Texts by J. Rowling's Fans as Means of Conveying Subcultural Values

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Abstract

The article covers the process of evolution of J. Rowling's fans' verbal creative work. The research is devoted to a variety of texts made by fans including forms of Internet-lore and fanfiction, a phenomenon close both to literature and folklore by nature, a kind of narratives developing on the Internet and highly popular with avid admirers of the *Harry Potter* series. The author has been observing the subculture of *Harry Potter* fans since 2003 and has made a number of important conclusions about the nature of fanfiction, its genres, its connection to the original books by J. Rowling on the level of interpreting mythological archetypes and attitudes of fanfiction author's to Rowling's style and set of values. The article regards the above mentioned problems following the author's earlier thesis and focuses on the modern stage in the development of fans' texts including memes and demotivators posted by users of social networking services and conveying the values already expressed in the older form of subcultural creative work—fanfiction.

Keywords: Harry Potter, Rowling, fanfiction, text, demotivator, potterheads, subculture, values, fandom

1. Introduction

The multicultural nature of the modern Russian society makes it possible to distinguish a great number of communities and subcultures, as well as their unique attitudes to cultural codes and peculiar ways of interpreting or adjusting those codes taking into account subcultural norms and values. Some previous research on young adult subcultures in Mari El Republic (Russia) (Zolotova & Efimova, 2013; Zolotova & Sitnova, 2010) point to numerous facts of connection between youth subcultural creative work and old cultural patterns (traditional folklore, classics) or today's cultural models (mass literature, mainstream cinema). Thus, it seems important to study communities and subcultures formed on the Internet (sites devoted to activities of different subcultures) and in various social media (social networking services, blogs, virtual game worlds etc.) (Ahlqvist, 2008) or those coming from real life and just emulated on the Web.

The subculture of fans of the *Harry Potter* series (labeled as *potterheads* in the English-speaking world) has been known in Russia since 2000-s. In 2003 the author of the article began her research on J. Rowling's books in the aspect of the writer's usage of mythological universal and national British motives in the plot, settings and images of the series. Unexpectedly, a great number of related texts of non-commercial character were discovered on the Internet. Those narratives were resorted to as fanfics (or fanfiction) by Internet users and looked like continuations or alternative versions of Rowling's storyline and settings. Texts by anonymous Internet authors varied in length and quality but one could definitely state they shared a core that was not restricted to formal borrowing of Rowling's characters or manner. The idea of understanding the underlying principles of how and why the texts were built and what they owe to Rowling's interpretation of mythological motives seemed challenging. Moreover, by the beginning of 2000-s fanfiction had not been introduced as a material for scientific analysis in Russia. These two reasons made it possible to expand the thesis adding another chapter on mythological archetypes in fanfiction, its classification and connections to professional literature and folklore. In 2005 the thesis was completed while the *Harry Potter* series went on. Consequently, the fandom grew; due to the successful screen versions of the books there emerged new fans and the amount of fanfiction increased. J. Rowling put the finishing touches to the series in 2007 having published the novel *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*; the final movie was released in 2011; however, eight years after the last book was written the *Harry Potter* fandom is extremely prolific as it is supposed to be the largest fanfiction community (Monroe, 2013). Fanfiction.net, the largest archive on the Web, at press time, contains 705,000 texts in the *Harry Potter* section; while in 2011 there were 526,085 entries (Grossman, 2011) and in 2005 it comprised only 50,000; the number

seemed incredible that time. Today fanfiction on Rowling's made-up world ("*Potterverse*", a coinage that emerged from the words "Potter" and "universe") displays a great diversity of genres and forms. Besides, *Harry Potter* fans' coming to social networking is a new turn in the development of the subculture. All things considered, the problem of subcultural narratives deserves a new research.

As for the previous studies in the field of fanfiction, they do not have a long history though early works date back to the 1980-s (Prasolova, 2009). Lev Grossman, the author of a series of articles about fanfiction, stresses, "Right now fanfiction is still the cultural equivalent of dark matter: it's largely invisible to the mainstream, but at the same time, it's unbelievably massive." (Grossman, 2011). In the journalist's opinion, the advent of the first fandom and fanfiction is connected with the TV series *The Man from U. N. C. L. E.*, though it is arguable, as he admits himself. According to our observations, a phenomenon typologically close to fanfiction emerged in Russia as early as the 18-19 centuries when the so-called *lubochnaya literature* enjoyed great popularity (Korepova, 1999). The first attempts to study the problem of 'Potterverse' fanfiction seem to have been made by BBC journalists in 2001-2003. They started discussing reasons for the enormous popularity of fanfiction within the *Harry Potter* fandom and concluded it was due to the fact readers dealt with an unfinished series. However, today one can definitely say it is only partially true as the series has been completed but fanfiction authors go on writing. A serious research on fanfiction within the *Harry Potter* fandom was undertaken by the author of the article in 2005 (Vassilyeva, 2005). A definition of fanfiction was developed; fanfics were classified according to the degree they correspond to the original text in the aspect of J.Rowling's using mythological and fairy-tale traditions. The fandom was described as a Web young adult subculture of romantic and entertaining nature with specific norms and values. Another profound and genuine work on fanficion as a phenomenon of literature and 'Potterverse' fanfiction belongs to K. Prasolova. The researcher summarizes relevant scholarship both in Russia and the English-speaking world, making an exhaustive historical account, enters the nature of the phenomenon and introduces a complex theory of fanfiction (Prasolova, 2009). Among the latest studies one cannot help mentioning articles by Lev Grossman (Grossman, 2011) and a thesis by Lauren Monroe (Monroe, 2013). The latter examines the fanfiction of three large communities (the *Harry Potter* series, the *Twilight* series and the *Hunger Games* trilogy) as the projects seem to share target audiences, fanbase and are sure to have a common core that makes fans write similar fanfics following different fandoms.

Watching the *Harry Potter* fans' recent activities, a researcher cannot but notice that fanfiction has remained an extremely popular kind of potterheads' verbal creative work but today it is far from being the only way to extend the world of the characters they love. Besides fanfics (prose, poetry, song lyrics etc.) located on special sites, there have appeared a number of new forms of fans' creativity common for the Web and adjusted to the needs of the subculture. The new forms (gifs, memes, demotivators) blend word and picture; they can hardly be regarded as fanfiction, in them the written word seems to be giving way to other kinds of expressiveness and communication. However, the verbal constituent in them counts a lot and the researcher needs a specific term to refer to both fanfiction and the new types of fans' verbal manifestations. To serve this purpose, the term *text* is selected as giving a general idea of anything that is told or written. In our recent studies we used the term narrative (Efimova, Zolotova, 2014) but we have discovered a number of texts of dialogical nature since then what makes the researcher reconsider the terminology as *narrative* is somewhat different from *dialogue* (Radbyl, 2006). Though the modern stage of development of the *Harry Potter* fandom is characterized by some new genres, we assume the *Harry Potter* fans' values and the functions of the subculture have not changed.

2. Methods and Materials

To conduct the study, we applied a complex approach including a variety of methods. The descriptively analytical method lets the researcher represent the necessary verbal material (text); the comparative historical method helps to find things in common between the new narrative forms with those previous (e.g. fanfiction); the typological method is aimed at discovering similarities in current cultural forms. The participant observation method is used to watch fans' activities in social networking. As for the materials of the study, the given research resorts to one of the most popular Russian social networking services, VKontakte (错误！未找到引用源。) which is considered here to be a platform for subcultural self-expression. To define subcultural values and narratives, we have analyzed texts reposted in the community and spread anonymously; for the indication to the author has vanished in the process of copying and is of no importance for users.

VK has some traditions of the social, semiotic and verbal aspects that define the nature of a subculture (Shchepanskaya 2004): there used to be a tradition to congratulate newcomers upon logging in; smileys, likes and reposts are in common use; there are peculiar genres of the Internet-lore (memes, demotivators) and texts built according to the model of a parable, tests and lists. Recently there has emerged a trend to emphasize one's loyalty to VK in a humorous way: "Neither Twitter nor Facebook are able to replace your normal live

communication in VK". The traditional activities emulate those from other social networking services or are common for the Web culture in general (memes, subjects for demotivators, etc.). VK is a ground for a great variety of subcultures but their activities are concentrated within specific groups or on separate public pages. Potterheads are among them. Their coming to social networking services is a new turn in the development of the subculture. Most of their activities take place in specific groups in VK while they used to be connected with sites in 2000-2007. The reasons seem evident: general popularity and round-the-clock availability of social networking, instant messaging, and a friendly interface that facilitates downloading and viewing. In March 2012 in VK one could find 12,442 Russian groups with the phrase *Harry Potter* in the title. We have been following the activities of the group *The World of Harry Potter* (more than 18,000 participants, at press time, URL: https://vk.com/hpworld) for three years and have picked out a vast collection of narratives (cartoons, memes, demotivators), which are presented in the article and marked with the abbreviation 'PAE' (Natalya Efimova's personal archive). As for the sources of fanfiction, it used to be the famous fanfiction.net that we resorted to while working at the thesis and making conclusions about the first stage of the *Harry Potter* fandom's life (preceding the era of social networking).

3. Results and Discussion

The content and activities of the *Harry Potter* fans' groups presented in VK are similar to what they used to publish on sites, e.g. the community The *World of Harry Potter* suggests the following:

- To look through screen shots from the *Harry Potter* movies, photos of actors starring, collages, and fan art in the anime style, photos of cosplayers wearing costumes from the Potter universe, comics, demotivators (80 albums overall);
- To listen to soundtracks, songs and poems performed by the cast;
- To watch movies, trailers, videos made by fans;
- To discuss the movies, books and their translations, fanfiction, characters, role-playing games, events of the subculture taking place in real life (*pottercons*), favorite quotes;
- To play games devoted to the "Potterverse" like "I know five names of…", "Associations", to take part in questionnaires and surveys like "Which house in Hogwarts would you like to study at?", "Who suits Snape as a girlfriend?", "What is your patronus like?" etc.

However, there are slight differences between the potterheads' activities within social networking and their ex-life on sites. First, more attention is paid to the adaptations and actors (up to celebrating the actors' birthdays). Second, the subculture has absorbed some popular Internet phenomena—memes and demotivates. Third, and this observation has much to do with the previous one, the written word seems to be giving way to other kinds of expressiveness and communication (gif animation, smileys, graphical means, demotivators where the word and picture are blended to create an image).

The nature of the potterheads' activities proves that the given subculture is based on interpreting Rowling's texts and movies (the so called *canon*) in all possible directions. The initial research of the subculture done by the author of the article was devoted to fanfiction created within the fans' community (2004-2005). The results of the analysis state that the given subculture highly appreciates texts that are aimed at maintaining Rowling's genuine interpretation and help the fan to dive deeper into the fictitious universe. Parodies are popular too, as they lower the pathos of some characters or events and remind the fan of a borderline between fantasy and reality.

The potterheads' folklore presented in VK, no doubts, proves the conclusion about the fans' strive for keeping to the *canon* (Rowling's original books) and getting deeper into it. The most striking example of their loyalty to the original text is a supposition about J. K. Rowling's being able to foresee the events of the seventh book while writing the first one, e.g. some fans consider the names of flowers mentioned by Severus Snape in Book 1 to be a cipher meaning "I regret Lily's death deeply" (PAE). Those knowledgeable about the plot of the series understand easily that such an insight at this stage of the storyline is highly improbable.

The *Harry Potter* brand is famous enough to find various reflections on the Internet outside the potterheads' subculture. Memes and demotivators as universal phenomena of the Internet culture display two tendencies in the attitude to the potterheads' values. The meme is "a kind of precedential texts as well as the humor for those 'who understands': the comical effect is aimed at a particular audience" (Shchurina, 2012).

The first tendency of treating *Harry Potter* phenomenon derives from the Internet-audience that does not share the potterheads' values. Outside the potterheads' community, there are demotivators of ironic and invective nature where the realities of the series become just a subject matter, not a universal form of expression. Thus, the

popular meme "Why not just…" picturing Boromir from *Lord of the Rings* movie, is provided with the caption: "Why not just / forget Harry Potter" (PAE). As a rule, outside the potterheads' community, *Harry Potter* realities do not become a separate meme but are included into universally acknowledged memes. However, there is an exception: one type of demotivators portrays a degrading man, resembling Harry Potter, and contains a caption of rude or obscene nature: "And I'm at Hogwarts after the fifth drink" (PAE).

There is a different tendency in the potterheads' community: any particularity of the canon or fandom turns into a meme. Memes emerge around vividly expressed personal qualities of the characters: "Study like Hermione / Eat like Ron / Live like Harry", "Got Granger? / Got no need in brains"; around studies as a problem uniting characters and readers: "Examus Passimus / Retakus / Avada Retakus"; around an occasional similarity with other blockbusters (*Thor*, *Avengers*, *Lord of the Rings*). Also, potterheads resort to popular memes, e.g. "Keep calm and…": "Keep calm and ask Hermione", "Keep calm and love Harry Potter", "Keep calm and cry for Fred Weasley" and the famous troll face that often accompanies Snape as an interlocutor (PAE).

Potterheads tend to create some texts where a certain life style and their loyalty to the details of the books are described. Works of this character appeared on sites ("100 signs of being a potterhead"); now they are published in VK: "I wasn't drunk!" "But you hit the wall at the railway station!", "I wasn't drunk!", "But you called the neighbor's dog Sirius and asked him not to leave you!", "I wasn't drunk!" "But you hissed into the sink saying you had to enter the Chamber of Secrets!", "I know. But I wasn't drunk" (PAE).

It is important to mention that Harry Potter fans do not tend to demonstrate their subcultural identity in their personal profiles on VK. Having looked through 2,000 profile photos of participants of the group *The World of Harry Potter*, we found only two images connected with the Potter universe. The same observation concerns profiles of fans of the cultic computer game *World of Warcraft*. Also, studying profile photos shows that there are many anime fans and cosplayers among potterheads what testifies to the synthesis of subcultures on the ground of their likeness (common aesthetic and behavioral models, similar sources of subcultures, e.g. books by Rowling and Japanese animated cartoons belong to the genre of young adult fantasy, etc.). Coming back to the problem of subcultural identity, it is important to emphasize that most VK users are inclined to create a self-image free from subcultural attributes. Thus, though VK hosts numerous subcultures, it tends to unite users by means of its own norms and rules despite their possible loyalty to a subculture.

4. Conclusion

The *Harry Potter* fandom has been developing and growing for about 15 years by now even though the series was completed eight years ago and J.Rowling does not seem willing to go on with the job. Harry Potter is a franchise and fans spend time and money eagerly enjoying products of the Potter industry. However, the fandom was and is predominantly a Web phenomenon and fanfiction has been the main way to display fans' loyalty to the series up to recent years. We assume it was the first stage of the *Harry Potter* fandom's development. As soon as the fandom settled down on public pages and in specific groups of social media, there began the second stage of its development. Within VK, the *Harry Potter* subculture has acquired a new platform for self-expression. If compared to its existence on sites, activities on VK become more dynamic but less oriented towards creating long texts. That is why one cannot be sure if fanfiction will preserve its popularity or will give way to other forms of fans' creativity which are borrowed from the Internet-lore and which blend word and picture. There is another side to the problem: the shorter the texts are, the more users read them and repost them, so they start answering the traditional criteria of folklore in a greater extent than fanfiction does. However, the new type of communication has not affected the values of the subculture; the potterheads have maintained the genuine interpretation of images and events of the canon with numerous parodies existing on the background.

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