

Placetne, J. K. Rowling?

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[Warning: the text of this presentation contains information about Sayers's Lord Peter Wimsey mystery novels that some readers may regard as spoilers. I have attempted to avoid revealing specific plot points, but it is next to impossible to discuss overarching themes in a multi-book series without reference to the relationships that develop (or not) between key characters. Please proceed at your own risk.]

Among J. K. Rowling's literary role models, one of the most notable is English mystery author Dorothy L. Sayers (1893 – 1957). My poster highlights some of the themes common to both Sayers's Lord Peter Wimsey mysteries and Rowling's *Harry Potter* novels, as well as hints and mentions of Sayers's influence to be glimpsed in Rowling's publicity and media communications. My exhibit also features portraits of Lord Peter Wimsey, Harriet Vane, and Severus Snape by accomplished fan artist Karasu Hime.

“Placetne” is a Latin question that can be translated as “Does it please you?” It is a play on a significant phrase in Sayers's novel *Gaudy Night*.

Dorothy L. Sayers was an English author and Anglican theologian. In some circles, she is best known for her translations of Dante's *Divine Comedy* and for religious plays such as *The Man Born to Be King*. In the realm of popular literature, her novels and short stories about detective Lord Peter Wimsey are considered classics. Published between 1923 – 1937, the Wimsey mysteries have remained renowned for their wit and comedy, but they are also revered for the insights they offer into the nature of responsibility and the challenges that individuals face both in identifying and staying true to their destinies, regardless of social convention or public opinion.

For instance, in *Gaudy Night*, Harriet Vane is confronted by an idealistic sociologist who “can't bear anything to be done except from the very loftiest motives” (GAUD 36) and thus disapproves of Harriet's career as a mystery writer. Harriet responds that

...for one thing, writers can't pick and choose until they've made money. If you've made your name for one kind of book and then switch over to another, your sales are apt to go down and that's the brutal fact [...] I know what you're thinking — that anybody with proper sensitive feeling would rather scrub floors for a living. But I should scrub floors very badly, and I write detective stories rather well. I don't see why proper feeling should prevent me from doing my proper job. (GAUD 31)

The character of Harriet Vane has been regarded by some critics as a stand-in for Sayers herself (a.k.a. a “Mary Sue”). Harriet is characterized as fiercely intelligent and independent, with a prickly temperament and a face that “had character, but no one would ever think of calling it beautiful” (BUSM 209), making her an unusual love interest for the aristocratic Wimsey, one of Britain's most eligible men at the time of their meeting. Their relationship evolves over the course of four novels (*Strong Poison*, *Have His Carcase*, *Gaudy Night*, and *Busman's Honeymoon*) that have moved and inspired subsequent generations of readers and writers. In

addition to Rowling's *Harry Potter* novels, Sayers's impact on contemporary fiction can be seen in Connie Willis's *To Say Nothing of the Dog*, Mercedes Lackey's *Serpent's Shadow*, Audrey Niffenegger's *The Time Traveler's Wife*, Elizabeth Peters's Vicky Bliss series, Lois McMaster Bujold's Miles Vorkosigan series, and Philip José Farmer's Wold Newton universe; allusions to Lord Peter Wimsey can also be spotted in Laurie R. King's *A Letter to Mary*, Peters's Amelia Peabody series, and elsewhere. Lord Peter's reach also extends to *Harry Potter* fanfiction, with prominent authors such as A.J. Hall, Sam Starbuck (a.k.a. Copperbadge), and Ellid paying tribute to Sayers by incorporating elements and quotations from the Wimsey universe into their HP-based crossover stories and essays (see Appendix).

Sayers's presence in the *Harry Potter* universe can be detected in minor details as well as major themes. Rowling appears to have consulted Sayers's *oeuvre* when determining the names of secondary characters such as Pettigrew and Crabbe (Jamoche), and the bookshelf on her website includes two volumes with "Dorothy L. Sayers" legible on the spine (Hobbs). The monocle worn by Amelia Bones, the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, may well be a nod to Lord Peter Wimsey's single eyeglass, which he deploys both as a fashionable affectation and as an investigative aid. Moreover, in an interview given on the publication day of HBP, Rowling makes a point of citing Sayers when asked about writing romance:

There's a theory — this applies to detective novels, and then Harry, which is not really a detective novel, but it feels like one sometimes — that you should not have romantic intrigue in a detective book. Dorothy L. Sayers, who is queen of the genre said — and then broke her own rule, but said — that there is no place for romance in a detective story except that it can be useful to camouflage other people's motives. That's true; it is a very useful trick. I've used that on Percy and I've used that to a degree on Tonks in this book, as a red herring. But having said that, I disagree inasmuch as mine are very character-driven books, and it's so important, therefore, that we see these characters fall in love, which is a necessary part of life. (Spartz and Anelli)

A recurring motif in the both the Wimsey and Potter sagas is the legacy of war and its impact both on relationships and one's sense of self. The lead character of Sayers's novels is both haunted by his traumatic experiences as an officer in the Great War and troubled by the signs that another war may be brewing. The cast of the *Harry Potter* books includes survivors of the First Wizarding War (such as Remus Lupin, Alastor Moody, and Molly Prewett Weasley), each with issues of loss and loyalty that seep into their interactions with other people as the Second Wizarding War unfolds.

The tension between adhering to one's principles and fielding the assumptions and expectations of one's peers is a difficulty with which both Sayers's and Rowling's protagonists must contend. For instance, Harry's struggles to handle the fame he never asked for and come to grips with the burden of saving the Wizarding World echo Lord Peter's efforts to come to terms both with his celebrity (as shown by his clashes with Salcombe Hardy, a reporter for the *Daily Yell* and later the *Morning Star*) and with the unpleasant ramifications (i.e., sending other people to their deaths) of pursuing justice.

Both Sayers and Rowling also demonstrate a preoccupation with the concept of life debts and the complexity of relationships affected by them. Over the course of *Have His Carcase*, *Gaudy Night*, and *Busman's Honeymoon*, Sayers explored the nature of reluctant and resentful gratitude through the perspective of Harriet Vane, the woman whose life Lord Peter saved in *Strong Poison*. In HBP, Rowling deepens the multi-generational tangle of favors and obligations

linking the lives of Harry Potter and Severus Snape. The characters of Harriet Vane and Severus Snape share a number of life experiences and traits in common: they are both depicted as intellectually inventive and academically industrious, and they each excelled as students at prestigious schools (Harriet earning First Class honors at Oxford University) in spite of having to forge their way under circumstances less affluent than many of their classmates. Neither Harriet nor Severus are considered physically handsome, but they are both verbally eloquent when they choose to be: Lord Peter falls in love with Harriet Vane upon hearing her speak at her first trial (GAUD 342), and Professor Snape's mesmerizing opening speech in PS on "the subtle science and exact art of potion-making" is one of the most-quoted passages in *Harry Potter* canon. In addition, if one subscribes to the popular perception of Snape's voice as uncommonly rich and silken — a belief particularly cherished by admirers of Alan Rickman's portrayal of Snape in the *Harry Potter* movies — then Harriet Vane's "deep and attractive" alto (BUSM 209) may serve as another point of resonance between the two characters. Harriet Vane and Severus Snape are both depicted as resentful and embittered at being forced to feel gratitude toward men more fortunate than themselves, and Rowling's conceptualization of a Life Debt — "that awful feeling of knowing that somebody you never wanted to be attached to at all is now the reason for your existence" (Sistermaggie) — remains oblique enough to invite reader speculation on just how debts of such magnitude are to be discharged (or perhaps simply endured), a conundrum that haunts Harriet Vane as she attempts to move forward with her life.

The men who rescue Harriet Vane and Severus Snape from their dire situations are both described as socially charismatic, uncommonly bright, and comfortably wealthy; the scion of an old and powerful ducal family, Lord Peter Wimsey comes from a society in which bloodlines are of excruciating importance, as does James Potter. The Wimsey mysteries include numerous references both to the dangers of inbreeding and to the resistance of traditionalists to marriages to commoners — snobbish nonsense to which neither Wimsey nor Potter subscribe in their respective worlds, as both men are shown enjoying the company of friends from diverse backgrounds. That said, each man's prominent social standing does appear to contribute to a certain sense of entitlement in his behavior that some observers (and some critics) find to be off-putting. Both men can be characterized as charming, gifted, mischievous, and not always compliant with official rules, yet ultimately devoted to the "right" side of justice and capable of maturing beyond their youthful arrogance.

The presence of such multifaceted characters is a key factor in Sayers's and Rowling's ability to command their readers' attention across multiple rereadings: the *Harry Potter* and Lord Peter Wimsey books are classics because they circle around themes both complex and compelling enough to revisit even after the reader finds out who's guilty of what — whether it be an unforgivable (or Unforgivable) act of murder, a stupid but solvable indiscretion, of excessive bitterness engendered by an inferiority complex, or some other variety of infelicity. While it is hardly necessary to be acquainted with Lord Peter Wimsey to enjoy J. K. Rowling's chronicles of Harry Potter's adventures, Rowling has clearly devoted time and thought to Sayers's narrative strategies; becoming aware of the echoes between the two series is to enjoy yet another dimension of the *Harry Potter* stories and the works they have inspired.

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Notes

Abbreviations for Sayers's novels

BUSM - *Busman's Honeymoon*

GAUD - *Gaudy Night*

The Harry Potter Lexicon (<<http://www.hp-lexicon.org>>; Steve Vander Ark, editor in chief) and *The Lord Peter Wimsey Companion* (second edition, 2002; Stephan Clarke, editor) were also consulted in the course of developing this project.

To see samples of Karasu Hime's splendid illustrations, please visit her online gallery at <<http://crowsnest.mediawood.net>>.

Appendix

This is a partial list of fanfiction authors and works directly influenced by Dorothy L. Sayers. A longer and sporadically updated version of this list is maintained at <<http://bronze-ribbons.livejournal.com/895.html>>.

A. J. Hall (ajhalluk on LiveJournal)

The *Lust Over Pendle* universe

<<http://www.lopiverse.shoesforindustry.net>>

A comprehensive guide to A. J. Hall's work (including stories and discussions not indexed elsewhere) is maintained at <<http://www.livejournal.com/users/geoviki/6442.html>>.

Hall's trenchant commentary on JKR, DLS, and HBP:

<<http://www.livejournal.com/users/ajhalluk/139903.html>>

Hall's analysis of Draco Malfoy as "Darth Wimsey":

<<http://www.livejournal.com/users/ajhalluk/111981.html>>

Busaikko (LiveJournal)

Her works include *The Waltz Continues*, of which she says, "Sayers, Pratchett, and Bujold: I owe them much" <<http://busaikko.livejournal.com/1790.html>>.

Catrinella (LiveJournal)

"Like the dew I begot you" (Dumbledore & Lord Peter) and other stories in *Placet*, a Wimsey-Potter crossover universe

<<http://www.livejournal.com/community/placet/5018.html>>

Copperbadge (LiveJournal)

Cartographer's Craft

Chapter 32 features a Ted Tonks characterized in the author's summary as "Sayersian"; the overall story focuses on Lupin/Tonks and other pairings.

<<http://samstoryteller.livejournal.com/tag/cartographer%27s+craft>>

Wolves at the Door (incomplete)

<<http://www.livejournal.com/users/copperbadge/707524.html>>

Cordelia_V (LiveJournal)

"Draco Vs. Lord Peter Wimsey," an essay

<http://www.livejournal.com/users/cordelia_v/5706.html>

Ellid (LiveJournal)

Her fics are archived at <<http://ellidfics.livejournal.com>>. Her *Motherless Child* series includes several stories ("Truth" and "Ghost Story") that take place in a flat formerly owned by Lord Peter Wimsey.

Mechaieh (LiveJournal)

"Placet," *Il s'enivrent*," and other stories

<<http://placet.livejournal.com>>

Untitled: A Harry Potter RPG [roleplaying game]

A post-War universe in which Draco Malfoy is the owner of a bookshop managed by Remus Lupin. His actions thus far include presenting Ginny Weasley with a copy of *Gaudy Night* on her eighteenth birthday.

<<http://www.stonelaw.net/untitled>>