

**“Pairing: Reader x Angst”: An Autoethnographic Look into how Readers Develop
Attachments to Romantic Angst Fanfiction**

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Introduction

Most people decide what their favorite book is based on how the story within made them feel. For those who revel in remembrance, their favorite book might have made them feel nostalgic for something that once was. For those who seek out excitement, their favorite book might have made them feel a thrill unlike any other. In any case, people tend to associate their favorite books with feelings they enjoy, and which they might like to relive every once in a while. As this is a pretty universal idea, you might be able to imagine my confusion when I realized that my favorite stories make me feel terrible. I was even more confused when I realized that I'm not the only one out there that feels this way about their favorite stories. When I sat down and thought about this conundrum for the first time, I realized that the understanding behind why I like to hurt so much lies within a huge web of my early reading choices, fan literature, and so many different aspects of my identity. So, when the opportunity of writing an honors thesis came along at the same time as my confusion, the two seemed to merge together seamlessly. The initial goal here was to find a definite answer as to why some of us are addicted to emotionally damaging fan literature, or romantic angst fanfiction as it will later be defined. The answer that we will end up getting to was not as concrete as I had hoped, but certainly helped me understand why I love the things that I do, and might help others on their own path towards understanding. Through an autoethnographic study of myself as both a fan and a reader, I have found a nuanced connection between the ideas of love that I got from my early reading choices, my toxic high school relationship, and the romantic angst addiction I developed in my later years.

Methodology

Autoethnography is a research method formed by a mix of personal experience and cultural analysis. The root word there is ethnography, which is the study of culture, and thus an autoethnography is a study of culture within the self. In “A History of Autoethnographic Study”, the authors very much stress the importance of understanding that “knowledge about the social and human world cannot exist independent of the knower; that we cannot know or tell anything without in some way being involved and implicated in the knowing and telling” (Douglass & Carless, 2013). This is the principle of which autoethnography prides itself on, as any autoethnography understands that culture is present within the self, and the self is sufficient enough to represent and explore such culture. This principle is reflected within the beginning of autoethnography as a formal methodology, which has multiple versions. *In Self + Culture + Writing: Autoethnography for/as Writing Studies*, Rebecca L. Jackson and Jackie Grutsch McKinney offer two possible origins of autoethnography. The first believes that autoethnography came to be because of the crisis of representation, which is when researchers began to struggle with the idea that they could write objectively. Specifically, ethnographers had to come to terms with the fact that ethnography could never really be just an account of culture, as the researcher is always going to be inevitably present somehow. This led to the formation of an evolved ethnography, autoethnography, in which the researcher is allowed to pay attention to and draw from personal experiences that acknowledge their involvement within the research. The second possible origin of autoethnography, as noted still by Jackson and McKinney, is attributed to black female writers and speakers in the 19th century, specifically Zora Neale Hurston. Hurston, an African-American anthropologist, used her ethnographic training and the knowledge that the lack of racial biases she had as opposed to her white counterparts when researching black culture

made her both the perfect researcher and subject to forge autoethnography. Whichever origin might have come first, both are perfect examples of why autoethnographic methods would be perfect to explore fanfiction, as it is literature created by the culture within people, and autoethnography not only acknowledges that culture exists within us, but encourages us to be aware of it and lean into it.

Autoethnography, while being a somewhat popular form of research and self narrative, actually has a history of being contested and shunned. For starters, while there certainly exists academic literature that could guide a researcher hoping to embark on an autoethnographic journey, most people would just end up telling you to do what feels right, because there aren't specific rules that dictate exactly what an autoethnography should be (Mendez, 2013). Sure, there are some parameters, such as an autoethnography must explore the self and make a valuable connection to and interpretation of culture, but what that is supposed to look like has never actually been set in stone. This has presented autoethnographers with issues when attempting to use autoethnography as methodology, as methodology usually gives a somewhat set idea of what a specific piece of research should look like. This has led to many scholars questioning the validity of autoethnography as a method, as having so much creative room has just led some to believe that it isn't really something that exists, or should exist. Even the very nature of autoethnography, which believes that the researcher can not only be the subject but actually benefit from playing both roles, has led to scholars raising a brow at autoethnography. This is perfectly explained by researcher Anjali J. Forber-Pratt in "You're Going to Do What?: Challenges of Autoethnography in the Academy". "This became a double-edged sword of a challenge—having to prove its worthiness for myself as well as acceptability to others—a challenge shared by other scholars too" (Forber-Pratt, 2015). This quote is pulled from a section

titled *Finding my voice*, in which Forber-Pratt details how they themselves struggled with accepting their use of autoethnography when those around them referred to their duality as researcher and subject as a “cop-out”. In any way, such attacks on the value behind autoethnography actually make it a great fit to discuss fanfiction, as fanfiction is no stranger itself to being questioned, or being considered “not academic enough” (Friess, 2022). As autoethnography and fanfiction turn out to be bedfellows in this way, they could end up understanding and supplementing each other better than any other pairing.

Now that I have laid the groundwork for us to understand autoethnography, and how it might intersect with fanfiction, I can build upon that and speak to what my autoethnography will entail. As mentioned previously, there is really no specific formula for creating an autoethnography; Some have decided to lean in more into the self narrative aspect, and have analyzed and interpreted culture in ways that read like a story. Take for example Rebecca Hallman Martini’s “When Things Fall Apart”, which *Self + Culture + Writing* labels as an evocative autoethnography. An evocative autoethnography reads more like creative nonfiction as opposed to a traditional research paper, and that was certainly the case for “When Things Fall Apart”. Martini’s ability to provide a cultural analysis of mental health, the role it plays in work conditions, and the journey of graduate students in a way that didn’t make me feel like I was reading a research paper, which I was, drew me in immediately. I decided then that I did not want my voice to get lost within the jargon of typical research and methodology, as I felt that it somehow compromised any authenticity within my own experiences. That being said, I was not ready to let go of my researcher voice entirely. It wasn’t until I stepped away from autoethnography and towards fan studies generally, that I found how my own autoethnography could serve all the purposes I wanted. One of the first texts I read in my fan studies deep dive

was *Framing Fanfiction* by Kristina Busse, who states the following in their second chapter:

“While some would argue that one’s position in a given community could lead to a lack of objectivity, I contend that my very subjectivity provides a comprehensive insight difficult to achieve otherwise.” Such an argument as to why a fan is better suited to study fans than a non-fan framed the way I analyzed any fan studies literature afterwards. I became acutely aware of the fact that the majority of the authors whose work I was reading were fans themselves, and thus integrated autoethnographic elements into their writing. It was a norm for scholars within this genre to blend their own experiences with larger and more general explorations of fandom, and not think twice about it. This then inspired me to not be afraid of letting my researcher voice and personal voice coexist.

Such an inspiration led me to the autoethnography you are about to read, which is a blend of evocative self narrative and “traditional” research conventions. While both my researcher voice and personal voice are present, I still value the two individually and do not want them to interrupt one another. That is what presents us with the personal memory/ external data section formatting I have chosen. The personal memory data sections, or the self narrative sections, are driven by personal memory data I collected through chronicling. Essentially, I picked out themes that I found to be relevant, and then I sorted through memories that fit those themes and wrote them in order, which is chronicling. Each personal memory data section is followed up with an external data section, or traditional research section, which is driven by external data that ranges from academic literature to mini self-observational studies. These sections read more like what you might expect from traditional looking research, but are still inherently autoethnographic as they can and will refer to my own experiences as data. The idea behind such formatting is that my personal voice will be able to tell an uninterrupted narrative through my personal memory

data sections, and my researcher voice will be able to use the external data sections to provide a more analytical look into what is going on in the personal memory data sections. Think of this like a middle school dance, where two partners are dancing to a slow song and are too embarrassed to fully hold on, so instead they are holding hands and keeping each other at arm's length as they awkwardly sway from side to side. My personal voice and researcher voice are those two partners, and this paper is that slow dance, only I hope the outcome is not as awkward.

Personal Memory Data #1: Twilight as My First Big Chapter Book

When I was in the fifth grade, my school's administration decided that student behavior would be the big focus of the year. As it turned out, us not staying silent when we were lining up for lunch and making slime in our desk drawers during class warranted some really big changes across campus. To alleviate this issue, they came up with a ticketing system, where certain good behaviors earned you a certain amount of tickets, e.x: 2 tickets for raising your hand before speaking, or 3 tickets for turning in your homework. At the end of each semester, they filled up one of the portables on campus with all sorts of treats for us, like candy and buckets of premade slime for those who had yet to forget what once was, with the idea that they would be auctioned off for tickets that we had earned. I was a really big reader back then, so I gravitated towards the used books section of the portable when I walked in on my designated day. It actually worked out perfectly for me, because while everyone else was bidding on bags of takis and lego sets, I had my pick of all the books available. What started off as a laidback search slowly grew into a very frantic one, as my teacher began hurrying everyone to bid for at least one thing before we left, and I had still not found an adequate book. Fearful of the possibility of walking away with nothing, I quickly handed in my tickets for a coverless copy of *Twilight*, by Stephanie Meyer, with a broken spine and sharpie all over it. When I realized I had picked up a *Twilight* book, the walk back to class was a shameful one. I knew only what a 10 year old could gather from society at the time, so I knew that *Twilight* was for girls, and what was for girls was not supposed to be cool. I knew that *Twilight* was about a girl who falls in love with a vampire, and that's way too girly. I didn't know much back then, but I knew that liking *Twilight* was embarrassing.

Despite the quarrels I had with engaging in such girly content, I ended up giving the book a chance, because there was no point in ignoring a book I had already spent tickets on. I started

off by telling myself that I would just read it during independent reading time in class, and that I wouldn't give it much thought outside of that context. At some point, it was obvious that my interest began to grow as I caught myself frequently going up to my teacher's desk, pointing at a word in the book, and asking what it meant. Eventually, my interest to know what happened next between Bella and Edward outgrew independent reading time. I started taking the book to recess, lunch, and my house. Before I knew it, I was so engrossed with what I was reading that it became very hard for me to put the book down. As a fifth grader, matters of love and relationships were completely new to me, so much so that it was almost like a taboo in my head. That was probably what made it so intriguing to me; it was new and exciting with a small hint of something that should be forbidden.

There was once a rare moment where my teacher came out of her "Lesly is at a high school reading level and is finally getting the chance to read high school level books!" haze and slightly questioned the maturity level of what I was reading. Independent reading time had just ended when she asked me if I had ever seen the movie adaptations of *Twilight*. I said no, that I was hoping to finish the series before I watched them. She replied with "Okay good, because those movies are for high schoolers. I think the books might be okay though." I spent the rest of the day overthinking this one sentence. Could I not handle something that was beyond what my capabilities should be? I retaliated by going home and watching the entire *Twilight* Saga on pirated movie websites, because I was at a high school reading level and I could handle relationships and love and high school things. I wondered why this was something people thought I was not supposed to be able to understand. In those moments, I reveled in the fact that I thought I understood everything. I understood that Bella and Edward were in love and what they

had was perfect. The main idea was that what Bella and Edward had was what a relationship should look like, and I understood that perfectly.

External Data #1: Our Early Reading Choices and Ideas of Love

When considering how we decide what love looks like and how one should love, a lot of that conversation revolves around attachment styles, which refer to a “constellation of knowledge, expectations, and insecurities that people hold about themselves and their close relationships” (Fraley & Roisman, 2019). A vast majority of the scholars who take on this research agree that attachment styles are created in the years where we are directly being taken care of, or in other words, they stem from our parents (Levy et al., 1998; Kilmann et al., 2009; Ebrahimi et al., 2017). In their section on attachment styles of the 2009 book titled *Handbook of Individual Differences in Social Behavior*, Phillip R. Shaver and Mario Mikulincer argue that the history of a person's close early relationships, i.e their parents, shape the boundaries of their attachment system, which impact their internal working models of self, partners, and relationships. This means that the nature of someone as a romantic being can be impacted by how their parents treated them. Such connections have been researched significantly, but a connection between our early reading choices and the nature of ourselves as romantic beings is not as commonly researched or easily proved. In many other cases, our early reading choices certainly have meaningful impacts on us. From open library access and increased literacy emphasis helping economically disadvantaged children score higher on aptitude tests than their advantaged counterparts (Neuman, 199), to gender representation in children's books having effects on the development of societal attitudes in children (Casey et al., 2021), what we read and how much we read matters deeply when we are young. So, how can we begin to understand how reading *Twilight*, and getting exposure to questionable ideas of love at an early age, might have affected me today? This question cannot fully be answered until we think about what was going on with me beyond the fifth grade, but we can begin to build on our understanding here.

There might be multiple reasons why not many people have looked into how our early reading choices impact our ideas of love. For starters, 10 year olds are not usually reading young adult fiction, as they are 10 year olds, and not young adults. Secondly, 5th graders aren't typically bothered with finding out the meaning of love at that age. This being a conundrum that does not usually happen does not change the fact that somehow, it was allowed to happen to me, and I might be living with the consequences today. Either way, this is still an essential part of this paper, so finding a path towards understanding this query is essential as well. Whilst the combination of reading young adult fiction at 10 years old, and trying to deduce what a relationship should look like using one of the most toxic literary relationships as an example is a newer combination, the concept of our early development affecting us later in life through influential factors is not new at all. A 2010 study in the journal of child development decided to take on the following question: how do our experiences in our early years "get under our skin", as in how do they maintain and elaborate our early wiring diagram, which is critical to establishing a solid footing for development beyond the early years. The researchers ultimately found that negative early experiences of deprivation, as in experiences where we are sorely lacking in something necessary, have highly negative impacts as our brain develops throughout time. Subsequently, our brains are also shaped by our early experiences of abundance. The more access we have to learning opportunities, which can look like social interactions or media, the more that we soak up what surrounds us and learn. In my case, I had an abundance of mature romantic literature at a very young age. My learning space, and what I had to soak up, was defined by a toxic and dependent fictional relationship. What I was deprived of at that age, was the maturity level and understanding that would have helped me make sense of what I was learning, and thus the ability to decide between what is healthy and what is unhealthy. This

might have resulted in me taking things in at face level and accepting them blindly. If the book tells me that couples are supposed to spend every living moment of every day together, then so be it. If the book tells me that couples are supposed to constantly be facing some sort of turmoil, then so be it. If the book tells me that couples are supposed to want to kill themselves if their partner dies, then so be it. So, while subjecting 5th graders to Twilight is not a very popular case study, there certainly is something to be explored between what we perceive love to be, and how our early experiences of lack and abundance affect that.

Personal Memory Data #2: Finishing *Twilight* but not really...

For almost the entirety of fifth grade, I was panicking if I was not reading about Bella and Edward. There is no form of anxiety in my life that I can recall as clearly as the anxiety that I felt in between reading the four books. If I wasn't actively reading *Twilight*, I would be stressed out. Before I could even notice, the feeling of needing to know where Bella and Edward stood at all times overtook me, and it got me through the entire saga before I started the sixth grade. After *Twilight*, not only was there a dramatic increase in the amount of books I was reading, there was also a dramatic increase in how fast I was getting through them. As soon as I deemed something interesting enough for me to read, I read it from cover to cover in days, sometimes even hours. In elementary school, I would take my books to recess and lunch. In middle school, I used my district assigned Ipad that was meant for homework and classwork to download ebooks and illegal PDF versions of books. I was never not reading back then, and after a couple months I realized that part of it was because I was on a journey to find my next *Twilight*. Keep in mind that *Twilight* was the first set of chapter books I had ever read, so in my head it made sense that what *Twilight* made me feel was probably found within all books. If all books don't give you an adrenaline rush when you read them, and withdrawal symptoms when you're done reading, then why does anyone even read? Sure, I read a lot of books, and the reason I am still a reader today is because those books did entertain me to a certain degree, but I soon found out that every book was not, in fact, *Twilight*.

When I was in 6th grade, Stephanie Meyer announced *Life and Death*, the gender swapped version of the first *Twilight* book meant to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the series. For 6th grade Lesly, it was like God had taken a peep into my prayers one night and decided to help me out. With the prospect of new *Twilight* content, I was bursting with excitement; I was

finally going to get to read about Bella and Edward again! Yeah, so I didn't really understand what Stephanie Meyer meant by gender swapped, I just saw a new *Twilight* book on the shelves and ran with it. You can imagine my disappointment when I took that book home, and genderswapped turned out to mean exactly what it says it is. I found that I was entirely excited for nothing, because it was the exact same plot as the first book, but just with all the characters having the opposite gender. The "new content" that had gotten me so excited wasn't real, but it was too late. The promise of getting to read about Bella and Edward again had already gotten to my head, and with nothing to satisfy the urge, the only solution was to reread the entire saga. Now, most people who read for fun have probably reread at least one or two books in their lifetime, because if you're reading for fun, you certainly value the feelings that books give you, at least enough to endure the same plotline again once or twice. Rereading is not a new or bizarre concept, but what might be a little strange is that I reread the entire *Twilight* saga at least two times each year from 6th to 8th grade, back to back. The story was not new to me at all, as I knew every little detail and could recite entire plot points almost entirely from memory. Even the way that reading about Bella and Edward's relationship made me feel was not new, but it was still there, and at last I found those specific feelings that I had been searching for in every book after. I eventually phased out of rereading the entire saga at a time, and began to focus on just what still entertained me. Whenever I felt a little anxious, there was always the ending of *New Moon* after Bella and Edward reunited to relax me. Whenever I felt a little sad, there was always the chapter in *Eclipse* where Bella slept over at Edwards house for the first time to pick me up. Whenever I felt bored, there was always the chapter in *Eclipse* where Edward proposed to keep me entertained. Whatever it was that I needed to feel better, *Twilight* had it.

External Data #2: The Online Fan Community and Romantic Angst

The online fan community, while a relatively new phenomenon, has recently grown to evolve into something that most anybody can participate in. If you create and publish fan based art online, engage in theory forums and discussions related to pop culture intellectual property (IP), or even keep up with a certain celebrity through their online activity, then might you have been involved with the online fan community to some extent. Another very popular form of engagement, and one that thrives almost exclusively in online spaces of fandom, is the creation and consumption of fan literature. Fan literature, or known more commonly as fanfiction, is defined by Bronwen Thomas as “stories produced by fans based on plot lines and characters from either a single source text or else a “canon” of works; these fan-created narratives often take the pre-existing storyworld in a new, sometimes bizarre, direction”. Fanfiction also happens to be one of the most accessible forms of fandom engagement today. Busse, who has already been established as the author of *Framing Fanfiction*, agrees. “Accordingly, fan fiction and the communities surrounding it have become more public and widely accessible. Several decades ago, to get their hands on a particular fanzine, fans had to visit a con or mail order it from the publisher. Today, a simple online search will bring up more fic than anyone could read, with countless fandoms, pairings, genres, and tropes (Busse, 2017, p. 141). In other words, millions of fan created stories are at the tip of our fingers in any given second. Those stories all have authors and readers, so to engage in fanfiction is to be in cohorts with millions of others all around the world. Even in the very few instances where fanfiction surpasses online boundaries and traverses into something a little more mainstream, it has been enough to contribute to the universality of fanfiction. If you have read the *After* series by Anna Todd, or the *Fifty Shades of*

Grey trilogy by E.L James, both of which are New York Times best sellers, or seen their movie adaptations, then you have engaged with fanfiction.

With such immense growth within just one singular fannish activity, the facets through which it can be classified and explored have had to grow as well. There is first the aspect of where we are exploring fanfiction. There are websites and apps whose entire purpose is publishing online fanfiction and housing it for readers, such as Wattpad, fanfiction.net, and AO3. There are also websites and apps whose media is not limited to just fanfiction, but can be used to publish and read it, like Instagram, Tumblr, and even Youtube. Each of these spaces has then needed forms of classification in order for fanfiction to not get overwhelmed by its own complexity, so readers and authors created the concept of tags, tropes, and warnings. Whilst all of these terms vary slightly in the ways in which they are used, they all have in common the aspect of categorization. Stories are tagged, labeled with specific tropes, or have warnings that “exist for the purpose of filtering stories based on the reader’s preferences or aversions” (Horáková, 2022, p. 24). In other words, they are meant to give the reader a preview of what they can expect in the story, and then the reader can use that information to decide whether the story is something they want to read or something they would be better off avoiding. Within this definition comes a bit of ambiguity, as what is a warning to someone, as in an element that would trigger that person and make them avoid the story, might be just a tag to someone else, something that they are willingly searching for for the purposes of actually reading it. Regardless, these are classification systems that were developed in order to help readers make better sense of all that is out there for them to read. One of the types of stories that is out there, and one very central to this paper, is romantic angst.

In terms of defining romantic angst, it is a very difficult task to get millions of fans to agree on one singular definition, so this might be better approached in smaller pieces. Angst on its own, as defined by Miriam Webster, is “feelings of anxiety, apprehension, or insecurity”. Romance, in terms of literature, is defined as a “love story especially in the form of a novel”. A love story would typically involve two people in a relationship, so one could say that romantic angst is some form of a story where two people who are involved romantically go through a situation that evokes some form of anxiety, apprehension, or insecurity. More specifically, and for the sake of this text, romantic angst will be defined as a trope in fanfiction that involves two main characters, a and b, involved in some form of a romantic relationship, character b does something that emotionally harms character a, and then character b grovels to gain forgiveness while character a shows indifference. It is important to note that definition works specifically for romantic angst as a subgenre, and not angst generally, as angst exists as its own very popular genre and can have a much more general definition than what we have outlined here. We can actually observe romantic angst elements in each of the scenes of *Twilight* I mentioned in the previous sections. In the ending of *New Moon*, Edward had just reunited with Bella after abandoning her for months. He then spends multiple pages trying to convince her that he loves her and isn’t leaving her again. In chapter 8 of *Eclipse*, Edward and Bella reunite after Edward had his sister force Bella into a sleepover while he was gone, and Bella had escaped to visit Jacob. They then spend the night trying to make up for their respective grievances. In the chapter where Edward proposes to Bella, Edward makes Bella upset by refusing to sleep with her and to turn her into a vampire, and then has to find some way to console her. In each of the scenarios, we have two people in a romantic relationship, one who does something to hurt the other, and then they must grovel. Such examples suggest that while romantic angst is a prominent trope

within fanfiction communities, it can very much work in non fan spaces. In other words, romantic angst has a pretty impressive reach, just like engagement in fannish activities overall, but is certainly much more explicitly defined as a subgenre within fanfiction.

Personal Memory Data #4: My first “thing”

When people who I wanted to love first entered my life, which was in middle school, I knew exactly how I wanted to love and be loved. I demanded extreme loyalty from those who surrounded me, because in my head, someone who truly loves me would want to be engulfed in me anyway possible. I met someone in middle school who gave me exactly that. This person and I were inseparable for the majority of the time we knew each other, and we were insufferable whenever we were apart. I would say the pinnacle of our time together could be explained by a single moment between us that occurred when we were in the 8th grade. It was 6th period, and I cared very much about focusing on my work, but it was hard to do so when I was so preoccupied by the fact that he didn't sit next to me. Maybe it was the fact that everyone else had someone to talk to that day while I sat in silence with my work, or maybe it was that I hated the girl he talked to the entire class instead of me, either way I spent the entire class moping. When the bell rang and he gathered his things so we could walk to the parent pick up line together, I zoomed out of class to convey the idea that I was mad and maybe he should say something. My methods of getting a response were so inconsequential that I had to quote Paramore on my instagram story that afternoon, something about being all alone, I don't know. In the end, I had to share how I felt about him “ignoring me” over the phone that night. After I shared how I felt, he apologized and told me how I was his favorite friend and that he did want to sit next to me, but he just thought I was going to be the one to move and so on and so on. After almost an hour-long validation conversation, I went to sleep with a smile on my face, reassured that he loved me. Moments like these set the tone for us two, even going into high school when I had even less of a reason to doubt him. We would be happy, he would do something that I considered mutinous, I'd pick a fight, he would apologize, reassure me of my place in his life, and the cycle would repeat.

If I look back on all of our fights, which is a term I use loosely for moments when I would get mad and seek out validation through instigating conflict, the most impactful one of our time together occurred the summer of 2021. He had gone on a family vacation, only I found out through instagram stories that it was not a family vacation, and he had instead traveled with someone I disliked very much. I spent a couple hours feeling sorry for myself, and then I sprung into action. I needed to figure out how I would get a satisfying confrontation out of the situation. I know I'm sounding extremely unaware of proper form for social interactions right now, but I wasn't really that unaware, just not aware enough to stop myself. This meant that I was definitely going to tell him that I was mad that he did this, but I was also going to have to concede that I knew the reason he kept certain things from me was because my tendency to be upset was strong. In other words, to not turn him off from my antics completely, I would have to play both the archer and the prey simultaneously. By the time he returned, I had an entire mind map of all the points I had to make, and all the responses he could possibly give. Out of those possibilities, I decided which would get me the most reassurance from him, and subsequently decided how the conversation had to go. I had masterminded a lot of our confrontations in the past, but I was especially proud of the mental math it took to have a conversation with a person in my head before I actually had it with them in person. You can also imagine the pride I must have felt when, upon his return, the dominoes fell in the exact way I had predicted that they would. He, of course, was extremely apologetic and eager for us to be on good terms again, and did not linger much on my admissions of fault in the situation. He ended up traveling to California with my family a couple days later, and thus we had concluded the most satisfactory angst to happiness cycle of our relationship. The high from that cycle was enough to get me through the entire summer.

It might be really easy to see how such a cycle of angst and happiness is unsustainable for a long term relationship, but I had no idea back then. In fact, I went day to day wondering what the next thing I could get irritated about would be, and daydreaming about what his method of apologizing would be. Halfway through our time together, tummy aches began to feel like butterflies. That's not some poetic way to say that I couldn't tell the difference between healthy and unhealthy, I genuinely mistook feelings of unease and anxiety for feelings of excitement and content. Either way, I had promised during that summer of 2021 confrontation that moving forward, I would only seek out retribution if it was actually needed, and butterflies aside, I meant to make good on that promise. It might sound like I hated him if I was constantly looking for fights to pick, but he was probably the most important person in my life at that point. I had every intention of him and I being in each other's life for a really long time, but that was far from what was actually possible for us. This was especially the case after the summer that we had just spent together, and how he had reassured me. Yes, how he had reassured me was almost a direct product of how I had purposefully manipulated aspects of that situation to get the results I wanted, but I paid no mind to this. Such false security might be the reason that by the time we got to our final year together, the conflict I used to seek out was now seeking me. I wasn't purposely and manically crafting real life angst scenarios between us, they were happening on their own. All of a sudden, I had genuine reasons to be mad at him, and all of a sudden, he didn't feel the need to apologize. This turned into the end of our relationship in October, when I aired some grievances, and he no longer felt the need to apologize.

For better or for worse, I spent half of my senior moping after a person who expressed clear distaste towards me in our final moments. I say for better, because I was never going to achieve any sort of growth with someone who I unintentionally forced to hate me. I say for worse,

because the cycle of angst and happiness had not concluded. We ended in anguish, and no matter how long I waited by the phone for him to come and apologize and make everything better, he didn't. I was always aware that the hurt I perpetuated was not normal or healthy, but that awareness was not enough to make me stop it. It was enough, however, for me to quickly realize that him and I could have never made it very far. Regardless, I grieved him, or something about him, for about a year and a half. I cannot pinpoint exactly when I reached the point of "enough grief, go back to living your life", but it happened, and it happened around the time that I started reading fanfiction again. Throughout my life I have gone through my phases of finding a really good story that I liked online, hyper fixating on fanfiction generally for a month or two, and then forgetting that Wattpad and Tumblr are installed on my phone. I had one of those phases in the time that I was getting over him, but instead it lasted all of 2022 and 2023, as opposed to just a month or two. Throughout those two years, if I wasn't on Tumblr, I was thinking about him, and I would much rather be on Tumblr than be thinking about him. It was like I had rediscovered fanfiction for the first time, and all of a sudden my saved list that hadn't had any activity since middle school was getting a new story added each day. I would be begging authors to add me to their taglists, which are what Tumblr authors use to notify readers of a new update to one of their stories. If they didn't have a taglist, then I'd be resigned to checking their accounts every morning and every night. Tumblr is not the most user friendly when it comes to posting fan fiction, since it isn't strictly fanfiction based like Wattpad or Fanfiction.ent, but it is where some of my favorite stories of all time have been posted, so I endured. One day in my second semester of college, I had gotten frustrated with there being no organization to my saved list of stories, which was curated by just me saving them to my liked posts, so I decided to do some organizing. Using the notes app on my phone, I wrote down every single story I had saved and added a link to the page

it was on. Then, I copy and pasted them around into categories based on the fandoms they were from. From there, I color coded tropes and genres, like friends to lovers, soulmates au, etc. This was 90 percent an activity to better facilitate the act of looking for stories, because when they were all in one page, the only way to look for a specific story was to scroll. The other 10 percent was me being curious about my Tumblr data, because I had never consciously been aware of how much I was taking in of what. Either way, I was mildly surprised to learn that out of 182 stories I had deemed good enough to be saved for later reference, 112 of them could be referred to as romantic angst.

External Data #4: Romantic Angst addiction

It was difficult to lay the ground rules for what romantic angst looks like in a space where every single rule and form of categorization is up to interpretation, but it is something that exists and can be consciously acknowledged, the definition is just a little up to interpretation. Romantic angst addiction provides itself as its own challenge, because as far as I know, I am the first to consciously refer to it and interact with it as a concept. There might even be questions as to whether or not romantic angst fanfiction can be something that someone is actually addicted to. That being said, I will be using addiction as a framework to understand how I have been engaging with romantic angst in this section, but this shouldn't necessarily be treated as a universal approach. Some might interact with romantic angst, enjoy it to the point of confusion over what they consider to be enjoyable, but not enough to say that they are addicted to it. Framing romantic angst engagement as addiction might be more helpful to those who feel the control it has over their life warrants it, which I do.

According to the American Society of Addiction Medicine, addiction is a “treatable, chronic medical disease involving complex interactions among brain circuits, genetics, the environment, and an individual’s life experiences. People with addiction use substances or engage in behaviors that become compulsive and often continue despite harmful consequences.” With that definition, I can begin to create parameters for what my romantic angst addiction looks like. First, there is the piece of how an individual comes to have an addiction. If addiction is a product of many personal factors, such as environment and life experiences, then we can assume that there has to be some sort of event or turning point that triggers a need for angst. This can be different for everyone, but in my case, I would consider this event to be reading *Twilight* in my formative years. Secondly, addiction involves an individual engaging in behaviors that become

compulsive. To determine whether or not I would consider my engagement with romantic angst in fanfiction to be a compulsive behavior, or addiction-like behavior, i.e: resulting from an irresistible urge, exciting, compelling, and against one's own wishes, I collected self observational data from my Tumblr activity for the duration of an entire month, February 1st to the 29th. This method comes from Heewon Chang's *Autoethnography as Method*, which she defines as methodology that "records your actual behaviors, thoughts, and emotions as they occur in their natural contexts". She also defines two different approaches to this method, on-site recording and retrospective recording. On-site recording is when you collect data as the behavior is happening, and retrospective recording is when you collect data after the behavior has occurred. Each has their own positives and negatives. While on-site recording is more likely to capture immediate emotions and reactions, it suffers from interrupting the behavior itself, and perhaps making it less natural. With retrospective recording, you are allowing the behavior to happen naturally, but won't really be taking note of immediate emotions and reactions. For my purpose, I decided that letting behaviors occur naturally mattered more than being able to record immediate reactions, so in order to preserve as much of the natural behavior as possible, I decided on retrospective recording. Essentially, after each time that I read fanfiction on Tumblr, which is really the only app I use, I asked myself the following questions:

What time of day did the behavior (reading fanfiction) occur and what was I doing?

Did the behavior involve a story, or multiple, that could be considered romantic angst?

How did I feel when I was reading the story?

How do I feel after the story?

The first 2 questions helped me unearth the compulsive nature of my behavior. For starters, Everytime I engaged in fanfiction, it was either the first thing I did in the morning, or the

last thing I did before falling asleep. Reflecting on that data made me realize two things: going onto Tumblr in the mornings consistently makes me late. I have no data to prove this correlation other than my own personal reflections, but as I was confronted with the fact that it was such a common thing for me to do as soon as I wake up, I thought of all the times where my alarm woke me up at 7, but I didn't get out of bed until 8 or 9. In other words, I get so lost within a story that hours of my time go by without me even realizing it. The second realization I had was almost identical: going onto Tumblr at night consistently makes me go to bed late. I make significant effort each night to go to bed by 10, which is reflected by my observational data showing that when I would go onto Tumblr at night, it was always at least 30 minutes before 10. Once again, further reflection showed me that if I was going onto Tumblr before my prescribed bed time, very rarely did I actually go to bed at 10. The combination of going to bed late, but still having to wake up early, but still ending up being behind schedule has affected me negatively in more ways that I can count: my health, my timeliness, and my ability to remain focused throughout the day. Despite this, I still compulsively read fanfiction 26 of the 29 days of February, and yes, every single one of those days involved at least one romantic angst story.

Apart from the physical effects of staying up late and not being able to get out of bed in the morning, the final questions led me to a much more explicit negative effect of romantic angst, which is the final piece of this addiction framework: continuing on with a behavior despite obvious harmful consequences. When looking through my responses of how I felt while reading and after reading, I frequently recorded feelings of unease, specifically felt in my stomach, and crying, which would occur whilst reading and last after reading on semi-frequent occasions. I do consider crying to be the most frequent behavior, as I reported doing so 14 of the 26 days I read fanfiction in February. It was at this point in analyzing the results of my study that I realized it

might have been beneficial to be more specific when documenting what stories I was reading. I say this because while I know that the feelings of unease and crying occurred on days that I read a romantic angst story, I can't recall what the specific stories were and if I liked them enough to save them for a later reread. I also have no documentation of whether or not they were stories that I had already read and liked enough to reread. Such information regarding saving stories and rereading stories that have negative emotional outcomes would have been helpful to further contextualize my addiction. Either way, I still know that such outcomes occurred from reading romantic angst, and the first instance of that outcome did not prevent me from seeking them out in following days. If I reflect broadly on these behaviors past the data that was collected, just as I did with the data from the first two questions, I am aware that I typically do save the stories that pull the strongest reactions from me. Feeling a sense of unease, or crying while reading a story, is not something that has occurred in February only, and if I look at my entire saved collection, there are several stories that I can identify as stories that have made me emotional in the past. This not only suggests to me that I continue on with this behavior despite obvious harmful emotional consequences, I actively seek it out in order to re-experience it. So, despite feeling that my mini-study lacked specificity in some areas, an analysis of the data shows to me that romantic angst fanfiction can be functioning as the object of my addiction.

Personal Memory Data #5: *We* have a problem

On a random November day of my first college semester, I had been on campus to meet up with one of my friends. We were currently in the middle of a book swap, which meant I had recommended a book to her, she had recommended one to me, and we met up every couple of days to discuss our reading. What was unique about this particular friend is that engaging in fandom is part of the reason that we had become friends in the first place. Not only were we part of the same fandoms, but we engaged in those fandoms in similar ways: by reading fanfiction. This matters because on this particular day that we had gotten together, a lot of what we had to say had to do with fanfiction. After we each delivered our spiels on the books we were reading, the conversation naturally shifted towards how we've been since the last time we had seen one another, which was usual procedure as well. It turned out that both of us had been going through some bleak times, so we began to speak openly about our current emotional struggles, how the semester was just a little harder than a typical semester, etc. At some point, one of us introduced fanfiction into the equation. More specifically, one of us had said that amongst all the hardships we were currently facing, fanfiction was somehow an element there. The conversation happened long enough ago that most of its specifics are currently lost to me, like who said exactly what and why exactly did they say it. One thing I will never forget, however, is when we were talking about our mental states and I said: "When I'm going on Tumblr and Wattpad everyday is when I know I'm getting bad". This stands out to me as the first moment I ever actively voiced a concern over the deterioration of my mental state and an increase in my fanfiction reading happening simultaneously. Making such an admission perplexed me so much that I reflected on it the entire car ride home. What did I even mean when I said that? Yes, I wasn't feeling very good at that point in my life, and my Tumblr use was off the charts, but who said that the two

had to be connected? I know that I did not lie to my friend, in fact, I had been more honest with her than I had probably been with anyone else for a while. So then, at what point did an increase in fanfiction reading become an internal indicator that my mental health was worsening, and why had I not noticed till then? Every avenue that I explored in a search to understand my realization brought me to more questions. I was just so genuinely surprised by having said something so confidently, and yet being so confused by the nature of the statement. Eventually, my one person car ride debrief brought me to a standstill between three questions: was the issue that fanfiction made me feel bad, or did I resort to reading fanfiction when I already felt bad, or was it somehow both? By the time I got home, I had not been even close to an answer.

As we were nearing the end of the semester then, I decided to file my fanfiction dilemma in my mental box of queries to ponder in a later, boring moment. I was taking college finals for the very first time, and I didn't want to have to be plagued by the ridiculousness of simultaneously understanding something and not understanding something. In order to keep such a dilemma from my mind, I had to make sure that I rarely had time to freely think. So, whenever I wasn't doing homework, or working, or doing anything that took up the majority of my headspace, I was reading fanfiction. If I was obsessive about story updates or certain authors before, then this was something new entirely. My reading rate grew exponentially, as I was getting through entire multiple chapter stories in a matter of hours. To offset this, I was constantly looking for new stories. At the time, I engaged with the BTS fandom primarily, so my search bar had seen hundreds of variations of BTS members and trope combinations. Eventually, one of those search terms brought me to a story called 4-7-8. Here is the description, as written by author Jiminrings:

pairing: jungkook x reader

glimpse: you're secure when it comes to loving jungkook, knowing that your husband loves you beyond words. what you aren't so secure about is *his first love — someone who isn't you. alternatively, jungkook's married to you, but he still celebrates his anniversary with his ex out of sentimentality.*

warnings: semi-heavy angst (pls take a break when necessary!!), emotional constipation, no cheating happens here btw (neither physical nor emotional), self-loathing, miscommunication, based on the moral dilemma of whether or not it's okay to be friends with ur ex, intense yearning. (@jiminrings, 2022).

As you might be able to tell from what has been discussed previously about my reading habits, this was the perfect story for me. It was romantic angst in all of its glory, with two characters in a romantic relationship dealing with the fallout of one of their poor decisions. At the moment, it almost felt like the story was written specifically for me; not only did it seem to have all of the elements of angst that I looked for, but it was so obvious that the writer was leaning into them entirely. The story follows a married couple, who love each other, but suffer from the fact that one of them loves harder than the other. In the beginning, the one who loves more finds out that the one who loves less celebrated his anniversary with his ex. Then, the reader gets to be privy as the couple attempts to reconfigure the dynamics of their relationship, and ultimately save themselves from becoming another divorce statistic. If it sounds like angst, that's because it is. There is quite literally an entire chapter of the series where all that happens is Jungkook, the one who loves less and has emotionally harmed his partner, reminisces about his love and does nothing but grovel at her feet. This was also a writing style and subject matter that I was entirely unfamiliar with. The way that the author wrote about the intricacies of married life, and what it means when someone you've tied your life to seems to value someone else more than you, felt so

incredibly authentic to me that it was almost as if I had been the one who was wronged by her partner. For me, this was the best possible outcome from reading a story, as their marriage falling to pieces ripped me to pieces, and as they fit the pieces back together, I was put back together. Though I did not realize it at the time, what I had found was not just any other fanfiction, it was the angst and happiness cycle that I used to have in my own life; It was the mind numbing angst and euphoric relief that I had been missing for about a year at this point, and so I latched onto it entirely. I was very elated to find out that the author continuously wrote for this couple, whether that be in the form of drabbles, which are shorter stories, or the second story that is yet to be published at the time of writing. I had found an author that was writing exactly what I needed, and I have yet to let it go.

It only took a couple more weeks, and a couple more hours of reading to realize that finding this story was a little more than just a happy coincidence. It had been a random day in early January when I had finally finished all of the 4-7-8 content on the author's blog. I wanted to read more, but the idea of having to start an entire new search for something that hit a spot just like this story did was a little too bleak. I was not ready to let go of this new writing style, so what better option than to peruse the other published works by the same author. My way of thinking was: if they could do it once, they could certainly do it again. To my enjoyment, and slight puzzlement, they had already done it multiple times. All of their top stories were self labeled as angst, and could all certainly be labeled as romantic angst. 4-7-8 was apparently not a one time thing for them, it was what they were striving for. I was about three new stories deep when the pattern started to become a little obvious: it was always a couple in a romantic relationship, one harmed the other, and they then had to grovel and fix whatever it was that they broke. This was exactly what I wanted , of course, as it was what had made me fall for this

author in the first place, but it still felt a little too on the nose. I was too curious about this corner of Tumblr that I had stumbled into, so I immersed myself more. The deep dive I did then completely changed what I thought I knew about romantic angst. I used to think it was something that authors created unintentionally; that the combination of pain and relief was a mere coincidence that for a reason I was not yet aware of, satisfied me greatly. My way of thinking was why would anyone actively seek out ways in which to break their hearts? I did it, but I didn't know why, I just knew that I liked it. I never in a million years expected to find that there was an entire niche community of people who liked this stuff as much as I did. The author of 4-7-8 intentionally wrote romantic angst, because it was what their readers wanted, and it was their specialty. Even beyond this author, I found plenty of others who had curated their entire following based off of the heart wrenching situations they could put their characters in. Their audiences even encouraged such writing in ways that seemed a little off. The following author/audience interaction on one of the angst blogs I found was one of the most eye opening:

Anonymous reader: "Seeing how some people don't like angst or aren't cool with it like ya'll omg... yal'll just hate fun!!!! I love a good angst story!!! Like the build up after the angst makes it"

Author response: i get why sum ppl dont like it as much bc it can get a bit overwhelming but for me angst is the most fun in stories !!! like yea it makes me feel miserable but i love it saur much!!. (@sparklingchim, 2024).

When I first came across this interaction, I was stumped. Like, what do you mean reading angst makes you miserable but you still love it? Why are you equating angst, a very negative feeling, with fun? For a couple of days, this confusion was my number one emotion. I had no idea what to make of this large but small group of people who came off like total masochists. It was like

my earlier fanfiction dilemma all over again: I understood them, but yet was entirely bewildered by them at the same time.

After a while, it no longer seemed important to me to try and figure out something that made no sense, so I left it at that. What they were doing was confusing, and that was the only conclusion I could come to. I didn't revisit this query until April, the one year anniversary of 4-7-8. In the story, April was a significant month for the couple, as it was when their relationship fell apart. Naturally, the author and their audience made a huge deal about this milestone. Readers were treated to exclusive drabbles, mainstream drabbles, and even sneak peeks into the next installment of the series. The thing was that most of this content was only available to readers who subscribed to the author on Patreon, which meant paying a monthly subscription fee of three dollars for access. As a fan, I had always stood firmly behind the principle that fanfiction is meant to be free, because putting it behind a paywall would make it a commodity when it is meant to be the amenity of fan spaces. This principle crumpled entirely that month, because I was dying for new content. When I was putting in my credit card information for the subscription, I didn't have any sort of revelation as to why romantic angst was something people were willing to pay for, but I did realize that I had been looking at the situation all wrong. For as long as I had been aware of what was going on, I thought of the romantic angst readers as an entity separate from myself, but what was I doing in that moment? I was giving someone on the internet my hard earned money so that I could read stories that made me cry, so am I not then the exact same as the author who writes such things for pleasure, or the readers who feel miserable but enjoy it? It would be months before I would even begin to understand why I had once told my friend that there was a connection between me feeling bad and my fanfiction habits, but what

I understood then, as I was laying in bed reading the new romantic angst content that I had just paid 3 dollars for, was that I had a problem.

External Data/Source #5: Fanfiction as Compensatory literature

In Janice Radway's ethnographic investigation of small town female romance readers, *Reading the Romance*, she invokes what is probably the first, and certainly one of the few recorded uses of the term compensatory literature. She uses the term in reference to female romance readers who have resorted to reading romance in order to seek out experiences, most of them revolving around emotional nurturance, that they lack in their daily lives. With that context, Radway is defining compensatory literature as literature that provides readers with a specific something, usually something that they are lacking. In "Dirty stories saved my life: fanfiction as a source of emotional support", Anastasiia Sereda uses Radway's analysis of female readers and her conceptualization of compensatory literature to define the concept of compensatory second hand experience in relation to fanfiction, which is when a reader, with varying degrees of consciousness, "can acquire certain experiences vicariously through a fictional character they identify or empathize with in order to compensate for something they lack in real life." (Sereda, 2019, p. 16). Sereda's purpose in defining compensatory second hand experience is to explain one of the many ways that fans can use fanfiction to better their own emotional state. Within such a definition, Sereda contextualizes the word compensatory as readers using fanfiction to compensate for a lack of something, and thus argues that it is not the singular function of fanfiction for its readers, as not all readers seek to alleviate a lack. While this is not generally wrong, I argue that fanfiction is holistically structured to serve as compensatory literature and is meant to be so, regardless of whether or not all readers are explicitly using it to counteract a lack in their life.

If we are considering the modern sense of the term fanfiction, as in fiction written by fans based off of some form of already existing IP, then the first recorded fanfiction could be found

within the 1960's Star Trek fanzine Spockanalia. If we were to consider fanfiction a little more generally and loosely, one could argue that fanfiction dates back a little farther, perhaps to postcolonialist rewrites, like *Wide Sargasso Sea* of *Jane Eyre*. Either way, both origins predate this paper significantly, so much so that pinpointing an exact reason as to why they were written might present a challenge, and could be irrelevant. I say irrelevant because the fanfiction of then and the fanfiction of today are two entirely different things, especially when we consider how the internet plays a role in the formation of the latter.

The fanfiction of today is built entirely on alleviating a lack for its readers, which is related to the fact that fanfiction is very much shaped by a majority of female/fem individuals, and for female/fem individuals. In *Everything I Need I Get From You: How Fangirls Created the Internet as we know it*, which employs the wonderfully niche use of a One Direction lyric in its title, Kaitlyn Tiffany states the following: "The constant, ambient disapproval of the general population can sequester fangirls joyfully, in semi private spaces with like-minded and creative groups of fast friends; or dismally, in semi private spaces that are still open to scorn...". This is a sentiment existing within the larger argument that female/fem individuals shaped online fan spaces and activities, like fanfiction, to be the safe space that the real world refused to give them. In other words, we seek out fanfiction like spaces on the internet because of what we experience when we are not in those spaces. On par with Tiffany's argument, readers today have made fanfiction because it was something that they did not already have, and continue to use it to give them something that they lack. Such is the case even when you consider *why* fanfiction specifically, as in: why turn to fan literature to alleviate a lack when literature in general could have the same effects? The answer lies within the accessibility of fanfiction. The accessibility aspect of fanfiction can be analyzed within many contexts, but within ours of a romantic angst

addiction, it means that a fan story is much more accessible to someone who is consuming specific content at higher than normal rates than say a movie or book that cannot be consumed as quickly nor as freely. The millions of stories, fandom, and trope variations that exist for free by just a single search on the likes of Wattpad or Fanfiction.net has always been a pillar on which fanfiction stands on and was created for; that fans would have plenty of access to content and explorative outlets that they lack in non-fanfiction spaces. To revert back to Sereda's earlier point that people engage with fanfiction for a variety of different reasons, that is totally the case. However, fanfiction, in many aspects, is attempting to give its readers something that they do not have, regardless of whether or not fans actively believe they are using it for that purpose.

Many fans/readers/scholars have been vocal about what it is that fanfiction gives them, which can give us an idea of how fanfiction is still actively working to fulfill people, even when fans don't actively realize that they need to be fulfilled. A good first example would be Susanna Coleman's study of female authors achieving agency through fanfiction. The study takes the form of a close reading of two stories written by the same author, one written for pleasure, and one written for an academic assignment. Coleman ends up finding that the author of the two stories gains a certain form of agency over her identities when writing fanfiction for pleasure, which she lacks when writing in academic contexts. The overall argument ends up being that academic spaces need to give writers more freedom when it comes to writing, but it is still subsequently proved that writing fanfiction gives students a certain ability to be in control that they do not have everywhere else. This is similar to what we can find in "Mary Sue-perego: A psychotherapeutic analysis of women in fanfiction" by Elaine Feehily, which is an exploration of the motivations people have behind reading fanfiction. Something that came up was that authors commonly use fanfiction to explore hidden aspects of their personality and identity that they are

not typically able to express or explore in a non-fanfiction context. They essentially found that its participants were “using fanfiction as a way of self-soothing, by escaping from unpleasant realities into a fantasy world which they have more control over (Feehily, 2017). This may show multiple lacks that authors might have when they turn to fanfiction, such as a lack of control in the real world, and a lack of ability to be self reflective. Feehily then also goes on to state that most of the authors in their study did not consciously realize that they were using fanfiction to fulfill an unmet need until they were interviewed for the study. The nature of both of these studies suggest that people turn to fanfiction when they are lacking something outside of it, even if they are not consciously aware of it.

There is a wide variety of literature out there when it comes to exploring the unfulfilled needs that fanfiction gives us within a variety of different contexts. There is the ability to explore gendered identities without scorn through self insert fanfiction (Lehtonen, 2015), the ability to write queer representation in slash fanfiction in the face of very little meaningful representation in popular media (Floegel, 2020), the ability for young women to explore romantic relationships and develop their own romantic ideals in low risk spaces (Rocca, 2024), and so much more. In short, I am halting discussion around what fanfiction can give us broadly to get more specific, and return to a query much more central to our purpose: what does romantic angst fanfiction give us? What unfulfilled needs are being met when someone with a romantic angst addiction interacts with romantic angst? For starters, there is the aspect of what leads an individual to develop a romantic angst addiction, which inevitably affects what they seek from romantic angst when they are reading it. In some way or form, one with a romantic angst addiction was probably conditioned to believe that romantic angst is something that they should need or want; a push into the genre. This might look like idealizing a toxic romantic relationship as you are in it, toxic

relationship dynamics being idealized through media representation, or perhaps growing up in traumatic environments that conditioned you to feel at peace in moments of turmoil. For me, it was the second example, in which *Twilight* taught me to believe that healthy relationships are constantly in angsty situations. Whatever it may be, an individual with a romantic angst addiction is seeking it out for a reason. With that in mind, there is then the specific lack that a person might have. Generally, people seeking out romantic angst in unhealthy amounts would just have a very pronounced lack of angst in their lives, but the context will vary based on what their push was. Someone who idealized their toxic relationship might have ended that relationship, and are now lacking that toxicity they think they need. Another possibility is that someone who learned to idealize romantic angst through representation in movies and books might have run out of content to go through, and are now lacking a source and need a new one. For me, I had no relationship to create and experience angst in once my high school relationship ended. Finally, the compensation is contextualized by the lack. If you lacked sources of romantic angst in other forms of media, romantic angst fanfiction is now providing you with thousands of stories just through a single Wattpad search. If you are no longer in the toxic relationship that you feel you need to be in, romantic angst fanfiction can allow you to insert yourself into those dynamics that you crave, which was the case for me.

In the end, I have had to make peace with the fact that the answer I came to did not have the precision I wanted it to have. I believed it possible to find one universal reason why anyone ever engages in emotionally damaging fanfiction, but instead found that I would be going against almost everything that we have already set out for fanfiction, romantic angst, and its readers if one singular reason existed. Once again, whilst fanfiction was built to take up empty space and provide, what this looks like for individual readers can vary immensely, specifically when we are

considering one specific trope within fanfiction. In any way, that individualism, combined with the fact that research into romantic angst generally is a pretty blank canvas, gives us much room to grow and expand on any understandings we have come to here. For starters, there are so many more aspects of my identity that could have come into play, when analyzing what contributed to the nature of my addiction, and would benefit from being observed more deeply. The first possibility is my sexuality, and how fanfiction was there for me at a time when there were no other low risk avenues for me to explore as much as I had liked. Could my addiction to a specific type of romantic literature have been shaped by the fact that I had very little experience with my own sexuality, and fanfiction let me understand what was out there through the relationships I was reading about? It would be interesting to see someone looking into the role that suppressed sexuality, specifically when it comes to female suppressed sexuality, plays in how often they engage with romantic literature in fanfiction spaces that can pretty much let you read about anything. Another aspect of my identity that I did not consider as much was the possibility of a parasocial relationship. A majority of the fanfiction I read around the time that I started engaging heavily with romantic angst was real person fiction featuring members of the band bts. They are a band I started listening to around the time my relationship had ended, and so the fact that I sought them out alongside romantic angst specifically might have influenced the nature of my addiction. Could a romantic angst addiction arise from heavy representation of a specific person within the genre, and what may that addiction look like when sharing the space with the object of a parasocial relationship?

There were also factors that were not considered because the focus on myself pushed them away. The first is the perspective of a romantic angst addiction from someone who writes it, as opposed to someone who reads it. The conversation of romantic angst addictions might

benefit greatly from an understanding of how aware romantic angst authors are of their own reading habits, and perhaps those of their audience, to see how they feel about this dynamic of yearning for what can be idealization of toxicity within romance, and playing a part in enabling it for others. Within this comes another big piece, romantic angst addiction awareness in others, which was mentioned slightly, but not as much as my own experiences. My own awareness was very slow to arise, but that won't be the case for everyone, and thus there is a wonderful possibility here for a study into how readers come to perceive their romantic angst reading habits, what those habits look like, and what led them to such habits. The trends that might arise from such research that is not limited to just my experiences and understandings, as well as a more involved investigation into all other aspects that my own research did not take into account, could very much add to any findings we have made here. Through this paper, I have been able to gain a better understanding of why and how I engage with romantic angst, but the hope is that one day, we'll all have a better understanding of why we love to hurt so much.

Okay, one last section, I promise.

If I had a penny for each time Stephanie Meyer released a rewritten version of the first *Twilight* book, I would have two pennies, which isn't a lot, but it's weird that it happened twice, right? Anyways, *Midnight Sun* was released in 2020, which is the first *Twilight* book but rewritten from Edward's perspective. In Meyer's opening dedication to her readers of the book, she says the following: "This book is dedicated to all the readers who have been such a happy part of my life for the last fifteen years. When we first met, many of you were young teenagers with bright, beautiful eyes full of dreams for the future. I hope that in the years that have passed, you've all found your dreams and that the reality of them was even better than you'd hoped". I was not a reader who met Stephanie Meyer, Bella, and Edward when I was a teenager, but little Lesly certainly had bright, beautiful eyes full of dreams for the future. That future, which would be today's past, was not always great. Because of *Twilight*, I spent some very traumatic years of my life searching and pining for a love that would never be sustainable. Additionally, in a weird and twisted way, the future today was also made better because of *Twilight*. If not for that book I once spent all my hard earned tickets on, this paper would not exist, which is ultimately a product from someone who, somewhere along the lines, became so confident in her identities as a reader, writer, and a fan, that she could use them to try and understand a part of her that she avoided for so long. The me after *Twilight* was not always the best, but she knows better now, and she's trying. So, Stephanie Meyer might have been wrong about a lot of things, like what a healthy relationship is supposed to look like, and some other more problematic stuff that we don't have to talk about right now, but she was right about one thing: the reality of my dreams is way better than I had ever hoped.

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