

Midcoast Senior College
Spring II, 2026
Dorothy L. Sayers

Website 5: *Gaudy Night*

In the last class we focused on the first three chapters of *Gaudy Night*. This week we'll be looking at the body of the book, and next week we'll look at the solution to the puzzle and the resolution of Peter and Harriet's relationship.

1. At the beginning of Chapter 4, in the light of her experiences at the Shrewsbury Gaudy, Harriet is clear that she wants to pursue her old dream of being a scholar, that this is her work, and is of overmastering importance. The traumatic events of the past are slowly receding (she thinks) and there is only one unresolved factor to trouble her, and that is her unresolved relationship with Lord Peter Wimsey.



The Brazen Head and the related quote refer to a comic Elizabethan play by Robert Greene, *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* in the magician Friar Bacon (based on a real late medieval scientist) creates a brass head that will answer questions. It can be seen in the contemporary woodcut

above speaking its warning to the two friars. The brass head's warning, "Time is, time was, time is past," is taken to mean something like, "The past cannot be changed, act now in the present."

2. So Harriet decides to put an end to the unresolved nature of her ties to Wimsey, who keeps asking her out to dinner. She finds herself agreeing to dinner with Wimsey. (When she tells him that she's busy and can't make dinner for several nights, he says, "Every night booked from now till the coming of the coqcegrues?". This is fictional creation of Francois Rebelais referring to a creature so absurd that it cannot exist, and so to wait for its coming is a vain effort.)

Through dinner and a play they make polite conversation. When he is seeing her home, he asks her to marry him, as he has done many times before. She is able to say no to this request, but she cannot firmly and finally get rid of him. Sayers tells us that she is "back in the old net of indecision and distress."

With the weekend at the Gaudy Sayers sets up the problem at the college, as well as Harriet's renewed sense of vocation. With this scene, with Wimsey, she sets up Harriet's inner conflict over her relationship with Wimsey. This inner conflict, of course, points to the fact that the murder of Boyes and her trial are not, in fact, in the past, but are unresolved. The genius of *Gaudy Night* is that the resolution of the mystery at Shrewsbury College is also the resolution of this relationship. Unlike in *The Nine Tailors*, where there was a mystery to solve and separately there was Hilary Thorpe with her issues, in this book, the personal problems and the mystery are integrated and very much a part of each other.

3. In the aftermath of her recovery of a sense of a scholarly vocation, Harriet, still in Chapter Four, begins to feel that her detective stories are all intellectual puzzle and no heart, no developed character. As we have

seen as we've followed Sayers from *Strong Poison*, to *The Nine Tailors*, to *Gaudy Night*, this is the process Sayers herself is going through, as she, in fact, gives the characters she has been writing about for several years complex inner lives.

4. Still in Chapter Four, Harriet goes to have dinner with Wimsey again, "in a belligerent spirit..." They have what they pretend is a dispassionate conversation about what creates problems in marriage, with Wimsey tying Harriet in knots by asking teasing Socratic questions, like an Elizabethan wit. And the Elizabethan Renaissance is, of course, Sayers's ideal Humanist period.

In the midst of this dinner conversation Harriet discovers that Wimsey has been shot and is in pain (vulnerable again). And she feels and expresses concern for him. Then he sees a nasty post-card (from the college poltergeist in fact), offers to withdraw from the relationship, admitting that he was being selfish (which he was). Asked why she hadn't shown him these communications sooner, she says she didn't want to hurt him. But, of course, her attitude toward him over the recent years having been hurtful to him, he is astonished. In return she expresses her hurt and ambivalence over their relationship and Wimsey offers to withdraw. But Harriet won't let him be wiped out by "plug-uglies".

In the course of one important chapter (4) we have seen the inner conflicts of both Harriet and Peter and seen those tied to the college problem. The chapter ends with Harriet agreeing to go back to Shrewsbury to help them work on the problem, hoping she might get some help from Wimsey, who is unavailable, abroad on work in this fraught pre WWII period, working on diplomatic problems.

5.



This is a picture of the Somerville College Senior Common Room, the SCR. It is a comfortable room where the Fellows can gather after meals for conversation and sherry, or where they can relax during the day rather than go back to their rooms. Several scenes in the book take place in the Shrewsbury SCR, as we watch the fellows express their distrust of Harriet, of each other, and finally, of Peter.

5. The next incident is the vandalism of the new library the night before the dedication. While Harriett guards the library during the ceremony, she has a conversation with Annie, who brings her lunch. We discover here Annie's negative attitudes toward women's education and the role of women in marriage. It's unclear yet, however, whether Annie's opinions serve as a counter to the feminism of the rest of the book, or are a sign of deeper problems. The library incident also leads to a conversation with the Warden in which Harriet reluctantly agrees to stay on and investigate the hateful and destructive incidents at the college.

Here are some views of the Somerville College Library. We need to remember that Somerville is not Shrewsbury, and that these are 21st Century pictures, but they can help us get a sense of place.



6. As a result of this conversation with the Warden, Harriet patrols the college at night and does research into Sheridan LeFanu in the Bodleian Library during the day. (Sayers herself did serious study of the 19th Century English author of Gothic romances, Wilkie Collins, who parallels LeFanu in many ways.) The Bodleian is one of the oldest libraries in Western Europe. Take a look at Where Harriet napped. The first picture is the main entrance, the second is Duke Humphrey's Library, the oldest section of the Bodleian.



7.



8. After her conversations with the Warden and the other fellows and tutors of Shrewsbury (there is another conversation with Miss De Vine about the intellectual life), Harriet has a series of adventures with undergraduates, whose lounge is the Junior Common Room, or JCR.

These adventures not only move the mystery plot along, but they help Harriet see herself and her relationship with Wimsey in a new perspective. They also give Sayers an opportunity to write younger characters and to differentiate them as individuals.

- A. Harriet gives a lecture on detection to the undergraduates, which raises issues about her relationship with Wimsey and her own trial for murder. The 'Wilvercombe case' referred to is the subject of the novel *Have his Carcase*, in which Wimsey and Harriet investigate a murder at a seaside vacation spot, watering hole, in the south of England.
- B. This lecture is followed by coffee in a student's rooms, where there is conversation about group spiritual movements, feminism, and relationships. Finally the topic of the college ghost comes up and we get an undergraduates' view of the problem.
- C. This is followed a short time later by Harriet's discovery of Reggie Pomfret invading the Fellows' Garden at night. Reggie's infatuation with Harriet and his jealousy of Peter are an important factor in Harriet's coming to believe that Peter's love for her isn't weird or idiosyncratic. Her adventure with Reggie also is part of the skillful way Sayers ties both the love plot and the mystery plot together.
- D. Miss Cattermole and Miss Haydock give Harriet another opportunity to reflect on the nature and importance of an Oxford education.
- E. This series of undergraduate encounters is capped by her literally running into Wimsey's nephew, Gerald, Gerry, Gherkins, Lord Saint-George (is Wimsey the dragon that Harriet needs to slay?)



This pool stands in the main quad of Christ Church College. At the center is a statue of the god Mercury. Saint-George tears out of one of the doorways in the background and runs full tilt into Harriet. They feed her crushed meringues to the carp in the pool.

As is the case with Reggie Pomfret, Harriet sees herself in a new and different way in Saint-George's response to her. And after his auto accident she is drawn into the Wimsey family, but also understands that Wimsey will be embarrassed and vulnerable by her knowledge of his family secrets.

It is while Harriet is trying to write a letter to Peter about his nephew (a simple writing assignment) that the lights go out around the college. Saint-George and the poltergeist prank finish off the term.

9. Harriet's time back in London after the end of term shows her the spiritual emptiness of the city life and culture, and she longs for Oxford again. It is in the midst of the silliness of her city life that Harriet begins to tackle the problems in her new mystery novel. The human relationships in the novel were "beginning to take on an unnatural, an incredible symmetry. Human beings were not like that." I think we can hear Sayers herself here as she tries to write full human characters for *Gaudy Night*.

While in town, Harriet sees Reggie Pomfret and tires of him when she gets a tired, dejected proposal letter from Peter. Again, it is not Peter's strength alone that attracts Harriet, but his vulnerability, and humanity, just the qualities that she's trying to build into her novel. And Peter can see that change in Harriet in her reply.

Also while in town, she has lunch alone and Freddy Arbuthnot comes over and says hello. Freddy is not one of Peter's brighter friends, but he basically asks Harriet not to hurt Peter, again, a new perspective on her relationship with Peter. He also tells Harriet that Peter is abroad for the Foreign Office, doing diplomatic service for the nation, again in that very dicey pre-war period. She berates herself for her focus on herself and lack of awareness.

10. So Harriet flees back to Oxford, from the craziness and silliness of London to the serenity of Oxford between terms. You can see the spiritual difference between London and Oxford in Sayers's prose. Short and choppy in London, and long and slow and peaceful in Oxford.

She goes punting on the river and rediscovers her love of poetry, and her desire to write poetry. Does anyone who may know T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* find an echo in the first, unfinished part of Harriet's sonnet?

While on a walk in the countryside, her mind on writing, she meets Annie again, this time with her daughters. We see here again, Annie's strong feeling against women's education, and, in fact, any role for women outside the home. Annie's elder daughter, Beatrice, (shades of Dante) resists her mother's importunities and says she wants to ride a motorcycle and keep a garage. Sayers herself loved motorcycles, and the father of her child was evidently a motorcycle mechanic and garageman.

11. As the new term, Trinity, begins Harriet is proposed to by Reggie Pomfret, who then has to angrily accept her protection from the proctor, the university official who makes sure students are in their colleges at night. On that same night Miss Newland goes out on the river, perhaps to commit suicide, but certainly driven by the nasty notes of the college specter. The Warden, Dean, tutors and fellows of the college now recognize the need to call someone in from outside and Harriet tries to get in touch with Peter, without success.

12. Below is a picture of the Church of St. Mary the Virgin on the High Street in Oxford. It is said that there has been a church on that site since Anglo-Saxon times. The present building has been there since medieval times. You can still see in the piers supporting the church the grooves that were cut into the stone to hold the dais on which the trial of Archbishop Thomas Cranmer (the architect of the Anglican Reformation) was held. As the University Church, St. Mary's has been at the center of theological and political controversies since the medieval

period.



Sayers speaks with fondness and approval of the marriage of the University and the Church of England. It is this spiritual/educational conversation that has formed Sayers's spiritual vision of the humanities.

It is as they leave the door of the church above that Peter and Harriet meet.

13. Below is Magdalen College tower, looking down over Magdalen Bridge and the boathouse where punts, poled boats, can be rented. It was here that Peter and Harriet met for their time on the river, reviewed the dossier of the Shrewsbury case, and had an experience of connection that let them know that there was no turning back. From here they had to make a decision.



14.