

Dorothy L. Sayers: *The Holy Mysteries*
Midcoast Senior College
Spring II, 2026
Class Website, Week 3

Introduction, background, and context for *The Nine Tailors*



This is a Parish church from East Anglia in England, the area of the country where *The Nine Tailors* is set. This is not unlike the parish in the book, seemingly large for the area. It was built, as were several others in the area, in the Middle Ages by wealthy wool merchants for whom building churches was a pious way to flaunt their wealth. These churches are known as ‘Wool Churches’.

1. Wimsey's Vulnerability.

We talked in the last class about the scene in *Strong Poison* where Wimsey is struck by change and mortality. In order to prepare Wimsey's character for *Gaudy Night* and an authentic relationship with Harriet Vane, Sayers continues the theme of Wimsey's vulnerability in *The Nine Tailors*. In our next class, let's talk about which scenes in this book show Wimsey as unsure and vulnerable.

2. Campanology.

This is how Wikipedia defines Change ringing, whose fancy name is campanology:

Change ringing is the art of ringing a set of [tuned bells](#) in a tightly controlled manner to produce precise variations in their successive striking sequences, known as "changes". This can be by [method ringing](#) in which the ringers commit to memory the rules for generating each change, or by [call changes](#), where the ringers are instructed how to generate each change by instructions from a conductor. This creates a form of bell music which cannot be discerned as a conventional [melody](#), but is a series of mathematical sequences.



3. The East Anglia Fens

Wikipedia gives us a quick introduction to the English fen country.

The Fens or **Fenlands** in eastern England are a naturally [marshy](#) region supporting a rich ecology and numerous species. Most of the fens were drained centuries ago, resulting in a flat, dry, low-lying agricultural region

supported by a system of drainage channels, man-made rivers ([dykes](#) and drains), and automated [pumping stations](#). There have been unintended consequences to this reclamation, as the land level has continued to sink and the dykes have been built higher to protect it from flooding.

4. Hilary Thorpe

Hilary is not essential to the plot, but she is essential to Sayers's reflections about herself and her vocation as a writer. We meet Hilary at the very beginning of the body of the story, after Wimsey and Bunter have had their snowy adventure in Fenchurch St. Paul. She meets the Rector's wife in the rectory garden.

A red-haired girl of fifteen, dressed in black, had come in, bearing a large sheaf of pheasant-eye narcissi. She was tall and thin and rather gawky, though with promise of becoming some day a striking-looking woman.

And we hear about Hilary's vocation as she talks with her father, shortly before he dies. He tells her that if and when he dies there won't be much money. She replies.

"...I'm going to get a scholarship, anyway. And I don't want money. I'd rather make my own living. Miss Bowler says she doesn't think anything of a woman who can't be independent." (Miss Bowler was the English mistress and the idol of the moment.) "I'm going to be a writer, Dad. Miss Bowler says she wouldn't wonder if I'd got it in me."

5. No Murder

Wimsey assumes throughout most of the book that the death of the body in the bell chamber was a traditional murder, with a murderer who had committed a vicious, willful act. Thus the natural conclusion is that the job of the detective is to uncover the perpetrator. But there is no perpetrator in *The Nine Tailors*, there is a man wracked with guilt because he had set up the conditions in which a man met with an accidental death. Google AI gives us an overview of an essay by the poet W.H. Auden, who was himself a devotee of detective fiction:

W.H. Auden viewed detective stories as a popular "addiction" or "fantasy of escape" akin to a religious, cathartic experience, analyzing them in his 1948 essay, "The Guilty Vicarage". He argued they required a closed, peaceful society disrupted by a murder that necessitates the restoration of order by a detective.

Fenchurch St. Paul is certainly a closed and peaceful society in the beginning of the book, but the death of Stephen Deacon in the church tower so unnerves Will Thoday and distresses his wife Mary, who had been Deacon's wife, that it causes the whole community to grieve and question the orderliness they had assumed. Wimsey's unraveling of the mystery creates a whole new set of moral problems. So *The Nine Tailors* does not follow Auden's outline; there is no restoration of order. Or is there?

6. Edmund Wilson

In the first posting on our website I quoted from Edmund Wilson's 1945 Essay, *Why Detective Stories*. He singles out *The Nine Tailors* for special criticism in this essay.

"...it seems to me one of the dullest books I have ever encountered in any field....I had often heard people say that Dorothy Sayers wrote well....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....In any serious department of fiction, her writing would not appear to have any distinction at all.

Wilson points to all the detail on bellringing, to stock English rural characters, to the ecclesiastical detail, to the plot, and especially to Lord Peter Wimsey as "The dreadful stock English nobleman of the casual and debonair kind..." with his "awful whimsical patter..."

If this were an essay exam, I might phrase the question this way:

Consider Wilson's Comments about *The Nine Tailors* and Sayers's writing. Do you agree or disagree? Are there places where, even if you disagree with him, you feel he has a valid point to make? In a clear, concise essay present your arguments for or against Wilson's position, pointing to places where he may or may not have a valid point. Finish your essay with an overview of the strengths and weaknesses of the book.

7. *Strong Poison* and *Gaudy Night*

As we are only spending one class on *The Nine Tailors* I'm going to cheat and talk here about what I see as *The Nine Tailors*' role as Sayers's preparation for her major work, *Gaudy Night*. If in fact Sayers spends the years (and the books) after *Strong Poison* trying to figure out how to resolve the relationship between Peter and Harriet, by the time she reaches *The Nine Tailors* she has discovered the outlines of her solution.

- a. Peter has to be as vulnerable as Harriet. As in the taxi with Marjorie Phelps, he has to be seen as 'changing, changing, fearfully changing.' Thus we see a great deal more vulnerability in Peter's character.
- b. Sayers has become much more concerned with the morality of the evil results of good intentions than with the unraveling of a puzzle. There is no murder in either *The Nine Tailors* or *Gaudy Night*. Considering her experience in having a child out of wedlock, this is understandable.
- c. In spending as much time on the character of Hilary Thorpe as she does, I believe that Sayers is exploring what we might call Harriet Vane's back story. This allows Sayers to develop Harriet's character in the next book

so that her changes and Peter's can build together into each other. The attention to Hilary is also an exploration of Sayers's own childhood, and it brings Harriet and Dorothy together.

- d. This Fen country parish, like Shrewsbury College in *Gaudy Night*, is territory Sayers knows well, and it carries much of her spiritual identity. The characters are her people and their problems are her problems.
- e. The work of the writer and the redemptive value of dedication to one's vocation and work well done.