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A Collection of Essays Presented at the Second
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Literature in the Text of *Gaudy Night*

Michael Cunningham

Literature in the Text of *Gaudy Night*

by Michael Cunningham

Dorothy L. Sayers is one of the most colorful female writers to ever grace the British literary tradition. She was wild, flamboyant, and yet extremely devoted to her faith. Her writing credits were extensive and included essays, dramas, short stories, novels, translations, and biographies (Wilson, 415). Interestingly enough, her popularity and reputation rests almost exclusively on a few mystery novels which feature Lord Peter Wimsey (Wilson, 425). With Wimsey doing the sleuthing, Sayers firmly fixed her position as one of the greatest British mystery writers (Staley, 223). However, Sayers was never very comfortable with the label of mystery writer, or what she termed 'literature of escape' (Staley, 223). Her Lord Peter Wimsey novels, however, did earn her a lot of money which allowed her to retire from an advertising agency, and then in return retire Wimsey so that she could focus on writing what she thought was important, what she called 'literature of expression' (Staley, 223).

The climax of the Lord Peter Wimsey character came with the book *Gaudy Night*. *Gaudy Night* is also the best mystery novel that Sayers ever wrote. This book was meant to be the last Peter Wimsey book, but the popularity of his character caused her to reconsider that decision (Winks, 808). *Gaudy Night* was very much a rogue mystery novel. In another letter to one of her friends, Sayers said this about *Gaudy Night*:

"*Gaudy Night* is not really a detective story at all, but a novel with a mild detective interest of an almost entirely psychological kind. But the plot, so far as it goes, is part of the theme. I mean that the fundamental treason to the mind which wrecks a man's career and makes the basis of the plot is the same fundamental treason which might easily have wrecked the Peter-Harriet combination if they had not, each in turn, refused to allow it" (Reynolds, 354).

In *Gaudy Night* Sayers chose to break the normal rules for mystery writing. This novel went into great detail to try to focus the themes on intellectual integrity and the conflicts between the intellect and the heart (Wilson, 416). Sayers in this novel strove to move away from the constraints of the typical mystery novel (Staley, 228). Sayers did not want this book to merely be a murder mystery but a 'Murder of Manners' (Staley, 225). Her goal was for this novel to be 'something "less like a conventional detective story and more like a novel"' (Winks, 814). Though she did receive some criticism for this shift from the usual in *Gaudy Night*. Sayers critics thought that with this new approach she was diluting the important elements of a good detective story (Staley, 225). Sayers defended her work by saying that her changes to the form were

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necessary to add sophistication and significance to a genre which she felt was getting stale (Staley, 225).

The setting for *Gaudy Night* was a women's college at Oxford University. Sayers herself attended Somerville college at Oxford from 1912-1916 (Winks, 806). After Sayers attended one of her class reunions, the Gaudy, at Somerville College she came back and wrote *Gaudy Night* (Wilson, 416). As a result, *Gaudy Night* is extremely reflective of her life at Oxford. *Gaudy Night* is also reflective of education itself, as it makes use of many different types of literature. In this novel, Sayers includes also a wide range of books in a wide range of time periods.

Sayers used literature in *Gaudy Night* in two very different ways. The first way Sayers used literature in her book is at the beginning of each chapter there appears a brief quotation that outlines the coming action in that chapter. The second way she used literature is in the text itself. Because *Gaudy Night* was a story taking place in a women's college, the characters are always talking about books or actually reading them. Only one book in this novel actually has anything to do with the plot. Yet, all the books she mentions in the text of this book carry on the themes of intellect, morals, and love which Sayers is trying to portray in *Gaudy Night*. So now let us focus on just a few of the books that Sayers mentions in the text of *Gaudy Night*.

The oldest book that Sayers makes reference to is the *Aeneid* by Publius Vergilius Maro (Virgil) (Mandelbaum, i). Virgil holds a very unique position in the Western literary tradition. The Romans simply referred to him as 'the poet' (Mandelbaum, i). Then during the Middle Ages he was hailed as 'the prophet of the Gentiles' (Mandelbaum, i). Virgil also served as the divine guide to lead Dante on his

journey to heaven. Alfred Lord Tennyson also wrote a small piece to commemorate the nineteenth century anniversary of Virgil's death (Mandelbaum, i). Sayers then uses Virgil's *Aeneid* to further her story in *Gaudy Night*. The person doing the crime in this story is just a simple maid. The main character, Harriet Vane, excludes the cleaning staff because she doesn't think that they are educated enough to express themselves by using a quotation from Virgil. Harriet had underestimated Annie, the maid, because she had married above her station to an educated man who taught her Latin. So one of the key pieces of evidence against Annie was the Latin quotation that she left attached to a dummy in the chapel. Beatrice was the name of Annie's daughter, but Beatrice was also the love interest of Dante who appeared every once in a while to help guide him and Virgil.

The next oldest book was also written by a Roman. This Roman's name was Apuleius and he was born in the Roman province of Africa around AD 125 (Hanson, ix). What little we know about him we have gleaned from what he said about himself in his recorded surviving speeches (Hanson, ix). He apparently traveled a lot and received a formal education in Carthage (Hanson, ix). He wrote in both Greek and Latin and he said he composed 'poems for the batan and the lyre, the slipper and the buckskin' (Hanson, ix). His greatest story that has survived the ages is *Metamorphosis*, but was later renamed *The Golden Ass* (Hanson, ix). *The Golden Ass* is a story about a Greek named Lucius (Hanson, xi). Because of his great zeal to learn magic Lucius is transformed into an ass (Hanson, xi). Through the rest of the book Lucius is used and abused by all different kinds of people and animals, and then with the coming of the new year Lucius is turned back into a man by the

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Goddess Isis (Hanson, xi). This same story just with a slightly different ending is also attributed to a second century sophist named Lucian (Hanson, xi). There is a great debate concerning the basic idea behind this story. It seems that Lucian wrote his story based on an even older Greek story called *Metamorphosis* (Hanson, xii). Therefore, it would seem that both Apuleius and Lucian never came up with the original story and just updated the old basic Greek story (Hanson, xii). The text for *Metamorphosis* or *The Golden Ass* by Apuleius comes down to us in forty manuscripts (Hanson, xiii). The earliest of these manuscripts are descended from the original and the later ones being produced by the Beneventan Monastery of Monte Cassino in the eleventh Century (Hanson, xiii). This story is mentioned in *Gaudy Night* on page 330. This is the scene in where Peter has just awoken to find out that Harriet Vane has been going through his pockets. Harriet asks him about his tastes in literature and he mentions this book as one of the ones he might have had on him. Peter tells her that he is very often drunk on words. Peter is certainly a scholar to the highest degree. He seems to consume the written word the way most people eat. It seems clear that Wimsey was certainly a man after Sayers's own heart with his love of books.

The book that Harriet Vane did find in Peter's jacket pocket, on page 328 was that of Sir Thomas Browne. The name of the book she found was *Religio Medici*. This book is a lot like C.S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity* in that it was meant to be a religious apology. The discovery of this book surprises Harriet, because she would have expected him to be reading a more intellectual work instead of an apology. When Harriet opens the book up, she

reads a passage from the book which is as follows:

“When I am from him, I am dead till I be with him. United souls are not satisfied with embraces, but desire to be truly each other; which being impossible, these desires are infinite and must proceed without the possibility of satisfaction” (Sayers, 328).

Although Browne was talking about God, this passage speaks very plainly for the relationship between Harriet and Wimsey. This is the point when Harriet really gets it. She realizes that she does love Wimsey and that she is going to marry him. This is the great resolution between heart and intellect. Sayers thought that ‘a detective married is a detective marred’ (Winks, 814). However, this punting scene is where Sayers finally lets Harriet commit herself to this man that she has spurned for so long. It is also appropriate that the issue between head and heart was resolved with books.

Another book that is mentioned in *Gaudy Night* is *Anatomy of Melancholy* by Robert Burton in 1651. This book was meant by Burton to be purely a psychiatric treatise on melancholy. This book really seeks the heart of melancholy. *Anatomy of Melancholy* explains exactly what melancholy is, with all the kinds, causes, symptoms, prognostics, and several cures for it. The book basically gives a shopping list of causes and cures of melancholy from a philosophical, historical, and medical perspective (http://www.kessigerpub.com/catalog/authors/Burton_Robert.html#262). A basic run down of this book is as follows:

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“Causes of Melancholy; bad diet, passions and perturbations of the mind; Symptoms of signs of melancholy in the body; Prognostics of melancholy; Unlawful cures rejected; lawful cures; Diet rectified; deformity of body, sickness, baseness of birth; Against poverty and want and other Adversities; Against: Servitude, Loss of Liberty, Imprisonment, Sorrow for death of Friends, Vain fear, Envy, Emulation, Hatred, Ambition, Self-love, and all other affections; Against: Repulse, Abuses, Injuries, Disgraces, Slanders; Cure of Melancholy all over the Body; Love-Melancholy; Symptoms or Signs of Love-Melancholy; Symptoms of Jealousy, fear, sorrow, suspicion; Cure of Jealousy; Religious Melancholy” (http://www.kessingerpub.com/catalog/authors/Burton_Robert.html #262).

The book is mentioned in *Gaudy Night* on page 454. Mrs. Hillyard is reading this book and she doesn't know whether to laugh with it or cry about it. This is interesting in itself considering what a tortured soul Ms. Hillyard is. Ms. Hillyard is also a strident feminist. Though when she meets Peter she is instantly charmed. Her jealousy of Harriet forces her to say the most terrible things about Peter. Ms. Hillyard though is also very critical of Harriet and gives her a rather rough time through the course of the book. A large part of melancholy is jealousy so it seems only to appropriate that Ms. Hillyard is reading a book concerning every part of it.

The next major work that we are going to look at is *Alice's Adventure in Wonderland*

and *Through the Looking Glass* by Lewis Carroll. *Alice's Adventure in Wonderland* appears in *Gaudy Night* on page 330. This is again the same spot where Peter goes through a whole list of what books he might have had on himself to read. This book is a fantastical journey underground into which Alice entered by following this rabbit through his hole. Carroll often entertained his friends and their children with stories on the banks of the Thames (<http://www.cl.utoledo.edu/userhomes/welee/carroll.html>). According to the University of Toledo Libraries, a young girl named Alice Dodgson, after hearing one of Carroll's stories put it down on paper. Carroll himself then drew illustrations for Dodgson's story and then gave them to her as a gift with the original title of *Alice's Adventures Underground*. Then in 1865 the story was revised and completed and was published as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (<http://www.cl.utoledo.edu/userhomes/welee/carroll.html>).

The next Carroll work to appear in *Gaudy Night* is *Through The Looking Glass*, which appears on page 418. This is the scene in which Harriet is going to allow Peter to buy her something. So they both go into this small shop because from outside they have seen a beautiful ivory chess set. After they look at it and Peter says to the effect that looks are not always what they seem (Sayers, 418). Harriet then says that his statement reminds her of *Through the looking Glass* (Sayers, 418). This statement comes from the fact that the second thing the girl notices after coming through the glass is a chess set. From a distance everything looks ok, but when she got up to it and picked up one of the pieces it came alive. One extremely large theme running through both Carroll's stories and *Gaudy Night* is that things may not always be what they appear to

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be. *Through the Looking Glass* is of course the sequel to *Alice's Adventure in Wonderland* and was published in 1871 (<http://www.cl.utoledo.edu/userhomes/wlee/carroll.html>).

The last book that is to be examined in *Gaudy Night* is *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley. This book is mentioned in *Gaudy Night* on page 15. In the scene where Harriet mentions the way the conversation went among the group that she was in at that moment. Harriet said that they talked about Biology, then about the ideas of heredity, and then about *Brave New World* (Sayers, 15). This was a very shocking novel that was published in 1932, characterizing a world in which people are no longer born, but engineered. The working population, "drawers of water and hughers of wood," were designed to do menial tasks. In the book, the designing of menial workers is accomplished by starving the growing fetuses of oxygen to make them brain damaged so they will enjoy doing the menial tasks. Huxley portrayed a disturbing world in his book, while also blending science fiction and philosophy quite well.

Dorothy L. Sayers wrote a splendid novel in which she successfully blends romance, mystery, and an insight into the intellectual world at Oxford in *Gaudy Night*. We have focused our attention on only a few works that turn up in *Gaudy Night*. Sayers was not only interested in literature, but philosophy as well. This can easily be seen in that she mentions philosophers like Macheavelli and Brocucio (Sayers, 330). The writing of Sayers is very deep and very dense, while her use of literature is very broad. She mentioned everything from Greek epics like the *Aeneid* to children's stories like *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Sayers also made use of countless Latin phrases in *Gaudy Night* including Peter's famous proposal at the end of the book. In

1920 Sayers was awarded both a BA and an MA from Oxford for her work there (Wilson, 415). Because of her high level of education she had no problems with showing it off in her writing of *Gaudy Night*. Sayers used literature in *Gaudy Night* not to draw attention to itself, but because her education was a part of her and it could not help but show through in her writing.

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