

## **How Sherlock Can Be a Barista and Still Be Sherlock: A Study in Fan Fiction**

Irene Howard  
Philosophy & Ethics  
Ithaca College  
953 Danby Road  
Ithaca, NY 14850 USA

Faculty Advisor: Tatiana Patrone

### **Abstract**

Fictional characters are often thought to exist in some form, though not in the same way many other objects in our world do. Though you cannot meet Sherlock Holmes in the street, he is nevertheless a being that can be pondered, altered, and sent on adventures in written form. The nature of being, or ontology, of fictional characters is a question of much research and philosophical debate. Of particular concern in this paper is the question of equivalency; should characters in certain derivative works written by various authors be considered to be the same characters as the ones in the original canon? Fan fiction is a subtype of derivative literature consisting of unauthorized written works concerning established characters. It is a large and growing sector of popular culture, but has not to date been subject to much philosophical examination. Fan fictions have more restrictions in regards to their connection with the original work than other derivative works, so they are worth looking at as a unique construct which we can examine philosophically in a manner distinct from other discussions about fictional characters. The basis of the popularity of fan fiction is in assuming that the portrayed characters are the same as those from the original canon material. This allows readers to become invested in new stories about characters they are already emotionally attached to. This paper addresses the question of whether characters in fan fictions imported from the canon source material are ontologically the same as their canon counterparts. This paper also examines the idea of "essential properties" of fictional characters, and how they can be used to discern ontological equivalency. This question is viewed through the lenses of internal and external realism, and takes into account the ethos of the community of fan fiction writers themselves.

**Keywords: Fan fiction, Philosophy of literature, Ontology of fictional characters**

### **1. Introduction**

When we fall in love with characters in novels, film, or television, we invest our time and emotional energy into the characters and the worlds presented on page or screen. We laugh with them, cry for them, celebrate their triumphs and mourn their losses. We feel that we form a bond with these characters, and when a particular work of fiction affects us more than most, that felt bond can remain even after we have consumed the entire canon of works containing that character and have run out of original content. In such situations, some people choose to either create more content of their own featuring that character, or read other people's such creations. These creations by amateur fans that are legally unaffiliated with the original body of work are called "fan fictions."

While fan fiction is not a new concept, there has been a recent growing awareness of it that has prompted a number of discussions. There has been academic examination of fan fiction as a historical and modern literary construct (Jamison, 49); of fan fiction and other fan works as media for interacting with stories once those stories are completed (Williams, 17); and even of entire subgenres of fan fiction, such as those derived from works of vampire fiction (Leavenworth and Isaksson, 4). In this paper, we consider fan fiction as a novel subject of philosophical discussion.

Though they are a subset of derivative works, the discussion about characters in fan fiction is unique. Like with other derivative works, such as authorized novels in extended canon universes, characters in fan fiction are directly declared by their authors to be the same as the characters in the canon stories. However, fan fictions have a different relation to the canon work than other derivative works do. The following distinction is offered by Brendan Murday: properties declared in the original canon work can be unambiguously imported into a work of fan fiction, while the reverse is not true. It is true in the canon that Hermione Granger's parents are dentists in the Harry Potter universe - this may therefore be assumed to hold in any fan fiction about her. Should a fan fiction declare Hermione Granger to be an admirer of Plato, however, as the author J.K. Rowling wrote nothing on the issue, the reader may hardly assume it to be true in canon (Murday). The restricted freedom this relationship grants fan fiction with respect to the original work raises the question of whether characters in fan fictions are ontologically equivalent to those in the source material, as the author and perhaps the readers as well might hope. This is the focus of this paper.

## 2. Notation

Throughout this paper, the convention "Character\*" will be used to refer to a fictional character that is considered by its author to be a derivative of a "Character" from an established canon, created for the purposes of a fan fiction. For example, "Hermione\*" refers to a fictional character called "Hermione," written by a fan author, in the context of a fan fiction about the canon character "Hermione" as written by J.K. Rowling. Similarly, "Holmes\*" represents a fan fictional instantiation of Arthur Conan Doyle's "Holmes."

As an example, the previous point about important internal characteristics can be summed up using this notation thus: "Hermione has dentist parents" implies "Hermione\* has dentist parents," but "Hermione\* loves Plato" does not imply "Hermione loves Plato." The central question of the paper is whether Holmes and Holmes\* are equivalent.

## 3. Establishing Ontological Equivalency

Even though this paper is not concerned with the question of the existence of fictional characters, understanding the different explanations for their existence is still relevant for being able to establish equivalency. As described by Stacie Friend in her 2007 paper "Fictional Characters," the three main views on the ontology, or nature of being, of fictional characters are anti-realism, internal realism, and external realism. Unlike both types of realists, anti-realists argue that fictional characters do not exist in any form, and that any discussion about said characters requires the *pretense* that they are real (Friend, 144). To start with, it is necessary for the purposes of this paper to adopt a realist view, because it offers "intentionality, or object-directedness, of thoughts and discourse about fictional characters [... thus allowing] 'counter-fictional' imagining, as when [one considers] what would have happened had Hamlet killed Claudius sooner" (Friend, 147). Nearly all of fan fiction engages in counter-fictional imagining to some degree. Therefore, as this is a practice deeply relevant to the genre and not accommodated by anti-realism, it makes sense to narrow our look at fictional characters to the lenses of internal and external realism.

Internal realists hold that fictional objects, including fictional characters, are defined primarily by their internal properties, such as their profession, hair color, or age. The internal realist view sees fictional objects as "eternal, uncreated entities, delineated or constituted by sets of properties; for every set of properties, there is a corresponding object" (Friend, 147). External realists hold instead that fictional objects are not defined by properties assigned to that object within a story, but rather by "external" properties such as the author who created them (Friend, 147). These external properties can also include the author's intentions or, as is particularly relevant for fan fiction, the origin of the object. In her paper on "Fictional Characters as Abstract Artifacts," Thomasson claims that "we would say that two works [containing similar characters] are about the same character only if we have reason to believe that the works derived from a common origin" (Thomasson, 145). Since a fan fiction author's explicit intention is to write a derivative of the original story, this definition would hold for characters\* in fan fiction stories.

If an amateur author writes a story in which their Sherlock Holmes\* has all of the same internal properties as Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, both realist theories about fictional characters would state that they are the same character. According to external realists, Holmes\* is the same as Holmes due to the former being part of a derivative work based on the latter, so the fan fiction author's "intention to refer to [the original] character suffices for the identity" (Friend, 149). According to internal realists, they are the same character because they share the same set of internal properties.

What if an amateur author writes a story where their Holmes\* is exactly the same as Holmes in every respect, from his mannerisms to his location to his particular adventures, except that he has blonde hair? In this case, would the two

be the same character? Instinctively, the answer would still be yes. According to external realism, they are still the same character. However, according to a strict interpretation of the internal realist theory, they are no longer the same character, because they do not have the exact same set of properties. A modification on the essential premise of the internal realist view may offer more flexibility with which to examine the internal properties of fan fiction characters.

In his 1994 paper "Fictional Characters Are Just Like Us," Suits postulates that fictional characters have a full set of properties much like non-fictional people, and that properties that the reader is unaware of still have a truth (Suits, 106). What if a writer were to create a fan fiction where they mention that Holmes\* has a mole on his back? Holmes\* is still Holmes according to external realism. However, whether the two are the same character according to internal realism is unclear. Holmes either does or does not have a mole on his back. In the case that he does, internal realists would say that Holmes\* is equivalent to Holmes, but in the case that he does not, internal realists would say that Holmes\* is not equivalent to Holmes. Since the truth about Holmes' potential mole is unknown, the internal realist's view is indeterminable. Therefore, a strict interpretation of the internal realism view would fail to be applicable to the study of fan fictional characters\* because most, if not all, fan fiction characters\* involve changes or additions to the internal properties of their canon counterparts. However, it still provides an important method of exploring our comparisons of fictional characters, so we will instead use a slight variation on internal realism:

*Two characters are the same if they share the same **essential** internal properties.*

Arguably by definition, if a property were essential to a fictional character, it would have been mentioned in the canon material, and its truth would therefore be known, which would resolve the internal realist's paradox above. Holmes' profession, living situation, family, and drug use are all properties that are essential to his character, and whose truths are known. Therefore, stories in which Holmes\* and Holmes share the same profession, living situation, family, and drug use (and all other such properties) would contain the same main characters according to internal realists. Similarly, internal realists would also be able to say that stories where Holmes\* has a mole on his back or prefers orange cats to grey cats, but is otherwise identical to Holmes, contain the same main character as Doyle's series. They would argue this because the truths of these properties are not mentioned in the canon and are thus unessential and irrelevant.

This does, however, introduce a question as to what qualifies as *essential* in regards to known properties. As said above, this clearly does not include any properties not mentioned in relation to the character in the original canon. However, it would be difficult to argue that every property mentioned in the canon is essential. Would Holmes be fundamentally the same man if he were exactly as he is, except blonde? A non-fictional person can dye his hair at any time and remain the same person, and a fictional character can easily be written as doing so, so it suffices to say that the bloneness itself is not the distinguishing factor. At the very least due to its easy mutability, it would be difficult to argue that bloneness is an essential property, and that blonde-but-otherwise-identical Holmes\* and Holmes are distinct characters.

If we are to gain a consensus in the argument that our blonde Holmes\* is the same character as Holmes, we could hope that the external realists are satisfied that it is a derivative work, and the internal realists are satisfied because the property bloneness is unimportant. Pushing the argument further, we may ask whether Holmes\* is the same character as Holmes if Holmes\* is no longer a consulting detective, but a barista. Certainly, Holmes being a consulting detective is an important property that defines his character. Yet due to the complete lack of regulation inherent to the fan fiction institution, there can be, and have been, fan fiction stories written where Holmes\* has a profession other than that of consulting detective.

As an example of a fan fiction that changes an essential property of a character while maintaining ontological equivalency, consider the following: A fan fiction called *Unfinished Business*, based on the *Harry Potter* series of novels, had the character of Hermione Granger\* die within the first chapter and return as a ghost. Being alive could be considered one of the most essential properties of a character, and yet the remainder of her character's properties are similar to the canon Hermione's properties:

As for Harry and Ron, their amicable conversation with each other and with her was the same as it had been on a hundred other afternoons in the library, despite her changed status. Hermione enjoyed their company immensely, especially their refusal to treat her any differently. Never before had she appreciated their exasperation as she nagged the two of them into some studying, although Ron complained about the unfairness that Hermione would never have to study again. Harry pointed out that, for Hermione, it was the equivalent of the two of them never playing Quidditch again, which caused Ron to shudder and shut him up most effectively. (Ramos, ch. 2)

Though this ghostly Hermione\* has lost the arguably essential characteristic of being alive within the story, she retains many of the same essential properties that defined her character in terms of personality, motivation, and interpersonal interactions. At the beginning of this story, Hermione\* was alive, sitting in Potions class, and displaying no properties that were at odds with the canon Hermione. Evaluating Hermione\* at the beginning of the story, both internal and external realists would unequivocally agree that she was the same as Hermione based on given information. Therefore, this story consists of counter-fictional imagining (Friend, 147), a major motivation for fan fiction writing wherein the author imagines how a canon character would react in a particular situation (in this case, supernatural death). This is in contrast with the other major motivation for writing fan fiction, which is seeing how a character's life would change if an aspect of the character themselves were to change. In the case of ghost-Hermione\*, mere counter-fictional imagining, especially when the character begins the story with the same internal properties as the canon character, should not have an impact on whether they are the same character.

These two motivations result in two types of divergences from canon that occur in fan fiction stories: either the author places a character with internal properties similar to its canon counterpart in a non-canon situation to see how they would react, or they change an internal property of the familiar canon character and see how this would change their interactions with their fictional world. An example of the former would be a canon-similar Hermione\* dying and becoming a ghost, and an example of the latter would be a story wherein Sherlock Holmes\* was a barista and had never been a consulting detective. In the former, the fan fiction character\* was at one point indisputably ontologically the same as its canon counterpart, in the latter, there were fundamental differences before the story even began. We have established how characters in the former can be ontologically the same as their canon counterparts. But what of the latter?

Say an author were to write a story in which Sherlock Holmes\* had the same personality, attitude, intelligence, and other such properties as Sherlock Holmes, but he had not been born with the independent wealth that allowed him to dabble with private consulting for the police department, and had become a barista instead. Imagine that he whiled away his work hours making silent deductions about everyone around him, and that one day, when a Dr. Watson\* entered his bar, a bond was formed after a deduction of military service made from a tan line and a small scar. Imagine then that they found themselves embroiled in a mystery, where the two used banter and detecting tactics that would be familiar to any fan of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's works. External realists would agree that they are the same character, for the same reason behind their agreement with all above claims, but internal realists would say that they are not, because an essential property is changed in such a way that at no time could Holmes\* and Holmes have been the same character before a divergence. However, they can be shown to be the same character, without disregarding internal realism.

If Holmes\* were a barista *and* blonde *and* American *and* had never met a Dr. Watson\*, it would be difficult to argue that they were the same character simply based on the word of the author. And yet, giving the character any single one of these new attributes does not make the character so different as to be unrecognizable and disconnected with the main character. The entire purpose of fan fiction is to write stories with the same characters as those in canon, with the knowledge that fan fiction readers have come to read stories about their favorite characters and that if the characters are unrecognizable the readers will have no attachment and will not read the story. Therefore, we can conclude that a story that successfully leaves the reader attached contains characters that the readers accept as equivalent to the canon characters. If external realists, authors, and readers all agree that a character\* is the same as its canon counterpart, it would be counterproductive to argue that they are different on the basis of internal realism alone. However, internal realism does play a part in defining the relationship the characters\* have with their canon counterparts: they are clearly defined by sharing most internal properties, and they are required to have these similarities in order to be accepted as the same character, but they are not restricted so that they have to share *all* internal properties.

### 3. Conclusion

A character\* in fan fiction is ontologically the same as the canon counterpart as long as 1) they are claimed to be, and are written as, a derivative of a character from an established canon work, and 2) they share enough *essential* properties with the original character that they are accepted by the readership as the same character.

## 4. Further Research

Although there is no official regulation within the fan fiction community, unofficially, the community will reject those works which fall outside of its generally accepted ethos. The following is a quote from an infamous piece of writing entitled "My Immortal" that the fan fiction community has universally cast out as not representative of true fan fiction:

My friend B'loody Mary Smith smiled at me understatedly. She flipped her long waste-length gothic black hair and opened her crimson eyes like blood that she was wearing contact lenses on. She had pale white skin that she was wearing white makeup on. Hermione was kidnapped when she was born. Her real parents are vampires and one of them is a witch but Voldemort killed her mother and her father committed suicide because he was depressed about it. She still has nightmares about it and she is very haunted and depressed. It also turns out her real last name is Smith and not Granger. (Since she has converted to Satanism she is in Slytherin now not Griffindoor. )<sup>[sic]</sup> (Gilesbie, ch. 5)

Although the above character bears no resemblance to the character of Hermione Granger from the Harry Potter series, the author does spend the briefest amount of effort establishing her *claim* that they are the same character (Gilesbie). To agree that the author is correct in this claim, on the external realist's basis that it is a fan fiction and that "Hermione"\* is a derivative of Hermione, would be to ignore the ethos of the fan fiction community that has unanimously disregarded this as a true attempt at a derivative work. In this paper, analyses of fan fictions are restricted to the body of works that fall within the unofficial, yet fairly unanimous, consensus on what constitutes true attempts at the genre. Examination of the properties and limits of this distinction could be continued in further research.

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