

The Perfect Girl: An Exploration of the Hidden and Dynamic World of Fan Fiction

By Nikara

The world of fan fiction is a strange one. Tens of thousands of people participate in it, yet it is barely acknowledged by the general public. Some of the most popular books, movies, and TV shows are the subjects of fan fiction, but most fans do not know of its existence. Simply put, fan fiction is a piece of writing about characters in an already established fictional universe, such as *Lord of the Rings*, written by an avid fan of the work. In other words, fan fiction consists of stories that were never officially written using ready-made characters. Some may be short poems explaining the feelings of a character during a momentous time of their life. Others may be explanations of what happened after the work ended, or expansions on events that were only mentioned briefly in the initial tale. Writers of fan fiction can range from ten year olds with little grasp of grammar and spelling to published authors writing under a screen name. These stories are then posted on the internet and read by other fans that can leave reviews of the stories for the writers.

While a highly inclusive community, there exists in the world of fan fiction one character that causes vast divides and debates. She is common in every genre, and can be found just about everywhere. Sometimes she can be seen saving Boromir from Orcs as the tenth walker of the fellowship. Occasionally she walks hand in hand with Melkor, preventing his fall into darkness. Often, she will become the sibling of Aragorn we never knew existed, and definitely deserves to be King instead of him. In the fan fiction world, her type is known as "Mary Sue", although she will usually be referred to in the story by another, more elegant name. The author comes alive in a Mary Sue as the character, often showing certain traits that obviously relate her to the author, such as having the same name with a different spelling. Often, the stories are termed "self insertion", as the author puts herself into the story, making her character the center of all attention and the most important in the storyline.

The following is an example of one story in which Mary Sue emerges as a character.

Dreams Alive

Arlenia slept, dreaming of elves, wizards, and kings. The day before she had watched *Return of the King* again, and her mind still ran rampant through the varied scenes of battle and chivalry she had witnessed. She especially dreamed of Legolas, the pointy-eared, blonde haired elf she had fallen in love with over the course of three films. She loved the films, as they were the one way she had of escaping her real life after the tragic freak accident that had killed both of her parents. She knew that her feelings of affection would never be returned, but at least she still had the movies, where she could watch him whenever she wished. Little did she know that she would soon be consorting with those of whom she had dreamed, and find the affection for which she so deeply longed.

As Arlenia awoke, she was startled by the bright rays of light hitting her eyes. Had she forgotten to close the shutters again? However, when she was fully roused, she found herself waking in a grassy glen surrounded by a forest of thick trees. Startled and taken aback at her improbable predicament, she let out a gasp of surprise and fainted, just missing seeing the golden haired elf approaching her.

Legolas, of course, is the one approaching her. He will bring her back to his home in Mirkwood, protect her from any dangers on the way there, heal the emotional scars of her troubled past and, most likely, fall madly in love with her.

As you may have gathered from the description of Arlenia, her role in the story is usually extreme. Sometimes she will even disrupt what in the fanfic universe is commonly known as canon. Canon is the original work by the author who first created it, in this case, Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. Changing it in any way is looked down upon by readers, especially if it was done in ignorance of the original work, instead of with awareness and intention. In a community that claims to accept any new writer, surprising trends have developed, proving that there are some lines not to be crossed. Canon issues are one such line, as the lack of knowledge of it immediately signifies to a reader that the writer does not really care about what is being written, but rather about the response that she will get to her story. Most readers of fanfic care deeply about the original work, and know obscure facts and histories by heart. Those that do not share in the knowledge of this complex background information are deemed inferior, often times without even a full reading of the story. Any flaws are quickly pointed out by reviewers, and if they are not rectified, or at least adequately explained, no one will read the story. On a popular Tolkien website, "Stories of Arda", canon is even included in their submission guidelines. "**Canon:** It matters. Stories on this site should reflect a respect for Tolkien's work, which includes an understanding of what he wrote" ([Nilmandra 1](#)). In order for an author to get her work on a respectable site, she has to take the time to research it.

Arlenia is not yet guilty of the crime of changing canon, as it is not known whether or not Legolas ever had a wife or lover. However, if she joins the fellowship to take the ring to Mordor, she will be seen in a very negative light. Mary Sues such a Arlenia are usually an original character made up by the fan fiction writer with a very complicated name, a tragic past (widowed, beaten by her father, an orphan), and a beautiful exterior such as eyes that change colors based on mood, luxuriously shiny hair in all shades but brown, and, of course, the perfect body.

Arlenia's story was written by me, mainly in an attempt to have a good example of a Mary Sue for this report. I did, however, post it on fanfiction.net in order to see what type of response it would get. The results were rather amusing and very telling about the characteristics of reviewers. The story itself got over one hundred hits, but only two reviews. Those two were representative of reviews that are often left for stories in this genre. The first, written by "Enchantedwriter72", is typical of the type of author who writes Mary Sues. "Very nice prologue! This could turn out to be a great story. Your description is very nice, though if this was a chapter, longer would be nice! Great job!" ([Reviews 1](#)). With all of the misspellings and the lack of any point relating to the actual story, this review was not highly prized by me, as the writer. However, this praise is exactly what some authors live for. The opportunity to have your writing thought of as great by someone you don't know is very gratifying. Unfortunately, it does not persuade the writer to improve her quality.

A more helpful (and readable) review came after the first, which shows the type of reader that is needed with Mary Sue writers, in most cases. Murpledurp complains, "Why do they always faint? It is well written, I'll give you that. I like your details, they are interesting. I want to see more of this, because I want to see more of your writing style. But unfortunately, I smell a SUE! If you are VERY careful, you can avoid it. Continue it soon please" ([Reviews 1](#)). Her statement consists of both criticism and praise, meaning that it is constructive rather than derogatory, as Mary Sue reviews often become. She realizes that there can be more potential to a story than is simply shown by the first page, and sees through my disguise as a first time writer (mainly because I use grammar and proper spelling). However, her final comment shows the problem with most of the reading and writing community. While a story may be well written, and the characters may have the potential to become appealing, if it seems evident that the story will fit under the genre of Mary Sue, the story is suddenly completely unacceptable. Good characteristics are sometimes ignored simply because the story involves a self-inserted protagonist.

In most cases, the Mary Sue is written by a younger crowd. Fan fiction is usually (though not always) written by women, and Mary Sue stories are generally written by younger women. Often times, this story will be the first creative writing that these girls have ever shared with anyone other than an assignment written for a class. The Mary Sue character is, in many obvious ways, an idealized version of the writer, a representation of what she wishes she could actually be. One of the desires that many readers share is to actually have a role in a book and get to meet the characters. Children role play such scenes often, wearing superhero costumes and trying to fly. Writing a Mary Sue story is an extension of this desire—one that is more acceptable in an older person. Through making a character such as Arlenia, the author is allowed to inhabit another world and take part in the world of which she has read. As Penley writes, when discussing fantasy, this is an "ability to describe how the subject participates in and restages a scenario in which crucial questions about desire, knowledge, and identity [are] posed" ([Penley 480](#)). This forms an ultimate translation between the book and the reader. As a figurative translator of the written story, the reader gets the opportunity to become involved in what she interprets.

As a result of her lack of flaws and, generally, personality, the large majority of authors dislikes and avoids such tales. Unfortunately, most Mary Sues are rather flat characters, usually the result of the inexperience of the writer. Writing a good Mary Sue is far more difficult than simply writing a fanfic, because the character being written has not already been defined. When using characters from previously written works, there is a large storage of information to draw from. With Mary Sues, that information can be used with side characters, but more creativity in the construction of the protagonist must come from the mind of the writer.

Derision directed toward the Mary Sue has turned fan fiction on its head, with many stories written in which she is killed or tortured in awful ways. More stories are now written that make fun of the Mary Sue than actually exist with the typical form of Mary Sue in it. An example of a satire of the role of Mary Sue comes from Camilla Sandman. She is one of the first to start the movement of anti-Mary Sue, with a story that she wrote in 2002.

"Never mess with a land where magic exists," the man went on. Then he took a deep breath and launched into what had to be a pre-planned speech. "But do not despair. You can still write fanfic. All you have to do is enroll and pass The Official Fanfiction University of Middle-earth. OFUM offers a wide range of subjects as diverse as Evil Is as Evil Does 101 taught by the

esteemed Sauron himself and Poetry 202 with highly acclaimed author of 'Merry Dol and Dong Dillo: How to keep your neighbors out'; the one and only Tom Bombadil. Our esteemed teaching staff also includes other well-known residences of Middle-earth. Upon successful completion you will be given a license to write LotR fanfic. All clear?"

The story then continues to tell the tale of Lina, a Mary Sue writer who goes to Middle-earth, where the characters teach her and other writers of her sort how to write properly and teach them the important and necessary knowledge of canon. While this may seem like another Mary Sue type story with Lina's redemption, our hero has many obvious flaws and is well rounded. Also, her eventual love interest is Gimli--a character with little physical charm, therefore, not the subject of a Mary Sue's love, which proves that Lina is not one of the hated faction. The OFUM universe has grown exponentially since the first story was put online, and has been followed by many similar fan fiction university stories in other universes, with over seventy-six different versions written by different authors.

This backlash helps to reveal the fear that authors have that their own work will be seen in this way. One of the worst brands a writer could get would be that of a Mary Sue writer. She is universally reviled by all who feel they know better. But why is this? One reason is that these stories remind writers of their earliest forays into the writing world, which often produced unimpressive results. Another is that most authors still have the desire to become a physical part of the world of which they write. Since this is generally frowned upon, authors find other ways of filling the same need. Often, a version of the author will roam about the work bringing doom to all Mary Sues residing there. While the author may not realize it, she is yet again making herself into a perfect figure. Only she can see the foolishness of the Mary Sue, and she must stop characters such as Arlenia in order to save the real book characters from her. Yet again, the author's vessel is able to save the day and win the affection of her favorite character. The new vessel of the author enters to save the canon, but further disrupts it in the process.

The hypocrisy of the situation is not generally seen. Not all anti-Sue stories fall into this trap. Some are incredibly well written and funny, poking gentle fun at the Sues while continuing to poke fun at themselves as well. OFUM is one such example, as Lina occasionally cannot contain her Sue-like behavior and tries to seduce Legolas or one of the other very handsome characters. Also, contrary to popular belief, it is possible to write a Mary Sue story that is excellent. One that has reached recent acclaim, titled "Don't Panic", explores what would really happen if a girl suddenly fell into the somewhat medieval world of Middle-earth. The results aren't very pretty, but they are realistic and fascinating. She has done research on both the character from Tolkien as well as the historic cultures that Tolkien based the races of Middle-earth on. These cultures reveal what conditions would really have been like. As a result of this consistency and research, she is respected by readers, one of the few Mary Sue writers to gain that position.

Some authors fear the label of Mary Sue so much that they avoid writing any original characters, because of the possibility of receiving a bad label. As is stated by Pugh in her recent book on the literary merits of fan fiction, "Fanfic writers in general have a hard time liberating themselves from the taboo on Mary Sues" ([Pugh 133](#)). Throughout her novel Pugh struggles with the same taboo. Little is said about the possible positive effects of a Mary Sue, and she seems to regard the writing of inexperienced authors poorly. While the quality of the work often times is poor, she fails to realize that in order for a writer to improve, she must make many attempts, most of which will be bad. The problem with fan fiction is that these attempts become

public, something that makes readers and writers of "good" fan fiction mock at those who are just getting started. While Pugh sees the existence of the taboos, she is not able to overcome them.

The concept of accepting the Mary Sue as a permissible type of story is repellant to many writers of the community. When the primary draft of this essay was posted online, the reviews were fascinating. One review, by a girl who referred to herself as Cristine, said "99.9% of all Mary Sues every written have the same plot - there's never anything new. Only once in my entire life have I ever read a *good* Mary Sue, and that was because it was written right after "The Fellowship" was released, therefore it was, then, original. However, even though I disagree with the points you make, your essay was rather well written. =)" ([Reviews 2](#)). The other comments were very similar, not agreeing with the premise, but appreciating my writing technique in general. This particular review, however, reveals another reason for the rejection of Mary Sue that the reviewer most likely didn't intend. She claimed that no Mary Sue is original, but fails to realize that almost no fan fiction story is original. How many times have we seen stories where Pippin and Merry fall in love with their respective wives, or tales about the childhood of Aragorn and Legolas? It is not the main outline of the plot of the fanfic that makes it original, but rather the things that are done with that premise, and the ways that the characters interact within it.

Thus, it seems that the commonly held viewpoint that all Mary Sues are evil and must be eradicated is ill founded. The main reason that such a story is really reviled is that those who write it are often inexperienced, with poor writing skills. These impediments make it difficult to pen a story in which the heroine is realistic and sympathetic. Arlenia does have hope. Perhaps Legolas will not fall for her, and maybe she will not greatly alter canon. She may simply learn to exist in the new world she has been thrown into, with a few interesting twists thrown in along the way, of course. There exist so many possible stories involving Tolkien's characters that the possibility of writing a good and original Mary Sue story must exist. In order for such a story to be appreciated, however, the taboos surrounding the genre must be broken down.

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