

Midcoast Senior College
Dorothy L. Sayers: The Holy Mysteries
Website

Week #1.

Welcome to *Dorothy L. Sayers: The Holy Mysteries*.

Sayers wrote an enormous amount of material, poetry, social commentary, plays, theology, her translation of *The Divine Comedy*, literary criticism, and, of course, her Peter Wimsey mystery novels and stories. Our focus in this course will be on three of the novels and their relation to Sayers's inner, spiritual life.

We have only six weeks, at two hours a week, to explore these books, and I'll tell you now, and frankly, that *Gaudy Night* is the culmination of her work and we'll spend most of our time on that novel. *Strong Poison*, and *The Nine Tailors*, prepare us for that third novel. PLEASE TRY TO KEEP YOUR READING AHEAD OF THE CLASS SCHEDULE! TRY TO HAVE THE BOOKS READ BEFORE CLASS!

Thus we will spend our first two weeks introducing Sayers and discussing, *Strong Poison*, we will spend one week on *The Nine Tailors*, and our final three weeks on *Gaudy Night*. If we were simply enjoying the novels, this schedule would be very unfair to the first two books, but I want to pursue another line of thought and I trust that you'll be able to go back to the first two novels and enjoy them at your leisure. Indeed, maybe you'll enjoy them more having seen how they lead up to the last novel.

SPOILER ALERT! I warn you now that the only way to analyze these mystery novels is by seeing how the author constructs them, and that involves talking about the solutions to the mysteries. So if you're not familiar with the novels, I'd encourage you to read ahead rather than feel like I've spoiled your enjoyment of the novels.

THE GUIDING QUESTION of our work together this spring has to do with the fact that in *Strong Poison* Sayers introduces Harriet Vane as a love interest for Peter Wimsey, but that it takes five years and five novels before she can bring the couple together in a happy and satisfying relationship. Why does it take five years for Peter and Harriet to solve the problems of their relationship? More to the point, I think, why does it take Sayers five years to write a book with a satisfactory (to her) resolution to the bond between these two very independent and demanding characters?

We will look at the ways in which *Strong Poison* sets up the relationship and its difficulties, then we will look at how *The Nine Tailors* plays with answers to the larger questions that Peter and Harriet's relationship implies, and finally, in *Gaudy Night* we will see how Sayers solves and resolves her problem.

Strong Poison, some questions to ponder:

1. What are our first impressions of Harriet Vane?
2. What are our first impressions of Peter Wimsey?
3. At the trial, who are the secondary characters whom we meet?
4. What expectations does Sayers set up as the trial scene progresses?
5. What is the role of women in this book?
6. What are our first impressions of Norman Urquhart?
7. What is Bunter's role in the book?
8. What is Charles Parker's role in the book?
9. What impressions do we get of religion from the book?
10. What is your impression of Boyes's father's religious attitudes?
11. How would you characterize Miss Climpson's religious attitudes and practices?
12. How would you characterize Bill Rumm's religious attitudes and practices?
13. What is Sayers's attitude toward religion in this book?
14. What impressions of the legal profession do we get from the book?
15. What impressions of the police do we get from the book?
16. What role does spiritualism play in this book?
17. Once Harriet is found not guilty, the book wraps up quickly.
 - a. What impression do we get of Harriet's state of mind at the end?
 - b. What is Harriet's attitude toward Peter at the end?
 - c. What does Harriet actually do?
 - d. What impression do we get of Peter's state of mind at the end?
 - e. What is Peter's attitude toward Harriet at the end?
 - f. What does Peter actually do?
 - g. If you were writing this book, how would you have ended it?



DOROTHY L. SAYERS

**AUTHOR OF
WHOSE BODY?**

PUBLISHED BY BONI & LIVERIGHT \$1.75



A later picture of Sayers.

What follows is from the website acton.org, in a review of *Dorothy Sayers: A Self Entire*, by J. C. Scharl. There is much more in the review if you're interested. This is a very quick introduction to Sayers's biography.

Secrets of the Queen of Mystery

Sayers' biography is a mystery worthy of a sleuth as perceptive as her own Peter Wimsey, with some of the most revealing episodes coming to light only after her death. She was born in Oxford in 1893, with her father serving as chaplain of Christ Church and headmaster of Christ Church Cathedral School. The family moved soon after, and Sayers spent her childhood reading books in the isolation of her father's country parish, forming only one significant childhood friendship: her cousin, Ivy Shrimpton, who would play a vital role in Sayers' life in years to come. Despite the quietness of her upbringing, Sayers was exposed to a vast world beyond her little parish; her father began teaching

her Latin when she was seven, and her aptitude for intellectual pursuits quickly made it clear that a retired country life was not her destiny.

While recovering from the devastating separation from Cournos, Sayers met a charming motorcyclist named Bill White. Sayers threw herself heart, soul, and body into the affair, and soon found that she was pregnant—and that White was married. In a characteristically bold move, Sayers sought out White's wife, who took the news remarkably well, it seems; far from condemning the unmarried young mother, White's wife helped Sayers prepare to deliver the baby in the country, away from prying eyes.

In an intriguing twist, Sayers kept the secret of John Anthony's parentage for her entire life; even John Anthony did not know that Sayers was his mother until after she had died. This surprising reticence from a woman known for her boldness, humor, wittiness, and openness hints at another side of the gregarious writer: despite her warm temperament and her tendency to write (in letters and in novels) clearly about her own emotional state, it seems that Sayers' interior life was also characterized by profound, possibly tumultuous feelings that she kept entirely private.

As a corrective to my boosterism of Sayers and her work, take a look at this evaluation of her writing by Edmund Wilson in January 1945. Wilson was a major critic and public intellectual from the 1930's until the 1960's.

The writer that my correspondents were most nearly unanimous in putting at the top was Miss Dorothy L. Sayers, who was pressed upon me by eighteen people, and the book of hers that eight of them were sure I could not fail to enjoy was a story called *The Nine Tailors*. Well, I set out to read *The Nine Tailors* in the hope of tasting some novel excitement, and I declare that it seems to me one of the duller books I have ever encountered in any field. The first part of it is all about bell-ringing as it is practised in English churches and contains a lot of information of the kind that you might expect to find in an encyclopedia article on campanology. I skipped a good deal of this, and found myself skipping, also, a large section of the conversations between conventional English village characters: "Oh, here's Hinkins with the aspidistras. People may say what they like about aspidistras, but they do go on all the year round and make a background," etc. There was also a dreadful stock English nobleman of the casual and debonair kind, with the embarrassing name of Lord Peter

Wimsey, and, although he was the focal character in the novel, being Miss Dorothy Sayers's version of the inevitable Sherlock Holmes detective, I had to skip a good deal of him, too. In the meantime, I was losing the story, which had not got a firm grip on my attention, but I went back and picked it up and steadfastly pushed through to the end, and there I discovered that the whole point was that if a man was shut up in a belfry while a heavy peal of chimes was being rung, the vibrations of the bells might kill him. Not a bad idea for a murder, and Conan Doyle would have known how to dramatize it in an entertaining tale of thirty pages, but Miss Sayers had not hesitated to pad it out to a book of three hundred and thirty, contriving one of those hackneyed cock-and-bull stories about a woman who commits bigamy without knowing it, and larding the whole thing with details of church architecture, bits of quaint lore from books about bell-ringing and the awful whimsical patter of Lord Peter.

I had often heard people say that Dorothy Sayers wrote well, and I felt that my correspondents had been playing her as their literary ace. But, really, she does not write very well: it is simply that she is more consciously literary than most of the other detective-story writers and that she thus attracts attention in a field which is mostly on a sub-literary level. In any serious department of fiction, her writing would not appear to have any distinction at all.

Dean of American critics, Edmund Wilson, in *The New Yorker*,

January, 1945