runs straight and high)* by bluesweatshirt

- *our love lasts so long* by blob_blob
- *so close to reaching that famous happy end* by dragongirlG
- *The World Will Always Welcome Lovers* by andrastes_grace

I will contextualize these works and analyse them in the chapter dedicated to it after the theoretical and cultural contexts have been given. Please note that the punctuation and capitalization has been left as it was in the source, since such a stylistic choice may indicate intent from the author, and therefore, it may look like typos, but it is intentional.

Despite these requirements, there are some problems that may alter my corpus. There has since long been a debate over the value of fanfiction on the grounds that not all of it exhibits “quality” that would put it in the same level as established printed literature. This argument, often used with an elitist ideology, can be applied to any genre of literature, but it is more noticeable in internet fanfiction due to the democratization of the genre; while in paper-based scenarios an editor decides what does and does not get published, the internet has levelled the publishing ground, allowing everyone to share their writings with the rest of the world wide web.

The Marvel Cinematic Universe: a plot summary and fan reactions.

Marvel as a brand has greatly impacted popular culture even before it decided to inaugurate its cinematic universe. However, adapting their comics into a quantum narrative paved the way for success in the audio-visual field, so much so that it has successfully produced fifteen years of films with no plans of stopping, having given concrete release dates for instalments until 2026. The volume of primary texts means that an explanation of the whole universe for the purpose of this thesis would be too broad, so instead, I will explain the events of phases one to three (called the *Infinity Saga*), which start with *Iron Man* (2008) and culminates in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), and I will focus

on the films that are relevant to the characters I have chosen for my corpus, *Tony Stark* and *Steve Rogers*, and I will explain the films in chronological order to contextualize them within the universe.

Iron Man (2008), directed by Jon Favreau, inaugurated phase one and the Iron Man Trilogy, as well as the MCU as it stands today. The producers admitted they were gambling with the first independent feature of the studio by choosing a less-than-known main actor and director, as well as basing it on a character that needed an introduction as opposed to other household names they had access to, such as *The Fantastic Four* or *Spider-man*. Nevertheless, the proximity of the hero, as opposed to the otherworldliness of *Thor* or the period setting needed for *Captain America* proved to be a great entry point into the MCU for fans of *Marvel Comics*, and its success greenlit the other features that followed, building the first phase of the MCU.

The plot of the movie follows Tony Stark (played by Robert Downey Jr.), a brilliant billionaire arms manufacturer who is kidnapped by terrorists in a weapons demonstration. During his kidnapping, he suffers an accident which leaves him with a chest injury, and instead of creating a weapon of mass destruction as his captors wanted him to, together with a fellow captive named *Ho Yinsen* he creates a potent magnet called the *Arc Reactor* to keep the shrapnel that was in his chest from entering his heart. This magnet produces enough energy to last 50 lifetimes, which they use to create a suit of armour to escape captivity. At this point, the idea of the suit of attack that will later be perfected by Tony back in America is born. Tony successfully escapes the terrorists, but Yinsen is not so lucky; he sacrifices himself so that Tony can escape, which is added to the guilt Tony feels after witnessing the impact of his arms dealing. This is the catalyst for Tony to shut down the weapons division of his enterprises once he is back in the United States. He also works on the suit to make it more functional and becomes the superhero known as Iron

Man with the help of his friend *Rhodey* and his assistant *Pepper Potts*. These developments catch the attention of his mentor and business partner, Obadiah Stane, who initially paid to have him kidnapped. Stane steals Tony's technology and creates a more rudimentary version of the Iron Man suit known as *Iron Monger*. The film ends with a fight between Tony and Stane, which Tony wins, and his announcement to the world that he is the person behind the superhero known as *Iron Man*.

A bonus post-credit scene (this device is very popular in the MCU, used to introduce connections between movies and introduce new features) shows *Nick Fury*, director of the government defence division *SHIELD* (an acronym standing for *Strategic Homeland Intervention Enforcement and Logistics Division*), introducing Tony to the *Avengers Initiative*, which will be developed in later films.

Overall, "Iron Man" showcases Tony Stark's journey from a self-centred and arrogant weapons manufacturer to a hero with a sense of responsibility and a desire to use his intelligence and resources for good. It establishes Tony as a brilliant inventor and a formidable superhero with his iconic red and gold suit. Despite his evolution as a character, there is more to him that is explored both in his solo films and in collective features.

In *Iron Man 2* (2010) picks up after Tony announces his superhero identity, which makes the government want to appropriate his technology for the benefit of the military. Tony refuses to give up the Iron Man suit, and his rival defence contractor *Justin Hammer* (with the help of *Ivan Vanko*, son of a disgraced former Stark employee) creates a similar model, which is thrust upon Rhodey, Tony's friend and Sergeant with the US Army. Parallely, Tony is suffering from complications related to the Arc Reactor in his chest, which, while saving him from shrapnel, is also poisoning his blood. Confronted with the

possibility of his own mortality, he begins to mentor Pepper Potts to become CEO of Stark Industries. As the film progresses, Vanko emerges as a new threat, using his own Arc Reactor to power a set of electric whips that he uses to attack Stark and his allies. Vanko was supposed to be a pawn for Hammer, who is seeking to create his own army of Iron Man-like suits, but he has his own motives and challenges his knowledge to seeking revenge from Tony for a wrongdoing involving their fathers. Eventually, Tony discovers a new element that can be the solution to his arc-reactor-related blood poisoning thanks to his father, which he, with help from Rhodey and Pepper, he uses to build a better suit to defeat Vanko and Hammer's army of suits. The film ends with the defeat of Vanko and Hammer and hinting to the next film in the franchise *Thor* (2011) with a hammer being discovered in New Mexico.

I am going to ignore *Thor* and explain *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011). In it, Steve Rogers (played by Chris Evans) is introduced as a scrawny man in the midst of World War II who goes on to battle *HYDRA*, the scientific division of the Nazi regime that is looking for an alien energy source called the Tesseract. Steve's physical unfitness prevents him from joining best friend *James "Bucky" Barnes* on the field. Nevertheless, his insistence catches the attention of *Dr. Erskine*, a scientist working on a secret government project to create super-soldiers. Due to his qualities, Steve is chosen as the first test subject, and he becomes a powerful super-soldier with the administration of a serum. Equipped with new super-abilities, Steve is sent to Europe to fight *HYDRA*, where he rescues Bucky from the nazis and meets love interest agent *Peggy Carter*, who will go on to establish *SHIELD*. He forms a team known as the *Howling Commandos* with them, some soldiers from his unit and *Howard Stark*, Tony's father and weapons developer.

During one of the missions, Bucky falls to his apparent death from a train in the middle of the Alps, heavily affecting Steve. In the final battle, which takes place in a plane, Steve

faces off with *Red Skull*, the chief of HYDRA, who is (supposedly) killed by the *Tesseract*. In order to save the planet from destruction brought on by the Tesseract, Steve crashes the plane in the Arctic, sacrificing himself. Decades later, Steve Rogers is found frozen in the ice and revived in the present day, setting up the events of the next movie, "*The Avengers*" in the post-credits scene of the movie.

The Avengers (2012) follows Nick Fury's introduction of a group of superheroes that could be counted on to defend the earth from outer threats, conformed by Iron Man/ Tony Stark, Captain America/Steve Rogers, *Black Widow/Natasha Romanoff*, *The Hulk/Bruce Banner*, *Hawkeye/Clint Barton* and Thor. The plot sees *Loki*, Thor's brother introduced in the 2011 film, steal the Tesseract from SHIELD, who had recovered it from the ice alongside Steve Rogers. As a response, Nick Fury pools together the heroes in an effort to recover the Tesseract and stop Loki from invading Earth with it.

Collaboration between the heroes proves to be more difficult than Fury anticipated, but after the death of *Agent Coulson*, whom they all liked, they bond and develop a plan to stop Loki in what will become the climactic *Battle of New York*. In order to save the city from an incoming nuclear missile, Tony opens a portal to outer space and drives the missile through it, even though he is not sure he will be able to make the journey back to Earth, showing his evolution from a self-serving man to a selfless hero. While Tony is dealing with the missile, the rest of the Avengers manage to reduce Loki's army and capture the god, effectively saving Earth.

One of the post-credit scenes (this movie has two) introduces *Thanos* as he learns of Loki's defeat. The other is a domestic scene in which the Avengers, still tired from battle, are eating shawarma in silence in a half-destroyed restaurant in the city.

"*Iron Man 3*" (2013) starts with Tony recalling the events of *The Avengers* and being shown dealing with anxiety and insomnia. At the same time, a series of terrorist attacks claimed by "the Mandarin" are happening throughout the United States. One of these attacks puts Happy Hogan, Tony's friend and head of security, in the hospital, which prompts Tony to publicly challenge the Mandarin to a fight. In his investigation of the Mandarin, Tony discovers that the terrorist is a creation of brilliant but unstable scientist Aldrich Killian, who was spurned by Tony in the past and was Pepper's former love interest. Killian developed a technology called *Extremis*, which allows humans to regrow limbs and gives them other superhuman abilities. However, the technology is unstable and causes serious side effects, among them, the explosions that were claimed by the Mandarin as terrorist attacks. Tony captures the Mandarin, who turns out to be a hired actor, and bait for his capture. He manages to escape thanks to Pepper, Rhodey, and a young boy named *Harley Keener*, and confronts Killian.

The climactic battle shows Rhodey and Tony battling Killian and his Extremis soldiers, who has taken Pepper as a hostage. With the help of artificial intelligence *JARVIS*, Tony is able to command the army of Iron Man suits he created after the events of *The Avengers* as a coping mechanism and manages to defeat Killian and destroy his technology.

Throughout the film, Tony is battling PTSD and its symptoms, which usually hinders his ability to deal with the stressful events he has to face. The end of the film shows Tony undergoing surgery to remove the shrapnel from his chest, which distances him from his alter ego Iron Man and destroys his suits as a symbol of his retirement from superhero shenanigans. However, the post-credit scene shows Tony tinkering with armor, leaving the door open for future missions.

Captain America: The Winter Soldier (2014), directed by Joe and Anthony Russo, is the second feature of the Captain America Trilogy. Two years after the events of *The Avengers*, Steve is working with SHIELD and faces a mysterious assassin called “*The Winter Soldier*.” During the opening scene, Steve carries out a mission with Natasha Romanoff that he thinks is a hostage rescue. However, he discovers that his partner Natasha Romanoff has a separate mission recovering data from the hijacked vessel they are supposed to liberate. Suspicious, Steve confronts Nick Fury upon his return and discovers that HYDRA has infiltrated every level of SHIELD and has access to all its data and armament. Steve teams up with veteran *Sam Wilson* (*The Falcon*, introduced in this film) and Natasha to uncover the conspiracy that has killed Fury when a mysterious assassin is sent to kill them to prevent exposure. Previously thought to be a ghost story, the Winter Soldier, the assassin with superhuman abilities is discovered to be Steve’s best friend Bucky Barnes, who was presumed dead, but was recovered by HYDRA after his fall from the train and brainwashed to be a killing machine. During the climax, Steve manages to defeat HYDRA and the Winter Soldier at great personal cost—Natasha, in order to expose HYDRA’s actions, exposes her own past as a spy, including her amoral actions under the Soviet government and SHIELD, and Steve loses a disoriented Bucky that has started to break through his brainwashing. The film ends with Captain America and Black Widow going on the run, with the fate of S.H.I.E.L.D. and the world in question.

Avengers: Age of Ultron (2015) takes place after the first *Avengers* film. The opening scene shows the Avengers storming a HYDRA base where they discover two enhanced twins, *Pietro* and *Wanda Maximoff* (*Quicksilver* and *Scarlet Witch*, respectively), and a powerful alien sceptre. This artifact allows Tony and Bruce to create *Ultron*, an artificial intelligence whose goal is to protect the world from future threats, as an effort on Tony’s

part to “put a shield around the world” as he says in the film. Despite their good intentions, their creation turns on them and becomes self-aware, and concludes that the best way to protect humanity is to eliminate it entirely. To this end, Ultron creates an army of drones and takes the Maximoff twins as allies, who blame their parents’ death on Tony Stark and seek revenge. Confronting Ultron implies having to face their personal demons and team challenges. During the film, they ally themselves with Nick Fury, who is revealed to be alive, and an android created by Tony named *Vision*, who is the personification of JARVIS. The climax of the film shows the battle between Ultron’s allies and the Avengers taking place in the fictional country of *Sokovia*, and the twins realising Ultron’s intentions are fatal and switching bands. Despite heavy casualties, including Pietro Maximoff’s death while saving Hawkeye, the Avengers emerge victorious.

At the end of the film the Avengers disband, some staying behind to guard the world, some pursuing their own affairs. This instalment closes Phase 2 of the MCU and hints at the conflicts the Avengers will have to face during Phase 3.

Inaugurating the third and final phase of the Infinity Saga, *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) introduces the conflicts that were hinted at during the other collective films.

During a mission in Lagos, the Avengers caused the death of many civilians, and a call for them to be regulated by the United Nations is made. The team quickly divides between those in favour and those against the so-called *Sokovia Accords* that would adjudicate decision-making powers to an external committee, with Tony being in favour and Steve being against it. The favourable side believes it will help prevent innocent deaths, while the opposing factor believes this will limit their ability to act in the face of danger. During a high-tension signing of the Accords in Vienna, a bomb kills many diplomats, among which King *T’Chaka* of *Wakanda*, and all evidence points to the former Winter Soldier, Bucky Barnes. This event, among others, is revealed to be orchestrated by *Zemo*, a villain

whose goal is to destroy the Avengers. Steve protecting his best friend is the detonator for a battle between the Avengers that serves as a physical confrontation between the factions regarding the Sokovia Accords. During this battle, *Ant Man (Scott Lang)* and *Spider-man (Peter Parker)* are introduced to the MCU. The confrontation ends with half of the accord-opposing team in prison and the other on the run. The final showdown between Tony and Steve as leaders of their causes takes place in Siberia, where Zemo reveals that the Winter Soldier was responsible for the murder of Tony's parents. This reveal is the last straw for the already debilitated friendship between Tony and Steve. After a tense confrontation, Steve and Bucky flee to Wakanda, which welcomes them after learning that Bucky was framed and did not kill their king and becomes their safe haven. The end of the film sees the Avengers fractured seemingly beyond repair with everyone trying to deal with their wounds and the consequences of their actions.

Taking a break from the collective Avengers storyline, the next instalment of the MCU is *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017). Peter Parker, a.k.a. Spider-Man, navigates his life as a high school student and a superhero under the mentorship of Tony Stark. He faces off against the *Vulture*, who is using advanced technology to commit crimes. This film shows the relationship between Peter and Tony as they navigate having a new father figure and a dependent respectively in the context of superhero morality.

With this brief break, the action goes back to the collective storyline with *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018). Here the villain Thanos, briefly introduced in the post-credits scene of the first *Avengers* movie, sets to collect six artifacts called the *Infinity Stones*, each of which has incredible power, but that together allow the bearer to have absolute control of the universe. Thanos is a radical conqueror that believes all of the problems of the universe are due to overpopulation, and seeks to solve them by snapping half of the life in the universe out of existence.

He and his henchmen manage to acquire the six stones, and, in the middle of the climactic battle, he snaps his fingers, doing what he promised and wiping out half of the universe population. The film ends in a cliff-hanger, with half of the heroes being turned to dust during the battle, and the other half being too defeated to do anything but deal with the consequences.

The last instalment of the Infinity Saga is *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), which has been called by its producers “the most ambitious crossover event in history.” The story takes place five years after the events of *Infinity War*, where people have been living with the consequences of Thanos’s actions. Scott Lang’s appearance from the *Quantum Realm*, a microscopic place not affected by the *Snap*, puts the events of the movie in motion. He suggests the idea of time travel to undo Thanos’s work, and Tony Stark, after seeing a picture of him and his mentee Peter Parker who was *dusted* in front of him, looks into the idea and makes time travel possible. This discovery allows for the Avengers to hatch a plan where they travel to alternative timelines, use the stones from said timelines and restore the pre-snap world. They split up in teams, each one tasked with a specific stone. I will not describe what happens in all the missions, only the ones relevant to the story and my thesis. Steve and Tony travel to 1970, and while recovering the stone, they have a heartfelt conversation about their friendship and their past. Meanwhile, Natasha Romanoff and Clint Barton, on their way to recover another stone, discover that it requires a sacrifice in order to obtain it. After a fight between the two friends, Natasha ultimately sacrifices herself and Clint comes back with the stone. Her death, together with Tony’s future demise, marks the end of the road for their characters. Once all the stones are collected, the Avengers fancy a gauntlet that the Hulk will use to snap the missing population back in existence. This event draws the attention of an alternate-universe Thanos, who travels through time to destroy the avengers once and for all so that they

cannot stop his plans. With the Hulk's successful snap, the vanished heroes join the ones that were left alive in the final battle against Thanos and his forces. In a sequence resembling a game of hot potato, the gauntlet changes hands until it reaches Tony, who, in a desperate attempt, snaps his fingers in order to eliminate Thanos and his army out of existence. The exertion the powerful stones cause Tony bring him to his death, surrounded by his friends and allies, forever remembered as the hero who saved the earth once and again.

The final shots of the movie show Tony's funeral, where the surviving Avengers and their allies pay their respect to their leader. After the funeral, Steve is tasked with returning the stones to their respective timelines. However, his return surprises his friends Sam and Bucky when, instead of coming back as he was, he appears as an old man, having lived his life with Peggy Carter and growing old in the past. He passes the mantle of Captain America onto Sam, and the movie ends with the Avengers going their separate ways, paralleling the endings of *Avengers*, *Age of Ultron*, and *Civil War*, but this time with a more positive note, knowing that they can count on the others to protect the universe when the occasion calls for it.

The long build-up of the saga and the magnitude of the cinematic universe raised the stakes for the end of the saga and caused emotional reactions to the finale aplenty. While some fans accepted the events as final, significant groups were left confused and upset by the events of the film. Three major plot points surrounding the heroes the fandom evolved with were met with especially negative rebuttal.

The first is Tony Stark's fate. While his character evolved to be a hero willing to sacrifice himself for the world, it does not make sense to fans that he would blindly believe that there was only one possibility to defeat his enemies without even knowing what it entails. Tony Stark, who has backup plans for his backup plans, who trusts his own judgement

over the universe's would never interpret a gesture as an indicator that he had to give his life, especially after he managed to build a family and heal his own wounds as a parent, many claimed. The gesture that detonated Tony's ultimate sacrifice could have meant a million things, exemplified by the following meme by Reddit user *u/tisisneo*:



Figure 2: Meme about the many possible meanings of Doctor Strange's gesture displaying the confusion about the logic of Tony's interpretation of the same.

Due to this undiscussed ambiguity, the general feeling that the snap was an excuse to end Tony Stark's presence in the MCU took hold. While giving a character a spectacular end is a noble goal, the narrative leading to the finale must point to and support the event, which was not the case for Tony Stark's final bow.

In the same vein, Natasha's death was met with astonishment, though in a smaller scale. Her feature film *Black Widow* (2021) promised an expansion on the character's motivations, and, fans hoped, an exploration of her motives for choosing to die instead of keep fighting, as she had done again and again throughout the Avenger's convoluted journey. This, tragically, was not the case, with her film focusing on her past in a way that bore no echoes to the events of *Endgame*, and left many a fan firmly believing that the same treatment that Tony had received was being applied to Natasha: the need to

finally send off their characters and, if possible, create a bit of shock in the audience was used as a shortcut that did not match their actions through the saga.

Steve's fate, however less bloody, was also met with confusion. The evolution of the character is centred around him adapting to the twenty-first century and finding his place among a group of people as extraordinary as him, never willing to back down from a fight in the face of perceived injustice. His dedication to peace and his own admission that he does not see himself settling down make his actions nonsensical; why would someone who embraces the fight, with a moral compass hardwired to keep going for what is right, suddenly decide to retire to a past he felt disconnected to, leaving everything he built in the future that welcomed him? And not only that, how could he manage to live life knowing of HYDRA's crimes, of his best friend being tortured and used as a killing machine, seeing the civil injustices he so despises happening in front of him without doing nothing? Fans claim that his fate is a character regression that goes even further than the first movie, and that the authors have not understood Steve's motivation at all.

Overall, these actions, perceived as easy fixes with no text to back them up, deepened the separation between the authors and the fans, with the latter feeling like they were taken for fools by the former.

About the Theoretical frame

I have chosen specific theoretical texts to analyse the primary texts. These texts fall mainly under the post-structuralist umbrella or are influenced by it, as it is the case with fan studies, and they take two focuses: either on the text or the author. The author that has impacted this thesis the most is Kristina Busse, with works such as *The return of the author* and *Limit play: Fan authorship between Source Text, Intertext and Context*,

closely followed by Catherine Tosenberger and her text *Mature Poets Steal: Children's Literature and the Unpublishability of Fanfiction*.

Busse's *The Return of the Author* takes Foucault's Author-function as a base to revise the evolution of the author through history, from the birth of the concept of the author as we know it in the eighteenth century, to the "Death of the Author" as described by Roland Barthes in the essay of the same name. This focus on the author implies the importance of the figure that creates or most importantly—their identity. Foucault argues that the author is relevant within a political, historical, social, gendered context, and these factors will modify how the text is perceived. In short, the *ethos* of the author shapes the reader's reaction (Busse 2013). Using reader response theorist Stanley Fish's *interpretative communities*, Busse contextualizes the act of reading as "a collective writing process, shifting focus from author to reader but also, more importantly, pointing out that texts only ever mean when they get read and that this reading process is never only passive or directed by author and text alone" (Busse 2013). Recontextualising the act of reading as a communal one implies the existence of communities that read, which is brilliantly exemplified in fan communities. "Authors writing within fan communities," Busse claims, "regularly make use of implicit underlying expectations and rely on *ethos* in ways published writers often cannot". These authors are creating, by use of their authorial identity (as fans or any other aspect of their identity) an interpretative framework that aids in the proper reading of a text. Authorial identity in these communities, that ultimately value privacy and anonymity above other things, is expressed in the pseudonyms the authors choose and the para-textual elements that they share to accompany their works, such as tags and author's notes, in which they describe the work, but also give their opinion of it, the canon, and share details that may be relevant to the story. What is most important when talking about the author function is not the name attached to the piece,

but that all of the pieces that are attached to the name are consistent. This consistency is created through time, and produces an *ethos* surrounding the figure of the author as much by sharing information as by hiding it, that, while separated from their real identity, is fundamental to the understanding of the text. The ultimate goal of pairing a work with the identity of the author is to claim ownership over intellectual property, at least in a capitalist system. Then why, one might ask, do fanfic writers choose to hide behind pseudonyms and choose to let the primary authors keep ownership, and therefore, the possibility of monetary gain? The answer is gender. The overwhelming majority of online fan-based writing communities is female-dominant and following the historical trend of diminishing women's creations in favour of their male counterpart's to avoid legal trouble, the emphasis that their work is derivative and not-for-profit is stressed, which is used as an excuse to dismiss their work as "scribbles" as described by Nathaniel Hawthorne (Busse 2013). This precedent makes fan writers the immediate descendants of nineteenth century's scribbling women and of Virginia Woolf's woman writers, those who still neither gain money nor respect beyond their fan communities. This concept of the "scribbling women" has come to be relevant in tying female writers (for the purpose of this paper, especially female fan writers) and annotation theory, a theoretical frame that argues that the meaning of a text is created by the reader in the act of reading by bringing their own experiences into the text. These additions enrich the text and make the reader a creative force in the same level as the author, effectively bringing together the two identities—that of the author and the reader—into one persona. This renegotiation of the authorial role and interpretative power plays on two *ethos*, the writers and the readers, and ultimately implies a redefinition of the terms *writer* and *reader*, and creates a third persona that encompasses both.

This paper is most interesting for this thesis due to the recontextualization of the writer and reader figures, which I will use in the analysis of my corpus. Any question regarding the author therefore, will be made under the assumption that these two identities meet under one person. The implications of this assumption will be explored in the findings of the corpus.

Kristina Busse also wrote "*Limit Play: Fan Authorship between Source Text, Intertext, and Context*" in collaboration with Louisa Stein from the San Diego State University, fellow fan studies scholar. This text focuses on the author, as well as the text and its interactions, and I am going to use it due to its work with the text, given that the previous article already works with the figure of the author, as well as Tosenberger's article. However, since the relationship between space and authorship is very present in intertextuality, I will be talking about this aspect as well. The focus of this text is the limitations that shape fan authorship, and I find what that means for the fan text in relation to the canon and other fan texts interesting for this thesis, and it works especially well because the authors of the text base their theories on media fandoms, which is exactly my case. Therefore, I will not have to adapt theories to fit the niche I have chosen, as has been the case with other papers. The authors also comment on the vastness of the field and stress the need for scholars to target small subsection of fandom to "unlock the richness and diversity across interface, cultural context, and decade" (Stein and Busse, 2009), which is what I am doing. The extreme specification of the topic is stressed throughout the introduction of this paper because of its importance both within the field and to the readers of this thesis. I am aware fanfiction in itself is fairly new to literary scholars, and the level of specification may be confusing for many, so a proper contextualisation is needed. On the other hand, there are endemic tropes, literary and aesthetic styles present throughout fandoms, which makes it a distinct collective despite

its diversity. Some reasons as to why that happens are fandom-migration, belonging to multiple fandoms at the same time (being multi-fandom), or influence of popular culture on a significant part of the collective. This allows for comparative analysis among tropes and fandoms in order to understand the trope better or to ponder about the differences between them and what they mean for literary theory.

This article discusses the limits of the source text, that is, the impact they may have on fan texts, in the following way: while the canon is the inspiration of a fan text, “fans will not always adhere to all of the details of what they consider their primary source text” (Stein and Busse 2009). Such is the case of the Fix-It Fic, a genre where disregarding or modifying the canon is the whole point. However, the primary text remains a referent for the fans. In order for the reader to understand why a certain text behaves a certain way or digresses in this specific way from the canon, the author has to communicate their intentions. This way, even if the final product is relatively separated from the canon, the primary text “delimits and delineates the work: the author’s choice to clearly mark a text as “alternate universe” or “constructed reality” signifies notable changes to the reader, thus maintaining the source text as discursive referent” (Stein and Busse, 2009). In short, the canon will be a referent of the fan text regardless of how separated the latter is from the former.

This is not the case of the fan text. While the canon text may have been created in a vacuum separate from the fandom, fan texts are inherently unable to do that. Fan communities become *interpretive communities* in relation to the canon, a term that has been explained in Busse’s other article. The ratio of fan communities to interpretive communities is never 1:1. Sub-fandoms, specific ships, character preferences and more each form an interpretive community that joins readers into a group with similar opinions, referents and interpretations of the canon that may digress from others. This disagreement

does not mean they belong to different fandoms; they are still grouped under the same one, as the canon they are based on is the same, but their differences will create new texts and opinions that, while belonging to the same fandom at large and potentially influencing it, will make most sense to those who belong to the same interpretive community. The texts belonging to each community are adequately tagged to differentiate them and to aid the fans in directing their attention to the niches they are interested in.

Apart from its clear relationship to the canon, fan texts, as literature, follow certain genre conventions (genre is here understood as “culturally constructed, shifting sets of labels, meanings, tropes and associations [...] in order to use genre to study the aesthetic characteristics of fan texts without ignoring their cultural context” Mittel 2004, Stein 2006 and Naremore 2008 as quoted in Stein and Busse 2009), some that have a history in broader literature, such as noir, fantasy, or horror, and some that are fandom-specific, as is the case of tropes such as *hurt/comfort*, *Coffeeshop AU* (AU being a shortened form of *Alternative Universe*) or *Fix-It Fic*. Some of these fan-specific tropes have made their way into popular culture and are used in canon texts, but they are ultimately better understood in the context of fandom. Genre in fandom functions as another constraint for the text, grounding it in its niche, while that is not the case when applied to canon. Genre constrains a text regardless, but the canon enjoys more freedom than fan texts, and therefore, this constriction does not signify the same.

Stein and Busse also stress the importance of understanding technology and interface when thinking about fan texts. “Understanding the technological history and its influence on fannish creative traditions” they claim, “may help to explain why, in contemporary online fan authorship, much of fanfiction still follows the text-centric model that evolved in Usenet and mailing lists, even though contemporary spaces facilitate hypertextual and multimedia narratives.” (Stein and Busse 2009). Understanding the platform that hosts

fanfiction is cardinal to understanding the texts that inhabit it. In light of this aspect, the platform I have chosen to study will be contextualised in this thesis, both for the benefit of the reader and for the clarification it provides to theory. This platform, AO3, a text-based archive as described in this quote, is not the only one that hosts fanfiction on the internet. Other platforms with different goals, such as social media, are also known to host fanfiction, which follows the constraints of the interface where they are published. This is the case of *Social Media AUs*, in which one or more characters have their own profiles and interact between them in what can pass as genuine interactions to people outside the fandom. This genre specifically has been adapted to text-based fan platforms (the interactions are formatted as they would appear on the platform the text is emulating, but ultimately are shared in a text medium) and even to pop culture, as is the case of the *SKAM* phenomenon, a TV show that, between episodes displayed interactions on social media that impact the televised story.

The conclusion the text reached is that fan authorship is a trigger for those with anxieties about originality and media authorship in an age of media reproducibility. The key is to treat new authorships not as a threat to the canons, which they are not, but as transformative works that draw from ideas in order to broaden or even create narratives the fans care about. This clarification is important due to copyright laws regarding original ideas and fan texts. The media fans this article studied “model the conflict between remixing and originality, between creativity within limits and creativity beyond limits. [...] In the end, the collective creative energies of media fans showcase artistic prototypes that emphasize intertextuality, community, and a creativity that is not invested primarily in notions of originality.” (Stein and Busse 2009).

The most important thing to take from this article is the notion of textual limits, relating both to the canon and the fan text, and the relationship between the two. The question of

genre is also a good point, especially regarding its different effects in canon and fan texts. The differences between the two exemplify the different stances of the texts in fan communities, a concept further developed in the next article.

Catherine Tosenberger argues in her text *Mature Poets Steal: Children's Literature and the Unpublishability of Fanfiction* that there is a parallelism between the reactions to children's literature and fanfiction, and it is not only the infantilisation of the genre and, therefore, its dismissal from canon. As stated before, Tosenberger's argument directly contradicts the idea that quality and aesthetic works are the only ones worthy of study championed by Harold Bloom. Tosenberger takes pleasure in most of fanfiction being unpublishable and thus unable to enter the canon due to its embeddedness into a specific community outside of which the text is difficult if not impossible to understand. The focus of the author is on fandoms of texts aimed at young people, such as *Harry Potter* or *The Hunger Games*, and she argues that fan studies would greatly benefit from engaging with the field of children's literature (Tosenberger 2014) due to its exploration of the relationship between creator-audience-text. In this text, the division between what Suzanne Scott calls "affirmational" and "transformational/transformativ" fandom practices, terms that are used throughout this paper, are described. Affirmational fandom describes the fandom in which "the source material is re-stated, the author's purpose divined to the community's satisfaction, rules established on how the characters are and how the universe works." (Scott 2013). Transformational fandom "is all about laying hands upon the source and twisting it to the fans' own purposes, whether that is to fix a disappointing issue [...] in the source material, or using the source material to illustrate a point, or just to have a whale of a good time." (Scott 2013). The main difference between both is the implied hierarchy and gender that participates in each. Affirmational fandom is male-coded and idolizes the canon above all else, and any deviation is shunned, while

transformational fandom follows a more democratized model in which everyone can create and share with the community and is female-coded. The gender division is consistent with western society and follows its principles: Males, who are generally benefitted from their gender and enjoy more respect from the status quo, tend to take the canon content at face value and react negatively to any transgression to it; female audiences, who are usually an afterthought, or even invisible to the canon creators, engage in transformation of works to make them relatable and enjoyable for themselves, an action that is not needed by their affirmational counterpart, since the content is almost exclusively catered to them. Therefore, the simple act of being a marginalised community implies that, to have the same positive experience the privileged group has as a base, members of the group will have to engage in a modification of the canon, an action often not well-regarded by canon creators. The addition to a wide variety of marginalised identities to a fandom open to fellow fans what Francesca Coppa calls “an increasingly customizable fannish experience” (Coppa 2010), which means that a fandom is enriched with every new perspective it welcomes. This text also introduces the concept of shadow texts, as described by Perry Nodelman and Marvis Reimer in 2002. This refers to the background repertoire of knowledge the audience is expected to have—in the case of fan writings, this includes the canon, the “fanon” (which includes fan *headcanons*, theories about the canon and previous works produced within the fandom) and osmotic knowledge of sister fandoms—for instance, in the case of fandoms such as *The Hunger Games*, *The Maze Runner*, and *Divergent*, given that many fans belong to more than one at the same time or interact with people who do. This concept, using Busse’s terminology, refers to the *ethos* not of the author, but of the text and its circumstances. What makes fan texts so special regarding shadow texts is the fact that unlike in the case of other genres such as children’s literature, the author belongs to the demographic the text targets, and so their

relationship with the shadow texts is more intimate than other authors. By having the same experience as the audience, the author does not display a superior position in relation to the audience, as the canon authors do, but share their work horizontally.

I have developed a diagram of the relationship between primary and fan authors and their audience based on these writings that conveys the difference between an affirmational and a transformational model so that the structure of fan writing is differentiated from the canon structure, illustrating the relationship between author and audience that I will be studying.

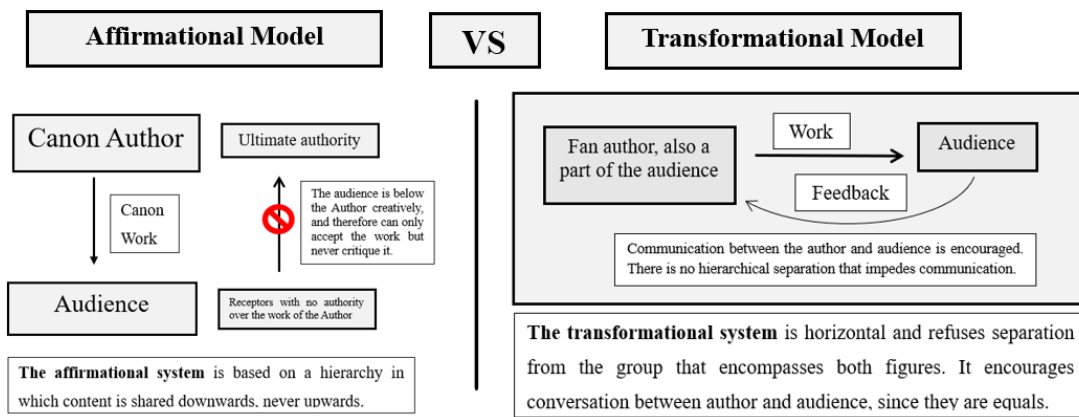


Figure 3. diagram of the affirmational vs transformational model, created by the author based on Busse and Tosenberger.

Tosenberger compares the hierarchy of the affirmational model to that found in children's literature, in which the standards and the texts are set by people that are not a part of the intended audience, and argues that the reason for this is the same infantilisation of the audience, that needs guidance from the figure of the author because they know best.

The next section of Tosenberger's paper focuses on the importance of not only understanding the canon, but also the fannish community to which texts belong in order for adequate understanding of it to be reached. This focus on the community—i.e. the

audience—shows the significance of the transformational system within fanfiction theory. Their additions to the transformational work and its background, added to the fan texts that are themselves based on other texts, are called “*intense intertextuality*” due to the heavier-than-normal interaction of texts (Busse 2012). From here, Abigail Derecho (2014) uses Jacques Derrida’s concept of literature as an archive containing all written texts to declare all narratives that exhibit this kind of borrowing to fall under the umbrella term she coins “*achronic literature*”; Tosenberger disagrees with the term and proposes the use of “*recursive literature*” in its place, which she feels encompasses the nature of the texts more clearly. Recursive literature, as defined in the *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* by David Langford, is that which “exploits existing fantasy settings or characters” from “a specific former fiction.” (Clute, 1997).

This recursivity has been used in traditional literary criticism as a reason to denigrate the types of literature that exhibit it, such as fanfiction and folk narratives under the guise that they are “unoriginal” and “inauthentic.” This opinion, coming from schools of thought that value aestheticism and originality above all and that are famously complacent with the status quo and its canon, relegating subversive works from study and, by extension, their authors and communities, effectively upholding an elitist ideal in academia. Fanfiction’s existence and circulation outside of capitalistic official institutions (namely publishing business and academia) has both damaged its reach to established audiences and freed it from the social constraints of the same. Operating under a gift economy—one in which there is no profit and where the product is considered a present to be enjoyed by fellow fans—saves the fan authors from being subject to copyright law, which was created with the idea of intellectual property in mind, as discussed by Busse (2013). This separation, therefore, is a double-edged sword; fan authors give up monetary

gains in exchange for freedom from an establishment that does not value them and for a community in which their work will be appreciated.

So far, these models have shown, for clarity's sake, two separate factions, as if they were monolithic identities with no internal fissions. Assuming so would be dangerously reductive, since, within any group there are different opinions that interact with and contradict each other. It is in this conversation that texts, opinions, and ideas are born. These divisions between fans do not substitute the power dynamics that separate the groups shown in the affirmational model, since they stem in the shared community, so they are included under the "feedback" shown in the transformational model.

After this long introduction of theory surrounding the author, it becomes clear that fanfiction is unpublishable due to the circumstances described, namely othering from mainstream channels, unprofitability under the law, and heavy imperative contextualisation.

These otherings create what fan studies call *Aesthetics of Constraint*. This term, applicable to any literary and vital to recursive literary, is especially relevant in fanfiction. The *blank page syndrome* is often said to be a writer's greatest affliction, and it stems, not as what many believe to be a lack of things to say, but from an overwhelming quantity of ideas. Karen Blixen was able to encompass the infinite possibilities of *nothing* in her short story "The Blank Page," possibilities only disturbed by the appearance of *something*. This disturbance becomes a constraint to the imagination, which is necessary to choose what to write. Narrowing the field, deciding on a specific story to focus on is freeing oneself from having to add the infinite possibilities to a story. *Writing a story* may be overwhelming because the concept is too general, but writing a story about a donkey crossing a rowdy river that must not be longer than three thousand words gives the author a starting point and limits within which they have free reign to create, protected by

external storylines by the limits that constrict them. When writing fanfiction, many authors will ask for prompts to develop, pairings to study, and places in which to place the characters. The need for constraint is fundamental to the creation of stories. Sometimes, these constrictions come from outside the reader; creating a story based on another text; developing a prompt in which two characters find themselves in an implausible scenario; but sometimes, the constraints are chosen by the author; Only writing about a set of characters, agreeing with a sub-fandom that refuses the aftermath of the canon, exclusively ending their fics in a specific way. The more constraints there are, the more focus is placed in what is truly important to the story, and, paradoxically, the more choice the author has. Instead of “mindlessly appropriating a creative work,” fan writers take inspiration from the canon to create more work, both limited and freed by aesthetic constraints.

What is most interesting for this paper is the introduction of the dual Affirmational/Transformational system to situate the authors and the audience. These will be used to discuss the agency fan writers possess and their relation to the canon, and the concept of Aesthetic constraints, which exposes the differences within a fandom, the need for limits, and the possibilities that reducing focus brings to the author.

These texts have become the basis of my theoretical frame. While other authors will be discussed, Busse and Tosenberger—as well as the post-structuralist notion that influence their writings—will be the bases of my analysis, since they tackle specific aspects of fanfiction, but also the figure of the author and the audience.

Fix-it Fic

Until this point I have only described fanfiction in general and have just mentioned the subgenre I will be working on.

Stuart Hall's paradigm of *incorporation/resistance* (1973/1991) describes two possible ways in which audiences and readers receive and process the canon according to Busse and Gray (2011). This concept has been evolved, as described in the Aim and Scope of This Thesis subchapter of this text, and so while I will point out the links between the incorporation/resistance and the affirmational/transformational models, I will use the latter because it is ideal for the field.

The incorporation model, which evolved to become the affirmational model in fan studies, assumes the reader to negotiate the contents of the text into their previously acquired knowledge of the same and accepting the contents without refusal, while the resistance model, transforming into the transformational model, redundantly expects pushback from the receiver in the form of criticism or outright refusal of the aforementioned contents.

The Fix-it Fic is possibly one of the most illustrative examples of the second instance of this model. As the name points out, the goal of Fix-it fics is to fix the lack of "integrity" in the canon, be it logical coherence or emotional, aesthetic or moral continuation in the story (Goodman). This trope can be divided in two sub-categories according to how the canon is treated. In canon Divergence Fix-its, some or all the events in the canon do not happen and are replaced by a new series of events. Whether or not the outcome is the same as in the canon is up to the author, but this is usually done to alter the end. Post-canon fix-it, on the other hand, as the name says, adds posterior events to the canon which modify the plot points in the canon.

Seeing as not all fix-its modify canon completely, one could ask what exactly it is fixing, and the answer to this question is quite interesting. As I will argue later, the many facets of media allow for as many interactions between text, creators, readers and fandoms; accepting this multi-layered interaction vortex, fanfic writers may write fix-it to address acts in canon they may not like, the outcome of the story, the narrative in an effort to “make sense of” the characters, or to make peace with their feelings about the text.

In short, everything can be wrong about a text, and therefore, everything may need to be fixed. Of course, this is an extreme instance, and if a work was deemed so wrongly executed as to change absolutely everything about it, some may claim a “*Ship of Theseus*” situation. The Ship of Theseus, as Noah Levin describes it, is “a thought experiment that raises the question of whether an object that has had all of its components replaced remains fundamentally the same object.” Using this paradox as a base, some fanfics are so removed from the source theme that one may question whether they are derivative at all, much less fanfic.

This can be exemplified by works that started off as fanfic but later got published, forcing the author to eliminate any trace of the original fandom, such as the *After* series by Anna Todd, which started as RPF of singer and *One Direction* member Harry Styles; when the author published it, names, references, and places had to be altered to avoid legal troubles. How much is the reader missing out on by ignoring the fanfic origins of the work? How much fandom-specific quips and subtext is being lost with this modification? In this case, the work that started as a fanfic creates a new canon, and the reason it is easier to be scrubbed for publishing is that it was not based off a piece of media, but an artist, so no storyline has to be completely changed to avoid claims of plagiarism. The inability to do this with fix-it makes the genre special; its heavy interdependence with the canon and its

rewriting (or bettering, some fans claim) goal makes this situation, and the paradox of the Ship of Theseus merely a theoretical and highly improbable scenario.

Authors on AO3 usually address their grievances with the text in the “Author’s Notes” section that precedes the fanfic text, as will be seen in the analysis of the texts.

Within the MCU fandom, the film *Endgame* marked the end of the ‘Infinity Saga’, spanning 11 years and 22 films since 2008’s surprise hit *Iron Man* (Mittermeier 2019). This film marks the final bow for two characters that have seen the start of the MCU, Iron Man/Tony Stark and Captain America/Steve Rogers, played by Robert Downey Jr and Chris Evans respectively. Tying over a decade of stories in one final film is a titanic empress, and it is no wonder that, despite the praise it has received by critics and fan factions, voices have raised against some character arcs, Captain America’s being the most discussed. Many saw Steve’s choice to return to the past and grow old with his old flame Peggy Carter as a dismissal of years of character development. Had *Endgame* come after the first *Captain America* movie, it would have been understandable by audiences that Steve would return to a steady life, but through the movies in the universe, Steve’s character comes very far from the sickly kid that would not back down from a fight even at his own detriment, and grows into someone who has had to adapt to the twenty-first century without the context of having lived the twentieth century. Despite missing many liberation movements such as the Civil rights movement and the feminist waves, Steve does not carry with himself bigoted views associated with the past. His trust in Sam Wilson, a black veteran who becomes his friend and teammate in *Captain America: Civil War*, or his natural acceptance of queer characters, such as in the Support group scene in *Endgame*, where the first official gay character in the MCU makes his very-forgettable debut. Please note that the use of official in regard to the first queer character refers to the incorporation of the same in the canon; since *Captain America: The First Avenger*, fans

have shipped Steve Rogers with James Bucky Barnes, his childhood best friend, and this is one of the most popular slash ships in fan spaces. This lacklustre effort to “appease the woke left” by including representation in name only has been criticised repeatedly as a strategy media corporations employ to save profit and avoid getting bad reviews or even banned in countries where the same action would not be welcome; the character or the scene are so inconsequential that cutting or modifying it has no impact on the overall story. It is techniques such as this that fans describe as “fan service that is made with the idea that the fans are too dumb or too desperate for representation to notice that what may be a very valid point on their part is only because the studio or the writers have to fill a diversity quota”. This construction of the ideal reader by the writers has been studied in reader response theory and, in a smaller scale, in children’s literature. Catherine Tosenberger in *Mature Poets Steal: Children’s literature and the unpublshability of fanfiction* describes how adult writers create the ideal child that will benefit from their stories and then write fiction specifically tailored to that ideal audience, even though there is an actual audience that can be consulted or observed to understand what they like and why, because the writers believe the content this audience gets should be vetoed by groups of people who “know what is best.” She claims these power dynamics follow the same pattern in children’s literature, where despite being the targeted audience, no children are involved in the process of creating or evaluating the product, and in media that wants to appeal to fans due to the importance of the community within the audience. In both instances, the audience has not been consulted due to the writers perceiving them as a group that needs guidance from them, incapable of knowing how a good text should look like. Ultimately, this matrix of all-knowing writer versus audience that needs to be shown what good media is has strained relationships between canon and fandom writers through innumerable fandoms, and the corporations that provide the PTOs seem to either play into

the preconceived notions of the writers because they are broad enough or they fit a demographic favourable to the establishment, or because they are more focused in the profits than the story—be it because they expect the outrage of a polemic work to boost audience indexes with “*hate-watching*” or because they know they can afford to lose the favour of a highly involved faction in favour of expanding the markets that want to influence.

Together with Steve Rogers’ “botched” character arc, Tony Stark’s end in the film has also been discussed extensively in fan circles. Most of the fanfics displayed on AO3 that ended up being part of this corpus are centred in these two characters, and they each tend to take one of the routes fix-its can go according to the definition mentioned above; since Tony Stark dies in the film that serves as PTO, and given that he was a central character in the Infinity Saga, many fans are reluctant about letting him die, and so he is usually the focus of fics with tags such as “*Tony Stark is alive*” and “*AU where Tony survives Endgame.*” Fans argue that after his arc saw him go from a “Genius, Billionaire, Playboy, Philanthropist” (2011) to happily married with a child he loves, it is gratuitously cruel and non-sensical to kill him off, even if the opposite opinion claims that it is consistent with the list of sacrifices he has made throughout the saga (Like the ones in *Avengers*, where he sends a missile to outer space despite it being regarded as a suicide mission, *Civil War*, in which he let his parent’s murderer go free as a way to not completely break his relationship with Steve and thus, keep the possibility of the Avengers open, and *Infinity War*, in which he left his retirement for the possibility that he could save the earth one last time). Nonetheless, these fics prefer to explore situations where Tony is alive and well, and many prefer to retire him from superhero shenanigans and instead let him fulfil his role as a mentor and father figure to his daughter Morgan, Peter Parker/Spider-man, and, sometimes, Harley Keener (first introduced in *Iron man 2*). The method of keeping

him alive varies from fic to fic. Some instances have another more powerful character snap the gauntlet instead of him, others choose to maim him, for instance, by making him lose the arm with which he snaps, or making him paraplegic, and some even fix the plot so far before the scene that the outcome that ends the war is another scene entirely.

On the other side of the trope relationship-wise, Tony's familial life focus is mirrored by Steve's romantic life. The stories centred around Steve Rogers tend to focus on his romantic feelings and the subsequent choice to retire. As stated above, many felt that Rogers would not abandon his best friend and found family in favour of returning to a past during which he knows Bucky Barnes is being tortured and used as a mercenary, his enemies are developing in the shadows, the politics of the twentieth century are developing in front of him without being able to stop himself from intervening, all for a woman, that, despite being "his first love"—slash shippers claim that Bucky was his first love either way—he had known for months, and who would not understand his choice either. Because of this argument, these stories usually ship Stucky (the pairing comprised by Steve and Bucky) and develop their relationship during the course of both *Infinity War* and *Endgame*, either with a pre-existing relationship already established or detailing how these events got them finally together.

The prevalence of these relationships as the focus of many fics reveal feelings the fans (here understood both as the community or the individual writer) have about canon, and more specifically, what emotions canon evokes. My theory about what the canon authors' intentions is, they wanted to retire the characters in a fashion befitting the raised stakes of the universe. What started as human heroes with human enemies grew to be human heroes against alien villains, with time travel and unprecedented technology being a common occurrence throughout the movies. Due to this, giving the heroes a peaceful and

coherent end would feel out of place in a saga always getting bigger, faster, better, stronger.

A similar failing can be observed in the finale of *Game of Thrones*. In this case, the TV show quickly chronologically surpassed the books it was based on, so the producers were given the end the author expected and only one season to develop the action to make it work, while G.R.R. Martin planned two more books at least to bring the actions to a point where the finale made sense. In this case, fans claim Daenerys' "craziness" came from nowhere and her being betrayed by Jon Snow was very forced. The same case happens with Tony and fans made sure to voice their disappointment. A figure such as Tony, a protagonist since the very first movie of the saga, that people grew to like—or at least be invested on—is not the type of character one kills off, and if the action was made to be subversive, it was done wrong and it could be one liner will not change that.

The role of the writer and the role of the reader in fanfiction circles

The fanfic reader/writer: a layered identity

The interpretation of the role of the author has evolved throughout history. From anonymous authors and those whose names got lost to the years, to those writing for and protected by *Maecenas*, all the way to the copyright laws that cemented the importance of the same in the literary and legal spheres, the act of writing has never been just about stringing words together. In modern western literature, due to the aforementioned copyright laws emerging in the eighteenth century, the author had ultimate authority over their text (or such was the general consensus). The Post-structuralist movement born in the twentieth century added even more to the discourse surrounding this figure. Theorists such as Foucault and Barthes question the power, influence and the role of the author introducing concepts such as “*authorial identity*,” and “*author function*”. These concepts can be explored in all their nuances in online fan communities. Krisitina Busse explores “*ethos and identity politics*” in “*The Return of the Author*,” focusing on online communities of reader-writers. She illustrates the evolution of the author shortly in order to contextualise this figure of the online author and their standing as a creator and consumer of texts within the same ecosystem. She analyses in the same text the role of the reader and the standing of the text within a “cultural situatedness”, which will illustrate the net of identities that shape these communities, usually within the same person as well as the community.

A shift from “*What are the author’s intentions?*” to “*Who is this author?*” shows how the importance previously placed on intent is now placed on the identity of the author. The collective of readers has subconsciously shifted from accepting the truism of the death of the author as absolute freedom in interpretation to acknowledging that subconsciously the

author will be biased in the writings. The need for an authorial identity is clear in nowadays' interpretative process. Contrary to logic, the pseudonyms and other ways of hiding personal identity are great ways to create online authorial identities that the reader will associate with the written work they consume. Said identities must be reinforced repeatedly and bring forward the aspects of the person's identity that will make the author connect with the readership. An example within the corpus would be the orphaned account that wrote "*i'm glad to be here (happy to be alive)*" and the persona visible through the notes accompanying the text. The addendum of this identity to the text tells the reader that "My brother and I (who's ten) didn't like Avengers: Endgame, so we rewrote it so that it is less stupid" (orphan_account, 2021), which alerts the reader of the writer's views and intentions. In the same work, the author's notes clarify the double authorship of the work (the owner of the account and their 10-year-old sibling), and situate it culturally, while getting affordances from readers that would not be accepted in any other context. The clarification that a child was involved in the writing tells readers not to expect advanced literary techniques, and that any criticism to the work for being "childish" or "simple" would be pointless and redundant.

The post-structuralist shift from author importance to reader reception allows me to analyse parallelly the circumstances and importance of reader and writer in connection to the text and each other. This may seem counterintuitive due to the importance of post-structuralism in the death of the author as a theoretical marker. Nevertheless, Busse claims that the phenomenon mentioned above, "the return of the author," recontextualizes the reading experience of today. I will try to steer clear of ethical and legal matters because that is not the focus of this paper and because such a focus is more appropriate in a law or philosophic thesis. Nonetheless, they are a part of the topic and of fan history, so be aware of the mentions in this text.

The conceptualization of Foucault's author persona adequately applies to internet personae. Two different reactions exist within fandoms depending on the category the authors; those who write the canon, directly involved in the creation of the primary text, and fan authors, or those who take from and transform the canon. Contextualized in fix-it circles, the reaction to the authors of the canon or the figure that symbolizes a group of writers (in this case, Kevin Feige, president of Marvel and producer, and Anthony and Joe Russo, screenwriters and producers) tends to be negative because the fandom feels "they have done the characters dirty." And it is not only the characters that the fans feel were betrayed, but themselves as well. During a previous instalment of the Infinity saga, *Captain America: Civil War*, the Russo brothers claimed it to be "a love story" in a written interview with *Empire*, which, at the time, was met with hope of mainstream representation from the LGBTQIA+ community. Nevertheless, posterior instalments depict Steve Rogers in romances that "feel forced" and "a way to reaffirm Captain America's heterosexuality," namely with *Sharon Carter* in the same movie and with *Peggy Carter* in *Endgame*. The picture of the time, described by Emily Gaudette in an *Inverse* article, is this:

What fans are left with is a director who defines the Captain America saga's third film as a definitive "love story", and a lead actor who says he's not playing it that way. Perhaps what's at stake here is the term "love story," which, by Russo's definition, would suit films like Bridesmaids, Bad Boys 2 and When Harry Met Sally, all at once. That definition is apt, when one considers that romantic love is not the only a deep, emotional human experience, but it's also an interesting strategic move for Russo to adopt the phrase when describing Civil War.

This convenient queerbaiting on the side of one of the biggest entertainment giants is nothing new; however, that does not mean that fans are okay with it. Steve's end in

Endgame was the straw that broke the camel's back for the queer community, especially online, and that translated to a surge of Stucky *slash* (Slash fiction, according to Fanlore, refers to "a type of fanwork in which two (or more) characters of the same sex or gender are placed in a sexual or romantic situation with each other.") and a boom in the fix-it genre. Representation is not the only qualm the fandom has against the Russos. Fan Mari Freixes articulates her opinion of the trajectory of the story in the following way:

"I feel like it's because their work sort of found itself in a slow descent after "The Winter Soldier"... They had plenty to prove as directors (particularly because they never helmed an action movie before and did mostly TV work) and it turned out wonderfully (regardless of critical reception, fans still think it's easily Top 03 of the best MCU films) and, once they proved they could do it - and, more importantly, do it well -, Marvel decided to keep them for a longer ride which ended with "Infinity War" and "Endgame" (movies they both - courageously and stupidly - decided to direct back-to-back).

Part of me kind of believes they lost a lot of momentum after "The Winter Soldier"... "Civil War" had interesting moments and ideas but felt way too overcrowded and shrouded with endless plots; "Infinity War", with the exception of Josh Brolin's excellent Thanos and some great fan-service moments, could've taken itself more seriously and made the threat feel more ominous and less humorous, which would've added up a lot of drama to the Snap; "Endgame", despite equally effective fan-service moments and character arcs, is long to a fault and drags and stalls right when it can't or shouldn't, and it also divided the fans over the creative decisions made about certain characters

I don't think they deserve the hate (I don't that anyone deserves hate if I'm honest, only when they are inherently cruel and evil) but I do feel like they are a little too

overrated and idolized by fans of a franchise that sticks to the formula as if it's a living creature attached to their hips... "The Winter Soldier" works because it follows it while also simultaneously diverges from it, and does it excellently... All their other entries in the franchise should've done the same, because they had the potential to repeat the success of their first outing three more times... Maybe that first successful movie boosted their confidence a little too much, or maybe the pressure put on them winded up taking up more than they anticipated, but they did what they could with what they were given, and did well enough to have people (not me though) want their return."

The criticism exposed here, aside from airing the perceived grievances of a canon author and its implications, shows a deep level of knowledge of the source text and of narrative theory, as well as the American movie industry and the circumstances under which the canon was created, contextualising the product and the possible intentions of the authors. This deep analysis clashes with the idea, supported in the Affirmational model of Fandom, that fans are not able to analyse the texts they are fans of due to intellectual immaturity or emotional blindness. This dismissal is not encountered in writings produced under the transformational model, that is, fanfiction, which produces positive interactions around a text, encouraging conversation as opposed to expecting absolute complacency from the fans.

The negative reaction to the canon creators has a complementary positive reaction towards for those authors on the same power level as the fans, that is, fanfic writers. Like knights in shining armour, they take the premisses they deem good or salvageable from the canon and expand them into stories that feel more coherent or consequent with said premisses. The pertinence to the same community also aids this positive identification,

since it is understood they share the same values as the receiving group and “fight” for these views and against those of the primary authors and their perceived evil.

This dichotomy illustrates the importance of identity in these spaces, both within the community (views as a levelled ground, where everyone has equal standing) and in opposition to the canon (to whose creators the fan community is in clear legal inferiority copyright-wise), but not creative. This refusal of one true eternal narrative opens the possibility of many versions of the same story to exist simultaneously within the fandom, making theoretical “*ship wars*” to become irrelevant (or, at least, ideally. Experience has shown the author that in every circle there will be people looking for any opportunity to disagree with someone, a sentiment that is only highlighted online).

The fact that the concept of the *Multiverse* is a central plot point within the MCU and especially relevant within the last instalments of the Infinity Saga also loosens the hold of canon in the creation of fanfics. While other fandoms tend to follow along the lines of canon, tropes such as *fix-it*, *crack-fic* and other blatantly anti-canon genres are more prolific in this fandom, and the Multiverse is just one of two plausible explanations the author counts on to explain this phenomenon, the other being the separation between the primary text creators and fandom sensibilities.

Reader’s responses and attitudes towards canon and fic

Kristina Busse stresses the importance of identity ethos in fandom spaces, arguing that consistency is key to creating an identity in fandom. I think the importance of consistency can be extended to the content of a text and not only to its author to understand what is considered “good” writing. Albeit the standard for “good” media is as variegated as there are fans, most reasoning follows a pattern. These patterns are, fundamentally, consistent. Consistency, especially regarding characters, is extremely important to the fans. Calling

someone's characterisation "*out of character*" when that was not the goal of the text is one of the worst offences an author can receive. This does not mean that fans want predictable and boring storylines in canon, but rather that the authors act in consequence with the limits of the text. If a character has been shown to go from greedy to selfless through the story, having the climax revert the character to an egotistical person without more reason than shock value will confuse the audience and show them that the authors either are not familiar with character development or simply chose to sacrifice it for the sake of surprise. Many media corporations have adopted this strategy over the last decade, relying on shock value in order to generate revenue and sacrificing narrative cohesion if necessary to achieve it. *Endgame* is a prominent example of this, but it is not the only one. The last season of *Game of Thrones* and especially its season finale, left fans furious over an end that completely disregarded eight seasons of narrative build-up.

Following the theme of consistency, fans value proper categorisation of works. Genres were invented to separate stories in smaller groups with a specific goal in mind. Categorisation lets the audience know what to expect and situates them in what attitude they should greet the text with. A set of expectations is placed on a work according to its genre, and subverting those expectations without advertisement or, most importantly, narrative cause will not elicit the desired feelings in the audience and will make them dislike the work and its authors. Someone looking for romance will not be pleased if what they thought fit the advertised description suddenly turns into a gory bloodbath halfway through in the hopes that it has an impact on the audience and they talk about it.

The implication that the authors have full permission to do what they want with their work (as displayed in the affirmational model of fandom) shows heavy disregard for the contract they enter when they label their work, in which the author writes something to fit a niche and the audience enjoys it as an expression of what they are seeking. While,

arguably, the author does have complete freedom in creating their work, they cannot control the reactions the work or its categorisation will elicit, at least not if they want to gain their favour, which translates into money. What this produce is a scenario where the author lies to the audience and then criticised them for reacting accordingly.

This regard towards consistency and the lack of it shown in the canon and its authors, is highly valued in fandom spaces as a response. Proper tagging or description of a story is not merely a courtesy but an imperative in fanfiction as a result of that, and storylines where a character is properly developed or otherwise shown more care than in the canon are popular for the same reason. The creation of Fix-it fic stems from this need for consistency and seeks to create what they need from the texts in direct contradiction of what the canon gave them, which, more often than not, does not align with their values.

Corpus analysis: What do these texts tell us about canon, fandom and narrative?

In this chapter, I will talk about each of the twelve texts mentioned in the introduction of this paper. Now that the cultural context and the theoretical frame have been explained, the texts will illustrate my points that the fanfic author has and will prove that the conversation between canon and fandom is nuanced, furthering the discussion around the author figure, the reader and the canon in a post-structuralist lens. To complete this, I will not exclusively focus on the narrative works, and I will include the para-text that accompanies them into my analysis. Said para-text, including tags, author's notes, and username of the author, is presented to the reader together with the text, so a regular reader would have as much access to it as a scholar that is focused on understanding the text and its implications.

As a preliminary analysis of the works, I have asked four questions pertaining to each of the texts to categorize them so that key points of the narrative can be explored separately. These questions, which undertake the length, subgenre, principal relationship depicted, and seriality of the work, are as follows:

Length: Is it a *one-shot* or multichapter work? This will show how much time it will take for the text to be read, as well as how much commitment is required from the texts. A one-shot, also referred to as a standalone is "one that is complete in and of itself, without prequels or sequels, and is not part of an ongoing series or shared universe." (FanLore). Multi-chaptered texts require more time and dedication, both to the reader and the writes, but they have more space for character and event development.

Subgenre of Fix-It: There are two subcategories for this genre, as explained under the subchapter Fix-It Fic. Which one does the fic belong to, *canon Divergence* or *Post-canon Fix-it?*

Relationships: AO3 classifies fics according to category, which applies to the type of relationship depicted in the text. These categories are *F/F* (female character paired with another female character), *F/M* (Female character paired with a male character), *Gen* (Short for general audiences, means the work does not contain romantic or sexual content), *M/M* (Male character paired with another male character), *Multi* (in which multiple people of various genders are in a relationship or relationships) and *Other*, which encompasses everything else. This question will deal with what relationships and what kind of relationships are depicted in the text.

Seriality: while many authors post multi-chaptered fics in one document, this takes planning and time, which may be overwhelming to some. Works pertaining to a collection have something in common—maybe they are part of the same AU, or they focus on one pairing or one AU with different pairings—which groups them for ease of access for the reader. Collections can be used as a *masterlist* of all the works the author has written (*masterlist* refers to a list of all the works an author has written, and they may be organised chronologically, by theme, characters or length). Whether a work is part of a collection or series indicates how expanded the universe depicted is, and how much content is available for those who want texts that follow the same trope or are written by the same author. The main difference between collections and series of works is that the works that are part of it are interdependent and interdependent from its peers, respectively. Works in a collection can be read as standalone pieces, and while context of the other works within the collection is encouraged, it is not necessary, while in a series, to understand the context, it is indispensable that the reader has read previous parts to understand the

content of the current text. This question will deal with the level of connection between this text and others with the same author or topic.

After answering these questions, a short summary of the work will be provided, as well as what that means in relation to the canon and any comments the author may have left that illustrate the conversation between writer and readers or their feelings and challenges towards the texts, both canon and fan alike.

When pertinent, the meaning of the pseudonym of the author will be addressed as well, because the information they choose to present cements the figure as part of the community. Some more general pseudonyms, such as *ageofgeek*, *sharpiegirl*, *blob_blob* and *bluesweatshirt* indicate that the author is not only a part of this fandom; a non-fandom-specific username points to the writer being open to writing for many fandoms and having a variety of interests, as opposed to usernames such as *natalie_nebula* and *skyrocket25*, which signal the authors as having Marvel as their main fandom and their commitment to these characters. Not only that, but puns that show the level of adaption to the text by the author, and which need specific knowledge to be understood, let the reader enjoy more the text the more aligned the reader and the writer's knowledge bases are. These choices display Foucault's concept of the author function in action and how it contributes to the authorial ethos that Busse describes.

Some of the texts allow for a deeper analysis, while others are perceived in a more superficial level. This is, I think, a very literary characteristic of fanfic; not every work within a literary genre will have the same quality, and expecting so of fanfiction would be setting a different standard that is not enforced in other genres. Not every horror story will become as known as *Frankenstein*, and that is completely normal. This may seem like a rebuttal of my own argument, but it is not. I chose to analyse all pieces regardless of perceived quality and have stretched them as thin as I could in a genre still young that

does not have the rigid rules that others exhibit. Seeing the different levels of analysis that can be pulled from texts whose ultimate goal is to entertain the reader and make them feel something establishes the genre among western literature, and as such, is and can be used to explain and expand literary theory, which is my goal for this thesis.

The texts that conform the corpus of this thesis are the following.

An Ass in the hole by wynnesome

An Ass in the hole by wynnesome is a one-shot with a word count of 2495 words that falls under the post-canon fix-it subcategory. While the author says the central relationship is *Stony* (Steve Rogers and Tony Stark), they also give the reader agency over how this relationship is interpreted: “*Steve and Tony’s relationship in this fic can be read as just about any flavor of your choosing, from friendship (with or without benefits), to pre-slash, to established relationship, to past-but-no-longer relationship. Your choice of main course comes with two sides: A Lot Of History and It’s Complicated.*” (wynnsome, 2019).

The work itself is a one-shot but is part of a collection of other works by the author, called “*Captain America/Iron Man Bingo.*”, and it “fills the “Presumed Dead” square on my 2019 round 1 *Stony Bingo* card.” As the title of the collection says, the works all centre on the relationship between these characters, and each one focus on a different slot of the bingo card. Bingo challenges are a popular and prolific way for authors to explore scenarios and AUs and work on the characters under difference circumstances. These bingo challenges are usually a community event in which many writers work on the same prompts and share their writing with each other and other readers as a way to reach wider audiences and get to know other writers they may enjoy, meaning that the writers become readers of other fics as well; this illustrates the aforementioned plurality of the fan figure.

In this fic, after dying at the end of endgame (this part is canon-compliant), Tony Stark asks Steve Rogers and James Rhodes to bring his body back to his lab, where he plans on rebuilding his body and restoring his memory in an experimental process. When he successfully does, Steve is there to greet him and the two talk about “awkward feelings-talkings” (wynnesome, 2019).

chaos theory by slylyaddictedtostories

The analysis of this 552-word piece is going to be a bit different to the others in this corpus, since it is written in poem form. Fix-it fics come in many shapes and forms and do not always abide by narrative constraints. In this case, what the author aims to fix is the relationship between Tony and Steve, but also, by choosing such an emotional form to write in, namely a poem, they also want to fix the feelings the canon has given them.

This poem, divided in fourteen stanzas of varying length is written from the point of view of Steve Rogers, who comes back in time to Tony. It features clear metaphors in which he uses water imagery to talk about himself, and attributes fire images to Tony.

In the first stanza, the opposition between them is established with the ice-fire parallelism, which is supported by canon, with Steve being trapped in the ice for seventy-five years and the various images of Tony soldering in his workshop and the sparks that usually accompany his scenes. There is also a mention of “*tragedy/[for]cruelty, love and lies*” which refers to the end of Civil War, in which they have their biggest falling out to date. Their personalities have been characterized as opposed since the first Avengers film, and this poem draws on that. The second stanza talks about being in the spotlight as heroes but being unknown by the masses, who only focus on the superhero personas they display to the world and not the character they show to closer friends and family.

The third stanza follows the theme of the first; it starts with a watery image (“*my head’s underwater/(it’s freezing cold down here)*”), again, referencing Steve’s time frozen under the sea, and goes on to talk about betrayal “*and there’s blood on my hands,/ your blood staining my dreams-*” and stresses the juxtaposition between the two.

The fourth stanza focuses solely on the theme of betrayal and heartbreak, while mentioning a thousand universes, that echoes the existence of the multiverse in canon. While this figure of many universes is not exclusive to texts about fandoms that include multiple universes, the reference is made more poignant by the focus the MCU has on the plurality of the universe within its storyline.

The fifth stanza specifically names love, and compares the affection Steve feels for Tony to a soldier and his home, a mother and her child, the earth and gravity, liars and sin, demons and heaven , all to express the complexity of the feelings he has for Tony, and ends with an “*I loved you*” that is echoed by a more present “*(I love you).*”

Stanza number six exposes hesitation and distance, with letters never sent away, and a tower too tall for the love interest’s too-low kingdom.

Stanza number seven expresses pain, again using water-fire symbolism with “*fire waterfalls on my lashes -*”, and the next stanza delves into the loneliness the author voice is feeling, jumping to antithesis “*you’re the peace in my war,/you’re the fight of my life,/you hurt like a missing limb/(I’m missing a heart).*” These comparisons also support canon moments. The phrase “peace in my war” refers to Tony’s goal of peace to contrast with the fighting-ridden life that Steve has experienced as Captain America, being frozen during a mission and immediately jumping to save the world after being defrosted. The “fight of my life” line resonates the popular romantic phrase “love of my life” that many couples feel about their significant others, but by writing fight instead of love, the image

that it evokes is that of a violent relationship, not necessarily between the people, but against the world, and it also evokes a will to keep going despite the circumstances that have affected the characters, how the feelings have persisted in staying with the loved one. *You hurt like a missing limb* is a reference to Bucky Barnes, over who Steve and Tony had the falling out in *Civil War* (2015) that keeps being referenced in the poem. By using the missing limb as a literary device, the author is comparing the love between Steve and Bucky, that the author seems to downplay, since Bucky is missing an arm but, according to the author voice, Steve feels like, without Tony, he is missing a heart, an organ associated with love and more significant than an arm.

The ninth stanza, talks about the external difficulties they have suffered, again mentioning the universe, and making them to be pieces being moved by the whims of the universe, while pleading him to stay and keep trying and, in the next line, to leave him.

The tenth stanza references the many time travels that they have taken during *Endgame* “*I’ve seen it all,/all the what-ifs, the first meetings, the regrets,*” and describing the impact this has had on them as Tony being Steve’s “*all too familiar ghost/and most painful heartache*” in a tragic voice, that follows in the next stanza where the similes between the two characters are again described in the form of antitheses: rust on a ring, a cure to a wound, the bullet to a scheme, and the perceived unreciprocity of the relationship “*you’re the love of my life/I’m the bane of your existence*”, which is also canon-supported by the rancor that Tony expresses to Steve due to his father having a higher regard for Steve than for his own son, who was constantly compared to the super-soldier and made to feel lesser than.

Stanza number twelve shows the division between what the author voice feels and does; while his lips break in silent prayers that his loved one will never hear, his fists break against his armour, together with the author voice’s heart, that hurts at this disconnection

between feelings and actions on both sides. There is another reference to Bucky Barnes and his fall to assumed death in *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2012), and this parallelism again applied to Tony makes the relationship with Tony to be more important to Steve than that with Bucky. Such jabs to the writer's NOTP (not one true pairing, that is, a romantic pairing they do not support) shows internal ship (short for relationship) wars within the fandom, in this case, between the two most popular ships involving Steve Rogers, Stucky (Steve Rogers/Bucky Barnes) and Stony (Steve Rogers/Tony Stark), and shows the layers of subtext involved in fanfics; to an outsider, these lines may not have an ulterior meaning, and just add to the vibe of the poem, but to a reader knowledgeable in pairings, these parallelisms denote at least, awareness, and at most, an attack at other ships with this character.

The thirteenth stanza is, arguably, the most hopeful one in the poem, but also the most defeatist. Its start with "*as time flies,/we'll meet again*", is followed by "*as ages end, we'll die again,/worlds apart, I feel your pain,/centuries away, my love is still in vain*". The time frames reference the time travel in canon and the far away points of birth of both—Steve's 1910s and Tony's 1970s, and the part that says *worlds apart* references their being separate, Steve on earth and Tony in Titan, during the Snap that erases half of the population of the universe. None of them are taken in this event, and they are both left to mourn in their own terms, separate from each other, since, historically, being around the other in moments of distress has not helped their relationship in canon, as can be seen in *Avengers*, *Age of Ultron*, and *Infiniy war*. Therefore, the distance between them is not only physical, but also temporal both in the literal and the literary senses.

The last stanza expresses the grief that Steve feels as he comes to terms with the fact that Tony will not be his and he has no claim to him ("*you weren't mine to keep, you weren't mine to lose, [...] and yet you're still noy mine to mourn*"). This fact, however, cannot

stop him from mourning the what-could-have-been in their relationship (“*the house by the edge of the lake/should have been ours ...*”), and most importantly, the history that made them like this.

Since there is no capitalisation or conventional punctuation such as a period at the end of a sentence, the only way to divide the poem is by the line jumps that form the stanzas, which makes it complicated to incorporate clearly into analytic text; nevertheless by using cursive and quotation marks I have made it clearer for this text.

Overall, this piece focuses heavily on the expression of feelings as a way to fix the canon as opposed to describing or ignoring different scenarios from the canon or the fan texts, filling the gaps of a character that the author feels has been neglected by the writers.

Collecting Kisses by inkinmyheartandonthepage

Collecting kisses is a 2964-word post-canon fix-it one-shot that focuses on the Stark family relationships. It is part of a collection named *Irondad and his Iron kids*, but is a standalone fic and not part of a series. In this piece, the events of *Endgame* still happen, but instead of dying, Tony loses the arm he used to snap the gauntlet in the movie. The fic is told from Morgan’s point of view, and rationalizes the events through the mind of a five-year-old, who thinks that, in the same way her parents giving her kisses when she hurts herself make her feel better, kisses will help his dad get better soon. This fic is a great example of the intertextuality that exists within fandom creators, since it is inspired by a comic by user *sreppub* on Tumblr, attached below as retrieved from the blog of the artist.



Fig 1. Comic that inspired *Collecting Kisses* by author Sreppub, originally posted at <https://sreppub.tumblr.com/post/185242245257/happy-birthday-tony-3-your-gift-from-morgan-and>.

This fic also explores the relationship between Peter Parker and Tony Stark, expanding the canon plot point that Tony created time travel after looking at a picture of Peter and missing him. Here we see this relationship developed in the hospital, making it paternal and integrating him into the family as Morgan's *big brother*. The reencounter at the hospital is also orchestrated by Morgan, since Peter had visited Tony at the hospital "sneaking by when Tony was asleep", and thus they had not had a proper reunion, which is described in here, and it involves crying and catharsis on both parts. In this happy note, the fic ends discharging Tony from the hospital and opening the door to hope.

home with you by *natalie_nebula*

home with you, together with *little hands, reaching forward*, is part of the *weekend memories* collection by author *natalie_nebula*. The whole collection these two works belong to is not part of this corpus due to the specifications I placed during the methodology (mainly length-wise, but also not being one of the first results for the search of a corpus), but I will talk about the *weekend memories* collection to better contextualize this text. *Weekend memories* is an eight-part fic collection that stems from a fic called A

day in the life of Steve Rogers. Despite belonging to the same AU, the author states in every piece that each fic can be read as a standalone if desired. This collection follows Steve Rogers and how he navigates his relationship with Bucky Barnes in the aftermath of *Endgame*, and follows them through domestic moments, dates, coming out to the public and making major life decisions.

In this particular fic, a retired Steve that does not have the supersoldier serum (how this happened is unexplained in the text) falls ill at the same time a terrorist attack keeps Bucky, who is still a superhero, busy trying to stabilize the country. This fic follows Steve through a doctor's appointment and a day of stubbornness defiance of his being sick until he passes out at home. He wakes up later to Bucky taking care of him and evolves into a fluffy scene in which they have a bath, eat dinner and partake in domestic activities until sleep. This piece is a prime example of a trope called *sickfic*. In it, one character falls ill and another character takes care of them. It is often a *fluff piece* and involves emotional vulnerability between the characters. In this case, the trope is part of a larger AU, so the revelation of romantic feelings is not the goal, but it serves for the characters to deepen their expressed affection to each other, and is just another instance of domestic life in a couple that, in canon, have been the target of more action-packed and harsh actions. This tendency to show characters from harsh canons in fluffy scenarios and vice versa, to put characters from low-stakes feel-good media in angsty, dark or high-stakes fics is a widespread tendency that I have mentioned it myself in this thesis, and it would be interesting to explore in another paper, because the literary implications are very interesting to me. Regretfully, I do not have the space or the time to delve into it in this paper, so it will remain, for now, as a suggestion for future researchers, developed in the conclusions among other research avenues.

I will see them when I leave here by ageofgeek

This canon divergent gen piece divides 7879 words into *Chapter 1* and *Coda*, and shows Tony Stark after snapping the gauntlet and dying in a sort of liminal state between life and death. This space takes the shape of the cave in which he was kidnapped and became Iron Man in the 2008 film of the same name. There, he meets a character who was also present there and who helped him escape but was killed during the event, Ho Yinsen. In conversation with him, Tony comes to terms with his death and acknowledges the personal growth he has experienced during the past fifteen years. Parallely, in the land of the living, Steve Rogers refuses to accept his friend's death and wills the infinity stones that took Tony away to bring him back from the dead through sheer willpower alone. While this may be regarded as a *Deus Ex Machina*, it forces Steve to reflect as well on the lives lost during the way and make peace with them.

This fic, while also “fixing” the result of the saga, focuses more on the feelings the text evokes. One of the aforementioned critiques to the creators' decision to kill off Tony Stark is that it felt pointlessly cruel to kill off a main character after a character arc such as his, in a point in time where he had a family and reasons to live, while not discussing his evolution further than gadget-wise. While the canon paints Tony's sacrifice at the end of Endgame as a noble thing, many fans felt it did not make sense for a man as smart as Tony to take the self-destructive non-denominational way out when, canonically, other characters present could have done the same thing without dying.

Yinsen making Tony confront his family missing him makes him yearn for a life with them, in which they do not have to mourn him and in which they can finally have what they fought for—a happy ever after, or, rather, a happy-for-as-long-as-possible. The parallels he thinks about regarding his dead-too-soon father and him, having died and left his daughter behind seem to be the tipping point for him (“*He had always tried to be*

better to Morgan than Howard had been to him. He had always told Morgan that he loved her, and he always tried to support her and encourage her. But if he stayed dead...how different would he and Howard be? Yeah, Morgan would know for sure that her dad had loved her, but it wouldn't change the fact that he was gone.”), as they are joined by thoughts regarding Peter Parker, in which the fanon *Paterno-filial* relationship between them is once again highlighted. Tony's turbulent relationship with his father dictates throughout the saga his feelings towards children and fellow teammates, a behaviour visible in *Captain America: Civil War*, *Ironman 3* and *Endgame* in his interactions with Peter and Harley. It is no surprise then, that the quote becomes his turning point for wanting to stay alive. While his character arc was about him becoming more altruistic, thoughtful and overall a hero, this last sacrifice is viewed in the fandom as an overkill for shock value. This fic corrects that, allowing Tony to be a bit selfish again after having saved the world, showing him that he does not owe the world his life after all he has done, and it drives the point home by having a character that saw his transformation begin, and died for it, be the one to give him permission to be alive again.

I'll Make Peace With Time by akasharpiegirl

This 1962-word one-shot, which is part of a series, is a post-canon fix-it that centers around a non-romantic relationship. Such fics are archived under Gen, meaning that the characters the fic explores do not focus on romantic relationships, but rather explore familial, platonic relationships, or none at all. In this case, the relationship is familial between Tony Stark, his wife Pepper Potts, their daughter Morgan Stark and fandom-assigned adopted son Peter Parker. This bit of fanon lore, Tony Stark being Peter Parker's father figure, comes from the movie *Spider-man: Homecoming*, in which their relationship as mentor and mentee, protector and ward, intern and boss, was an important plot point that fan writers chose to develop thoroughly in fic. The Tag "*Iron Dad & Spider*

Son” and other associated tags such as “*Tony Stark Acting as Peter Parker’s Parental Figure*” are used to tag such fics, and have over 20000 entries on AO3. In this specific fic, set several years after the events of Endgame, the reader meets a teenage Morgan Stark (who was a five-year-old during the events of Endgame) intent on bringing her father back from the dead. The fic describes Morgan going back in time (and during it, she mindlessly calls Peter her brother, cementing the notion that they have a familial bond in this fic) and telling her father what to do so as to not die, causing him to be alive when she comes back to 2032.

This work’s author’s notes also mention reader interactions with the author, mainly, to jokingly say “Y’all all bullied me into making this into a series, so here is the second part of my new series: “I Won’t Leave What Is Lost Behind”, which was preceded by “Vivid Dreams and Worst Case Scenarios”. Please read the previous part if you haven’t already.” (akasharpiegirl, 2020).

Lake house stay by Skyrocket25

Skyrocket25’s *Lake house stay* is a 1515-word one-shot that focuses on the familial relationships between Tony Stark and Morgan Stark and Peter Parker. It is part of a collection called *Iron Man*, but not part of a series. The author mentions in the tags that the fic has not been *Beta Read*, that is, that is has not gone through a process of edition and revision by another person, and shows their rejection of the last instalment of the Infinity saga with the tags “*End Game fix it*”, “*fix it*” and “*game and EndGame? we don’t know her*”. In the author’s notes, the author asks for ideas to write more small pieces like this and encourages the readers to leave their thoughts in the comments, asking for the intercommunication that makes fanfic a collective medium.

This fluff piece starts with Tony Stark reflecting on the five years since the Snap and the way his feelings regarding Peter had changed with the years. The evolution of his grief is what starts this fic, putting it in context in the untold scenes of the canon such as Morgan's birth, which is a catalyst for Tony to accept that Peter is gone. He thinks of Peter as his daughter's big brother, feeling like he was a son to him, but it is not until Steve shows up at the start of *Endgame* to put the events of the movie in motion that he allows himself to hope that he can get Peter back. Then, Tony is afraid that this hope is going to lead him back to a path of suffering, but seeing the picture of him and Peter together brings him into the action, just as in the movie, describing the moment like this: "if only he hadn't of seen [sic] that picture of peter he wouldn't have... he would have stayed how he was only half a man, living for his daughter and his wife. What a horrible decision that would have been." The actions of *Endgame* are here omitted and the text jumps to a the moment where a very much alive Tony smiles looking at his children sleeping in his arms. This fic, as with others in this corpus, depicts Tony as alive but disabled, missing the arm he used to snap half the universe back to life. This approach does not ignore Tony's sacrificial nature, but does not let him pay the ultimate price for it either. He recognizes in this story that his sacrifice was completely worth it to bring Peter back, but does not mention death as an option in the mix, which is something other fics do as a way to say "how lucky this did not happen!" in direct defiance to canon. Tony's solution to him and Peter's *Aunt May* wanting to keep the boy close is to build them a house next to their lakeside home, at least until he grows up and goes off to college. His reaction to that thought tells the reader that Tony fully considers Peter to be his son, exhibiting thoughts proper of a parent facing the future independence of their son, cementing the *Irondad* and *Spiderson* relationship that is the centre of many fics in the fandom. The line "*It's okay, dad*" that Peter utters in response to Tony squeezing his children harder while thinking about the future shows this

feeling of having become family to be mutual, and the “*you can rest now*” also said by Peter parallels Pepper saying the same to Tony in canon after snapping the gauntlet and dying for his ideals, leaving behind the family that he was so decided to protect and keep with him at all costs.

little hands, reaching forward by natalie_nebula

little hands, reaching forward is a 4165-word one-shot that belongs to the series “*weekend memories*,” in which the author develops the universe created in their other work “*A day in the life of Steve Rogers*,” which has been discussed here under *home with you*.

The reason why this fic is featured and not the original one “*A day in the life of Steve Rogers*” is because this one was listed in the results of the search for the corpus, while the original was not. I find relevant to mention the origin of this AU, but following the stipulations I set for this corpus I will focus on the sequel. This post-canon fix-it is Stucky (Steve Rogers and James “Bucky” Barnes) centric, and it describes “After the events of Endgame, Steve is retired, in a relationship with Bucky, and spending his time volunteering as an art teacher, when one day he is very rudely interrupted by his friends and by newfound realizations.” (natalie_nebula, 2019). His new job as an art teacher makes Steve start considering having children with Bucky, and this fic explores how he came to this realization and how he communicates this to Bucky.

This fic is also interesting to this paper because it shows the conversation between the writer and the reader. The author herself dedicates a paragraph to talk about how these interactions were crucial in her writing more:

“Part of what motivated me to write and post this so suddenly was reading comments and getting kudos in my inbox from all of you guys, even though that original fic was posted months ago. It really boosts my creative spirit and I can’t tell

you how much I appreciate feedback! I try to respond to all the comments that come in right after I post and even if I don't respond I do read and love all of them. Also, if you have any suggestions for scenarios to write in future fics in this universe, please let me know.” (natalie_nebula, 2019).

As one can see, the focus on feedback is highlighting the nature of the gift-economy so prevalent in fan circles. Since, legally, fans cannot make money from fan works due to copyright laws, they get “paid” in feedback and exposure, and they are okay with it due to the non-profit nature of the activity.

Meet you up there (where the path runs straight and high) by bluesweatshirt

This 31635-word fic is a one-chapter post-canon fix that focuses on the familial relationship between Peter Parker and Tony Stark. It is a part of collections *Irondad_and_Spideyson*, *Irondad Creators Awards 2022*, *Marvel(ous) Universe*, and *Irondad Creator Awards 2023*. While the work is not divided formally by chapters, the changes in scene, both temporary and spatial, are marked by the use of asterisks between scenes (***) , which allows the action to have a clear distinction between scenes without dividing the text.

The author's notes have many interesting data about the story and fandom culture etiquette can be inferred from it. The first note is a warning that “*this fic DOES CONTAIN CHARACTER DEATH.*” However, for those who want to avoid spoilers, the author says who dies at the *End Notes*, so that if someone wants to know more they have to manually scroll to the end and thus there are no accidental spoilers on their part. The tags already mentioned this death (“*someone dies (but it's not Peter or Tony), Read the notes for more info*”). In said end notes, the author discusses the general reluctance by authors to kill characters in fic, and as this corpus has shown, this is a visible trend. After all, “*everyone*

lives” and “[*character*] *doesn't die*” are common among fix-its, and I have discussed how many writers prefer to disable Tony instead of *killing* him like in canon or retire Steve instead of making him follow his canon actions. The author also mentions the issue of characters willing to sacrifice themselves for someone else, even though they do not consider it to be suicidal ideation, but they are aware that it may be triggering to some audiences and therefore there is a warning. Lastly, the author also claims no responsibility for accuracy to canon, and asks the readers to “please suspend your disbelief 😊.”

This shows three important facets of fanfiction: while it is assumed that readers will be familiar with the canon, it does not mean that everyone wants to know what happens in the fic, so proper tagging of fics is necessary. The author can share as much as they want in the tags, but it is polite to allow the reader to choose how much they want to know about a fic before reading, giving the option to know the story ends if they wish so separate from the natural reading path so that there are no accidental spoilers. The end notes also contain some thoughts that may have been too explicit spoiler-wise for the author’s notes, placed at the start of the work. The aforementioned musing about reluctance to kill characters is followed by the willingness to explore the ending of the story from another point of view in a future work, “unless someone hates me [sic] for killing Steve, in which I’ll [sic] probably let this fic be a standalone lol” (*bluesweatshirt*). Upon looking at the author’s AO3 page, it appears there was not enough interaction from fans, or there was a lot of hate regarding the piece, because the possible fic has not been posted as of the completion of this thesis.

It is also expected from the author to give clear warnings, both for content and for theme. In some dark circles (dark here refers to adult, heavy or possibly triggering themes such as violence, gore, sexual violence, death or similar) this is sometimes referred to as “*Dead Dove: Do Not Eat*”, a phrase that comes from the show *Arrested Development*, in which

a character opens a paper bag labelled "DEAD DOVE DO NOT EAT" and, upon discovering that there is a dead dove inside the bag, says, deadpan, "I don't know what I expected." (Fanlore). Tumblr user *mostlyvalid* explains it by saying that:

“The “Dead Dove: Do Not Eat” tag would essentially be a “what it says on the tin” metatag, indicating “you see the tropes and concepts tagged here? they are going to appear in this fic. exactly as said. there will not necessarily be any subversion, authorial commentary condemning problematic aspects, or meditation on potential harm. this fic contains dead dove. if you proceed, you should expect to encounter it.””

The last courtesy is to announce possible accidental discrepancies with the canon, done to protect the author from readers commenting “This actually does not work like that!” or calling out the author similarly, but also informing the reader that some suspension of disbelief may be needed. In genres where the canon is disregarded this may not be as important as with other genres, but the addition by the author here shows they are well versed in other genres where this is standard issue. Therefore, this author shows, through their notes, that they are a well-integrated part of the writing community and that they take the time to consider the implications their fic may have in the readers.

In this fic, Peter and his newfound family composed of Pepper and Morgan, together with the remaining avengers and his Aunt May deal with the grief of having lost Tony, a mentor almost-paternal figure and a leader respectively. While Peter does want to bring Tony back and hatches a plan to do so together with Harley, a kid his age who is in the same situation as him regarding Tony, this does not happen until halfway through, and even when it does, this is not the narrative of the piece—the focus on the process of grieving and healing takes the spotlight continuously.

This is not the only fic in this corpus that focuses on Peter and Tony's relationship, but there are three instances that make this one stand out. First of all, the proportional length of this piece allows the author to develop the concept of loss further; while shorter pieces such as *lake house stay* choose to focus more on the alive relationship between the characters and only mentions grief briefly, this one spends a good portion of it exploring the feelings of the main characters, even mentioning it in a separate tag "*Grief/Mourning*". The vivacity and volatility of the feelings described suggests that the author is familiar with grief themselves, and that lends authenticity to the story, describing the sadness of loss, but also the anger, the bargaining and acceptance. I will talk point out some examples of all of these below. Secondly, this fic pays attention to the Spider-man lore outside of the MCU. Spider-man's origin story is detonated by the death of Peter's Uncle Ben, a father figure that took him in when his parents died, and that famously said "*With great power comes great responsibility*" to a Peter who then accepted to take the mantle of superhero. In its inclusion of Spider-man in the MCU Marvel chose to not to mention *Uncle Ben* by name, with Kevin Feige justifying it in an interview with *Screen Crush* like so:

"Does this Spider-Man have an Uncle Ben? Or had an Uncle Ben?"

I love that you asked the question that way. [long pause] The answer is we allow the audience to bring in what they know about Spider-Man and plug it in themselves. What really happened, how it really happened? He got bit by a spider, he was talking to Ned about it. "Spider's dead, Ned." He tries to start to tell the story to Tony Stark in Civil War.

Right, and Tony shuts him down."

With five films dealing with Peter's backstory, it is understandable that Marvel did not feel necessary to re-introduce the same storyline and instead adapt it to the new project where Spider-man has a place. Due to this omission, the choice by *bluesweatshirt* to include this backstory is pointed and adds another layer to the story. Without Ben's inclusion Peter would "only" lose one parental figure, which, if one chooses to focus solely on the MCU canon, is bad enough, but with the addition of a past event that brought the same emotions to the surface once again, the depth of Peter's grief is allowed to spiral, even more so when the reader notices Peter feels responsible for both deaths. With this context, it feels natural that Peter wants to save Tony as a way to make up for the guilt he feels; he may have not been able to save Uncle Ben, but he is going to try his hardest to get Tony back after he chose to die for him.

The many mentions to Ben are kickstarted in the second scene of the fic. In it, we are shown the aftermath of a mission gone wrong in which Peter is too shocked to do anything and so Tony has to help him, an action that Peter feels "*Ben would have done, if he'd lived to see Peter's Spider-Man days.*" During this scene we see the first instance of guilt that Peter feels regarding the death of his father figures, but it will not be the last; this guilt is a motif in this fic and a common thought for children experiencing loss of a parental figure, and will be explored further down. The fact that Peter has this conversation with another father figure that will, eventually, die as well and elicit those feelings again feel prophetic, and it is a great use of foreshadowing. Due to his erasure from canon, the author has to make a point to include Aunt May (Ben's wife)'s canon relationship with Happy Hogan, head of security for Tony, and this is done in a scene where Peter thinks that, while Ben and Happy were very different, they both made May happy, and at the core, they were very similar.

The trauma associated with Ben rarely comes alone; Peter does not compare his feelings for his father figures, but when one appears the others inevitably dogpile on top of the others due to the emotional similarities he sees. After all, it is not one, or even two, but “three men who would never see Peter go to college or get married or have his own children.” I want to point out the “his own” in this sentence, because it implies that Peter was like a son to all three of the men that he misses (his father, Uncle Ben and Tony), and that he would have liked for them to be there when he has children himself.

There is an aspect of grief that is rarely portrayed, and if it is, it is misrepresented, and that is the anger that grief sometimes brings with it. One can see some instances in this fic, such as in the training scene with Steve Rogers in which Peter has an intrusive thought to hit Steve’s nose with his knee, to which he is both surprised and disgusted to have this reaction. Luckily, he is able to get away from the thought and stop before any damage is done. Happy talks about this anger Peter is feeling, and he tells Peter that, while it is okay to feel angry, he must not let it turn him bitter. Peter should, he says, “do whatever you can to make the situation bearable for yourself.” The next instance appears when, after witnessing a family reunite while on patrol, Peter has what seems to be an anxiety attack, and the superhero suit that Tony had made for him suggests calling Tony, an outdated suggestion that reminds him that Tony is gone and cannot reach him, to which he “lets out a furious scream, ripping his mask off” and thinks “it’s not fair! It’s not... it’s not fair.”

Circling back to the guilt surrounding Peter’s loss, it is clear he feels guilty for both Ben and Tony’s death. Ben’s circumstance has been addressed above, so now I am going to talk about Tony’s case. It is canon that Tony decided to attempt time travel to fix the Snap after looking at a picture of him and Peter, and the author chose to include that and use it to explore the guilt that Peter may feel in canon. While Pepper agrees with him living

with her and Morgan and accepts him wholeheartedly, Peter still feels the need to make himself small around her, to help around the house and to babysit Morgan so that she does not cast him away, because he feels she blames him for her husband's death. This could not be further from the truth, and the scene in which Pepper catches Peter sleeping in Tony's lab explores this. Peter expects her to be mad at him for "invading her dead husband's space", which he sees as an extension of her feeling Tony's death was his fault. Even when she makes it clear she only blames Thanos for Tony's death, he does not believe her until she mentions that Tony considered him (and Harley) as part of his children, and that thanks to him he was able to feel like he deserved being a father. Guilt is addressed for the last time in the last scene of the fic. In it, Peter asks Tony if he thinks he deserves to have him back and be happy again, to which Tony responds "well, you've had a tough go of it, kid. You've gotten used to losing people. But take it from someone who has a guilt complex to top all other guilt complexes—it was never your fault that your parents or Ben or I died.", to which Peter agrees to seek therapy to deal with the feeling.

Morgan's healing journey works both as a parallel of young Peter grieving both his dad and Uncle Ben and makes Peter have to focus on dealing with an emotional dependent such as a younger sibling as a side-task of the grieving process that he has not encountered before, having been an only child. This sibling dynamic helps Peter deal with past and present trauma. His insight from his past makes him understand what Morgan is feeling:

"Morgan was one of the only things that kept him going after Mr. Stark's death. Kids grieved differently; Peter knew that from firsthand experience. Morgan was sad and she missed her dad every single day, but she still wanted to play. She still needed to be loved and looked after. [...] it felt like one final gift from Tony.

Someone who needs Peter. Someone Peter could take care of, someone to distract him from the gnawing hole in his chest”.

His experiences make him be very gentle with her, helping her understand and process her emotions “Are we going to be big sad forever, Petey?” “well, we’re always going to be big sad sometimes, because we love Dad and we miss him. But you’ll start being happy again too. And it might be sooner than you think” and calming her when she is upset.

The author also uses popular culture to explore Peter’s journey, such as the scene where he watches *The Land Before Time* with Morgan, or him discovering a copy of *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy that Tony had heavily perused. There are many parallels between the characters in *The Road* and the characters in the fic, both following a father and son duo in which the father ends up dying; the book clearly resonates with Peter: “[Peter] would read a few pages and then look away, feeling his sadness wrapping around him like a physical thing, so thick and suffocating that he almost couldn’t breathe. But every time he tried to set the book aside, something about it drew him back in.”, from the paterno-filial relationship, the father dying to the son being taken in by a group of benevolent refugees. While Peter’s story does not end at that point in this fic, it affects him because he does not know how his story is going to end; he thinks the boy and him are destined for the same end, with the group that welcomes them, but without a dad. His identifying directly with the son in the story brings him to the realisation that he sees Tony as a father, an evolution from his childhood hero status to mentor-mentee, to them watching movies and eating pizza together. This evolution is better explained by Peter’s realisation that while “Mr. Stark took care of Spider.Man—patched him up when he was injured after patrol, equipped his suit with a ridiculous amount of safety features—[...] he also took care of Peter Parker”.

With the heavy themes covered, there are some minor points in this fic that are worthy of mention. The first one is the headcanon, so extended that at this point it is considered fanon that Tony is of Italian descent through Maria Stark, his mother, despite it not being mentioned anywhere in canon sources except an obscure comic (Leishman), with fans wondering about the origin: “is Maria Stark canon-Italian or is this another Clint-In-The-Vents #I’m reading my own fics and I always mention she’s Italian #but I think I get that from other fics I have no idea if that’s real or not” (sailorslowbro, 2020).

This piece of fanon, usually seen in fics through Maria calling Tony *bambino*, child in Italian, has two appearances here, in the scene where Peter remembers Tony teaching him how to make pasta from an Italian cookbook that he presumes to have belonged to Maria Stark, and when Tony calls Peter *bambino* after he is resurrected in *Voromir*, a parallel from other fics in which Tony is in the receiving end of the *bambino*. This serves to establish a generational mark of affection, indirectly establishing Peter as Tony’s child.

The second and last point is the disappearance of the tension between Tony and Bucky. While in the canon Tony is overtly trying to kill Bucky due to his involvement in Tony’s parents’ death, this fic shows Tony willing to help Bucky deal with the grief of losing Steve. The justification for this complete reversal of opinion is time. “Germany really had been a lifetime ago, it seemed,” Peter reflects upon Tony’s offering.

our love lasts so long by blob_blob

our love lasts so long is a canon-divergent 4603-word standalone Stucky-centric one-shot that features a conversation in which Bucky asks Steve why he did not go back in time to be with Peggy, as opposed to what happened in canon, because the author feels that “*steve*

going back in time is stupid,” a sentiment reiterated in the summary, where the author describes the plot like this:

“[...] *Or: Bucky doesn't understand why Steve wouldn't have used the time travel as an opportunity to live out his life with Peggy (like the idiot movie writers thought, although at least Bucky has the excuse of insecurity), but since the thought literally never crossed Steve's mind and also Bucky is very vague, Steve misunderstands the question and thinks he's asking if he went to visit his mother. So his reasons not to are basically "I didn't want to mess with time more than I had to and also how would I explain that to her" and Bucky is hurt because he thinks that means Steve would have ditched him for Peggy if he could have which is . . . not the case.*”

The author also mentions in the author's notes that they got the idea of Steve wanting to visit his mother from fellow fic writer *papersdontsellthemselves's* “*dance before death*.”

This conversation happens months after a version of Endgame where Steve did not return to the past to live his life with Peggy Carter, but comes back to the present to his family, and becomes a love confession in which the characters express their feelings for each other. Bucky is very insecure about Steve's feelings for him, missing many clues that Steve reciprocates him. A similar trope to this one, dubbed *Idiots to Lovers* depicts the getting together of two characters that are unaware of the fact that their pinning for the other is very much mutual, and the realisation of this is the principal plot point of the fic. In this case, that trope is only fifty percent true; one of the characters, Bucky, is unaware of Steve's love for him. Does that make him an *idiot* according to the trope? While it may sound similar enough, this is not the case—here, the unawareness stems from insecurity and fear of rejection, which is consistent with a character born during the early twentieth

century. Bucky's insecurity makes him ask, very vaguely, as if afraid of mentioning her name, why Steve did not go back in time to Peggy Carter, his first love, and someone Bucky considers the winner of Steve's affection against whom he is nothing more than a consolation prize. This lack of specification regarding the woman he would go back to the past for makes Steve, who does not read romantic angst into the loaded question, think that Bucky is talking about his mother, Sarah Rogers, who died when the two soldiers were young. So, while Steve is reminiscing about his mother, Bucky feels like a backup option, thinking that the only reason Steve did not go back to Peggy was the difficulty to explain time travel and not because he chose to come back to Bucky, which he feels arrogant for hoping was the case. While Steve elaborates, Bucky is stuck in the rejection he feels.

Coupled with this, he feels that Steve cannot see him without thinking about all the horrible things Bucky was forced to do as the Winter Soldier, and that he pities him, and is convinced that Steve does not love him like he does, and chooses to suppress his feelings to keep the friendship (*"he knew Steve didn't love him that way. He'd known for as long as he'd known he loved Steve that way. He'd wondered, sometimes, when Steve seemed uninterested in the dates Bucky set up for him, but he'd always known it was wishful thinking"*). Through this and other clues, the reader can see that the feelings Steve has match those of Bucky's, which cements the knowledge the reader has when choosing to read this fic: that this is a Stucky fic with a happy ending.

Choosing to read a tale of which one already knows the ending seems weird to people who abhor spoilers and are more interested in the element of surprise in fiction rather than the way that brings the characters from the start to the end of the story. This phenomenon is very minoritarian in fanfiction. The intentionality of the choice to read fics, looking for something that the canon does not have, and knowing what that missing piece is, makes

the reader know what they are seeking in fanfiction, and thus, the element of surprise loses value against the wishes of the fan to see the canonical universe expanded through the hands of fans. Therefore, the development of characters, actions and relationships take precedence over cheap jump scares and plot twists that “original” fiction may recur to in order to shock and engage the audience. “original” media has the challenge of having to grab the viewer’s attention and keep it, while fanfiction does not have that crutch; its readers are there by their own free will, and can dedicate more emotional involvement to the characters. Another point that helps with this more relaxed approach to fanfiction is the previous knowledge of the canon. “Original” media has to dedicate a certain amount of time to situate the viewers into the world where the action takes place, while in fanfiction any addition to the canon is either distinctive, accumulative, or transcendent, and therefore, enriches the story on a higher level than the canon can afford.

The fact that the reader knows (or, suspects) the ending does not prevent the author from developing the story however they want. Only the start and the end are set, but between these two points a lot of things can change and a lot of things can go wrong. In this fic, despite knowing that they characters get together, there is a good deal of angst brought by the misunderstanding that detonates the action, and so the reader, apart from getting the happy ending they are reading the fic for, get a healthy dose of angst that furthers the plot.

When the point of view is reversed further in the text, the suspicions the reader had about the reciprocity of Steve’s feelings are confirmed by Steve thinking that maybe Bucky figured out that Steve has romantic feelings for him, but does not seek clarification in the matter, choosing a tense peace over a possibly devastating confrontation. Their dance around their feelings beats to the drum of their nightmares. Seeking each other after nightmares was something they did previous to the half-conversation, but this stopped after

it, and Steve does not understand why, and the first time they it happens after the deed is awkward, but it causes another conversation, this one about all the things left unsaid and unclarified. They discover they were talking about different past women in the first conversation, and when the misunderstanding is clarified, it leaves space for them to confess to feelings that are more corresponded than either of them thought. Steve reaffirms Bucky as his first choice (“why would you possibly think I’d go back to Peggy? I’ve—I’ve got you. I wouldn’t just leave you. I couldn’t”) and reveals his love for him. The ending shows them lying in bed, just like at the start, but this time they are together, happy, content, and secure.

so close to reaching that famous happy end by dragongirlG

dragongirlG’s so close to reaching that famous happy end is a 2555word parallel and post-canon fix it focused on Stucky. I am using parallel and post-canon to refer to the fact that some events detailed happen before the events of *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2012), and while it describes some canon events during *Avengers: Endgame*, the focus is placed after these events, so it puts canon in a parenthesis and describes the before and after. This fic features tropes such as Soulmates and impersonation, and it was written as an entry to the *Stucky Secret Santa Bingo 2019* challenge, filling the square *grief/mourning*. Despite the topic, it has a happy ending in which another character that dies in canon, Natasha Romanoff, comes back alive with Steve.

In this fic, set in a *Soulmates AU*—an alternative universe in which soulmates are real and decided by fate— Steve and Bucky discover their soulmate bond on Steve’s eighteenth birthday, but they hide it due to fear of homophobia in their background: “Bucky let his parents, his sisters, his neighbors tease him about being a cad; better than being labelled a queer.” They do not spend much longer in that time period, however; the events of *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2012), through *Avengers: Endgame*

(2019) happen the same way as in canon without being delved into, and the action picks up when the Snap is reversed at the end of *Endgame*, when Bucky feels the soul bond break and is ignored by Steve. Through this heartbreak, he carries on, helping reconstruct the Avengers Compound and building a friendship with Sam until his birthday, when a very dishevelled Steve appears with Natasha, who everyone presumed dead, and explains that after the snap he had been trapped in another universe and had been replaced by a Skrull, an alien race with the ability to transform into any other creature first introduced in *Captain Marvel* (2019), citing that as a reason why the soul bond felt broken and the fake Steve had ignored Bucky after the battle. After this revelation, they renew their declaration of love for each other and proceed to walk into domestic life.

In this fic Bucky's insecurity is highlighted again, as it has been seen in other fics in this corpus. While this facet is supposed by canon, it is not as expanded as it is in fic. Fan writers use the insecurity that Bucky's past actions as the Winter Soldier and the aftermath of being a Hydra agent against his will as a vehicle to study remorse, retribution, forgiveness, love and hope in their fics, taking a passing plot-point that was meant to support Steve's character arc and forward the plot into an opportunity to focus on the humanity of heroes, villains, and the grey areas in between.

The World Will Always Welcome Lovers by andrastes_grace

The world will always welcome lovers is a canon-divergence 1528-word one-shot that is the first part of the collection "*Phase Four Reloaded*". Phase Four refers to the so called fourth phase of the Infinity Saga, which happens after the events of endgame, and the author has chosen to expand that universe by changing events from the previous phase, to which Endgame belongs to. As is the case with other texts from this corpus, I am analysing the specific piece and not the collection it belongs to based on the search results stipulated in the introduction of this thesis. Were I to have more space, I would gladly

analyse the collections as a whole and what the multiple texts add to their fellows, but since that is a task too long for a master's thesis, I choose to suggest further study on the subject by other scholars.

In this fic, Steve Rogers goes back to the past, as his canon-self does, but discloses his situation to Peggy Carter, his love interest in canon and the woman he went back to the past for. As discussed above, this character regression from Steve Rogers did not bode well with fans, and this fic explores the possibility of Peggy and Steve both accepting that even though they love each other, their time separated has made the different people that would not fit together anymore, because too much (time and progress) has happened for them to be on the same page (“eventually, the last note plays, the dance ends and it's years too late for both of them” (andrastes_grace, 2021)). The angst-filled conversation brings up many plot-points the creators of the canon chose to ignore, such as the fact that they gave Peggy Carter a healthy love interest at the end of her show *Agent Carter*, and the fact that Steve has seen Peggy die in the future and has mourned her and come to make peace with it. At the same time, Steve struggles to understand all the ages of Peggy in the woman in front of him:

“She was 21 when he first met her, 95 when he saw her last and is 35 as he stands with her now. [...] But there is a gap - 70 years and 12 years - and it's too much [...] He is 27, 105 and 39 years old and he is waiting for a woman who has been dead for 7 years (will die in 59 years) to make tea” (andrastes_grace, 2021).

Commonalities and conclusions of the analysis of the corpus

Works that focus on Steve tend to follow this pattern: focus in romantic relationship and its goal tends to be to change the romantic interest, be it Bucky Barnes or Tony Stark. This illustrates the author's need to address what they consider a primary fault in the

canon and a failing to the character, who they chose to develop according to earlier moments of his character arc, where his relationships in the present are more important to him and the times more according to his moral compass.

The works focused on Tony, however, follow a pattern in which the main focus is the familial relationships he misses on by dying and that the fanfic authors choose to recuperate by bringing him back from the dead. In this case, the main failing is with his fate in the universe, but a side argument can be made for his actions being out of character or discrepant with his character development.

These marked differences illustrate the existence of sub-fandoms within a wider fandom. Such divisions can be due to a preference over a certain character over another, over a disagreement with the validity of the canon or over romantic pairings. These microcosmoses display distinct preferences in narrative outcome, character appearances and simple attitude to the canon, as the corpus has exemplified. The extra layer of constraint is useful both in distinguishing fan opinions and fuelling creativity. I have established that the constraints that fanfiction as a genre is subjected to foster creativity, be it in the form (word limits, narrative voice, time used, belonging to a challenge) or, in this case, content. Going from the general Avengers fandom to the more specific sub-fandoms surrounding Tony Stark and his family or Steve Rogers and any of his romantic interests allows the author to ignore storylines and characters alien to these narrative niches and explore the characters in more depth. To further narrow the focus, the author chooses to focus on a specific moment in the timeline, either following its narrative cues or editing it to their liking, as is the case of the fix-it fic.

What all the texts show is a conversation between the canon and the fanbase, which creates their opinion and view regarding the events, and that evolves then within the fandom, in which writers take the cannon, common among all fans, and rewrite, edit or

expand the text from a fan perspective, for a fan audience that is in the same level as them. Therefore, a work that was first intended to travel downwards, from the hands of the primary authors onto a receiving mass that the primary authors hope will accept their creation without dispute and engage in affirmative action around it, goes through a transformative process in which the receiving mass becomes a creative agent that modifies the text and distributes it horizontally within fellow fans. This change of paradigm shows the democratization of this genre, described since the start of this paper, and brings the question of gender to the forefront. As discussed above, the divide between affirmative and transformative action are heavily gendered with males mainly falling under the first category and a female-coded base being a larger part of transformative action. Due to this, it is appropriate to conclude that most of the authors discussed here are not male. This assumption shown both the sexism that inhabits literary theory and proposes a reason why fanfiction has not been more widely studied in literary circles.

This brings me to the importance of the identity of the author in fanfiction, and by extension, in all literature. The authors may be shielded by usernames, and they can choose what to share about themselves, but by sharing their work they are showing other fans that they are a part of the same community, an equal. Despite their authorial identity, they are not placed above their audience like the primary authors are, and the readers react more positively to their context, because they feel that their views are more aligned than with the primary authors.

Extrapolating this to wider literature, it is safe to assume that the author will have both a conscious and unconscious footprint in their work. However, as fanfiction has shown, the understanding of the figure of the reader has evolved to make them participate in the authorial activity by choosing what aspects of the text they relate to or ignore. This evolution, described in Kristina Busse's *The Return of the Author*, opens the door for a

reevaluation of the author and reader figures within a post-structuralist lens. Since the concept of the author created for an industrialist, capitalistic society is evolving as exemplified in fanfiction, with it, the figure of the reader must evolve as well, and so must the reasons why literature is studied. Long gone are the days where the canon was the only body of text that matters, where the author was the utmost authority on a text, where the reader was merely a vessel for the knowledge the author wants to share. The power dynamics within literature are being shifted, and future academia must accept this change study it and take it for what it is: an expansion of knowledge and a mirror of society.

Conclusions

The findings of this thesis directly impact the concepts I set out to explore—author-readership and intertextuality. Thanks to the theoretical framework and the analysis of the chosen corpus, I have developed a more nuanced and updated conceptualisation of the central themes of the genre, positively impacting future understandings of fanfiction and its cultural context.

First of all, fanfiction redefines the concept of authorship; the post-structuralist idea of the death of the author (which claims that the author and their intentions regarding the text are erased and rewritten whenever a reader engages in the act of reading the text) is no longer relevant and needs to evolve. Thus, the concept of the return of the author, which explains how the ethos related to the figure the author curates for their audience is relevant to the text on account of power dynamics among canon and fanfic authors, championed by Kristina Busse, widens the conversation around the author. Busse's figure of the author is more visible in fanfiction than it is in other genres where the author can well be just a name on the cover of a book, as has been explored in this thesis, thanks to the inextricable para-text where the author directly addresses the reader and expects an answer. This circular communication has been aided by the internet, which allows fast communication all over the world. Such a revolution in literature must be considered when working with contemporary texts; it shapes the way the works are distributed and perceived, as I have explained in my analysis of the corpus and its intrinsic para-text. Each one of the texts, with their specificities, highlight different levels of interaction between the author and the fandom they belong to. A new figure must be considered when discussing authorship in fanfiction, and that is the reader-writer. Busse uses Fan Reader/Writer Interaction when discussing intracommunity communication, but I believe the concept Reader-Writer encompasses the two facets that interact with the texts within

the same person in a much clearer fashion, implying the existence of both rather than a case of either-or. This figure encompasses two facets of a fan, that of transformative creator of text and of a receiver, both of canon, other texts within the fandom and feedback. The post-structuralist notion that the reader is the true writer, created as the text is being read does not fit right either, because, as much as fans are aware of their contribution to the text, they do not claim to be the main creative force. Rather, the text is a collective project where different actors—the canon authors, fanfiction writers, and readers—contribute in varying amounts and therefore apply their understanding, created by their background, to a text that works as a mirror of the reader. This collectivisation has transformed the once lonely profession of the (female) writer described by Woolf into an action grounded in community, affording everyone involved an affinity and understanding previous centuries could only dream of.

The new considerations of what an author does and what they imply open the possibility of analysing previous texts under this light. Furthermore, a new figure refusing the before considered canon, as is the case of fix-it writers, challenges preestablished roles and redefines authority over the text, backed by the audience to which they belong as well. This way, the power imbalance is, if not completely fixed, restructured in a way that allows the canon to mean more to its audience.

The intrinsic intertextuality of fanfiction, once again present in the corpus, marks a distinction between fanfiction and more established genres. Given the genre's centrality, I believe that the definition of fanfiction must be updated to reflect that. The definition of fanfiction shared in the introduction of this thesis ("a work of fiction written by fans for other fans, taking a source text or a famous person as a point of departure" (Fanlore)), would benefit from evolving into "a work of fiction written by fans for other fans, taking a source text (referred to as canon) as a point of departure and developing aspects of it at

the discretion of the fanfic writer, dependant of its context and inviting replies from fellow fans”. This new definition reflects the importance of the role of the reader, as well as that of the fandom environment which fostered the creation of the fan text, and more adequately reflects the transformative nature of fanfiction as a collective act rather than following the classic mono-authorship model of paper literature, upheld by the affirmative model of fandom, which makes no space for the creation of a subversive text like fanfiction.

The collective nature of fan reading and writing gives a human perspective to media, as opposed to the capitalistic approach of corporations and their focus on net profits over story value. The dichotomy in values between the two groups, represented in writing by the authors of the canon and the authors of its fan texts—marketable vs. creative—is highlighted with the creation of fanfiction, and is especially relevant to fix-it fic, a genre outright defiant of robotic plot-twists and proponent of transforming a canon whose goal is to be profitable into an exploration of the possibilities the canon offers to those willing to develop them. The fans’ search for consistency and exploration in a text embody the very literary ideal of creation and sharing to understand the human condition. The original goal of the canon was a monetary rather than a literary one, which the fans chose to transform so that the needs of the reader are met in what can be considered the first case of humanisation of a text, contrasting the previous notion that it is a text that makes us human; Fanfiction affirms that what we do with the text is what defines us as humans, echoing Goetschell’s idea that the creation of narratives is tied to the human condition. When the canon creates a need in the fans, fix-it writers set things right and fulfil fan expectations.

During the writing of this thesis, I have found myself redefining once and again the limits of my topic, and each time it produced a narrowing of the texts, both the primary and

theoretical ones. In the same way constriction allows fanfiction to be developed, it aided me in successfully studying a passion of mine and producing this thesis. While the narrowing has been indispensable, it also forced me to exclude whole areas that are interesting to the development of literary fan studies. While I intend to dedicate my career to literary and fan studies, the field is so broad that any help is welcome. Therefore, I would like to suggest some avenues for researchers to tackle in the future.

The contrast between the genre of the canon and the fanfiction it produces (for instance, how bloody or dramatic media sees a surge of domestic AUs, coffeeshop AUs or other fluff-based prompts or the opposite, fandoms aimed at young audiences inspire fanfiction that deals with mature and heavy themes) would be interesting to delve further in the question of what fans seek in fiction and how they balance the canon and the fan texts to their own needs.

A focus on fanfics written exclusively in poetry would allow for a study of format and its importance in developing a text not based on the same medium and what this transformation means for the result.

The traditional anonymity of female writers contrasted with the culture of pseudonymity in fandom allows for a gender-based exploration of the author and their impact in their work.

For a suggestion more centred around traditional literature, an exploration of texts from a literary fandom and the fan texts it produces—such as *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, or more recent non-published, internet-based pieces—would bring an alternative perspective to my work, which deals with media fandoms.

As a final note, I want to reiterate my intention of continuing my academic work within the field of fan studies with a literary perspective, taking this thesis as a starting point for

further exploration. While I may not choose the avenues described above, there are many other niches that deserve to be explored, both for the sake of fan studies and for the possible redefinition of literature fanfiction introduces.

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