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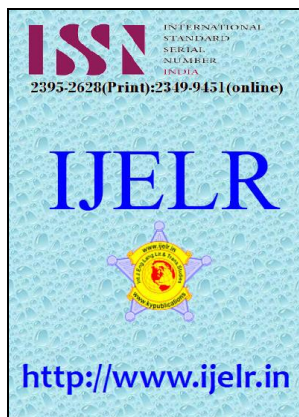
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DOROTHY SAYER'S LORD PETER: PLEASURES OF THE PEERAGE FOR THE PUBLIC

MAAZ BIN BILAL
PhD, QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY
BELFAST

ABSTRACT



This paper is an attempt to unravel the materialist nature of the fiction of Dorothy Sayers from a standpoint that views the fiction as a strategy to entice the readership with visions of leisure and plenty, and seeks to establish the upper-class protagonist as the only possible saviour of his society. Lord Peter Wimsey becomes the archetypal rich genius with an Oxbridge education, an affluent and charming charisma, delightful wit, and incredible intelligence that was beyond the means of the working classes. The paper sets about this examination by beginning with historical context to move into a closer examination of the Wimsey fiction by Sayers, drawing some comparisons with P. G. Wodehouse's fiction.

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Hornung's lead protagonist, the anti-detective Raffles, when about to venture out for his first crime with his Watsonian chronicler partner Bunny Mundars, philosophizes:

Of course it's very wrong, but we can't all be moralists, and the distribution of wealth is very wrong to begin with. —“The Ides of March”, *The Amateur Cracksman* by E.W. Hornung

Not only did class privilege stratify society, but it also percolated into popular detective fiction to provide vistas of comfort and luxury as vicarious pleasure to the reading public from all classes, most often the lower. This paper is an attempt to unravel the materialist nature of the fiction of Dorothy Sayers from such a standpoint that views the fiction as a strategy to entice the readership with visions of leisure and plenty, and to establish the upper-class protagonist as the only possible saviour of his society. Lord Peter Wimsey becomes the archetypal rich genius with an Oxbridge education, an affluent and charming charisma, delightful wit, and incredible intelligence that was beyond the means of the working classes. The paper sets about this examination by beginning with historical context to move into a closer examination of the Wimsey fiction by Sayers, drawing some comparisons with P. G. Wodehouse's fiction.

In 1936 two thirds of Britain's private property was owned by 1.8% of the population (Watson 106). In fact even as late as 1968 when Perry Anderson published his “Origins of the Present Crisis” in the *New Left Review* he tells us that one per cent of the population owned two fifths of the property. In fact, it is useful to go into Anderson's thesis at some length to analyze the composition of this small landed minority and the hegemony they continued to exert certainly for the greater part of the twentieth century (if not till the present).

This class remained powerful despite the end of feudalism with the Civil War and interregnum period of 1642–1660 because of its very nature. There was never a purely bourgeois revolution in England. The Whigs comprised landed aristocracy with progressive interests who were at odds with the more conservative Tory rentier Royalists only for wanting more open trade which could be gained through parliament rather than through the Scottish Stuarts with their Catholic sympathies and narrow trade policies. Thus, after winning sovereignty, it was this landed class that now transformed into a capitalist and mercantile one as well with investments in imperial trade and aggressive agrarian reforms. Therefore, this intra-class struggle only transformed the complexion of the ruling class without changing the class structure of Britain as a whole.

When industrialization came to Britain, and it came and rapidly developed here first in all of Europe, it was again this malleable class that was investing in industries. Thus, the landowning aristocracy became England's industrialists too. By the second generation any upstart bourgeois would be incorporated mentally and behaviourally within this Elite class, having studied at the same institutions of the public schools and (Oxbridge) universities. Even the universal male franchise bill of 1832 only bore change over long periods of time. The House of Commons, as late as 1865, had half its members related to each other in a world of nepotism, of mutual interest, and elitist bonhomie. Even in 1964 half of it came from a school of a thousand students in a country with a population of over 50 million. The 1854 Civil Service reforms were a de facto failure too since the posts were given hierarchically to graduates from the same educational system to which rarely others than these elite went to.

The world's largest Empire, its concomitant obfuscating national pride, and the creation of a further and stricter hierarchy of rank lent to the establishment of the snobs. Also, England remained the only nation in Europe to never be ruled over by a foreign power and to a large extent emerged intact with its fixed class structures after both the World Wars. In fact the First World War came at just the right time to crush the first major Labour build up. The organization of mass capital by the aristocracy accumulated over time, having encapsulated the bourgeoisie within itself, was powerful enough to combat Labour even from outside its interbellum governments of 1924 and 1929-31 to capsize them, and also to keep the labour movements in check. The General Strike of 1926 was put down with relative ease as compared to other proletariat uprisings in Europe. The inter-war period, as much of England's long and almost continuous class history, thus remained highly conservative.¹

This conservatism became the dominant hegemonic force in British Culture especially in and around the World Wars. The snobbery of high culture, an Oxbridge parlance and vocabulary, a distinct sartorial sense, and even the daily diet were all invoked to create an obfuscating atmosphere that shaped British society according to the convenience of this small percentage of the entire population. The reading public would come from the bourgeoisie that was already appropriated by the erstwhile feudal aristocrats and their mannerisms and wished to enjoy and emulate them. Alternatively, it came from the lending library membership of the inter-war period often comprising of the labour classes that needed an escape from their harsh realities, which they sought in reading of the luxuries of their masters. This was the ideal world everyone was to look up to, that was deified and had to be preserved.

The English proletariat was formed the earliest in Europe, even before most of the socialist theories of industrialism had come up. It could only manage to become a bloc working for its own interests as a class and never to change society or its class structures. The Elitist creation of a self-supporting mindset therefore worked its way insidiously with even its agents often oblivious of spreading and establishing it, let alone the passive recipients.

Some of the most potent of these agents were the popular fiction writers. What Raffles says could have been also been said about the disseminators of this traditionally feudal, hegemonic culture of the British peers, among them not the weakest being most of the Golden-Age Detective Fiction writers. The only difference is that unlike Raffles they wouldn't have themselves been conscious of the 'wrong(s)' they

¹ It is no arbitrary phenomenon that the longest Labour Government, and also the only one to last a full term of five years or more, of Tony Blair, needed the 21st century to last as long as it did.

committed. They were no moralists in their own conduct or their profession of writing, even if seemingly so in the content of their texts.

Dorothy Sayers, along with her Lord Peter Bredon Death Wimsey, was at the vanguard of such writing. This paper interrogates the various ways in which her writing worked towards maintaining this status quo and establishing the noble peer as the subject worthy of all attentions, and the only one with his good breeding as capable of bringing sanity to the increasingly insane and unsafe world.

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu in a letter of hers in the eighteenth century had written, about popular fiction writers that “as they write merely to get money, they always fall in to notions that are most acceptable to the present taste” (Watson 15). By late nineteenth century, *The Times* and *The Quarterly* had expressed their sense of outrage at the availability of cheap books, (which was later increased by the lending library) to all classes, people who often had no ‘taste’ (Watson 21-22). The 1870 Education act had done away with almost all illiteracy and by 1920 almost everyone could read. Matthew Arnold in 1880 had seen the novel as designed for a “low life,” middle-class readership but later also realized that the plebs must decide the content in a market-driven world of letters (Watson 21). So, even if the snobs seemingly looked down on popular writings, the writers had no choice but to cater to them since that’s where their sales lay. The writers themselves came from the middle class backgrounds, mostly products of the elite educational systems. They may not have had the money of the landed capitalist peers but had their affectations and tastes. In practice they were able to exercise these only once they were a smash hit like the Edgar Wallace or an Edward Phillips Oppenheim of the yachts and yarns. Not always having the means but the imaginations these writers often yearned all the more strongly for these pleasures of the rich. These they were to vicariously engage in, in their creations, as it also filled the aspirational needs and escapist requirements of the inter-war public.

Crime fiction based in an upper class milieu with a high profile crime, criminal and amateur detective comprised the perfect window of excitement into an otherwise no trespass zone. It showed them sights, smells, sounds, tastes and textures that were forever unaffordable, while giving ample pace and excitement to keep the pages turning. It captured the imagination of much of the English reading public over the world right since Arthur Conan Doyle’s ordered Victorian world of the 1880s². His amateur detective, partial to the titled classes, man of independent means and eccentricities, Holmes, endeared himself to the masses as he and his world also came with a (false) sense of security in increasingly unsure times.

Dorothy Sayers was the perfect heir to take forward this baton of writing of high culture for the popular. Daughter of a clergyman who taught music and the classics, she was educated at Somerville College, Oxford and was among the first batch of women to be given a degree in 1926. Her education gave her the flights of fancy into a world she had glimpsed at Oxford. Her lack of extravagant resources meant she had to toil to claim even small portions of it for herself. Like much of her readership she recreated these in her writings. The difference lay in the fact that unlike them her writing also greatly helped her monetarily over time.

Her Lord Peter Wimsey and the settings of the Wimsey novels and short stories take this upper class British culture and its good life to the furthest extreme possible. Lord Peter was, and had, everything that anyone less than a member of the peerage in Britain desired. Sayers puts it best herself, in “How I Came to Invent the Character of Lord Peter Wimsey”:

Lord Peter's large income... I deliberately gave him... After all it cost me nothing and at the time I was particularly hard up and it gave me pleasure to spend his fortune for him. When I was dissatisfied with my single unfurnished room I took a luxurious flat for him in Piccadilly. When my cheap rug got a hole in it, I ordered him an Aubusson carpet. When I had no money to pay my bus fare I presented him with a Daimler double-six, upholstered in a style of sober magnificence, and when I felt dull I let him drive it. I can heartily recommend this inexpensive way of furnishing to all who are discontented with their incomes. It relieves the mind and does no harm to anybody. (Reynolds 230)

² First published 1887 in *The Study of Scarlet*, first short story in *The Strand*, “A scandal in Bohemia” in 1891.

As is clear, Lord Peter was the consummated bliss of all escapist desire for luxurious pleasure combined with cerebral pursuits for both writer and reader. At the same time he went a long way to establish Sayers' ideal moneyed man who carried out responsibilities and gave back to the society. However, this again was far from reality and was one among Sayers' many valorizing attempts of representation of this class.

The public's first encounter with Lord Peter in the opening lines of the first Wimsey novel, *Whose Body*, published in 1923, alerts the reader to some of the most emblematic qualities of the detective as well as Sayers' writing style:

"Oh, damn!" said Lord Peter Wimsey at Piccadilly Circus. "Hi, driver!"

The taxi man, irritated at receiving this appeal while negotiating the intricacies of turning into Lower Regent Street across the route of a 19 bus, a 38-B and a bicycle, bent an unwilling ear.

"I've left the catalogue behind," said Lord Peter deprecatingly, "uncommonly careless of me. D'you mind puttin' back to where we came from?"

"To the Savile Club, sir?"

"No--110 Piccadilly--just beyond--thank you."

"Thought you was in a hurry," said the man, overcome with a sense of injury.

"I'm afraid it's an awkward place to turn in," said Lord Peter, answering the thought rather than the words. His long, amiable face looked as if it had generated spontaneously from his top hat, as white maggots breed from Gorgonzola.

The taxi, under the severe eye of a policeman, revolved by slow jerks, with a noise like the grinding of teeth.

The block of new, perfect and expensive flats in which Lord Peter dwelt upon the second floor, stood directly opposite the Green Park, in a spot for many years occupied by the skeleton of a frustrate commercial enterprise. As Lord Peter let himself in he heard his man's voice in the library, uplifted in that throttled stridency peculiar to well-trained persons using the telephone. (1-2)

In the very first line it is established for the reader that he is in the presence of royalty, a 'Lord' Peter Wimsey. He inhabits the most upmarket parts of the metropolis, a new apartment in Piccadilly. His amiable face and his easy flow of words make him instantly agreeable to the driver and the reader despite the driver being put into an uncomfortable turn but assuaged by his passenger's polite understanding and apologetic self decimation. This is a man who knows how to get things done. The catalogue he has forgotten is linked to his scholarly hobby of incunabula pointing along with the polished way of speaking to an Oxbridge education. The well trained, properly pitched, deep-throated voice on the phone indeed belongs to one of the best-trained menservants, Bunter. Over the Wimsey corpus we discover the essential role and indispensable relations of this perfect butler, Bunter, to Wimsey, the gentleman detective.

Furthermore, the fictitious "Who's Who" entry of Lord Wimsey, which emerged with the subsequent Wimsey works, confirms many of these impressions. It might do well to have a look at it here:

WIMSEY, Peter Death Bredon, D.S.O.; born 1890, 2nd son of Mortimer Gerald Bredon Wimsey, 15th Duke of Denver, and of Honoria Lucasta, daughter of Francis Delagardie of Bellingham Manor, Hants.

Educated: Eton College and Balliol College, Oxford (1st class honours, Sch. of Mod. Hist. 1912); served with H.M. Forces 1914/18 (Major, Rifle Brigade). Author of: "Notes on the Collecting of Incunabula," "The Murderer's Vade-Mecum," etc.

Recreations: Criminology; bibliophily; music; cricket.

Clubs: Marlborough; Egotist's. Residences: 110A Piccadilly, W.; Bredon Hall, Duke's Denver, Norfolk.

Arms: Sable, 3 mice courant, argent; crest, a domestic cat crouched as to spring, proper; motto: *As my Whimsy takes me.*

Not merely was Wimsey the son of a Duke, he came from the house of Denver. His brother is given to us as the richest of the peerage in England, and Wimsey utilised his own means to their utmost. Wimsey indulged in, and practised, almost each and every one of an educated man's fancies to the furthest extent possible. Exactly what the readership wanted.

Wimsey, had been to Eton and Oxford, and one couldn't ask for any better than these when combined with a first. His erudition hinted at by his hobby of collecting rare manuscripts is confirmed by his conquest of a hostile Miss Hillyard, the tutor in history at Shrewsbury College in *Gaudy Night* (394) and the further suggestions he makes to her argument as an expert historian. The note also tells us that he has authored scholarly treatises on his hobbies.

Also, in *Gaudy Night* while punting on the river, Wimsey runs into an old friend Peake of Brasenose College who tells his wife and Harriet of how Wimsey was the man to be displayed to wide-eyed country-cousins or American tourists who asked to be shown the Oxford manner. E describes Wimsey as a "cricket blue" and remarks on Wimsey's "arrogant, off hand, go to blazes tones," and his "exquisite insolence." Besides the education, Wimsey is also clearly endowed with all the Oxford affectations (Peake also speaks of the Americans' surprise at Wimsey's monocle), and a certain intellectual snobbery, the stiff upper lip—the mark of being, (not just sports), royalty. These are attributes that Sayers, in absence of all social criticism, is clearly projecting as attractive and desirable.

Next, in his two inches of fame in the Who's Who entry, Wimsey is told to us to inhabit certain elite clubs that were among the most exclusive spaces in all of the Empire, with a hierarchical degree of affiliation according to social rank. Audiences, particularly of the counties, which were ignorant of London and its ways were eager to lap up the inside encounters with any such environs such the Bellona Club around which the plot of *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* revolves. The university spaces of Oxford were another such elite bastion recreated in *Gaudy Night* for the satiation of lowly educated readers.

While Wimsey would maintain an elite air about him at the clubs that he is next told to us to frequent, he is also shown to us as simultaneously capable of transitioning into the glib, debonair (at times even cad-like) frivolousness. In fact, this may be called his predominant mood in the series. However, there may be traced both structural as well as commercial reasons for this. As with the driver in the opening scene in *Whose Body*, firstly it allows Wimsey to charm his way through many a people and situations. This disarming manner, combined with his polyglottal abilities, also makes him the perfect foreign ambassador for England. At the same time it masks his devilish cunning and his abilities of ratiocination behind the garb of stupid, good for nothingness.

This latter trope followed the commercial success of the silly ass convention a la P.G. Wodehouse's Bertie Wooster. It was the poor man who had to be shrewd about himself and his money. The moneyed could afford to behave as fatuously as they wished. The public expected and enjoyed the buffoonery and the "eh, what(s)?" of the heir apparent of the Woosters. Wimsey too dealt with his compatriots at his clubs with a delightful repertoire of "don't y'know(s)" but one always suspected, in fact, knew, better of him. While Bertie would be constantly seeking the help of the indomitable Jeeves to find the word he sought to suit the exact turn of phrase he meant to use, it is Wimsey who supplies the answer to the crossword clue 'two' of seven letters, "amsace" to Bunter who is solving it in "The Fascinating Problem of Uncle Meleager's Will" (Sayers, *Lord* 40).

This also brings us to the two indispensable menservants and their relationships with their masters and their vital roles in the plots of the novels. The male ministrant symbolised the greatest advantage of the rich. In the Wodehouse series, in fact, Jeeves has often eclipsed his master in terms of popularity with his wisecracks and superior intelligence. Sayers' Bunter on the other hand is highly efficient yet only a helpful attendant. He is assistant in the detective efforts as a photographer or trustee and legatee in cases such as "The Adventurous Exploit of the Cave of Ali Baba" (Sayers, *Lord* 301-39) where Lord Peter pretends to be dead. Never does he become his master's master of affairs the way Jeeves does of Wooster's actions. It is no wonder then that in *The Inimitable Jeeves* Bertie jibes, "You can't be a serf to your valet" (423), though actually he is, whereas Sayers' Lord Peter is completely in control.

However the important point of similarity is the politics that both evoke and handle with a subtle difference. The service that both butlers rend their masters continues to carry strong feudal overtones. Jeeves, very easily his master's superior in mental faculties and worldly judgements, continues to work in his service in a world that is not in effect meritocratic. Yet, in this very assertion, there lies a social critique in Wodehouse.

Whereas, in Sayers on the other hand, a Bunter might choose the daily news for Wimsey, instinctively speculate his master's dietary or any other preferences, take care of a shell shocked Wimsey in *Whose Body* calling him a "bloody old fool" (71-2), and save his life in *Clouds of Witness*, yet for all practical, and criminological concerns Lord Peter maintains his mastery with an iron hand and flamboyant and superior ability. A sense of slavish feudal servitude is almost engraved in the minds of both, particularly Bunter who at various places when offered the hospitality of others alongside his master refuses to accept it. He always declines any equal treatment in favour of taking his regular position with other menials. For instance, in "The Vindictive Story of the Footsteps that Ran" when asked by the Doctor whom master and servant are visiting to join them for lunch, Bunter says, "If I might venture to indicate my own preference, sir . . . it would be to wait upon you and his lordship in the usual manner" (Sayers, *Lord* 174). In *Whose Body*, after having bought a rare manuscript for £750, Wimsey repartees with Bunter. The latter does not succumb to the bait. One could say that it is almost as if he knows his place:

"No, Bunter, I pay you £200 a year to keep your thoughts to yourself. Tell me, Bunter, in these democratic days, don't you think that's unfair?"

"No, my lord." (8)

It is again Bunter who manages the other perfections in the person of Lord Peter, attributes that are again immensely lucrative to the lower and the middle-class public. Sayers glamorizes Wimsey through his sartorial and toilet excellence, as these qualities remain out of reach for the reading public which lends a certain amount of aspirational value to commodities on show such as the Bond Street clothes and accessories. The following is a sample of the elegance from "The Entertaining Episode of the Article in Question":

On the morning of the wedding-day, Lord Peter emerged from Bunter's hands a marvel of sleek brilliance. His primrose-coloured hair was so exquisite a work of art that to eclipse it with his glossy hat was like shutting up the sun in a shrine of polished jet; his spats, light trousers, and exquisitely polished shoes formed a tone-sympathy in monochrome . . . Mr. Bunter, likewise immaculately attired, stepped into the taxi after him. (Sayers, *Lord* 34)

Twice "exquisite" and once "brilliant" and "marvel"-ous within the space of five lines—these expensive, cultivated and perfectionist tastes carry on from the sartorial to driving the best ride in the Bentley or the Daimler, or even to savouring, arguably, the best gourmet in all of Europe. In "The Bibulous Business of a Matter of Taste" (Sayers, *Lord* 192-209) it is his expert judgement of wines that establishes his identity in a batch of three Wimseys. Also, his travels, both private and in the capacity of an English ambassador, were the other acts of envy and admiration for the readership. Colin Watson tells us of the Marquess of Donegal who estimated that in 1933 the wandering elite comprised of the small number of some ten thousand out of the entire population of England (56). It is almost as if a catalogue of luxurious goods is on display for the readership to flip through and admire. Much of it comes from the toils and care of Bunter.

From these outwardly effects of cultivation and the affectations if one was to move to the inner spaces or psychology that Sayers has endowed Lord Peter with, one may easily find at heart the original belief in the nobleness of the nobility to be operative. Quite typically he is always a "Sport". This does not merely reflect on his prowess on the cricket field or the references to his match saving knocks at Lord's in *Gaudy Night* and others, but to the idea of being a sport that was an essential requirement of Englishness. It meant fidelity to friends, chivalric honour to ladies. Wimsey inherited it from Hornung's Raffles, who despite being a thief and murderer was a sport because he cared for the life of his friend Bunter before his own. Wimsey too went around with his life on his sleeve as evident in *Clouds of Witness* when he runs behind Goyle who has a gun and gets shot, and when he traverses the Atlantic in a two-seater plane to save his brother. Incidentally the brother is under trial because he doesn't wish to reveal his alibi that would compromise a woman. Clearly, as for Wimsey's Viennese singer, who is also known to Harriet, sexual liaisons are permitted but not murder or compromising a woman's honour. This is what it meant to be a 'sport'.

Also, in the post-World War world of all sorts of breaks from the past, Lord Peter is the rock on which Sayers founds her faith.³ Lord Peter Death Bredon Wimsey, is perhaps the only Golden Age Detective to be visibly shown as suffering from the after effects of the war or even referring to it directly.⁴ The war taxes him both mentally and physically as he remains in shell shock and gets concussions whenever he is towards the end of a case and liable to cause death or imprisonment once again, albeit to the guilty. This very hobby of his, and its seemingly frivolous yet in reality a conscientious treatment, point to his sense of the *noblesse oblige*. Just as Baldassare Castiglione had averred in his *Il Cortegiano*, the man of noble birth is expected—as also shown by Sayers—to act in the moral obligation to his birth. Speaking on the canon, on Dante and Christ, Sayers had said that if a culture lost the great ones, it stood to lose everything (Munsdale 147). This faith in the classics and religion clearly extends to the aristocracy in her writings.

Also, at the same time, she endows Lord Peter and her own writing with a great degree of racism and anti-Semitism. While Wimsey denigrates the French education system in *The Nine Tailors* (Watson 134), the whole attitude of various characters and the writer to Jews across Sayers' body of work, from *Whose Body* to "The Piscatorial Farce of the Stolen Stomach," is highly stereotypical and antagonistic. Socialism and socialists are reduced to a farce in *Clouds of Witness*, as evident in the bumpkin Goyle.

Even Lord Peter's and the author's use of language are highly elitist and markedly colonial. "Pukka" (*Clouds* 37), "houris" (*Whose Body* 9), "-wallahs" (*Lord* 46), and "Sahib" (*Unpleasantness* 92) are some examples of the latter. Words from Latin and French are thrown in without translations to give an authentic feel of the educated elite snobbery as well as to showcase the erudition of Wimsey who is a Dante Translator. Even the proposal and its acceptance between the man and to be wife, both from Oxford, Peter and Harriet, takes place perhaps a little too aptly, in Latin, in *Gaudy Night* with the question "Placetne, magistra?" begetting the reply "Placet."

Harriet too is a very vane character. Basing her to a great extent on herself, Sayers presents in Harriet as the one politically redeeming character to the extent that ascribing agency to the female in terms of career and personal freedom goes. Yet, behaving very much like the Elizabeth of *Pride and Prejudice* and largely following its pattern of courtship, Harriet remains the perfect parvenu intellectual snob. The other women of Sayers' world, such as the poltergeist Annie of *Gaudy Night*, show the only fate for an uneducated woman in her view. The other scouts are also stereotypically shown as gullible and to have paltry concerns.

Clearly, despite all of a Raymond Williams' later appeals and calls to the heavens that "Culture is Ordinary," for Sayers it remained highly conservative, and elitist. As someone who in the end wished to be known for her work on Dante, she came endowed with a strong priggishness herself and brought it to her popular writing with a vengeance. She and her detective helped obfuscate the fact that what the proletariat had in their daily lives and their own oral or other traditions was already a culture. An upper class hegemonic control of culture to present its own affectations as the only way for culture to exist was established. In England, as already stated through Anderson's thesis, this was done with a thorough control because of the continuous presence of the feudal hegemony that had moulded itself with the capitalist while maintaining its register. In and around the Golden Age period, and for authors like Dorothy Sayers, this was no residual ideologue but the dominant one, powerful enough to keep combating and suppressing even the emergent strains of labour, socialism etcetera for a long time. The readership in lower middle-class households needed an escape. Sayers provided with elite pleasures culled from the life of the peerage for her public.

³ Mitzi Brunsdale's book gives a long discursive account of Sayers' life and religious convictions and traces the strongly Anglo-catholic conservative bent of mind despite her valiant sins and the child out of marriage that she had.

⁴ Though even Sayers omits much of the economic and political effects of the war except for small allusions by Peter to his pacifying trips to Europe in *Gaudy Night* (338).

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