

# Evolution of the Mary Sue Character in Works by Wattpad Social Platform Users

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**Abstract:** This article discusses the evolution and popularity of the Mary Sue character in the works by Wattpad social platform users on the basis of *Teenage Dirtbag* by SumNawaz. The study maps the relationships between the rise of fan-fiction on the social platform, characteristics of autobiographical genres and the idealized characters constructed subconsciously by young authors. The analysis of the sub-genre of Real Person Fiction reveals the elements binding the fiction genre and the Mary Sue character, presenting the differences and similarities between contemporary versions of the character and its archetype introduced in the 1960s. The study enhances the understanding of “imaginative reading” and reveals the variety of literary tendencies enabled by new social media technologies.

**Keywords:** Wattpad, fanfiction, Real Person Fiction, Mary Sue character

## 1. Introduction

Social media are the leading force of communication in mass culture. Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have dominated the discourse; however, as the demand for social media centers around more specific purposes, Internet users seek alternative channels of communication. The aim of this study is to discuss one of such channels and analyse its significance in the process of experiencing current literature trends among youngsters. Some of the most favoured online trends include publishing fiction on a social platform called Wattpad. It has gathered an enormous number of followers throughout the years and its charts of popularity are constantly being dominated by literary creations containing characters from existing cultural products, such as movies, TV series and no-

vels. The trend is named *fanfiction* and it surfaced when the *Star Trek* series started to gain popularity in the 1960s.

One aspect focused on in this study is the tendency to incorporate numerous autobiographical inserts into fanfiction texts. Autobiographical elements are usually motivated by one's fantasies associated with a certain fictional character, a celebrity, or an actor who renders the character in a cinematic production. As the majority of such texts were produced by female fans, the inserts usually take shape of an idealized female character: an unrealistic avatar of the author. The journalist Paula Smith was the first person to spark the trend when she included another female character in her short parody of *Star Trek* (Smith 1973). She named the girl Mary Sue and portrayed her as exceedingly perfect, which started a trend applied later in numerous contemporary publications.

One of the most popular genres of fanfiction shared on Wattpad is RPF (Real Person Fiction). Such texts describe fictional stories about real people and focus on depicting relationships between Mary Sues and various idols, usually singers and actors. Through RPF, authors and readers engage emotionally in the process of "imaginative reading" (Barner 2016, 8-12). As a Mary Sue character goes through various adventures, writers subconsciously incorporate their biggest fantasies into the texts and attempt to represent themselves as someone more exceptional than they are in real life.

The process is worth analysing as not much research on the Wattpad social platform and the Mary Sue character has been conducted. Although Sophie Collins and Ashley J. Barner have offered brief descriptions of the literary characteristics of Mary Sue, their publications focus on exploring fanfiction in more general sense. They both examine fanfiction stories based on fictional characters and occurrences, such as fantasy novels, movies, comic series, etc. On the contrary, this study explores the ways in which specific works published on Wattpad depict imaginative relations between real people and their fans. The processes of composing the two types of fanfiction differ significantly. Although some elements of those fanfiction genres are similar, the way in which authors mirror real celebrities and fictional characters differ significantly.

The first section of this paper focuses on explaining the role of the Wattpad social platform among other contemporary social media. It describes the reasons behind it overshadowing other similar sites and explains the phenomenon of its continuous popularity. The second section proceeds to revisit the history

of the Mary Sue character. A general definition of the term is based on "A Trekkie's Tale" by Paula Smith. Then, the reasons behind its frequent presence in fiction written by youngsters are revealed and discussed. The third section describes specific contemporary trends associated with the character which can be found only in the texts published on Wattpad. The analysis is based on *Teenage Dirtbag* by SumNawaz. It also discusses the differences and similarities between the quoted publications, the very first Mary Sue and tendencies followed by young Wattpad users.

## 2. Social Media and Wattpad

In the last two decades, social media have become the dominating force of private and public communication and they have changed the way millions of people interact with each other. Although the majority would usually associate the phrase "interpersonal communication" simply with conversations between persons, younger generations, especially those who have experienced intense interaction with technology while growing up, might identify the act with conveying messages through various network tools. Those electronic instruments act as primary channels of communication. As stated in *Social Media: a New Way to Success*, Social Webs are Internet locations which bring together users with similar interests, so that they can participate in discussing current trends and affairs (Mustonen 2009, 8), for instance, publish factual information about one's life in a form of short messages (e.g. Twitter) or share one's works of fiction with other users (e.g. Wattpad). The later network, despite its niche status, is constantly gaining interest within diverse social groups.

Wattpad is a social web which grew into the largest literature-oriented Internet community among the contemporary social media. As Sophie Rochester writes, the platform was firstly designed to be an uncomplicated mobile application that could display only short fragments of texts and was prototyped in 2002 by Allen Lau. The co-founder of the network claimed that he was inspired to create an e-reading device as he faced a common obstacle while traveling; he could not read as much as he had wished. Since he already had experience with managing businesses related to IT discourse, he established cooperation with his partner, Ivan Yuen, and officially launched the network in 2007 (Rochester 2012, para. 6). As stated on the official Wattpad website,

the first works published in the service were actually free domain books, for example *Pride and Prejudice*, since, during that time, such applications were not well known to amateur writers ("About Wattpad" n.d). Fiction writing was limited chiefly to the works saved in the form of computer files or handwritten abstracts. Most blogs focused on presenting more factual, diary-like content. Wattpad's CEOs decided to target less specific audiences by providing them with access to more inclusive reading and succeeded in gaining the interest of millions of registered users in later years, while easily hindering other platforms with similar aims from succeeding in the cyber marketplace.

One such network tool is *Blogger*, one of the earliest services provided for various types of writers and launched by *Google*. One could question why blogs in general have been overtaken by Wattpad, since they function as individual channels of communication, whereas Wattpad is more like an assemblage – a cluster of various stories that compete for popularity. It is easier to stand out among the mass if there is no crowd. Yet, despite the fact that Wattpad consists of thousands of published stories, the platform managed to overtake blogs. The reason behind this phenomenon is the complexity connected to searching the blogs for the content. Wattpad provides its users with an uncomplicated search engine, enabling them to explore not only varied genres of fiction (e.g. fantasy, fanfiction, comedy, etc.), but also more specific preferences, such as language, quantity of chapters and types of the audience the story would be appropriate for. By contrast, a blog is an individual piece of work without much specification on the genre, or the length of the story. There is no such Internet tool that clusters and analyses them for those interested, forcing the audience to go through the content, even if it is beyond their interest zone. Although functions of contemporary blogs have been enhanced, as in the past a published post could consist of textual content only and rarely was treated as a "two-ways communication channel," the *blogsphere* – the entire connected community – does not fulfil the audience's expectations (Mustonen 2009, 13). The same issue occurs when a writer considers publishing their works on discussion forums.

As stated by Piia Mustonen (2009, 14), discussion forums are not only among the oldest types of social media, but they are also established to focus on a specific area of interest. Whether writing in general, or just a particular genre of literature, they used to be a popular medium of communicating written stories to a wider audience. The main function of the medium is to allow users to participate in reviewing the content in a "linear fashion" – answering

messages that take the form of a thread (Mustonen 2009, 14). This means that a single story could become a thread, allowing, not only the audience, but also the authors themselves to comment on every message. The whole content would be considered a specific topic, thus becoming easy to search for via the engine. It is similar to the way Wattpad's search engine functions, yet, in practice, might be the cause of numerous issues even for the author. Since specific topics published on such forums are continuous strands of "discussion", the way particular chapters of stories can get combined and lost within the audience's feedback might actually prevent the content from reaching the readers, as they will be discouraged by the constant chaos. Such a form of publishing fiction might be deemed successful for some types of story-writing, for instance RPG-type stories, which require quick and constant communication between participants; however, when it comes to publishing more traditional literature, be it by an amateur or an experienced author, Wattpad is more reader- and writer-friendly.

Because of its significance for the Internet writing community, the social web is no longer considered only a writing network, but a whole company. The official website states that the CEOs have launched sub-applications of the social web, such as *Tap*, and gathered international investors who have raised more than \$117 million to develop the service into mobile writing and even publishing force. Wattpad's popularity is constantly increasing and as of today it generates more than 70 million monthly uses with an average 37 minutes spent browsing the platform ("About Wattpad" n.d.). The users come from around the world, and even though the headquarters of the company is located in Toronto, Canada, 63% of writers and readers come from outside North America, mostly Europe ("The International Language of Storytelling" n.d.). The largest number of the readers is fanfiction-oriented and it is one of the most searched-for genres of literature on the platform. The story *After* by Anna Todd, which was written as a fictional story based on a real band, has generated more than 477 million views on the platform alone and was republished as a physical book (Todd 2014). *Teenage Dirtbag* by SumNawaz, which is the main object of analysis in this paper, is also written as fanfiction about the band One Direction, and has been read more than 9.6 million times (SumNawaz n.d.). The plot follows a rather well-known schema, often associated with fanfiction, as it presents the story of Elena Carter, "the most beautiful and popular girl you'd ever lay your eyes on", and Harry Styles, "the school's bad boy" (SumNawaz n.d.). The direction the story takes is easily found

in most similar works of fiction. The female protagonist is also rather formulaic and represents the phenomenon called “Mary Sue”. This character type is considered a problematic self-insert, which mirrors the author’s inner fictional, but also equally autobiographical identity and symbolizes their unrealistic expectations.

### 3. Fanfiction and the Roots of the Mary Sue Character

Fanfiction is one of the most favoured story-types on Wattpad. There are numerous definitions of the term, as they are often transformed in accordance with particular types of the genre. Ashley J. Barner (2016, 12) sums up fanfiction as a literary work based on dynamics established in publications by other authors or existing characters and happenings. She also declares that, although the term is a twentieth-century invention, its history dates back to Ancient times. Greek tragedies, like for instance Sophocles’ *Antigone*, were often inspired by mythology and either followed the courses of action depicted in legends, or “borrowed” specific details from myths and evolved into new works of fiction (Barner 2016, 13). Instances of such derivative works can be found in every literary period, since people always enjoyed engaging imaginatively and emotionally with the text. Barner (2016, 8) emphasises that such practises result in the popularity of the genre. “Imaginative reading” allows the fan to visualise the settings described in the text and through mentally constructed images enter the universe. It often motivates fans to create their own avatars and involve themselves into the plot.

Such devices became extremely popular during *Star Trek*’s era in the 1960s. It incited Paula Smith, the creator of the very first Mary Sue character, to write her own imaginative take on the series. However, Smith’s “fanfiction” was not a work that would usually be associated with the term, as fans write their own stories to show support and commitment to the series. Whereas the majority of fanfictions are written as a form of worshipping the original title, “A Trekkie’s Tale” is a parody of the trend (Fanlore n.d.).

Paula Smith’s piece of writing was firstly published in December 1973 in *Star Trek* anthology *Menagerie*. “A Trekkie’s Tale” consists of a few paragraphs only, yet the author managed to summarize the archetype of Mary Sue perfectly:

“Gee, golly, gosh, gloriosky,” thought Mary Sue as she stepped on the bridge of the Enterprise. “Here I am, the youngest lieutenant in the fleet – only fifteen and a half years old.” Captain Kirk came up to her. “Oh, Lieutenant, I love you madly. Will you come to bed with me?” “Captain! I am not that kind of girl!” “You’re right, and I respect you for it. Here, take over the ship for a minute while I go get some coffee for us.” Mr. Spock came onto the bridge. “What are you doing in the command seat, Lieutenant?” “The Captain told me to.” “Flawlessly logical. I admire your mind.” (Smith 1973, para. 1).

Paula Smith’s Mary Sue was the youngest member of the crew. Despite her young age and lack of experience, Captain Kirk entrusted her with managing their ship. He abandoned his position because of a trivial reason, a cup of coffee. Not only does it seem absurd, as if the whole piece of writing is simply a joke; a mockery of the Captain Kirk’s character in the original series; it is also illogical. Even if someone was not familiar with the *Star Trek* series, thus did not know how Captain Kirk usually acted, the audience would consider such behaviour unreasonable. How is it possible that someone who bears such authority and responsibility for the whole crew decides to pass down the ship to a teenage girl? What can also be quite shocking for a reader who does not know the real purpose of “A Trekkie’s Tale” is that the rest of the crew consented to their captain’s will without any second thoughts. Mr Spock approaches the girl and even though he questions her presence in the command seat, after her vague explanation, he accepts her filling in for Captain Kirk. He deems the resolution an incredible idea and his final statement even implies that he believes the whole idea was devised by Mary Sue herself.

The first fragment of Paula Smith’s writing is already indicative of Mary Sue’s signature traits: incredible, almost miraculous capability of being the best among everyone she meets. She strikes everyone as being extremely skilful in any area of her existence, sharp-witted and so beautiful that anyone would fall for her charms. The following fragment portrays more of her virtues, surrounding her with an aura of a superhero:

Captain Kirk, Mr. Spock, Dr. McCoy and Mr. Scott beamed down with Lt. Mary Sue to Rigel XXXVII. They were attacked by green androids and thrown into prison. In a moment of weakness

Lt. Mary Sue revealed to Mr. Spock that she too was half Vulcan. Recovering quickly, she sprung the lock with her hairpin and they all got away back to the ship. But back on board, Dr. McCoy and Lt. Mary Sue found out that the men who had beamed down were seriously stricken by the jumping cold robbies, Mary Sue less so. While the four officers languished in Sick Bay, Lt. Mary Sue ran the ship, and ran it so well she received the Nobel Peace Prize, the Vulcan Order of Gallantry and the Tralfamadorian Order of Good Guyhood (Smith 1973, para. 2).

Although Mary Sue did experience moments of vulnerability, just as any other self-aware being, she recovered quickly. Not only did she manage to overcome her oppressive secrets, she was also able to save everyone by using a simple hairpin. Typical characters are usually constructed in a way which incapacitates them to do so. On the other hand, Mary Sue's exaggerated exceptionality enables her to achieve uncommon goals. What is more, despite the fact that she did not stay immune to an incurable disease, she still headed up the ship. While suffering from the illness she managed to obtain numerous awards. She became an icon, an authority for everyone who knew her. Even after her tragic death she was still cherished by the crew:

However the disease finally got to her and she fell fatally ill. In the Sick Bay as she breathed her last, she was surrounded by Captain Kirk, Mr. Spock, Dr. McCoy, and Mr. Scott, all weeping unashamedly at the loss of her beautiful youth and youthful beauty, intelligence, capability and all around niceness. Even to this day her birthday is a national holiday of the Enterprise (Smith 1973, para. 3).

Mary Sue character deriving from "A Trekkie's Tale" is summarized as a girl as an exceptionally beautiful, capable and lovable adolescent character. Later on, Paula Smith broadened the depiction and made the girl even more "relatable" for the public. As stated in an interview conducted by Cynthia W. Walker, the author of the original Mary Sue added that the girl was gifted with such perfection that the whole universe, be it the literary universe from *Star Trek* or just a random story setting, was centred around her. Her mental and physical capabilities would often be strengthened by tragic past and the fact



that the character was able to overcome her trauma. What is more, a typical Mary Sue usually possesses an unordinary physical trait, for instance unusual eye colour, a birthmark, or unique hair colour (Walker 2011, para. 4). Yet, according to Sophie Collins, it is rather difficult to grasp one characterization of Mary Sue. The only characteristics that are definite while describing such characters are: female gender and lack of depth in the process of developing her character (Collins 2018). However, the phenomenon of the Mary Sue character evolved throughout the years and the issue regarding non-binary gender became apparent for the public, proving that the basic definition ought to be broadened.

If a female character's capabilities were even slightly more extraordinary than readers deemed appropriate, the character was still considered a Mary Sue. This resulted in misogynistic tendencies towards female characters and those authors who tried to stand by their creations. Trying to stop the community from going to extremes, the public attempted to note that some male characters that were highly appreciated by various fandoms could also be described as Mary Sues. Barner (2016, 77) explains that, for instance, Captain Kirk himself might be perceived as such an idealized character. If we take into consideration, for example, his achievement of defeating the *Kobayashi Maru* test as the only person in the Starfleet Academy, or his traumatic experience of witnessing a massacre of 4000 people, yet overcoming the trauma, he could easily be declared a male version of Mary Sue. There are numerous instances of such characters in pop-culture, although the majority of the public would not associate them with exaggerated traits and capabilities. An essay published on *Tumblr* summarizes that idealised male characters (superheroes) are considered more normal and people rarely view them as negatively as their female counterparts (Ladyloveandjustice 2011, para. 5). Ladyloveandjustice (2011, para. 6) names a few reasons behind such a bias. One of them is cultural domination of men. In literature a male character wins readers' acceptance much quicker than females, as they are naturally assumed to be likeable. Their female counterparts need to show that they are worthy of acknowledgement, yet, if they try too hard, they will be dismissed as inauthentic.

Ladyloveandjustice (2011, para. 10) observes that both genders tend to indulge in "power fantasies", which derive from a subconscious need of wish fulfilment. In *Who is Mary Sue?* Sophie Collins (2018) also associates the phrase with narcissism and a strong will to fulfil one's wishes. That is why the author is the only person who can fully identify with the character and often does not find any faults with the creation, even if confronted by readers (Collins 2018).

The process of constructing such characters might occur at any moment during which the author is exposed to their desired stimulus. The incentive affects the author's way of perceiving the context of the situation and often results in a creation of an autobiographical story. While having to imagine or describe a possible situation, people depict the happenings either from a point of view of their "possible self", or "wanted self" (Trzebiński 2002, 53). In these circumstances, an author of a Mary Sue character subconsciously envisions their wanted self as an element of a fictive course of actions.

Fanfiction readers usually identify a Mary Sue character right after being introduced to her description and since the phenomenon became so apparent and frequent, members of the fanfiction community often treat such characters highly negatively. For them Mary Sue's unreality is obvious. However, such autobiographical inserts are produced subconsciously and writers usually do not perceive them as such even after being directly confronted. They are either too inexperienced in writing or are simply too blinded by their desire to imaginatively fulfil their fantasies. Those fantasies usually include becoming a part of their idols' life and engaging intimately with them.

In addition, writers often sexualize their favourite celebrities and do not recognize the impropriety of such behaviour. Sexual fantasies are conditioned by the limbic system, thus humans cannot restrict them to what they consider moral. Allan N. Schwartz regards the phenomenon as "natural and positive elements of one's sexuality" and claims that it ought not to evoke guilt (Schwartz n.d., para. 4). Yet, although humans cannot control their imagination under certain circumstances, fanfiction writers are able to control what they describe in their stories. They also change specific characteristics to avoid experiencing guilt and the sense of crossing moral boundaries. Portraying juvenile idols as sexually involved characters is often perceived as sexual misconduct, thus authors attempt to change their age believing that manipulating the facts in their stories will result in a more positive response. However, Isu Mizumi (2017, para. 2) declares that adjusting facts to the plot does not change the reality. The sexualised minors are still underage in real life and even if some readers do not know the specimen behind the described avatar, someone will always be able to recognise them.

Many authors try to avoid improper associations by changing their RPF-type stories into texts that readers would consider typical fiction. Characters based on existing people get new names, surnames, occupations: their whole identity is changed. Yet, authors always abstain from changing their auto-

biographical inserts, as that would hinder their fantasises from being fulfilled. They do not limit their avatars' abilities, personality characteristics and looks, since, as mentioned before, they subconsciously imagine their "wanted self" as the main character of the story. Imagination is a form of providing pleasure to the mind and encountering idols is not the only method for satisfying one's fantasises. Mary Sue's creators often shape the character in a way that corrects their imperfections and allows them to indulge in the reality they desire. Writers can achieve goals they would never be able to reach in real life or experience adventures that the reality prevents from occurring. Although readers might view such creations as not believable and often inappropriate, the authors still perceive them as highly positive and reasonable. That is why the need for satisfaction is the main reason behind the popularity of the Mary Sue characters' existence in Wattpad stories and generally in fanfiction.

#### **4. The Mary Sue Character in the *Teenage Dirtbag* and an Analysis of Autobiographical Inserts in the Text**

*Teenage Dirtbag* by SumNawaz is a widely known instance of fanfiction centred around autobiographical tendencies. The story accumulated an enormous number of fans. The publication was read almost ten million times, 195,000 users voted for the text as a sign of acclaim and more than 32,000 readers follow the writer's profile (SumNawaz n.d.). The text is discussed on various social media and provokes detailed reviews. The majority can be read on Wattpad, but Facebook, Tumblr and Twitter are also used to share opinions about the story. For instance, the publication was often discussed in a Polish Facebook group associated with Wattpad and each post about the text was commented about 250 times. The community gathered around the publication is clearly divided, as many instances of both positive and negative feedback can be read on social media.

Numerous readers declare sympathy for the story as they enjoy the plot, language utilized in the text and its structure. For example, some users find the text pleasant, as the mere presence of their idols incite them to delve into the narration. Many similar opinions have been published on various social media and although the process of the publication of *Teenage Dirtbag* started a few years ago, it still arouses curiosity among new fans. On the other hand, numerous commentators state that the "fictitious" text is an apparent pastiche

of Paula Smith's parody and that it does not deserve its popularity. Those who oppose the story's popularity view the text as full of mistakes: poor structure and language, yet fans are often oblivious of the text's negative aspects. However, many readers, despite criticising the main character, point out that Elena Carter is not a typical example of the character prototyped by Paula Smith. Although the female avatar shows apparent similarities to the majority of Mary Sue characters, she possesses contradicting personality traits. Thus, the creation is in fact a combination of the original Mary Sue and the two types formed by Wattpad users: "a susceptible, highly intelligent introvert and a rebellious social butterfly."

The description presented in the first chapter indicates the nature of the main female character in *Teenage Dirtbag* and possible directions of her development. It also touches upon similarities between SumNawaz's creation and its archetype:

My name is Elena, I'm seventeen years old, and am in Year 12 here in Holmes Chapel. It's a small village, but really cosy, and I love it her. I live with my parents and older brother Tyler, and I pretty much tolerate my family. My mum is a doctor and dad is a professor in nearby college, so we're pretty well off. I'm a straight A student and never had a blemish in my record. It's weird to say, but I'm the most popular girl in school. I'm not like those stereotypical bimbo blondes who run the school. I have blue eyes and long, light brown hair and am fairly skinny. I also have a nose piercing that I love (SumNawaz n.d., chap. 1).

As usual, the main female character is a youngster attending high school. Numerous stories of this kind take place in American or British secondary schools, because authors are usually students themselves while writing their texts. SumNawaz's story and Paula Smith's parody start at a similar point in their creations' lives. The original Mary Sue was a teenager, too, and was "only fifteen and a half years old" (Smith 1973, para. 1). Both authors begin their texts with a precise description of the main characters. Such a method of narration is in fact a common element in fanfiction stories. Authors often highlight their character's most important traits right at the beginning in lieu of introducing them at a more moderate pace. This results in quicker recognition of the character's role. The descriptions often include their achievements and a clear declaration of their social status. Elena Carter is an exceptional student. Not only

does she always attempt to get the highest grades, but she also cares about her reputation. She is an ambitious character and perfectionist when it comes to the school sphere. The first type of Mary Sue characters constructed by Wattpad users is, as mentioned, highly intelligent person who often comes from a wealthy environment. Elena Carter is a member of an upper class and how she treats her school obligations is most probably a result of her family's background. The original Mary Sue also possesses so many abilities and such knowledge that every member of the spaceship crew deems her perfect. Although people might question such a young person's abilities and experiences, the original Mary Sue was approved immediately. It is not revealed whether Smith's character is a member of the upper class because of her ancestry, but her exceptionality allows her to be considered one.

In addition, as Paula Smith stated after publishing her parody of *Star Trek*, typically creators of Mary Sues combine their characters' beauty with extraordinary traits. In the case of SumNawaz, Elena Carter pierced her nose so that she would be distinguished from the crowd. That feature serves as a similarity between *Teenage Dirtbag's* main female character and its archetype. Paula Smith points out that such characters often have eyes in unusual colours, birthmarks or unordinary accessories. Elena Carter and the original Mary Sue are also considered physically attractive, which is one of the reasons behind their recognition. Elena Carter is aware of her physical appearance and popularity. She enjoys the attention, which makes her develop a high level of self-esteem. She willingly attends various social events, as other students often invite her because of her popularity. The original Mary Sue was also well known not only among her closest colleagues, but generally among the majority of characters. The popularity and the crew's trust strengthened her self-confidence and allowed her to become a national hero. Elena Carter's popularity with her schoolmates and her awareness of the fact contradicts with the first type of Mary Sues introduced in Wattpad stories. As the first type depicts a self-aware introvert, Elena Carter's behaviour clearly problematizes this portrayal. The traits mentioned above indicate that the main character of *Teenage Dirtbag* is a combination of "a susceptible, highly intelligent introvert" and "a rebellious social butterfly."

The second type of those characters, "a rebellious social butterfly," often resembles a delinquent. Although SumNawaz does not allow her creation to have direct contact with criminal environment, she still constructs her so that Elena Carter touches upon the topic of "bad girls." Piercings are often associated

with questionable characters, especially if they are seen on unorthodox parts of human body. Such characters are well known for trying to go against the grain and in further parts of the story Elena Carter follows such a dive. In addition, she opposes her parents' opinion on tattoos. Her family believes that "tattoos are a way of ruining your body. They are pointless" (SumNawaz n.d., chap. 1). However, the female character sees them as "a different, individual part of one's life" (SumNawaz n.d., chap. 1). The tension between Elena Carter and her family plays an important role in the process of her development. "Bad girls" either do not have families or are often conflicted with them. As stated previously, Elena Carter does not enjoy their company and the communication channel between the main character of Teenage Dirtbag and her family must be disrupted. Various fragments of the text describe the situation in detail:

I can't tell Tyler or my parents that I had detention. If my parents find out, I probably will be dead. To them, if their perfect daughter gets detention, then they would be so ashamed. I already feel pressured enough by my parents because they want perfect grades and have me get a scholarship to an amazing college. I do my best to please my parents, but it just seems like it's never enough. My parents are perfectionists, you could say. They want me to be the perfect daughter and do everything right, which puts a lot of pressure on me (SumNawaz n.d., chap. 2).

The quotation presents the reasons behind the character's complicated relationship with her family members. As her parents attempt to transfer their ambitions onto their child, it causes the main character to feel mentally unsettled. The fear troubles her. Although the original Mary Sue lost her family to a tragedy, which makes the circumstances different in SumNawaz's creation, the notion of tragic occurrences still binds these two characters. The original Mary Sue had to face the loss of her loved ones. There was a certain point in her existence when her mental strength was tested. Elena Carter is forced to overcome her insecurities and fears every time she faces her parents. When she enters her house, she transforms back into the first type of Mary Sue, creating a clear division between the main two environments she is a part of: the school and the household. At home, she becomes a self-conscious introvert, whereas at school she morphs into a self-confident, dominant girl whom no one really knows.

She pretends to be invincible in front of the other students, as much as she is embarrassed and scared of her father, who turns abusive in the further parts of the story. When Elena begins to stand up for her interests and relationships her father deems “toxic”, he loses his patience and hits her. The situation is described after the main character reveals that she became close with the main male character: “I was suddenly cut off when something came in contact with my cheek harshly. My head turned to the side as it happened, my hand immediately reaching up to the spot where my cheek was hit. My eyes widened when I touched my now warm and stinging cheek. He slapped me. My dad actually slapped me” (SumNawaz n.d., chap. 13). The female later states that aside from her boyfriend, she has only few people that she can share her fears with. She often underlines that only her closest acquaintances are aware of her situation.

Mary Sues frequently limit their social interactions to small groups of characters, usually people who have similar backgrounds. Authors construct their creations so that they are forced to overcome trust issues and doing so is possible only when interacting with similar characters. Not only do they come from the same social class, but they also possess similar qualities. In the case of SumNawaz’s story, the author constructed the plot in a way which generally follows the tendency. Elena Carter and her closest friends are alike. However, they also counterbalance the main character of the story, as some of their qualities differ. Elena Carter’s best friends are two girls, Rebecca and Candice. They are both well known among other students and aware of their popularity. It is written that Rebecca and Candice are really “funny and loud, but also a bit on the shy side in presence of strangers” (SumNawaz n.d., chap. 3). Although Elena Carter does not share her personal dilemmas with anyone but her closest acquaintances, she does not fear interacting with strangers, as if the author wanted to create an illusion of perfection. Since the situation was depicted before the author revealed Elena Carter’s family situation, she seemed more perfect in comparison with other characters. The fact heightens the character’s combination of personalities. The rebellious type of the Mary Sue character does not socialize with people who are not exactly the same as her, whereas the second type, the introvert, does not shy away from such forms of social interactions. The notion is usually highlighted while Elena Carter interacts with the main male character at the beginning of the story and later on when she falls out with her parents. The combination is used as a starting point for Elena Carter’s and the main male character’s relationship.

SumNawaz focuses the plot of her story on the relationship between Elena Carter and Harry Styles. As mentioned before, Harry Styles is considered “the most feared person in Holmes Chapel” (SumNawaz n.d., chap. 1). His character is supposed to counterbalance the Mary Sue and influence her development. The differences between these two characters are used as a powertrain of the plot. The author sums up the beginning of the characters’ relationship with “opposites attract” schema, but then continues to reveal that they are in fact similar. First of all, neither of the students is afraid to share their opinions about each other. The first type of Mary Sue characters, the intelligent introvert, usually refrain from sharing their feelings with their love interests, but when asked directly, Elena Carter admits that she finds Harry Styles attractive. Since the mutual attraction is revealed at the beginning of the plot, the development of the relationship is faster than in many similar stories. The pace allows the author to reveal numerous details of the characters’ personal lives, which are usually brought to light towards the end of such stories. One such detail is Harry Styles’ family situation. Similarly to Mary Sue’s, it is complicated, as his father is a criminal who abused his wife and children and thus was sentenced to a few years in prison. As a result, both characters do not have proper role models. The realization of the similarity strengthens the mutual fascination between the teenagers and incites the Mary Sue to follow Harry Style’s habits and share personal details of her life with him.

The mutual trust becomes a strong base not only for their relationship, but also for Harry Styles’ change. The process is depicted in a slightly different way than in most publications of this type. That is another reason for Elena Carter being an unordinary instance of Mary Sue character. The change of a “delinquent” character that completes the first type of Mary Sue character’s activity is usually described as something continuous and complex. It follows a popular schema of the male encountering the female and developing a strong fascination towards her, as she is considered “a forbidden fruit,” influencing her negatively and then realizing the mistakes. In the case of SumNawaz’s publication, “the change” is not actually a change, but rather a process of unravelling that Harry Styles is not in fact as antagonistic and negative as he was portrayed at the beginning. The Mary Sue’s influence on the male character does not impose a need for change in him, but rather an obligation to bring his real personality out into the open. The image of “a bad boy” that everyone in the story, but also readers, associate with him is an illusion. It does not conceal any dramatic



secrets, as Harry Styles does not even consider the relationship with his father as something tragic. The bad boy aura serves simply as an element of creating appearance, of being cool and feared. The method of exaggerating the negative qualities of the male's personality is a result of the mentioned fascination with "the Dark Triad of personality traits": narcissism, Machiavellism and psychopathy (Mehta 2013).

Young women consider a relationship with a "bad boy" thrilling. The notion seems rousing, thus many young authors create stories consisting of their fantasies. In this case, SumNawaz's fantasises centred around her favourite celebrity musician and resulted in writing the text composed with numerous inserts of biographical nature (Real Person Fiction). Elena Carter, undoubtedly the author's avatar, allows the readers to "experience" a relationship with Harry Styles, an idol and member of a popular band. Not only is such a relation exciting, because it grants SumNawaz and the audience access to ideas that the majority of societies view as too negative, but it also allows them to indulge in closeness to the idol himself, as having contact with him is impossible. As music fans, the readers of the story wish that they could start such a relationship with Harry Styles as well. Considering his bond with Elena Carter, they also want the support and warmth he offers her. They can imagine that the actual Harry Styles possesses similar personality traits as SumNawaz depicted in her publication and that he would behave similarly to his "fictitious" equivalent. The author of the *Teenage Dirtbag* might be in need of such relationship and support it provides due to her troubled family situation.

Elena Carter endures an abusive relationship with her father. SumNawaz's background might be the reason behind such occurrences in her text. The language she utilizes in the publication and other creations published through her Wattpad profile do not indicate that the author is being a victim of domestic abuse at the moment; however, she might have been or witnessed such happenings. Portraying a situation in which a father hits his daughter and his constant attempts at making her fulfil his own ambitions might come from SumNawaz's personal experiences. Those incidents imposed the need for perfection on the character of Elena Carter. Perfection is viewed as a necessity in every aspect of Elena Carter's life, starting from her reputation at school and ending with her physical appearance. As observed in the above fragments, the way in which the Mary Sue is described strikes as being both a knowledgeable, popular and beautiful person. In addition, the clear division between Elena Carter's domestic and school life is another element, which can be a parallel of the author's

situation. The Mary Sue possesses two different personalities depending on her environment. When she enters the school in Holmes Chapel, she assumes a persona of an independent and strong character, whereas while being at home, she is forced to act like a puppet controlled by her father. There is high likelihood that the autobiographical inserts described in the text were supposed to serve as an auto therapy for the author. The numerous forms of literary self-indulgence incorporated in the text vary from such examples as described above to less grievous instances from the author's real life.

SumNawaz introduces her profile on Wattpad with a declaration of her age. As it is presented on the front page, the author is currently twenty years old. The story was first published a few years ago, so the writer was still a teenager while developing the plot. SumNawaz incorporated her real age in the publication. The surroundings and the environment depicted in the text, the school and the mentioned house might be based on her own life as well, as the descriptions consist of highly detailed portrayals. The majority of such fragments contain complex characteristics, such as number of cracks on a wall or the amount of paint used to decorate a room. Such features do not play a crucial role in the story and authors would not usually focus on describing them if they were made up. They are too abstract to imagine in detail and too unnecessary. This indicates that SumNawaz might have witnessed them in her life. Moreover, the method in which the writer describes her avatar's acquaintances is similar to the way which was utilised to portray the surroundings in the story. While describing Rebecca and Candice, the author pays specific attention to even the smallest characteristics of the girls and often mentions, for instance, their birthmarks or the colour of their freckles. SumNawaz does not declare that the mentioned features are important for the character's development, thus, they are only other elements that the author attempts to base on actual people and transfer from her personal life into the text.

## 5. Conclusions

This study reveals that with time the phenomenon of the Mary Sue character transformed significantly. The character evolved, as it changed in parallel to the tendencies surfacing in Wattpad stories. Due to it being influenced by general trends followed by young writers since the *Star Trek* series gained

popularity in the 1960s, the contemporary versions of the character might be altered in various ways, some of them personalized and idealized. When it comes to the depictions utilised in publications found on Wattpad, authors focus on two types: “a susceptible, highly intelligent introvert” and “a rebellious social butterfly.” Although they differ significantly from each other, they possess various characteristics of the first archetypal Mary Sue. Because of the similarities between the types frequently present in Wattpad stories and their archetype, they are easy to identify.

Those characters are among the most popular schemas incorporated in Wattpad publications, as the fanfiction genre of literature they come from, is also the most favoured type of fiction on the social platform. Indeed, due to their frequent presence in numerous texts, the Mary Sue characters are now considered a strongly negative occurrence. Because of the repetitive development, inauthentic personality traits and unrealistic relationships with other characters, readers deem the character exasperating. In addition, as Mary Sues usually occur in Real Person Fiction stories, the link between their “fictitious nature” and an author’s idealization of self tends to be apparent. The obvious autobiographical nature of a Mary Sue allows readers to experience an imaginative approximation of an author’s real life, although, for the less knowledgeable audience, this fact might not be so straightforward.

When associated with Real Person Fiction publications, the existence of the Mary Sue character reveals young people’s fantasies related to their favourite celebrities. Those fantasises include a close relationship with an idol and the adventures that the writer cannot experience in real life. However, they also communicate the issues those young people conceal under the surface. A need for perfection and exceptionality are the less serious reasons hidden behind the Mary Sue character. Young authors compose their stories so that the main depicted character is an improved version of themselves, which serves as a confidence boost. Those autobiographical inserts in fanfiction are usually included in publications subconsciously and often reveal more severe facts about the writers’ lives.

Some authors do not realize that the facts they incorporate into their texts might come from their being mentally strained. Such issues might result from traumatic experiences in the past. Because their usual mental and behavioural processes are distorted, they cannot cope with demands of their lives. Thus, they attempt to relieve themselves by composing stories. The structure of their texts includes a seemingly unremarkable introduction, which later on changes

into a plotline that is full of obstacles. After describing the main events, the author concludes their story with a “happy ending” and transforms the fictional world so that their avatar and its love interest are the only characters that can influence the plot. Such structure mirrors the writer’s desired life course and need for control. Other significant characters in such stories are also designed in a way that helps the author to idealize their avatars. Meanwhile, antagonistic characters are usually depicted so that they counter-balance the Mary Sue. Their flaws are exaggerated. As a result, the Mary Sue appears as more perfect and the most unordinary and positive of them all.

No matter what is concealed by portrayals written by young authors, there is no doubt that they represent actual reality and mirror an author’s narcissism and egocentrism. Fanfiction stories that are centred around the Mary Sue character are worth detailed analyses, as they can reveal useful pieces of information about the young generations and sometimes even serve as a base for psychological therapies. After identifying issues represented in texts of a subconscious autobiographical nature, it would become less difficult to treat mental disorders in young communities.

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