

Dorothy L. Sayers: The Holy Mysteries

Midcoast Senior College

Week 2 *Strong Poison*

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In the opening scenes of Harriet's trial and in the beginnings of the investigation, Sayers introduces her characters and lets us know that Peter is falling in love with Harriet. At the same time we see, in the scenes where Peter visits Harriet in prison, that Harriet is at the end of her tether and not able to take Peter's protestations of affection seriously. Soon the investigation will be taken over by two women. But first Sayers inserts a short but telling scene where she exposes Peter's humanity as she has not shown a character's inner life before, in any significant way. Keep this moment in mind; in *Gaudy Night* the writer having the courage to expose her character's inner life is an important part of the working out of Peter and Harriet's relationship.

In Chapter 8, before Miss Climpson and Miss Murchison become the center of the plot, Wimsey calls on an old friend, possibly old girlfriend, Marjorie Phelps, who appeared in *Cloud of Witnesses*, to take him to meet two of Harriet's friends and Ryland Vaughn at a radical artsy Russian tea room. There is an important moment in this chapter when Peter and Marjorie are in a cab, chasing down witnesses. Peter has a moment of awareness of his aging, changing. It is moment of spiritual awareness that parallels Harriet's awareness of the possibility of being hanged for a crime she didn't commit. I will quote the scene in the cab in a while, but in order to see Sayers's skill in setting up scenes and themes, we'll begin a little earlier in Chapter 8, in a short scene between Bunter, Wimsey's gentleman's gentleman. This scene has a lightness to it, but it introduces Wimsey's anxiety about change that deepens significantly later in the chapter.

"Bunter, I have a sensation of being hovered over. I do not like it. It is unusual and it unnerves me. I implore you not to hover. Is the proposition distasteful, or do you want me to get a new hat? What is troubling your conscience?"

"I beg your lordship's pardon. It had occurred to my mind to ask your lordship with every respect—"

"Oh, God, Bunter—don't break it to me gently. I can't bear it. Stab and end the creature—to the heft! What is it?"

"I wish to ask you, my lord, whether your lordship thought of making any changes in your establishment?"

Wimsey laid down his pen and stared at the man.

"Changes, Bunter? When I have just so eloquently expressed to you my undying attachment to the loved routine of coffee, bath, razor, socks, eggs and bacon, and the old familiar faces? You're not giving me warning are you?"

"No indeed, my lord. I should be very sorry to leave your lordship's service. but I had thought it possible that, if your lordship was about to contract new ties—"

*"I **knew** it was something in the haberdashery line! By all means, Bunter, if you think it necessary. Had you any particular pattern in mind?"*

"Your lordship misunderstands me. I referred to domestic ties, my lord. Sometimes, when a gentleman reorganizes his household on a matrimonial basis, the lady my prefer to have a voice in the selection of the gentleman's personal attendant, in which case—"

"Bunter!" said Wimsey, considerably startled, "may I ask where you have contracted these ideas?"

"I ventured to draw and inference, my lord."

"This comes of training people to be detectives. Have I been nourishing a sleuth-hound on my own hearth-stone? May I ask if you have gone so far as to give a name to the lady?"

"Yes, my lord."

There was a pause.

"Well?" said Wimsey, in a rather subdued tone, "what about it, Bunter?"

"A very agreeable lady, if I may say so, my lord."

And then, several pages later the subject of change comes up again.

"We're getting old, you and I," said Wimsey. "Sorry, that's rude. But do you know, I'm getting on for forty, Marjorie."

"You wear well. But you are looking a bit fagged to-night, Peter dear. What's the matter?"

"Nothing at all but middle age."

"You'll be settling down if you're not careful."

"Oh, I've been settled for years."

"With Bunter and the books. I envy you sometimes, Peter."

Wimsey said nothing. Marjorie looked at him almost in alarm, and tucked her arm in his.

"Peter—do please be happy. I mean, you've always been the comfortable sort of person that nothing could touch, Don't alter, will you?"

That was the second time Wimsey had been asked not to alter himself; the first time [in an interview with Harriet] the request had exalted him; this time, it terrified him. As the taxi lurched along the rainy Embankment, he felt for the first

time the dull and angry helplessness which is the first warning stroke of the triumph of mutability. Like the poisoned Athulf in the "Fool's Tragedy", he could have cried, "Oh, I am changing, changing, fearfully changing." Whether his present enterprise failed or succeeded, things would never be the same again. It was not that his heart would be broken by a disastrous love—he had outlived the luxurious agonies of youthful blood, and in this very freedom from illusion he recognized the loss of something. From now on, every hour of light-heartedness would be, not a prerogative, but an achievement--one more axe or case-bottle or fowling piece, rescued, Crusoe-fashion, from a sinking ship.

For the first time, too, he doubted his own power to carry through what he had undertaken. His personal feelings had been involved before this in his investigations, but they had never before clouded his mind. He was fumbling—grasping uncertainly here and there at fugitive and mocking possibilities. He asked questions at random, doubtful of his object, and the shortness of the time, which would once have stimulated, now frightened and confused him.

Wimsey quotes from "Death's Jest-Book, or, The Fool's Tragedy," by Thomas Lovell Beddoes. The description below, the on-line Encyclopedia Britannica, helps us see how the quote fits Wimsey's feelings of depression around the ideas of change, mutability, and mortality.



Beddoes, detail of a portrait by Nathan C. Branwhite, 1824

Thomas Lovell Beddoes (born June 30, 1803, Clifton, Somerset, Eng.—died Jan. 26, 1849, Basel, Switz.) was a poet best known for his haunting dramatic poem “Death’s Jest-Book; or, The Fool’s Tragedy.”

The son of a distinguished scientist, Beddoes seems early to have acquired, from his father’s dissections and speculations on anatomy and the soul, an obsession with death that was to dominate his life and work. He was educated at Charterhouse in Surrey, where his passion for the drama became evident and where he nourished his imagination on 18th-century Gothic romances. In 1820 he went to Oxford University, where he wrote his first considerable work, *The Bride’s Tragedy* (1822), based on the story of a murder committed by an undergraduate. In 1825 he went to Göttingen, Germany to study anatomy and medicine. There he continued work on *Death’s Jest-Book*. Friends who read the first version advised revision, and Beddoes’ acceptance of their advice hindered his poetic development; for the rest of his life he was unable to escape from the work or to complete it, and it was eventually published posthumously in 1850. In “Death’s Jest-Book” itself, which Beddoes described as an example of “the florid Gothic,” he aimed to use Gothic material to discuss the problems of mortality and immortality.

This photograph of the main courtroom in London’s Old Bailey courthouse, from commons.wikipedia.org, will give a sense of the setting of the beginning and end of *Strong Poison*. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Central Criminal Court of England and Wales \(The Old Bailey\) Court No 1.jpg#/media/File:Central Criminal Court of England and Wales \(The Old Bailey\) Court No 1.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Central_Criminal_Court_of_England_and_Wales_(The_Old_Bailey)_Court_No_1.jpg#/media/File:Central_Criminal_Court_of_England_and_Wales_(The_Old_Bailey)_Court_No_1.jpg)

Spiritualism

The online Google AI summary of spiritualism gives us some context for Miss Climpson’s encounter with the nurse, Miss Booth at the home of Rosanna Wrayburn. This summary doesn’t mention the fact that there was a spike in the interest in spiritualism in England in the 1920’s because of all the deaths of young men in WWI.

Spiritualism is a 19th-century social and religious movement based on the belief that human consciousness survives death and can communicate with the living through mediums. Its core tenets emphasize the soul’s continued evolution, the existence of a spirit world, and the ability of spirits to offer wisdom.

Core Beliefs and Principles

- **Survival of the Soul:** The central belief is that the spirit continues to exist after the physical body dies.

- **Communication:** Spirits can interact with and communicate with the living, often facilitated by mediums.
- **Spirit Guides:** Believers think everyone has spirits or guides who aid and protect them.
- **No Hell/Eternal Damnation:** Spiritualists often reject traditional concepts of heaven and hell, believing in a progressive afterlife where souls continue to grow in wisdom.
- **Personal Responsibility:** Individuals are responsible for their actions and actions result in direct consequences, rather than divine punishment.
- **The 7 Principles (NSAC):** While they vary, organizations like the National Spiritualist Association of Churches (NSAC) outline principles including the Fatherhood of God, Brotherhood of Man, Continuous Existence, Communion with Spirits, Personal Responsibility, Compensation/Retribution for Deeds, and Eternal Progress.

Practices

- **Séances:** Gatherings aimed at communicating with spirits, often involving a medium to facilitate messages.
- **Mediumship:** The practice of acting as a conduit between the spirit world and the living.
- **Spirit Photography/Materialization:** Historical practices (often criticized) designed to prove the presence of spirits.
- **Spiritual Healing:** A practice focusing on channeling energy to help heal, guided by spirits.
- **Development Circles:** Meetings for individuals to develop their own psychic abilities.

History

- **Origin:** Modern spiritualism began in 1848 with the Fox Sisters in Hydesville, NY, who claimed to communicate with a spirit.
- **Growth:** The movement rapidly grew in the 1850s and peaked in popularity in the U.S. and Europe during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.
- **Social Reform:** It was closely tied to progressive causes, including the abolition of slavery and women's suffrage, offering women a strong public platform.
- **Skepticism:** Spiritualism faced immediate opposition from scientists and religious institutions, often fighting accusations of fraud.