

Abstract: Oral Traditions as a Model for Understanding 21st Century Writers and Readers

The Internet is home to a high volume of enthusiastic involvement in media fandom: the shared appreciation, discussion, and reworking of source material from tv shows, movies, books and other media 'texts'.

One of the central activities of fandom is fan fiction, a form of writing in which fan authors compose new stories using the characters and settings from existing media. Fan fiction was well-established before the Web existed, but has exploded in popularity since the Internet became accessible to the general public in the 1990s.

Thousands of stories are disseminated through blogs and online forums, settings where writer and readers can converse in full view of the rest of the reading audience. This degree of interactivity is unknown in print culture but has a strong parallel in the oral traditions documented by folklorists. Technology makes possible this form of interaction between storyteller and audience, and shared participation in fan culture brings it to life.

Together these elements produce a body of literature which has much in common with oral traditions. Improvisation, a technique associated with live performance, can be practiced in this setting. Compositional strategies considered hallmarks of oral narrative, such as the additive style described by Walter Ong and the unity of plot identified by Axel Olrik, are common in fan writing. And, like folk literature, bodies of fan writing develop such a degree of coherence over time that sophisticated motif-indexes can be developed.

Of course, literary paradigms and compositional methods also influence fan writing. However, scholarship on the oral tradition offers useful models for describing forms of writing which are unique to fan fiction, and may even represent a trajectory along which writing and readership will develop in the interactive environment of the Web.