

The Silmarillion, Fan Art, and A Typology of Fandom Comments: A Qualitative Analysis of Fan Fiction Comments Posted on Deviantart Platform

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Abstract: J.R.R. Tolkien's books are more and more popular in recent years, and there are many fans who created fandom work based on Tolkien's fantasy world. Many users go to some websites to read/watch those works, interact with the works, and then exchange different opinions about those works. This research gives a snapshot of Tolkien's online fandom community by focusing on categorizing the types of users' comments on a fan art image shared in such a community and speculating how these comments will affect other users' reactions. The study analyzed 650 comments to the image and found that four types of comments emerged from the data: praise comments, challenging and discussing the interpretation of the characters created in the picture, discussing the (romantic) relationship between the two characters that the illustrator drew, referencing of original book all reflect different types of people who watch fandom creation.

Keywords: Fandom, Fan fiction, Silmarillion

1. Introduction

Tolkien fanwork creation, is becoming popular among many people who love fantasy literature in recent years, especially among the fans of The Silmarillion. The Silmarillion is a collection of myths and stories happened in the middle-earth created by the English writer J. R.R. Tolkien. This research is interested in the types of users' comments on one fan art image that was created by a fan of The Silmarillion based on Tolkien's stories. This topic is worth discussing because, first of all, there are a lot of Tolkien's fan works on fandom creation platforms, which indicates the popularity of fan art creation in Tolkien's fandom community. However, despite the popularity of these fan works, little research addresses the users' perceptions of such works. Therefore, the research on this topic is representative of the popularity of the fan works in Tolkien's fandom community. This research classifies different responses of people who watch Tolkien's fan art on deviantart, an American online art community that features artwork, videography and photography.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Fandom and Participatory Media Culture

Watching a film or playing a video game can comprise an experiential unit for fans that are interconnected to an expensive multi-textual environment which can encompass magazines, books, interactive media, and online clubs [1]. Fans may immerse in a special world when they identify with the texts. They may also take attitudes, language, or some behaviors to agree with the texts [1]. Therefore, participatory fandom is known as a persistent emotional and physical engagement with a particular narrative universe, where the fans participate in visualizing "non-commercial ownership with media companies that hold the commercial, legal property rights" [1]. Fans often appropriate corporate-generated images into other formats such as songs or paintings, using their own artistic expressions [1]. Since people actively create works based on the original books/movies and share with them other people on the Internet, these fans can be considered as 'active fans.' Active fans are a specific type of audience who are distinguishable from the majority of media consumers [1]. They are 'active' fans because they actively participate in the creation of fanworks such as paintings and songs based on the original books or movies. There are many active fans in Tolkien fan community. As such, this gives us a brief understanding of what is fandom work and participatory culture, and specifically, what is Tolkien's fandom work.

2.2. Tolkien-Based Fanfiction and Community

Tolkien-based fanfiction, frequently abbreviated as Tolkienfic, has been around for at least 60 years, with the first known instance being in the 1960 fanzine *I Palantr* [2]. Ever since, fanfiction and other fanworks have probably been published in Tolkien fanzines. This continued until the early 2000s, when the majority of fanfiction activity moved online [2]. Tolkien fiction is diverse. In addition, Tolkienfic is prevalent in several fanfiction subgenres. In 2006, Busse and Hellekson identified three primary fanfiction genres. From the beginning of the online Tolkienfic fandom, all three subgenres were prevalent and well-liked. First, heterosexual relationships are a central theme in 'het' stories. Second, same-sex relationships are slash stories. In contrast to the first and second subgenres, the third subgenre is genfic stories, which does not emphasize romantic or sexual interactions, although they might be implied [2]. These are all types of Tolkien's fan fiction. Fans fiction has been digitalized, making communities around them more diversified and democratized [3]. As a result, people from all backgrounds have easy access to such communities [3]. Also, fans in such communities prefer not to show their real name due to the fear of legal actions from right holders [3].

Fanfiction used to be on the periphery of the literary scene. Some fanfiction authors interpreted Archive of Our Own's Hugo Award victory for the Best Related Work in 2019 as validation from the mainstream speculative fiction publication business [3]. The great diversity seen among the fanbase is supported by the fractured character of Tolkienfic. Additionally, even the most open-minded archive is limited in some ways by less obvious community ideals that affect where and what writers upload. For a Tolkienfic lover, the outcome often entails involvement in a number of forums that give access to the information they want to read and share within a social environment they feel comfortable [3]. Tolkien's fandom community is bigger and bigger now in many platforms, with creators sharing not only just fanfiction literature, but also fandom pictures are created by illustrators. Therefore, the study raises the following research question:

RQ: How do viewers respond to a fan-created picture shared in Tolkien's fandom community?

3. Method

To address the research question, this study uses textual analysis to uncover viewers' comments on a selected picture in Tolkien's fandom community. For this study, textual analysis is suitable to the viewers' narratives through their comments, in order to understand the viewer's opinion about the Tolkien's fandom picture. Researchers use textual analysis to interpret films, television programs and so on, to show that in particular culture at a particular time, how people understand this world [4].

3.1. Sampling

The study selected fan-created picture entitled 'Silmarillion Melkor Seducing Mairon' by illustrator 'Phobs' because the illustrator is famous among Silmarillion community on deviantart.com and there were 660 comments under this picture by October 2022. The researcher of this paper collected the data by copying and pasting all the comments into a spreadsheet for analysis. Then the researcher read all of them, following the constant comparison approach [4], and categorized them into four categories.

3.2. Analysis

The textual analysis involved 660 comments. The researcher extracted all the comments under the picture for analysis, to understand the viewers' different perspectives on the picture. All the comments were captured in August 2022 and were stored in a Google spreadsheet for analysis.

All of the comments were first entered into one column during the primary-cycle coding stage, then a parallel column was made to record any themes or short codes that formed as the researcher read the material. The researcher took note of each comment's linguistic content line by line, contrasting each new line with the one before it. The Google spreadsheet's sorting feature made the comparing procedure easier. Codes like "praise comments," "ship," and "referencing of an original book," and "discussing the characters' image that illustrator created" emerged from the text after the researcher reviewed all the comments and had a sense of the general themes.

Themes from the first-level codes were identified during the secondary-cycle coding process and subsequently classified into conceptual categories at a higher level of abstraction [4]. In order to further investigate the emerging themes, which were then further developed inductively, this method involved two additional rounds of rereading the spreadsheet comments, regrouping the information and the pertinent codes. As a result, the researcher entered the period of creating the narratives and examining the data with specific examples, gradually honing the essence of themes that emerged [5].

4. Findings

The results that emerged from the data demonstrated how the viewers responded to the selected picture created in Tolkien's fandom. To answer the research question which asked about how viewers respond to this fandom picture, there are four types of responses emerged from the viewers, as described below. A diagram representing the typology can be found in Figure 1. The findings and corresponding examples are summarized in Table 1.

4.1. Praise Comments: Appreciating and Complimenting The Illustrator's Efforts on The Picture

One of the most common comments from the viewers is praising the work of the illustrator. Viewers like the work very much. There are different ways of complimenting. Some were straightforward and concise, expressing that they like the work very much, and others praised the work by complimenting the illustrator's technical skills such as lines, colors, and interpretation of characters. Also, some

viewers praised the works by commenting that the illustrator drew the characters as what they imagined. A few viewers think the illustrator's work is really beautiful and they want to use it as their phone's background. One viewer wrote: "I've had this as my desktop background for a while now X333 Is there any way to buy posters from you Phobs? Cause I'd soooo want a poster of this to put on my wall!" As such, these comments represent one of the most commonly seen type of comments in fan fiction, which is to complement the illustrator's works.

4.2. Challenging and Discussing The Interpretation of The Characters Created in The Picture

Challenging the representations of the characters is the second type of comments. Most of these comments were a) doubtful comments on the illustrator's representation of the characters and b) other users' replies to these doubtful comments. The comments mostly questioned why the author drew one of the characters more feminine and/or questioned whether the character was a woman or not. For instance, one viewer wrote: "hold up - hold up - hold up !!!Sauron's a girl?"

Most of the replies to these doubtful comments are to explain why the illustrator made the character feminine, or cite the content of the original book to explain why the appearance of the character created by the illustrator is reasonable. For example, one replied: "No. No he is not a girl. Admittedly it's not gay either... [the art surely shows them as male tho]. as both would be genderless immortal beings." And another viewer said: "The way that Tolkien wrote it, the Ainur had characteristics of men and women; not physical, as they did not natively have bodies, but in mindset. This puts them more or less in the same mold as the Children of Iluvatar. So, they were more sexless than genderless." There are also a small number of people who do not understand certain parts of the work, such as the jewelry held by one of the characters. Viewers feel that the existence of this jewelry is inconsistent with the original work, and these people always did not understand the author's true intentions. There are also some negative comments that directly demonstrate that they do not like the characters created by the author and feel that it does not match the image in their mind. One viewer said: "This is wrong on so many levels. Tolkien would have the artist's head on a platter." The people who replied to these comments are basically supporting the illustrator's work. For example, one user explained: "It's Tolkien himself that uses the word "seduce" when referring to how Melkor rallied Maiar to his side. Besides, I think that Tolkien was a person of extremely kind nature, with great tolerance. If he met a "shipper" (i.e., a shipper is a reader of Tolkien's work who consider two of the characters in his work as a couple—note from the researcher), he'd probably have a conversation with them, ask them a few questions out of genuine curiosity, and be quite amused." Another one said: "I disagree. Tolkien said that Melkor swayed many of the Maia to his side - seduced was his word. Valar can communicate on many levels, including direct sharing between minds. This looks to me as though Melkor is impressing his "grand vision" to Mairon, showing the Craftsman all the wonders they could create together." As such, these comments represent some people's different perspectives to the characters that the illustrator describes, whether they like or not.

4.3. Discussing The (Romantic) Relationship Between The Two Characters That The Illustrator Drew

Discussing the romantic relationship between the two characters that the illustrator drew is the third type of comments. Such comments are commonly seen in fan fiction community. There are two reasons for why viewers have such comments. One of the reasons why these comments exist is that the illustrator is very interested in these two characters. From the illustrator's perspective, the two characters are in a (romantic) relationship. So the illustrator will try his or her best to show this relationship when s/he creates this picture. Some viewers would be very happy when they saw that a

talented painter also painted the couple the way they wanted and therefore they expressed their joy through the comments. Another reason of why these comments exist is that some viewers who never thought that these two characters could form a couple. When they saw the illustrator's work, they found that these two characters could actually have formed such a strong relationship, so they fell in love with the idea of the two characters being as a couple. Here's one example, a viewer said: "I've never thought about a ship between the two of them... not sure it would work eheh I am so in love with your style (and let's just say that I've always thought that Sauron looked that way)." As such, these two reasons clarify the type of comments where viewers discuss the (romantic) relationship between two of the characters that the composer drew.

4.4. Referencing of Original Book

The fourth type of comments is when some viewers ask questions about certain characters in the work, some enthusiastic fans will answer the questions and reference the relevant parts of the original work. One viewer commented: "Sauron is a male and is in every form he's taken. The artists interpretation of him just makes him seem more feminine which is really a bit overboard, as Sauron was said to have taken the form of a fair elf, again male, but no where near this." There is another situation when viewers reference the original book. That is, some viewers want to know the source of the characters after seeing the picture, so they ask about the source, and some answered the questions by referencing the original content. One viewer said: "Mairon is Sauron, who is also Annatar, as well as a few more. His different forms have different names. If you don't remember one of the main big bads, it's probably time to read the book again."

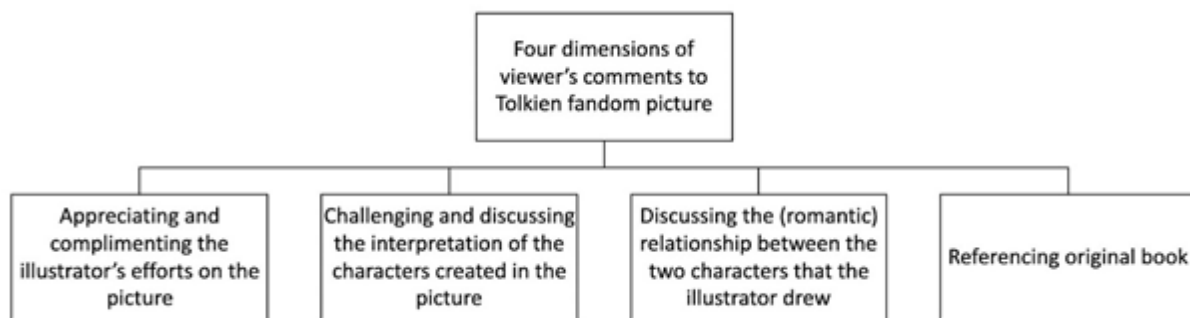


Figure1: Four dimensions of viewer's comments to Tolkien fandom picture.

Table1: Category and examples of comments.

Category of comments	Examples
Praise Comments	Pleaaassee give me more of this I don't want to live without this pairing anymore I just love it so much!
	WOW!!!! Awesome!!! This colours! That shapes! And lines! And what an idea!!! Not really know much about "Lord of the Rings", but it makes me interested in finding out more!And I hope you'll forgive me if I'll say, that your Sauron is so alike with Lord Pitchiner (Rise of the Guardians, Pitch Black). I'm sorry if I offended you with this comparison.P.S. Your style is awesome!
	Absolutely amazing!
Comments that hints a reference of original book	To put it very briefly, Morgoth is an archangel who messed with Eru's plans even as the world was being created (Eru is the God of Tolkien's universe), and later became the Satan-figure of that world, Mairon/Sauron is one of the (relatively) lesser angels that Morgoth converted to evil, and his most loyal lieutenant; after a very long while the gods and elves succeded in banishing Morgoth forever (however since he is the original source of evil he was never really 'gone' from the world), and Sauron slowly began his own bid for world domination. During the period when a lot of people were fooled by his intentions, he helped a group of elves forge the Rings of Power, and secretly creating the One Ring for himself . . .
	Erm, you DO know that in the Silmarillion Sauron appears to the Elves as a extremely charming, attractive and eloquent fair-haired elf, right? It's just another one of his forms. It's canon.
	Indeed. Mairon's name was changed to Sauron after he joined Melkor/Morgoth. Later, he is known as Annatar when, with his help, the Elves forged the Rings
Analyze character image that composer create on the picture	It almost looks like he is seducing a girl; I never read the Silmarillion, but from what I have read on one of the wikias, Melkor was the big bad guy before Sauron. I also heard that the big bad dragon before Smaug was called Ancalagon the Black; could you draw him, Ancalagon, next?
	Sauron looks most like a lady in this one
	OK I've made a fool of myself... Sauron is male, but still as SOLcaster said he is very beautiful

Table1: (Continued)

Category of comments	Examples
Reference the original book	I know! It's great but so complex e.e... I guess I'll pick it up again when I'm not already reading three books at once.
	I could never get past the first few pages of The Silmarillion. It just confused the hell out of me. But this makes me want to try reading it again.
	mAYBE YOU SHOULD READ THE silmarillion you twaT!!
Realize the couple relationship between two of the characters that composer drew	You make me ship these two XD I can never see them the same now
	First thing: you are amazing! second: I plan on reading the Silmarillion soon and now I know I will ship Sauron and Morgoth and it will be all your fault...
	Im shipping these two crazily thanks to your fanarts! xD I've already made some fanfictions, unfortunately they are in Portuguese only... but... very beautiful!!

5. Conclusion

From Table 1, it can be seen that comments can be divided into four types, each of which corresponds to different responses from people watching the fandom picture.

The first types of comments that responded to this picture were talking about the original book and having a special appreciation for the author's paintings. People who send this type of comments liked the work a lot and complimented the illustrator's great work. The second type of comments reflected those people who have already read the original work, but the picture is not exactly the same as what they read/watched because the presentations in the Lord of the Ring and the Silmarillion are different, so they mixed up. The third type of comments was sent by some people who read the original book and start liking the idea of thinking of the two characters as a couple, as drawn by the illustrator. The fourth type of comments were given by those people who referenced the original work (including asking and replying) and those who asked about the source of the original because they haven't read the original yet but were intrigued by the illustrator's work.

5.1. Limitation of The Study

The study is not without limitations. First, it is assumed that most of the positive comments praising the fanwork and the illustrator are from the people who read the original book. In the fandom community, it is rare for someone who has not read the original creator's works to give any negative comments. Second, it is likely that only a group of people who love Tolkien's fandom pictures and have already read this book went to this website to comment on this picture.

The current study aims to classify the comments of the Tolkien's fandom picture. The study advances the understanding of different viewer's perspectives about certain fandom work in Tolkien's fan community. Future studies should explore whether and how different Tolkien's fan communities on different platforms or even different countries may have different types of comments to fan-created images.

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