

J.K. Rowling's Subversion of Traditional Fantasy Nomenclature

Throughout her *Harry Potter* series, Rowling is always conscious of the names of her characters and their meanings. Over the course of seven novels, she uses the names of her characters to either reinforce character traits or misdirect the reader's assumptions. It is the latter of these functions that poses a point of interest since fantasy literature, and the fantasy genre on the whole, depends heavily on the naming of things to solidify readers' understanding of them amidst a world of oddities.

Rowling's deception begins with *Prisoner of Azkaban* where she introduces the character of Sirius Black. Ironically, this is also the novel where her nomenclature is at its weakest, as shall be discussed later. Keeping with the conventions of many of her main players, Black's name carries significance beyond its identification of him as a character. This significance is tied into the omen of the black dog, also introduced in this novel. As per *Harry Potter* lore, seeing a black dog is an omen of death, and Harry has various sightings on a black dog throughout the novel – which we know in retrospect to be Sirius. But before that revelation is made, there's a possibility that Harry's seeing the black dog truly is an extrasensory or magical omen. If we deconstruct Sirius's name, we'll find that Sirius in the real world is a double star, and the brightest visible star in the night sky. Dive a little further and it happens that Sirius is the central star of the constellation Canis Major. Hereafter, Latin language skills (which Rowling employs prominently in her novels) allow for the translation of this constellation's name, roughly, into "great dog," with *great* here meaning large. Add to this Sirius's family name of Black and the relationship Rowling wishes to draw between him and the black dog of omen are completely transparent. With this understanding, all clues point to Sirius as being a messenger of death; this understanding would be a point of tension to a reader who takes into consideration traditional fantasy nomenclature. A character named after an omen of death in fantasy literature wouldn't be expected to emerge a hero. In this, Rowling has failed to achieve consistency with a central character of her story. She has jeopardized the integrity of nomenclature for a one-time plot reveal. It could be argued that Sirius, coming from a

prominent family of dark wizards, was so named by his parents as a reflection of his lineage, but an explanation internal to the novel cannot erase the external agency of the author as the sole creator of those internal conditions. This early entry in the series opens up the question of how much we can trust the names of the characters.

Most often, Rowling over commits to using names as tools for characterization, and it is perhaps this sharp contrast between those that are accurate and those that aren't that makes those unfaithful names seem so unappealing. Severus Snape whose Latin name translates into "severe" remains severe throughout the series. Professor Vector appropriately teaches arithmancy. Remus Lupin, whose last name is a poorly disguised spelling of *lupine*, though he doesn't have any wolf-like characteristics, is indeed a werewolf. But these still stand against characters named contrary to their actual character, one such individual being Draco Malfoy – in fact, his whole family can be lumped together in this group – because despite the family name prefix mal-, none of them are touched by inherent evilness. Draco whimpers and snivels when faced with making truly terrible decisions, both hesitating to kill Dumbledore and defecting from the Death Eaters at the conclusion of the Second Wizarding War. This cowardly behavior in the face of evil, surprisingly, is an attribute attached to Malfoy's parents as well, both of whom defected with him. Lucius (whose given name, it's worth noting, translates into "light" from Latin) reluctantly returns to Voldemort when the dark mark summons him at the end of *Goblet of Fire*, and regards the Dark Lord with evident fear. It can be assumed he only returned to save face; and thereafter, it seems that his every action carried out under Voldemort is carried out reluctantly, most notably the surrender of his wand which Voldemort notes should be regarded as an honor. Lastly is Narcissa who receives the unbreakable vow from Snape, a pledge for the Hogwarts professor to protect Malfoy. That she's more afraid for him than proud demonstrates her unwillingness to commit fully to evil. From Draco's introduction in the first book to our introduction to his father in *Chamber of Secrets*, there's the distinct impression that Draco and his family are all bad, yet Rowling reverses this characterization the

further into the series she gets with the Malfoy family behaving more like good people who became trapped in bad situations.

But the worst of it comes with Albus Dumbledore, Hogwarts headmaster and wizard extraordinaire whose name translates to “white” from Latin. Already, the name white carries with it a good deal of baggage, particularly within fantasy. In *The Lord of the Rings*’s Gandalf is one great example, having made the ultimate sacrifice for the greater good only to be resurrected as Gandalf the White. Of course, there are also instances in fantasy when whiteness is attributed to forces of evil. Saruman the White, another character from *Lord of the Rings* became evil somewhere along the path to vanquishing evil, but this was an instance of Tolkien very deliberately intending to show how power corrupts even the best of us. Then, there’s the example of the White Witch from *The Chronicles of Narnia*, but she is obviously christened white for having brought perpetual snow to Narnia and not on account of her character. Like Gandalf, Dumbledore is so named white to account for the purity of his spirit and intentions. We initially see these qualities when he rewards Gryffindor house at the end of *The Philosopher’s Stone* for their achievements in protecting the school. Most of the rest of the series documents Dumbledore’s greatness through the ruminations of other characters, and by the time *Order of the Phoenix* begins, a strange phenomenon occurs wherein members of the titular Order trust every decision Dumbledore makes simply on account of those decisions being made by him. Despite this, a good number of Dumbledore’s decisions are questionable (and members of the Order aren’t always oblivious to the absurdity of them). With the Dark Lord rising, secret-keeping was necessary, but the extent to which Dumbledore mistrusted all who trusted him paints a darker picture of his character than his colleagues would support. The methods by which he achieves his and the Order’s goal of destroying Voldemort relies heavily on his ability to deceive those closest to him. While this isn’t a blatant deception (for example, a lie), it is one that nonetheless subverts the characteristics associated with whiteness and purity in fantasy literature. Dumbledore willingly withholds significant information at every turn in the

novel. Above all else, trustworthiness is meant to be the characteristic that defines Dumbledore, yet the reader can never be entirely sure if Dumbledore *is* to be trusted since, like Harry, they are kept in the dark regarding critical elements of the master plan. Dumbledore himself admits on multiple occasions that his major decisions are based solely on guesswork – educated guesswork but guesswork nonetheless. Rowling heavily reinforces this uncertainty in *Deathly Hallows* through her liberal use of Rita Skeeter and Aberforth, especially the latter whose deep personal connection to Dumbledore must be taken into high consideration when he denounces the soundness of his brother's character. While Skeeter's account is less than 100% reliable, she has shown throughout the novels a tendency to grossly overemphasize truths more so than tell a complete lie. It is for this reason that her argument against Dumbledore's character holds its ground and detaches Dumbledore from his namesake. Like the Malfoys, the nomenclature would have us think the opposite of what the narrative constantly drives us to believe.

One can draw either of two conclusions from Rowling's use of nomenclature. Either she's irresponsibly bending the expectations of the fantasy genre, or she's deepening the characterization through these irregularities. Nothing would be lost in giving Sirius Black a name less oriented around murder; nothing would be lost in giving the Malfoys a surname less associated with evil; and nothing would be lost in giving Dumbledore a name that had less to do with his purity. Destabilizing the connection between name and character only confuses her philosophy for character nomenclature which, with the exception of these major characters, reliably provide a hint at their true natures. But perhaps the confusion and uncertainty of the reader holds greater importance than does the consistency of an organized system of nomenclature. But if such is the case, none of the names matter in respect to character; they become an elaborate system of coincidence, and in fantasy literature, no symbolism, in respect to the structure of the novel-world, should exist as a coincidence.