

Sayers Website: Week 6

So, we're coming up on our last class. I just want to thank you all for your interest in Sayers and her books and for your whole-hearted participation in class. I've enjoyed it a lot; and I've learned a lot more about Dorothy and the books myself from your comments and questions. Here are some thoughts and reflections about the end of *Gaudy Night*, and about the book as a whole.

1. The Radcliffe Camera is the name of the domed Library building behind St. Mary the Virgin, the University Church, and in front of the Bodleian Library. It is the center of Radcliffe Square, a nice open space that is a focus of Oxford life.



The last chapter of *Gaudy Night* begins here. Harriet goes to the Camera to work on her notes on Lefanu. While she's working there Peter invites her up to the outside gallery for a conversation. There we meet for the last time Reggie Pomfret and Miss Cattermole, who quickly exit, leaving the balcony and the rest of the chapter to Peter and Harriet.

In their interchange on the roof of the Camera Harriet and Peter tell each other, and us, what they have learned about themselves over the course of the investigation into the Shrewsbury College troubles. This seems significant to me beyond the simple solution of the problem because, as I have said far too often, the heart of the book is the developing self-awareness of both Harriet Vane and Peter Wimsey. We see the plot of the whole novel, not this time from the point of view of the mystery, but from the point of view of this couple's relationship, and their inner, their spiritual, lives. Harriet has found her own value, and Peter hopes that she will be able to forget the unhappiness of the previous five years. Harriet says no, she will be glad to remember it. This is the hoped for outcome of the maturation that is part of the process of growth, and the work of psychological insight and spiritual understanding. Harriet discovers, as we all, ideally, discover, that the moments of pain and conflict are also the moments of growth and understanding, and that, in the end, she would not have found the sense of inner peace that she sought in the early pages of the book without going through the difficulty. AND, she would not have Peter Wimsey.

2. The scene in this last chapter then moves to the dining hall of Balliol College. Balliol is Wimsey's college, so Harriet and Peter's attendance at the concert takes place on Peter's home turf, intellectually speaking. At the end of the Bach Concerto in D Minor the couple discuss polyphonic music as a model for relationship, two equal partners each doing their own work and contributing to the relationship. So we see here that Harriet's concern with one's own work had a hidden purpose.



This is a picture of the Balliol dining hall. Having discussed the nature of relationship they move out for the conclusion. But first, I have to mention that this scene of musical metaphors is also the scene of one of my disappointments with Dorothy. She didn't need to belittle the man "hoping to be thought musical", or the lady she calls "a musical moron". But, in a life of shame, sometimes we have to put down others to feel good about ourselves.

3. As they leave Balliol, Harriet and Peter walk down Broad Street, "The Broad", toward the river, where they began to find a way toward their love for each other. Here the final barriers are broken down and they accept their love. It's not just a matter of each accepting the love of the other, but of each, especially Harriet, accepting the love they bear for the other. Harriet has resisted for five years. This is not a bad place to ask the question again, "Why does it take five years?"



This is a picture of Holywell Street, Oxford, with New College on the left. It is here that Peter and Harriet embrace and embarrass the Proctor.

4.

The Contemplative Path to Spiritual Perfection (otherwise known as Union with God or Mystical Marriage)

Mystical Union is one way of describing the goal of the spiritual life for the Mystical Theologians of the early Christian and Medieval periods. When Harriet finds a copy of Thomas Browne's (1605-1682) *Religio Medici* in Peter's pocket she is discovering the work of an Anglican priest, scientist and mystic, who represents the late flowering of the medieval mystical tradition and who, at the same time is one of the early scientists of the English branch of the Enlightenment. This spiritual/scientific split is a perfect representation of the two sides of Peter Wimsey's personality.

The mystics describe the lifelong pursuit of this goal as a four part exercise of the spiritual practice of contemplation. It begins with a period of questioning, in which the devotee finds herself troubled by an unhappiness, dissatisfaction with life, a sense of meaninglessness or

distance from God and the things that give one a sense of connection and satisfaction in one's inner life. This dissatisfaction is the beginning of the path. Dante's *Divine Comedy* begins with a classic image for this unrest. Here is Sayers's translation of the first verse of the first Canto of this classic spiritual work:

Midway this way of life we're bound upon
I woke to find myself in a dark wood,
Where the right road was wholly lost and gone.

The first part of Dante's work explores the consequences of completely losing one's way and ending up in Hell, *Inferno*. When we first meet Peter and Harriet at the beginning of *Gaudy Night* they are both lost and unhappy, wanting something they cannot find; stuck in a relationship with each other that is going nowhere.

In the second part of Dante's work, *Purgatorio*, the souls of the dead must learn to know themselves and their faults, must atone for the pain they have caused others and God. At the end they begin to see light and hope. This story of Dante's is not describing an imagined real place, it is presenting a metaphor for the spiritual journey in this life. The second stage of the mystics path to union is purgation, facing up to one's pride and hurt of others. It means facing the pain of knowing the hurt and suffering one has caused, but holds out the hope that at the end of purgation one begins to see light, a unity of one's own soul and a sense of the knowledge of God's love. It seems to me that this is the function of the first half of Sayers's book. Harriet sets out to find a way of life that gives serenity and spiritual peace. In doing so she struggles with Wimsey and with her own doubts and hurts and questions. Wimsey meanwhile goes through a parallel process that we only get a sense of at moments, and finally toward the end of the book.

The third book of Dante's trilogy is *Paradiso*. Here Dante moves closer and closer to God, ending with a vision of the divine unity of Heaven. On this stage of the mystics' path, the purgation is finished and one comes to know oneself in relation to the divine. After Peter's arrival in Oxford (remember the epigraph from Donne, "The university is a paradise") Harriet and Peter are clearly on a path of greater knowledge of themselves and each other, greater enlightenment.

The end of this mystical path, the fourth stage, is the mystical union. It is not Peter and Harriet's wedding, but the inner acceptance of their spiritual union that constitutes this mystical union. I believe that *Gaudy Night* is Sayers's *Divine Comedy*. It is not secular; it is deeply spiritual, but not explicitly theistic.

5. John offers us a couple of links. One he mentioned in class, explains "debugging". The other is a fine overview of what's going on in *Gaudy Night*. Thanks John!

GN overview:

<https://g.co/gemini/share/411853f638be>

Debugging:

<https://www.google.com/search?q=oxford+bags&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8&hl=en-us&client=safari#lflid=ChxjMe>