LOOKING INTO CYBER SPACE :
FAN FICTION ONLINE AS A CREATIVE WRITING

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Abstract. *Artikel ini ditulis sebagai upaya menawarkan strategi pembelajaran creative writing melalui penulisan fiksi di media internet. Sebagai media yang menciptakan ruang cyber, ruang maya yang menawarkan anonimitas dan 'kebebasan', media ini memungkinkan siapapun untuk berpartisipasi didalamnya tidak sekedar sebagai konsumen teks, namun sekaligus sebagai produsen aktif. Situs www.fanfiction.net adalah salah satu situs yang marak dengan karya fiksi penulis non profesional yang lazim disebut fanfiction. Dalam situs ini, para penulis fanfiction bebas berkreativitas melalui tulisan mereka tanpa diketahui identitas aslinya. Dalam konteks ini, ruang cyber dan fan ficton dapat dipahami sebagai satu alternatif strategi pembelajaran creative writing yang cukup efektif.*

Key words: *media internet, ruang cyber,fan fiction, creative writing*

Introduction

Today, internet exclusively used at its early emergence has included almost all aspects of human kinds. Not only is internet used for informational purposes, but also for entertaining ones. Internet users are able to easily get access to any news, music, song lyrics, as well as literary works. Furthermore, various kinds of anonymous writing including fiction and non-fiction unpublished in offline world and written by non-professional writers have widely emerged in the internet, including fanfiction as the object of discussion in this article. Fan fiction (also known as fanfic/fic) is a fiction written by a fan of a certain text (source text) which borrows the characters, plot or settings of the source text.

The widespread of anonymous writers with their anonymous writings cannot be separated from internet characteristics that offers anonymity and 'freedom' enabling every user to be actively involved in expressing ideas without being known as the 'real person' in offline world. Internet has created a cyber space; a space of fluidity enabling 'the absence of identity. The term cyber was originally created by Gibson in his cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer.* The formulation of cyberspace written in Gibson's Neuromancer runs as follows:

> Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by millions of legitimate operators….A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellation of data. Like city light, receding. (Gibson, 1984: 67).

Even though computing science realities about what the so-called today as cyberspace was little known to Gibson, the term cyberspace an its quality as depicted in *Neuromancer* has played strong influence on its development and representation (Bell, 2007).

Furthermore, the anonymity of internet has provided people to be actively engaged not only as users, but also as producers. In the case of fanfiction, cyber space provides opportunity not only for the author and reader to build communication between each other, but also for the readers to give comments on the fanfic they read, which means there is a more equal relation between readers and writers. This equal relation is unquestionably due to internet's unique characteristic providing what Fiske says as 'semiotic democracy', i.e. the media's power in enabling audience to be actively engaged in creative process to form cultural symbols, rather than being passive consumers (1997).

Due to previously elaborated characteristic of internet, it is assumed that fan fiction, a form of online fiction, can be very helpful as a strategy in teaching creative writing, since it enables students to freely express their ideas and imagination without being recognized as the real person in offline world. Moreover, fanfiction is helpful in making creative writing class more enjoyable since it enables students to write about what they really like. The question based on such assumption is: how does fan fiction help students improve their writing skill? In addition, concerning the issue of 'originality', is fan fiction worth accessing in creative writing class, since its characters are borrowed from another text namely source text? To answer such questions, it is a need to elaborate on fan fiction, its unique characteristics as well as what its authors do in writing their fanfictions

Fan Fiction: The Readers' Writings

Fan fiction (also mentioned as fanfic/ff/fic) is a fiction written and uploaded in internet by a fan of a certain text. Fanfic is based on a certain text that can be in form of novel, film or TV series as its source text. In fanfic, its authors uses the source text's characters or settings. Nevertheless, it does not have any relations with the source text's publisher or author. For this reason, fanfic text is frequently started with a disclaimer

stating that its writer does not own the characters and settings. Since fan fiction does not exist without the existence of source text, it can be said that fanfiction is about what fans do with the source text. Furthermore, fan fiction is said to be a form of readers' response of a certain text. By writing fanfiction, readers of a certain text are able to express their ideas and expectation as a respond to the source text that cannot completely fulfill their expectation (Astutiningsih, 2012).

History of Fan Fiction

Even though fan fictions are widely spread out in the internet, its origin emerged far before the internet era. Many assumptions are made about its origins, one of which is said by Derecho who borrows Derrida's term by regarding fan fiction as archontic literature. Referring to what Derrida's writing *Archive Fever* (1995)*,* Derecho says that *archontic* is related to the word archive understood as unfinished and ever-expanding text (2006: 64). Relying on this point, Derecho believes that fan fiction has emerged for centuries, particularly when in 17th century women writers published their stories as a follow up of the other writers' previous works (2006). Another assumption about fanfic origin is stated by Hale saying that fanfic started from the writing of Jane Austen and Sherlock Holmes' fans who joined fan society in 1920s (Derecho, 2006: 62). Alongwith the growth of audiovisual media, in the late 1960s, the fans of *Star Trek* TV series published *fanzine Spockanalia* which was said to be the 'stone age' of fanfiction. In 1975 *Star Trek* fandom became more popular and established, noted by the publishing of *"Star Trek" Lives* (Coppa, 2006: 45).

As internet has been more widely used, fan fiction become more popular. Starting by using *electronic mailing list* to publish, today's fanfic are easily accessed in various particular sites. In 1998, a non-profit site www.fanfiction.net was established to provide opportunities for fans of any texts (films, TV series, cartoons, music groups, short stories or novels) to upload their fictions. The site www.fanfiction.net is the largest fanfic site containing millions of fanfics written by non-professional writers throughout the world in various languages. Compared to other fanfictions, *Harry Potter* fanfic is the most written fiction in www.fanfiction.net. *Harry Potter* fanfics have reached 642,188 while the number of other fanfics is merely below three hundred thousands; such as *Twilight:209,699*; *Sherlock Holmes:3,403*; *Bridge to Terabithia:455; Dracula: 111*; (www.fanfiction.net per 14 May 2013).

Fan Fiction as Creative Writing: Students' Activities and Creativities

Apart from its vast progress and popularity, it is inevitable that fan fiction has to face its challenges. Considering as a form of cyber literature, a lot of criticism has been directed to it. In her writing, Thomas depicts her interview with one of fanfic authors concerning assumption that fan fiction is shallow and trivial. Tiana, one of fanfic writers responded to such assumption by saying that such assumption is based on people's ignorance about what fanfic authors really do:

> …people feel that we're lazy, not creating our own worlds and characters (which I have done BOTH in fanfic). They regard us, sometimes, as bad writers because we don't use our own canons, when, in fact, some people's fanfics are much more enjoyable than novels …
> (in Thomas, 2006).

Considering many assumptions that fanfiction is amere imitation of its source text that makes it unoriginalor even shallow, the questions that may rise concerning the possibility of using fanfiction as a strategy to teach creative writing are: Is it appropriate to use fanfiction in creative writing class? Is it worth it? Wouldn't it be a stimulation for students to do the act of plagiarism, instead of being a good author?

Responding those questions, I would like to argue by elaborating more on how fanfic is written and what scholars say about it. Moreover, my online interview with some fanfic authors is also used to strengthen my point. It is definitely true that fanfiction is not an independent text, which means it does not exist without the existence of source text. Nevertheless, fanfic does not always correspond completely to the source text. Some fanfics plot and characters are beyond the source text, which makes fanfic have unique genres such as *crossover* and *alternate universe*. Fanfic authors may combine two characters from two different source texts in a whole story as can be found in *crossovers*, or place a certain character in a complete different setting with different characterization in *alternate universe*. Furthermore, fanfic authors may also create their own characters commonly known as *OC* (Original Character) or *Marry Sue.*

Referring to the previously stated genre of fanfiction which does not correspond completely to the source text, it can be said that fan fiction is not merely a matter of copying or imitating a certain source text. Fanfic authors embellish their own story

using their creativities and thus, produce their own texts. This productivity captures many scholars' interests in giving assumption about fanfiction as a form of fans'; activities, one of whom is Hill who says that the assumption about fan fiction is not supposedly limited to fanatism. He considers fanfiction authors as 'fan scholars' since they work through their writing, creatively make their own stories (2002: 12-14). This assumption corresponds to what Jenkins says about fans in his writing *Textual Poachers* that they are not passive mindless consumers of source text but active producers and manipulators of meanings (1992: 23). In TIME, Grossman says that fan fiction writers are parts of community who talk back to the culture in their own ways:

> Fanfiction is what literature might look like if it were reinvented from scratch after a nuclear apocalypse by a band of brilliant pop-culture junkies trapped in a sealed bunker. They don't do it for money. That's not what it's about. The writers write it and put it up online just for the satisfaction. They're fans, but they're not silent, couchbound consumers of media. The culture talks to them, and they talk back to the culture in its own language. (TIME, 18 July 2011).

Referring to the above-mentioned assumptions about fan fiction, it is then clearly understood that fan fiction is what fans do about the source text. Fan fiction is readers' reflection of their own ideas and imagination by embodying their own elements in their stories. Even though the source text is undoubtedly needed as a basis for writing fan fiction, fan fiction itself is a form of creativities crafted by readers. Instead of a mere imitation, fanfic is a creation, a product of imagination. The presence of Marry Sue, the original character also known as *OC* is only one example of 'original creativity' in writing fanfiction. Some fanfic writers even make the character's characterization of the source text completely different, which is generally known by OOC (out of character). They also set different setting as well as different plot. Along with different characterization, it is then clear that the source text elements remain a mere character's name. This means that the author has created their original story, not a mere 'reporting', as Sybil Marshall says about creative writing: "involve their entire, including the ability to go beyond the realm of tact and sensory impression to the limited area of the imagination" (1974).

Using Harry Potter fanfiction in www.fanfiction.net as the primary data to analyse in my previous thesis (2012), I made an online interview with the fanfic authors, some of whom have been very fond of writing since their school ages. Hanan, one of

my interviewee said that she had been writing fanfiction since the fourth-grade of primary school. Being unconfident to expose her writings in offline world, Hanan found cyber space very helpful in motivating herself to do more writings. Besides being valuable in providing her a space to boost her passion for writing, internet also enables Hanan to be actively enganged with many people who share the same interest in cyberspace. Receiving many reviews and comments from her fanfic readers (one thing that she finds it impossible to happen in offline world due to very limited friends knowing her skills), she finds it easy to know about her shortcomings, and thus, makes her do more attempts to write better fiction. Another interviewee named Santi is also very keen on writings and starting to write her own novel (online interview: March 2012). This reminds me of Virees' writing about cyber literature (2005) concerning one of fanfiction writers named Linna Wongwantanee from Thailand who turned her real person fanfiction about t.A.T.u into an actual novel and published it in print. She gave up fanfiction and started writing her own novel.Not being satisfied with fanfiction, she mentioned that fanfiction had limitation since the characters do not belong to her :

> When I started to write fanfiction, I sought entertainment, wished to express my fascination with my favourite rock group and communicate with other members of the fan community. But the more I wrote, the more the writing became serious for me. And then one moment I realized that I was no longer writing about my pop idols, but about myself. (Virees: 2005)

Considering fanfiction as something unfamiliar in Indonesia as a subject of discussion in a scholarly format, I have been very curious about my students' knowledge of fanfiction. Having asked students joining my class whether or not they are interested in accessing fan fiction sites, I received answers most of which were beyond my expectation. Not only do many students know about www.fanfiction.net as the largest fanfiction site, but also actively join it as writers. One of them has told me that she finds it easier to create her own characters through fanfiction. In other words, it is a little more difficult for her to create her original character in an original story. By writing fanfiction, starting from writing characters already prevailed in the source text, she can create original character alongwith the progress of plot in her story. For this reason, all of her fan fictions contain original character. The most important thing from my interview with her is that she finds it more fun and enjoyable to write fan fiction.

Another student of mine writes fan fiction and at the same time, also writes a novel in progress (interview October, 2012).

Based on what I have figured out through interviews with some fanfic writers, it can be concluded that fanfiction writing is more about students' passion for writing. Instead of spending too much time in creating original characters to make a new story, fanfiction can ease students to go straightforward into their imagination in embellishing their stories. Instead of being a a little burdened by a must to create their original characters at the very start, they feel more fun to write stories based on previously existing characters in their favorite text. Nevertheless, as they begin writing and get more engaged, they will freely add their own characters, and probably create a new plot as well in their subsequent writings. Since their writing can be done online, students can put aside their lack of confidence due to the anonymity cyber space offers.

The unique character of cyber space providing absence of identity, more freedom and fluidity enable students not only to have opportunity to boost their passions for writing, but also help them figure out their shortcomings in writing through the readers' reviews. In this case, teacher is definitely needed in joining the site where students upload their stories. The teacher is supposed to act as online reader to give reviews and comment supposedly helpful for students to improve their writings. In this way, students are expected to make progress in their writing troughout the term.During class meetings, students can discuss anything related to the reviews they have received in cyber space. One thing students need to know in doing their activities in writing fan fiction online is that they do not need to reveal themselves as the 'real person in real world'. Instead, they can choose to remain anonymous. Even though they have offline discussion in class, it is not necessary for them to refer directly to what they are currently writing. Such anonymities would avoid students' lack of confidence and help those with problems of vulnerability. Their 'real identities' are required only in the end of the term when they should submit their fictions as final assignment.

Conclusion

Throughout its history, internet users' online engagment has endured its vast development. Internet users are not only passive consumers, but have also become

active producers. In a cyber space providing anonymity, any users are free to be actively engaged as producers, including creating stories online. Fan fiction is one of strategies that can be helpful in teaching creative writing, since it is based on a certain text that students are really fond of. Furthermore, fan fiction online enables them to remain anonymous which means they can put aside their lack of confidence in expressing their ideas and imagination. Writing about something they really like means writing for fun, and writing for fun means writing enthusiastically. Such enthusiasm is the strong point in enabling students to reflect their ideas and imagination, as well as improve their writing skills.

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