

Subtext and Identity: Constructing Sexuality in Fiction

by Lauren B. Collister

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Introduction

What happens when a beloved television show ends abruptly without any sort of closure for its viewers? Before the proliferation of the Internet, people who once loved the cancelled shows were reduced to watching reruns on late night television and maybe engaging a friend in conversation on the topic of this television show; characters died when they were no longer explicitly portrayed by their actors on the screen. The scene is different now that the Internet has created a gathering place for television show fanatics – shortened to be called simply *fans* – to congregate across the miles that once separated them. Worlds, stories, and characters continue to live on in the minds and the conversations of those who love them. It was in this setting that *fanfiction* was born.

Fanfiction is defined below by *The Fanfiction Glossary*:

any story written about an existing TV show, book, movies, comic, etc. without permission from the original creators or intention of profit.

In other words, some fans of various media, including television shows – whether cancelled or ongoing – spend their free time writing stories based in the world and using the characters of their chosen subject. The term for this collective of fans and their work is *fandom*. A peculiar phenomenon often happens in subsets of fandom, particularly when authors of fanfiction want to write about the characters in romantic relationships -- while a majority of romantic fanfiction features heterosexual pairings, a substantial portion features homosexual pairings, particularly between male characters. Homosexual

fanfiction is called *slash*, a name derived from the mark used to separate the names of the characters involved in the pairing (e.g. Kirk/Spock).

There has been limited past work done on the slash subset of fandom. Scodari (2003) showed that fanfiction and slash in particular is an attempt to subvert the hegemonic tendencies of the writer's culture. This is highly contextualized, though, and is not an accurate reflection of the culture of slash fandom. In fact, she shows that the hegemony is often reflected in the fiction even if the actual romantic pairing is subversive.

Another interpretation of slash fiction is a proposed by Somogyi (2002). Quoting Russ, she states, "They [fans] want to create images of male bodies as objects of desire." Salmon and Symons complicate this issue with ideas of mating psychology, by indicating that slash is about "female fantasy of heterosexual sex acted out via ostensibly male bodies" and that the partners depicted, "before they fell in love... were united by a bond that is plausibly more durable and secure than sexual or romantic passions". The authors add that, since slash relationships often consist of two partners who are warriors, another possible interpretation is that the women who read these stories identify with a more adventurous character (who, in modern fiction, is rarely, if ever, female) and "fuses traditionally female romance with traditionally male camaraderie, adventure, and risk taking". How do these fans create these relationships, and what kinds of cues can lead to the formation of these fan-based pairings?

Woledge (2005) details the practices of fans more clearly, citing Morley's four processes of decoding: "recognition, comprehension, interpretation, and response". Woledge applies these processes to the Kirk/Spock pairing of *Star Trek* to illuminate the ways in which fans decode the textual material and exploit ambiguity. This process can

be applied to any television show in a fictional setting, whether science fiction or fantasy based. It is through this process that the concept of “subtext” is created. *The Fanfiction*

Glossary defines subtext as:

In literary analysis, "subtext" refers to any element of plot that is implied rather than clearly stated. In fandom, this term is usually used to label any canon action, dialogue, or imagery which imply sexual attraction between two characters, usually of the same gender.

What types of things can be classified as subtext? Fans can create subtext of almost anything, but one of the most common types is compliments.

Spotlighting the science fiction series *Firefly* (Whedon 2003), the phenomenon of subtext can be analyzed in the interactions of the character Simon Tam. The other male characters feminize him by objectifying him with similar treatment to typically female characters, and his characterization is inherently one that is easily identifiable with female fans while still being inside the masculine world of the show. Specifically, two related scenes (defined by many fans as the “slashest” scenes in the series) featuring two male characters exchanging compliments can be analyzed for complimentary subtext.

The Setting: Resisting Hegemony in Context

Simon Tam is well-educated, a doctor, one of the top surgeons in the universe. He has no objection to seeing blood, reattaching a severed leg, or drugging himself to near-death in order to sneak into a hospital. Why, then, is he nearly-ubiquitously among both the show’s characters and its fans considered to be one of the most feminine characters, even more so than the women? The answer is the nature of *Firefly’s* setting.

The show is set five hundred years in the future, where the most common means of travel is a spaceship and an interplanetary war has occurred and decimated the lives of many of the main characters. The majority of the show takes place on a run-down Firefly

class cargo ship named *Serenity*, and its crew barely ekes out a living doing petty thievery and smuggling. To complement the setting, the characters (even the females) are also very stereotypically male in this usually male-dominated setting. The main character, Captain Malcom Reynolds, is one of the masculine characters on the show -- not only is he the captain of the ship, but a veteran of the losing side of the interplanetary war -- and someone who often engages in fistfights in bars. Another male on the ship, Jayne Cobb, is a mercenary with a precious gun collection who plays the part of the “dumb comic relief” of the show – another masculine role. The pilot, Hoban “Wash” Washburne, is a risk-taker who excels in technical knowledge of machinery and flight, the stereotypically male “techie” with a quick wit and a sarcastic sense of humor. Shepherd Book, the final male on the regular cast, is desexualized because of his religious standing and his vow of chastity – one of the first things he says in his first appearance is to say “I never married” when he is called “grandpa”. (Interestingly, many fans on the Browncoats message board voice a vehement opposition to any romantic pairings involving Shepherd Book, insisting that it goes against his core characterization.)

Even the female characters occupy masculine roles. The second-in-command, Zoë Washburne, can best be described as Amazonian – she is tall, dark-skinned, muscular, carries a gun at all times, and wears leather as a major component of her wardrobe. The fact that she is married to Wash, the techie pilot, is a matter of much consternation throughout the show, and it is often in this context that we see the only “feminine” aspects of her character. The ship’s mechanic, Kaylee Frye, is a techie counterpart of the pilot Wash, except she is masculinized by wearing baggy clothing and constantly being covered in engine grease. Kaylee’s femininity is often seen as “cute” because she often

seems so out of context with herself with her conflicting feminine desires and masculine occupation. Simon's sister, River, is revealed in the movie *Serenity* to be a highly skilled killer, a dangerous telepathic who fits the "superpower" aspect of the science fiction and fantasy genres.

Compared to these characters, Doctor Simon Tam is out of place with his high-class speech patterns, his finely pressed clothes, and his soft features. His only comparable character on the show is Inara, a "companion" – the show's version of a socially-accepted prostitute. She is highly sexualized due to the nature of her occupation – she is the only character we see actually engaging in the act of sex (outside of the married couple Wash and Zoë), and she is definitely seen with both male and female partners.

While Simon may seem at first glance to be a man who conforms to an ideal of modern American culture, within the context of the show, he is understood as out of place and highly feminized. His homosexualization by fans is a reflection of how displaced he seems around the other highly masculine crew members; while he may seem masculine when taken out of context, when he is placed in a setting like *Firefly*, he becomes feminized. The other characters routinely feminize him – Mal and Jayne describe him as "pretty" on many occasions, and his many botched romantic attempts with Kaylee characterize her as the dominant one in the relationship while he is the shy one who does not know what to do with himself.

Many fans point to Simon's inability to initiate a relationship with Kaylee as proof of his bisexuality (if not his outright homosexuality). However, in the show, bisexuality is seen to be the norm – Inara is seen sleeping with both men and women, and in the episode "Heart of Gold", Mal specifically states, when asked if he's "sly" (meaning

homosexual, in the context of the show), “I lean toward womenfolk”. In the early episodes, Kaylee is also often teased about her crush on Inara. Bisexuality appears to be, in the *Firefly* universe, much more accepted than in contemporary American society. This makes it easy for many fans to justify their same-sex pairings; still, there are subtextual clues about which characters could pursue a relationship. One very popular pair, Jayne/Simon, seems to be counter-intuitive since the two characters express much hostility toward each other in the course of the show. However, Cox (2005) remarks that “Jayne is an oversexed, underwashed space cowboy... but he's got that edge of danger that makes him extra-appealing to Simon, who quite frankly doesn't know how to let go in any other way.” There are many ways that fans identify this relationship with subtext, but one of the principal ways is with compliments.

The Interaction: How Compliments Become Subtext

Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003) say regarding the gender difference in making and receiving compliments, “women complimenting is primarily about (positive) affect, about strengthening solidarity with others in one’s communities of practice. For men, in contrast, complimenting is supposed to be primarily about asserting one’s authority to evaluate the other” (151). In other words, women make genuine compliments that are intended to help another person’s positive presentation of self; contrastingly, men compliment each other in order to assert their dominance over another by being of a high enough position to make a value judgment on another’s action.

One scene from *Firefly* which is often cited by fans as one of the most convincing of Simon Tam’s homosexualization is what the user Executrix refers to as “Simon’s ‘My

Hero' performance". This performance occurs at the end of the episode "Ariel". The basic plot of the episode is that Jayne Cobb is paid a large sum of money to leak information about Simon Tam's whereabouts to the authorities who are searching for him. Jayne leads Simon and his sister right into a trap, but then ostensibly feels guilty and fights against the authorities to free Simon. Simon, having no idea that he was just sold out, thanks Jayne for saving him, and also at the end, comments on how amazing Jayne was when he was fighting. The lines, directly from the script (TWIZ TV 2004), are below – the first is from the scene where Simon, River, and Jayne are being held by the authorities, and the second is back on the ship, safe and sound:

SIMON

I saw what you did out there.

A long beat, as Jayne wonders if he's busted. Defensive --

JAYNE

I didn't do nothing.

SIMON

(kicking himself)

More than I did. If those officers hadn't been armed, I think you'd have had a chance.

JAYNE

Guy shoved me, I shoved back. Not like I was trying to mount a rescue.

SIMON

Still. I appreciate you trying.

JAYNE

You know what I'd appreciate? If you'd stop flapping your pretty mouth at me. I'm trying to think of a way out of here and I can't do it with you yammering.

KAYLEE
What happened to your face?

JAYNE
Got it shot.

KAYLEE
With a gun?!

JAYNE
(said with disgust)
One of them "non-lethal" guns.

SIMON
It was a sonic rifle. He was amazing. I can't begin to tell you... we wouldn't be standing here if it weren't for him.
(to Jayne, means it, patting him on the shoulder)
Thank you.

JAYNE
Hey. You're part of my crew.

MAL
I think I might cry.

SIMON
(giggles)

The first conversation is something that Eckert and McConnell-Ginet discuss as being an example of a routine and formulaic compliment, one that could be insincere. They give the following example:

A: I liked your paper about X.
B. Thanks for the compliment.
A: It's not (just) a compliment. I REALLY liked it.
(Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 147)

Simon and Jayne's first exchange falls into this pattern. Simon compliments Jayne on how well he fought, trying to save face for Jayne when he says "If those officers hadn't

been armed, I think you'd have had a chance.” Clearly, Simon is trying to make Jayne feel better about their predicament (when he does not know that Jayne actually was the one who knowingly arranged this predicament beforehand) by saying that the officers had an unfair advantage. He is performing facework for Jayne by preserving his positive outward portrayal of a tough mercenary who can take down any opponent. Jayne immediately denies that he did anything special – not once, but twice. The first time, it is because he is trying to save face for himself by denying that he turned Simon in when he thinks Simon has figured out his scheme. The second time, after he finds out that Simon does not know about his betrayal, his denial is part of a ritual compliment routine – someone compliments, and the complimentee says “Oh, it was nothing” or “Don’t worry about it”; Jayne has his own version of this response, “Guy shoved me, I shoved back. Not like I was trying to mount a rescue.” Just like in Eckert and McConnell-Ginet’s example, Simon replies with his own form of “It’s not just a compliment”, which is “Still. I appreciate you trying.”

At this point, Jayne does not know how to handle a reassurance of positive meaning by Simon, and he immediately orders Simon to “stop flapping your pretty mouth”. This speech act reinforces Jayne’s superiority to Simon in the hierarchy of the show – Jayne is the experienced man who has been in and out of more dangerous situations than Simon has ever dreamed about, and therefore he is the one qualified to make an evaluation of the current predicament. Jayne puts Simon down and raises himself up at the same time; he comments on Simon’s appearance within the context of an insulting order, which could be compared to a man telling a woman that her duty is to look pretty while his is to take action. By using the word “pretty” (which, as a side note, many men in the show often

use to refer to Simon), Jayne feminizes him at the same time, which increases the gender ambiguity of the later complimenting scene. Sffan on the Browncoats message board says of this first scene, “That's one of my many shining points of proof that Jayne is rude to Simon because he's got a big crush on him.” This response shows that fans can perceive Jayne's unsureness of how to handle Simon's compliments and sincerity as a form of sexual tension, and is an example of how fans of a show can sexualize ambiguity by reading into the “subtext” an idea of sexuality that may not be overt.

The second script example above features another compliment exchange from the same episode that follows Eckert and McConnell-Ginet's example. Simon remarks again that Jayne was “amazing”, and then genuinely thanks him for it. This time, he is saying this in front of the whole rest of the crew, definitely doing facework in Jayne's favor. This time, Jayne replies with something that is both a ritual compliment response and a compliment in itself – “You're part of my crew” is a way for Jayne to say that he would have done the same for anybody else; however, up until this point, Jayne has obviously never considered Simon to be a part of the crew (or else he would not have sold him out to the authorities earlier in the episode). He shows here that he accepts Simon, which, by the reaction on Simon's features, is something the often-ostracized doctor appreciates. This response increases the ambiguity of not only Simon's portrayal on screen, but the perception of him by the other characters. Jayne's ambivalent reply is both the kind of brush-off that would reject another man's attempted dominance over his authority *and* the kind of group solidarity strengthening comment we might see in female compliments. This reaction by Jayne is in stark contrast to Simon's initial compliment, which is a compliment intended to do facework and strengthen the relationship between himself and

Jayne. This discrepancy is another example of subtext that causes people like LiveJournal user Emella to say regarding the scene: “Simon practically drools over Jayne. He grins and acts like a little fan groupy. It's so gay and Simon acts like Jayne is the greatest thing since white bread.” Jayne, by complimenting Simon in both a masculine and feminine fashion at the same time, holds onto the characterization of an adventurous person, but also incorporates a feminine action that fits the identification desires of the slash fans from Somogyi’s 2002 study as well as Salmon and Symon’s 2003 work.

These two conversations are the most frequently-cited instances of subtext by fans who pair the characters Jayne and Simon romantically. In the context of the series, the compliments are indicative of the tense relationship between the two characters, and it is up to the fans to decide whether this tension is platonic or sexual. Those fans who identify with slash pairings interpret these compliments in the context of sexual tension, while it is also possible to a conflict between two people of different social classes and in different places in the hierarchy.

Conclusion

Subtext is a difficult concept to define, especially in the ever-changing world of online fandom. However, interpreting subtext is one of the most important practices within the subset of slash fans, and each fan has a definite grasp on what subtext is, even if many may not be able to define what constitutes as “slashy subtext” and what does not. Complimentary subtext is seen quite often in online slash fandoms, including those who operate within the context of the television show *Firefly*. By examining the two most

often cited instances of complimentary subtext, the ambiguity of the reception of and the response to compliments by both characters can be broken down into two interpretations – platonic and sexual – which can be interpreted differently based on the desires of the fans. Ambiguity is a highly important component of subtext, and is something that gives fans a wide range of interpretation opportunities and possibilities to identify with the characters.

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