

**“No job for a gentleman”:
Gentlemanliness, Romance, and Moral
Ambiguity in Dorothy L. Sayers’s Lord
Peter Wimsey Detective Novels**

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on the series of detective novels written by Dorothy L. Sayers; and, in particular, on the characterisation of Sayers's detective, the aristocratic sleuth Lord Peter Wimsey. While Lord Peter's status as an aristocrat and English gentleman may have begun as a matter of pure plot convenience, with his wealth and background giving him the freedom to investigate crime at leisure, Sayers skilfully exploits the conflict between his gentlemanly sensibilities and the moral ambiguity of detection to create a more complex and layered approach to the interwar mystery story.

Sayers's contributions to the field have often been dismissed or downplayed. As with other authors of Golden Age detective fiction – most of whom were women – Sayers was frequently subject to limiting, gendered judgements. The situation has shifted considerably in the past few decades, however. During the 1990s, in particular, critics such as Catherine Kenney and Gill Plain would bring more nuanced and positive views to the field of Sayers studies, and there is now a wealth of critical material focused on the Wimsey novels. To this can be added a number of important biographical studies chronicling Sayers's life and literary career. Nevertheless, I argue that much more can be done to draw the full picture of how Sayers deepens the character of the detective. Through sustained close reading of Sayers's fiction and essays, and guided by detailed engagement with scholarship on detective fiction and interwar culture, as well as modernist studies and affect theory, I set out to reveal the full depth and complexity of the gentleman detective in Sayers's novels. The gentleman detective emerges, not as a stylish combination of the brilliant Holmesian sleuth and the stereotypical English gentleman, but as a flawed and traumatised human being who must grapple with the painful consequences of detective work.

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Author's Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for a degree or other qualification at this University or elsewhere. All sources are acknowledged as references. I also acknowledge that I received assistance from a professional member of the Chartered Institute of Editing and Proofreading to proofread this thesis, in line with York's Policy on Transparency in Authorship in PGR Programmes.

Abbreviations

BH	<i>Busman's Honeymoon</i>
CW	<i>Clouds of Witness</i>
DC	<i>The Documents in the Case</i>
GN	<i>Gaudy Night</i>
GSS	<i>Great Short Stories of Detection, Mystery and Horror</i>
GSS: 2	<i>Great Short Stories of Detection, Mystery and Horror: Second Series</i>
GTD	<i>Great Tales of Detection</i>
HHC	<i>Have His Carcase</i>
MMA	<i>Murder Must Advertise</i>
NT	<i>The Nine Tailors</i>
SP	<i>Strong Poison</i>
UBC	<i>The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club</i>
UD	<i>Unnatural Death</i>
WB	<i>Whose Body?</i>

1. Introduction

This thesis examines the series of interwar detective novels featuring the aristocratic sleuth Lord Peter Wimsey, written by the English author and theologian Dorothy L. Sayers (1893–1957). I have also drawn on one of Sayers's other, less well-known forays into crime writing, *The Documents in the Case* (1930), a stand-alone novel not featuring Lord Peter, but which can help to further illuminate Sayers's approach to detective fiction. However, I remain squarely focused on the Wimsey novels, examining the characterisation of Sayers's aristocratic sleuth in detail. While there is already a wealth of useful critical material dedicated to the Wimsey novels, I believe that much more can be done to draw a fuller, richer picture of how Sayers broadens the capabilities of the classical mystery story through the characterisation of the detective.

Through her increasingly ambitious portrayal of the detective, Sayers challenges the generic expectations typically imposed on the classical detective, who is supposed to be detached, scientific, and eminently rational, a view that can easily be linked to broader perceptions of detective fiction as a genre that prioritises intellect over emotion, downplaying the messiness of crime in order to foreground the thrill of solving puzzles. By contrast, Sayers portrays her detective as a flawed and fallible human being, one who is acutely sensitive to the moral and emotional costs of detection, and who finds the consequences of his detective work all the more painful in that they recall his past experiences as an officer in the First World War. In addition, Sayers further disrupts the image of the detached, Holmesian sleuth by presenting narratives in which Lord Peter is, from the beginning, personally invested in the outcome of the cases he is investigating. He is shown to be subject to romantic, sexual, and familial attachments in ways that set him apart from other fictional sleuths of the Golden Age. In fact, I argue that Lord Peter is more closely related to the detectives of nineteenth-century sensation fiction, a body of work that influenced Sayers's approach to the mystery story heavily. Through my analysis of these issues, I challenge views of the detective – and of detective fiction as a whole – as being dispassionate and affectless.

I am especially closely concerned with Sayers's approach to the figure of the *gentleman* detective, an archetype that recurs throughout the pages of classical detective fiction. My analysis of this issue is indebted to the work of Laura E. Nym

Mayhall, who argues that, through the figure of the gentleman detective, Golden Age authors such as Sayers set out to reinvent the ideal of the gentleman to suit the needs of a new age. I would add, however, that detective fiction was not the only field in which authors of the interwar period tackled the question of whether or not the feudal gentleman could adapt to survive in a rapidly changing society. With reference to Christine Berberich's work on the ideal of the gentleman in twentieth-century fiction, I place Sayers's work in conversation with that of other contemporary authors such as Ford Madox Ford.

A key issue that I highlight throughout this thesis is that, in spite of his gentlemanly scruples, Lord Peter remains dedicated to the truth above all else. Across the series, and especially in the later Wimsey novels, Sayers makes it clear that Lord Peter seeks to uncover the truth at any cost, and that this quest must come before any personal loyalties – an insistence notably at variance with a gentlemanly code of manners that encompasses ideals such as fair play and personal loyalty. While this ruthless dedication to the truth could easily be dismissed as a narrative requirement of detective fiction – a genre typically seen as promising its readers complete closure – I argue that Sayers's portrayal of her detective is far more compelling and complex. Sayers deepens the mystery story by presenting the detective as a ruthless and morally ambiguous figure who is prepared to set aside personal loyalties in their quest to uncover the truth, and by showcasing the moral and emotional crises that might arise as a result of their commitment to this principle.

This thesis, then, illustrates the full depth and complexity of the gentleman detective in Sayers's novels. I read Sayers through close reading of her fiction and non-fiction, as well as her personal letters, and through conceptual engagement with analyses of genre and literary prestige. To situate this study within a broader context, I examine the literary landscape of the interwar period, focusing, in particular, on a wide range of contemporary attitudes toward the mystery story, and on the policing of generic and cultural boundaries. I also touch on social and historical issues, such as intergenerational context and shifting attitudes toward class and gender.

1.1 The Figure of the Detective: An Introduction

In writing detective fiction, authors are inevitably confronted by the question: what kind of person should the detective be? One possible answer was provided by the author

Raymond Chandler, who would argue that the detective must be somebody incorruptible, a figure capable of investigating violent and sordid crimes without being contaminated by them. Writing in *The Atlantic* in late 1944, Chandler famously declared that “down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid” (Chandler 237). For Chandler, the ideal detective is “a man of honor”: “the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world” (237). However, some would suggest that much has changed in the decades since Chandler wrote his essay, and that a new generation of detectives have emerged who are neither untarnished nor unafraid. This view was clearly conveyed by a 2016 television documentary presented by Andrew Marr (“Detectives”). After examining the history of detectives in fiction, Marr arrives at the conclusion that crime fiction has progressed away from the eccentric sleuths of the classical mystery story, and that the contemporary detective tends to be a more troubled, world-weary character. In recent crime and thriller fiction, Marr suggests, there is a price that must be paid for the intellectual enjoyment, the fun of solving puzzles, and it is the detective who pays that price:

Now, all this is beginning to seem just a tad unfair. We started by talking about how detective fiction was a game played between the reader and the writer, but now it seems that whoever wins that game, regardless of that, the loser is always the fictional detectives. They have gone to the dark side on behalf of us, our reading pleasure, and perhaps because we’ve enjoyed ourselves too much, I don’t know, they always end up paying a deep psychological penalty. (“Detectives”, 55:36–56:05)

If Marr is correct in suggesting that the contemporary detective is a flawed character who inevitably pays a “deep psychological penalty” for the reader’s “pleasure,” then I would argue that this development was anticipated by Dorothy L. Sayers, one of the most prominent writers of the Golden Age. While Sayers’s series detective, the aristocratic sleuth Lord Peter Wimsey, may initially appear to be nothing more than a frivolous English gentleman who regards detection as an entertaining pastime, a closer investigation reveals a more complex and compelling character, one who is repeatedly brought face to face with the moral and emotional costs of detection.

Above all, my examination of the Wimsey novels focuses on one specific aspect of Lord Peter Wimsey’s characterisation: his status as an English gentleman. Here, it is worth considering the question of why Sayers should have chosen to cast an

aristocrat in the role of detective. One possible explanation is that, for Sayers, writing about the life of a wealthy gentleman initially served as a kind of wish-fulfilment; after all, Lord Peter was originally created at a time when Sayers had only recently graduated from university, and was struggling to make a living. In a 1936 article, indeed, Sayers would claim that she found solace in envisioning the details of Lord Peter's extravagant lifestyle: "After all it cost me nothing and at that time I was particularly hard up and it gave me pleasure to spend his fortune for him" (qtd. in Reynolds 230).

An alternative explanation is offered by Erik Routley, who rejects the notion that Sayers had made her detective an aristocrat for the sake of "snob-appeal" (Routley 139). Rather, Routley argues that Sayers's decision was based on practical considerations:

Consider the great advantages of this scheme. If you want something different from an eminent doctor, lawyer, or what not, why not have a peer? The great question for the author is how, if the detective is not a policeman, he is to find time and money – which means freedom of action – for detection. (139–40)

As Routley points out, "one very plausible answer" to this dilemma is to cast a "man of leisure" – such as "Peter Wimsey, the younger son of a duke" – in the role of detective (140). I would argue, however, that throughout the Wimsey novels, Lord Peter's status as a gentleman can be seen as something more than a means of solving these simple practical difficulties. As my analysis will show, Sayers skilfully exploits the tension between Lord Peter's gentlemanly sensibilities and the requirements of detective work – which in the Wimsey novels is revealed to be a messy and morally ambiguous business – to create a more complex and layered approach to the interwar mystery story.

1.2 Interwar Detective Fiction: Its Development and Critical Reception

The ambitious nature of this approach is made all the more significant by the fact that the interwar mystery story has often been dismissed as a particularly formulaic kind of entertainment in which depth and complexity are sacrificed for the sake of the puzzle. In his 1944 article "The Simple Art of Murder," for instance, Chandler would deliver a scathing critique of the classical mystery story, which he notably defined as "the English formula" (Chandler 223). For Chandler, this "English formula" was an

inherently limited form in which characterisation was subordinated to the requirements of the puzzle plot:

If it started out to be about real people [...], they must very soon do unreal things in order to form the artificial pattern required by the plot. When they did unreal things, they ceased to be real themselves. They became puppets and cardboard lovers and papier mâché villains and detectives of exquisite and impossible gentility. (232)

By contrast, Chandler would credit American authors such as Dashiell Hammett with presenting a more artful, realistic approach to detective fiction, written “for people with a sharp, aggressive attitude to life. They were not afraid of the seamy side of things; they lived there. Violence did not dismay them; it was right down their street” (234). In mapping out the territory of detective fiction, then, Chandler sought to establish a carefully maintained boundary between American hard-boiled fiction and “the English formula,” painting the latter as a distinct – and distinctly inferior – tradition. As Gill Plain puts it, “Chandler had a vested interest in convincing his audience of the impermeability of the great divide separating the hard-boiled from the classical tradition” (Plain, *Twentieth-Century* 30). Chandler’s aim was to strengthen the position of hard-boiled approaches to detective fiction – a project that required him to downplay the merits of the interwar English mystery story.

Here, it is worth noting that Chandler’s own position was a precarious one. Though born in America, he spent much of his early life in England, where he received a classic public-school education; as Alison Light succinctly puts it, he was “a Dulwich schoolboy turned San Francisco tough guy” (Light 75). In fact, Chandler was naturalised as a British subject in 1907, and would not regain his US citizenship until 1956, more than ten years after the publication of “The Simple Art of Murder.” There is something rather ironic, then, in Chandler’s efforts to defend the position of American approaches to detective fiction, while simultaneously presenting the work of English authors as limited, formulaic, and wedded to a middle-class vision of reality – to “the conversational accent of Surbiton and Bognor Regis” (Chandler 234). In attempting to shore up the boundaries between English and American approaches to the genre, Chandler was perhaps also seeking to distance himself from his own Anglo-Irish origins.

Nevertheless, other writers have followed his example in criticising the classical mystery story. In the 1972 study *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime*

Novel, for example, Julian Symons would accuse Golden Age authors of “abjur[ing] voluntarily the interplay of character and the force of passion,” and so “reduc[ing] this kind of detective story to the level of a crossword puzzle, which can be solved but not read” (Symons 106). As Symons saw it, the interwar detective story “pandered to the taste of readers who wanted every character degouted so that there should be nothing even faintly disturbing about the fate of victims or murderers” (130). For critics such as Chandler and Symons, Golden Age detective fiction was to be condemned for its limited characterisation and its detached, affectless representations of violence.

While such criticisms could easily be challenged, these portrayals of the interwar mystery story as something closer to a “crossword puzzle” than artful fiction resonate strikingly with many earlier *defences* of the genre. During the 1920s, writers and critics often emphasised the restricted characterisation of the classical mystery story, as well as its focus on puzzle-solving; they simply presented these characteristics as a necessity or a strength, rather than a damning weakness. Consider, for example, the 1929 article “The Professor and the Detective,” in which the American academic Marjorie Nicolson argues that, for “the academic reader,” the mystery story offers an “escape [...] from literature,” from “an excessive subjectivity to welcome objectivity; from long-drawn-out dissections of emotion to straightforward appeal to intellect” (Nicolson 113–4). In short, Nicolson’s argument is that the mystery story appeals to educated, highbrow readers precisely because it lacks the qualities associated with “introspective and psychological literature,” with “contemporary realism” (116, 117). For Nicolson, the mystery story is “an enthralling game,” comparable to “chess,” and “those who seek to read character and emotion into our pieces and our cards miss the essence of this most entrancing game” (118–9). A similar view of detective fiction was presented by Willard Huntington Wright, an American art critic whose detective novels were published under the pen name “S. S. Van Dine.” Writing in the late 1920s, Wright suggests that it would be “manifestly unfair” to judge the mystery story by the same standards as novels “written for purposes of intellectual and æsthetic stimulation” (Wright, “Great Detective Stories” 34). For Wright, “the detective novel does not fall under the head of fiction in the ordinary sense”; rather, it is comparable to “the cross-word puzzle” (35). The reader of detective fiction, Wright insists, is focused on “the working out of the puzzle” (38). Hence, detailed characterisation must be avoided: “Any closely drawn character analysis, any

undue lingering over details of temperament, will act only as a clog in the narrative machinery” (39). Throughout the 1920s, then, defenders of classical detective fiction set out to distinguish the mystery story from other, more artful kinds of “literature,” and to argue that the genre should not be criticised for its perceived lack of depth and complexity. The real appeal of the mystery story, these writers would insist, lay not in detailed characterisation, but in the intellectual thrill of solving puzzles.

This kind of self-deprecating rhetoric has been usefully analysed by Anna Bogen, who argues that, during the interwar period, authors of detective fiction intentionally downplayed the literary merits of the genre as part of a calculated marketing strategy. Bogen asserts that “by purging the detective novel of its pretenses to literary quality and reducing it to a puzzle, golden age writers were able to position their product as a type of entertainment for an intellectual audience” (Bogen 259). Noting that the interwar mystery story was praised by authors such as “T. S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein, and W. H. Auden,” Bogen observes that “[f]or these self-consciously highbrow writers, detective fiction was pleasurable at least partly because it knew its place as a formulaic amusement for the intelligentsia, a positioning that in turn reinforced the superiority of their own cultural productions” (259–60). This restrictive “positioning” can be linked to the interwar “Battle of the Brows,” as Bogen points out; detective fiction was assigned to “the realm of the lowbrow/popular,” and presented “as ‘safe’ entertainment for the highbrow” (260–1). In the literary marketplace of the 1920s, the mystery story was marketed as a “formulaic” product that could be readily consumed by the educated, “highbrow” reader – a strategy that required authors to downplay the literary merits of the genre, to make it clear that the mystery story “knew its place” and would not intrude on the territory of artful, “highbrow” literature. Thus, defenders of the genre would suggest that the mystery story should not be castigated for failing to reach the standards of “contemporary realism,” because it was never intended to achieve such standards. It was not meant to be anything other than an intellectual puzzle, a game played between readers and authors.

As a member of the Detection Club and an author who frequently wrote about the craft of detective fiction, Sayers herself played a key role in such discussions, and was instrumental in codifying the conventions imposed on the genre. More specifically, it seems that Sayers initially accepted the conventional view that the classical mystery story was a plot-oriented form that did not allow for deep characterisation. In a private

letter written in 1925, for instance, Sayers lays down what she regards as key principles for the writing of detective fiction. She expresses her opposition to the inclusion of romance – “on the whole, I do not care for a love-interest in a detective story” – and stresses the importance of fair play between readers and authors, insisting that “there should *never* be any clue in the hands of the detective which is not also in the hands of the reader” (Sayers, “To John Courson” 240). Most importantly, Sayers portrays the writing of detective fiction as an “exercise of cunning craftsmanship,” asserting that it is “on the whole most effective when done in the flat and on rather broad lines” (241). Sayers illustrates this claim by referring to Wilkie Collins’s *The Moonstone* (1868), a novel she greatly admired: “Even in *The Moonstone*, though the characterisation is sound and good, it is not intricate and not altogether in the round. The Conan Doyle, Freeman Wills Crofts, and Austin Freeman methods are all strictly two-dimensional, and, I think, the better for it” (241). While Sayers goes on to suggest that her writing may have been evolving beyond this kind of “flat,” “two-dimensional” approach, such a prospect left her uneasy:

[...] I may, of course, make a dead failure of it, because it is a very difficult thing to do. It means combining the appeal to the emotions with the appeal to the intellect, and I’m afraid it means foregoing the appeal to the Tired Business Man and the Tired Journalist who [...] do not want to flog their jaded intellects over the craftily-constructed detective story! (241)

While Sayers’s tone is facetious, these comments are striking. Sayers’s suggestion is that readers turn to detective fiction for relaxation, and may be put off by a detective novel striving for greater complexity; we might recall Nicolson’s argument that the genre appeals to weary readers seeking relief from the depth and ambiguity of more artful, introspective types of fiction. Above all, Sayers is conscious of what she regards as the challenge of combining the ratiocinative, puzzle-solving aspects of the genre with more “intricate” characterisation – of “combining the appeal to the emotions with the appeal to the intellect.”

Indeed, Sayers would further emphasise this issue in the introduction to the 1928 anthology *Great Short Stories of Detection, Mystery and Horror*, in which she goes so far as to declare that the mystery story “does not, and by hypothesis never can, attain the loftiest level of literary achievement” (GSS 37). In this introduction, Sayers highlights the perceived difficulties of introducing “real human beings” to the

genre: “At some point or other, either their emotions make hay of the detective interest, or the detective interest gets hold of them and makes their emotions look like pasteboard” (40). Evidently, Sayers’s belief was that “the detective interest” – the genre’s focus on the intellectual thrill of solving puzzles – could not be reconciled with a serious portrayal of human “emotions.” Hence, Sayers would suggest that characterisation in detective fiction should be carefully limited: “Just at present, therefore, the fashion in detective fiction is to have characters credible and lively; not conventional, but, on the other hand, not too profoundly studied – people who live more or less on the *Punch* level of emotion” (41). Writing in the late 1920s, then, Sayers would echo other Golden Age authors, such as Willard Huntington Wright, in suggesting that the appeal of the mystery story lay chiefly in its intellectual, puzzle-solving elements, and that the nature of the genre simply did not allow for “intricate” characterisation.

Yet there are signs that, even in the 1920s, Sayers was dissatisfied with contemporary approaches to detective fiction. In the 1928 Introduction, for instance, Sayers declares that, when compared to Collins’ *The Moonstone*, “with its wide scope, its dove-tailed completeness and the marvellous variety and soundness of its characterisation, modern mystery fiction looks thin and mechanical” (25). As her career as a detective novelist progressed, Sayers would only become more vocal in criticising what she regarded as the “thin and mechanical” limitations of “modern mystery fiction,” and in calling for a return to older modes of crime writing. Writing in 1936, Sayers would praise the work of nineteenth-century authors such as Collins and Charles Dickens, highlighting their approach to detection:

The writers approach the subject in the spirit of the novelist: however complicated the problem, they never present the story as an isolated episode existing solely in virtue of its relation to the mechanics of detection. They are interested in the social background, in manners and morals, in the depiction and interplay of character; their works have a three-dimensional extension in time and space; they all, in their various ways, offer some kind of “criticism of life.” (*GTD* ix)

By contrast, Sayers would argue that the interwar mystery story focused too narrowly on the intellectual, puzzle-solving aspects of the genre: that detective fiction had become “over-intellectualized” (xii). In Sayers’s view, authors needed to return “to the Victorian conception of a detective story that should at the same time be a novel of

character and manners,” and to combine “the mechanical elements of the plot [...] with a serious artistic treatment of the psychological elements, so that the intellectual and the common man can find common ground for enjoyment in the mystery novel” (xiii). While Sayers had initially highlighted the difficulties of “combining the appeal to the emotions with the appeal to the intellect,” she would now argue that, if detective fiction was to thrive, authors needed to pursue this challenging strategy.

It is worth noting that Sayers’s calls for a more ambitious approach to the mystery story – one that would combine the intellectual, puzzle-solving aspects of the genre with a more detailed approach to characterisation – can be seen as part of a broader pattern in interwar discussions of detective fiction. Consider, for example, the arguments presented by Anthony Berkeley in the preface to his 1930 mystery novel, *The Second Shot*:

I personally am convinced that the days of the old crime-puzzle pure and simple, relying entirely upon plot and without any added attractions of character, style or even humour, are, if not numbered, at any rate in the hands of the auditors; and that the detective story is already in process of developing into the novel with a detective or a crime interest, holding its reader less by mathematical than by psychological ties. The puzzle element will no doubt remain, but it will become a puzzle of character rather than a puzzle of time, place, motive and opportunity. [...] In a word, the detective story must become more sophisticated. There is a complication of emotion, drama, psychology and adventure behind the most ordinary murder in real life, the possibilities of which for fictional purposes the conventional detective story misses completely. (Berkeley 5-6)

Clearly, Sayers was not the only author who believed that the mystery story was evolving beyond “the old crime-puzzle pure and simple,” and that the genre needed to combine the intricacies of the puzzle plot with a deeper exploration of character. Indeed, writing in the introduction to the second series of *Great Short Stories of Detection, Mystery and Horror* (1931), Sayers saw “the detective-novel” as evolving “towards a wider psychology and more humane style” (GSS: 2 19). In a review published in the *Sunday Times* in December 1934, Sayers would make it clear that she approved of “the efforts made of late to give the detective story a more reasonable psychology than it used to have and to link it up with problems of less ephemeral interest than the barren ingenuities of murder mechanics” (Sayers, “Detective Novel Problems” 225). Such comments resonate with Sayers’s claims that nineteenth-

century authors such as Collins and Dickens were not solely concerned with “the mechanics of detection,” but were also “interested in the social background, in manners and morals, in the depiction and interplay of character.” While other authors of the Golden Age may have been interested in the prospect of transforming the classical mystery story into “a puzzle of character,” Sayers would present such a strategy as a return to older modes of crime writing – to the more expansive scope she associated with nineteenth-century sensation fiction.

Within the literary context of the interwar period, however, such a strategy was potentially problematic, as illustrated by a scathing criticism of Sayers’s writing by Q. D. Leavis (like her famous husband F. R. Leavis, a notably highbrow critic). In a review of Sayers’s later novels, *Gaudy Night* (1935) and *Busman’s Honeymoon* (1937), Leavis makes clear her culturally elitist disdain for Sayers, whom Leavis identifies as belonging firmly to “the new kind of bestseller, the *educated* popular novelist” (Leavis, “Case” 334). While Sayers may have endeavoured to bring a more artful, highbrow approach to detective fiction, Leavis would contend that Sayers’s fiction merely gave the appearance of being artful and highbrow. In Leavis’s view, Sayers “performs the best-seller’s function of giving the impression of intellectual activity to readers who would very much dislike that kind of exercise if it were actually presented to them; but of course it is all shadow-boxing” (336). A useful theoretical analysis of this review has been offered by Bogen, who makes explicit the connection between Leavis’s criticisms and *Gaudy Night*’s status as, essentially, a middlebrow novel: “While Leavis does not use the word *middlebrow*, her distaste for what she sees as Sayers’s pretension strongly recalls the contempt often attached to authors working in this newly emergent category” (Bogen 257). As Bogen shows, Sayers’s call “for literariness in the detective novel” would have been seen by “others, including Leavis [...] as a drift toward the middlebrow” (258). Within the literary marketplace of the interwar period, then, Sayers’s call for a more artful, psychologically convincing approach to detective fiction was troublesome. If the commercial success of the mystery story depended on the sense that it “knew its place” as formulaic entertainment and would not aspire to the standards of more artful, highbrow fiction, then Sayers was taking a considerable risk in overstepping the carefully policed boundary between lowbrow and highbrow fiction. Nevertheless, Sayers clearly believed that such a strategy was necessary, if the mystery story were to thrive and attract a wide readership.

Importantly, these calls for greater depth and complexity are also reflected in Sayers's own detective fiction. More specifically, I argue that the increasingly ambitious nature of Sayers's writing is illustrated by her approach to the characterisation of the detective. According to critical commonplaces, the classical detective is a closed book, lacking in any sense of interiority; the reader is rarely, if ever, permitted to know what the detective is thinking. This tendency is perhaps most clearly apparent in Arthur Conan Doyle's detective fiction, in which the reader is never given access to Sherlock Holmes's thoughts: Holmes is only ever seen through the eyes of the narrator, Watson, and Susan Rowland has emphasised Holmes's "isolation and distance from the reader (emphasised by Watson's self-evident inadequacies)" (Rowland 18). The inscrutability of the classical detective, their supposed "distance from the reader," may also be recognised in the sleuths of Golden Age detective fiction. Jessica Mann, for instance, highlights "the apparent sangfroid" of the classical detective: "We are not made party to his thought processes about his emotions. Even those detective heroes who are quite fully characterised in other ways are seen from the outside. [...] We are rarely told what Wimsey thinks, or Alleyn, or Poirot, unless they express their feelings to other characters" (Mann 86). However, I would challenge Mann's assertion that "[w]e are rarely told what Wimsey thinks." A key feature of the Wimsey novels is that Sayers frequently strives to close the "distance" between the detective and the reader, to present us with Lord Peter's inner thoughts and so deepen the characterisation of her aristocratic sleuth.

A particularly striking illustration of this authorial strategy can be found in the fifth Wimsey novel, *Strong Poison* (1930), in which Lord Peter finds himself overwhelmed by the complexities of a challenging murder case, and by the terrifying experience of having fallen in love. In a lengthy and striking passage – which I will discuss further in Chapter 3 – Lord Peter reflects on his own disturbed feelings:

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 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 recognised 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. (SP 98–9)

Crucially, there is a meta-fictional aspect to Lord Peter's realisation that he is "changing, changing, fearfully changing." I would argue that, in this novel, we are confronted with the realisation that the figure of the detective is "changing"; Lord Peter is evolving beyond the detached and infallible super-sleuth typically expected of the classical mystery story. At the same time, the mystery story, too, is "changing"; the genre is being pushed into fresh territory by Sayers's insistence on deeper characterisation. In short, the mystery story's focus is being turned inward, to scrutinise the nature and character of the detective as well as the crimes they investigate.

To a certain extent, Sayers's increasingly ambitious, highbrow approach to the mystery story may be seen as reminiscent of modernist writing of the interwar period – a body of literature that has typically been seen as highly introspective in nature, focusing on the psychological exploration of character. One critic who has attempted to define Sayers's relationship to modernist writing in detail is Aoife Leahy, who, in her 2009 monograph *The Victorian Approach to Modernism in the Fiction of Dorothy L. Sayers*, argues that Sayers was influenced by nineteenth-century literature, and by contemporary authors such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. More specifically, Leahy emphasises the "strongly didactic element" of the Wimsey novels, observing that "Sayers's novels were intended at the time of writing to bring the key moral issues of the early twentieth century to the attention of a wide readership" (Leahy 5). "Like the Victorians before her," Leahy declares, "Sayers's writing demonstrates a great desire to teach. This does not place her at odds with the modernist writers" (21). In essence, Leahy's argument is that Sayers regarded modernist literature as being potentially inaccessible to many readers, and would therefore draw on nineteenth-century literature in her "didactic attempt to bring modernist issues within the reach of her readers" (21). Here, it must be noted that I do not necessarily agree with many of Leahy's readings of Sayers's novels.¹ Nevertheless, there is an element of truth to

¹ For example, I would dispute Leahy's reading of Sayers's 1930 stand-alone novel, *The Documents in the Case*. This novel is typically understood as having been influenced by a real-life murder trial, the Thompson-Bywaters case of the early 1920s. Leahy disagrees with this reading, arguing that it is a "simple answer that must be replaced by a more obscure solution" (Leahy 74). Instead, Leahy identifies parallels between the novel's plot and "the art and culture of 1850s Britain" – including "[t]he crisis in John Ruskin's marriage to his wife Effie and the involvement of John Everett Millais" (57). While this

Leahy's suggestion that Sayers's novels touch on what might typically be considered "modernist issues," while also drawing heavily on the work of nineteenth-century authors. I would argue that Sayers brings an essentially moderate, middlebrow approach to the mystery story, attempting to introduce a more introspective and psychologically convincing approach to characterisation while continuing to adhere to traditional realist conventions.

The nature of Sayers's approach to the mystery story, I believe, can be illuminated by comparing Sayers's literary style to that of another author typically considered middlebrow, Winifred Holtby. Writing in *Modernism and Physical Illness: Sick Books* (2020), Peter Fifield notes that "Holtby's novels" seemingly stand out in contrast to those of "modernist writers," given that Holtby owes a clear debt to nineteenth-century authors: "In form and content their cultural touchstones are primarily Victorian rather than Georgian; their kinship to Elizabeth Gaskell, the Brontës, and George Eliot worn clearly" (Fifield 187). As Fifield would have it, "Holtby's writing celebrates and extends this earlier tradition rather than seeking to turn over its literary tables" (187). We may recognise here a clear parallel with the work of Sayers, who similarly sought to foreground and extend a nineteenth-century literary tradition; as Leahy puts it, Sayers's "novels draw on the sensation novelists like Wilkie Collins and Mary Elizabeth Braddon at a time when they were not considered to have any academic merit" (Leahy 11). Most importantly, Fifield offers a noteworthy analysis of Holtby's 1936 novel *South Riding*, which reinforces that Holtby's adherence to the conventions of nineteenth-century realism should not be seen as indicating "a clumsy simplicity, dead to nuance and judicious stylistic play" (Fifield 204). A similar critical approach might easily be applied to Sayers. While Sayers's detective fiction may be closer in style to the work of nineteenth-century authors such as Collins, this particular aspect of Sayers's fiction is by no means a sign that her approach to the mystery story is simplistic or lacking in moral "nuance." Rather, as this thesis will show, Sayers is able to invest the mystery story – and, in particular, the figure of the detective – with unusual depth and complexity.

reading is an intriguing one, I feel that Leahy's interpretation of the novel is somewhat tenuous, and that she is too quick to dismiss the parallels between Sayers's plot and the Thompson-Bywaters case.

1.3 Critical Approaches to Sayers

However, Sayers's efforts to introduce greater depth and complexity to the mystery story have not always met with a positive reception, as illustrated by the range of reactions to *Gaudy Night*. Because more recent critical assessments of *Gaudy Night* are largely positive, it is easy to overlook the fact that initial reactions to the novel were mixed; indeed, Bogen warns us against "ignoring much of the initial reception of *Gaudy Night*" (Bogen 256). While Q. D. Leavis's notoriously scathing review of *Gaudy Night* is perhaps the best-known critique of the novel, others would express their reservations concerning Sayers's more ambitious, literary approach to the mystery story. In his review of *Gaudy Night*, for instance, the poet Cecil Day-Lewis would comment:

We may feel, too, a puritan twinge at seeing so much erudition, sensibility and humour devoted exclusively to this kind of fiction. Still, if Miss Sayers prefers the halls to the legitimate stage, that is her business; and it is silly to carp at an old favourite who has always given great pleasure [...] (qtd. in Stewart, "Defining Detective Fiction" 109).

Here, it is worth pointing out that Day-Lewis was himself a detective novelist, publishing mystery stories under the pen name "Nicholas Blake." As Victoria Stewart has observed, then, "[i]t seems strange that Blake, himself a practitioner, condemns detective fiction through a comparison to music hall, aligning it with cheap entertainment rather than high art" (Stewart, "Defining Detective Fiction" 109).

However, his reservations seem less "strange" when we consider that Day-Lewis was clearly uneasy about his own role as a writer of detective fiction: Stewart identifies "a strand of mild self-hatred" underlying his attitude toward the genre, and points out that he pursued a careful strategy of "separating Day-Lewis the poet from Blake the detective writer" (109). Nevertheless, Day-Lewis' review of *Gaudy Night* serves to illuminate contemporary objections to Sayers's style. In particular, this review is reflective of the fact that, during the interwar period, detective fiction was usually aligned with "cheap entertainment rather than high art." Critics often sought to police the boundary between "cheap entertainment" and "high art," and to make it clear that detective fiction belonged to the former; indeed, we might recall Bogen's argument that, within the literary marketplace of the interwar period, the success of detective fiction was dependent on the sense that it "knew its place as a formulaic amusement for the intelligentsia." In such a context, it is hardly surprising that some would object

to Sayers's more ambitious, highbrow approach to the detective story. For critics such as Day-Lewis, Sayers was not refining and deepening the mystery story, but uneasily and inappropriately introducing "erudition, sensibility and humour" to a genre that was inherently "cheap" and "formulaic."

It must also be noted that Sayers has frequently been subject to limiting and gendered judgements. While Symons's opinion of Sayers's work was almost uniformly negative, for instance, his assessment of *Gaudy Night* was particularly damning. In his 1972 study of detective fiction, Symons asserted that "*Gaudy Night* is essentially a 'woman's novel' full of the most tedious pseudo-serious chat between the characters that goes on for page after page" (Symons 128). A similarly contemptuous note of misogyny was sounded by George Grella, who, writing in 1970, regarded *Gaudy Night* as being "devoted to a rather repellent intellectual-feminist thesis" (Grella 45). The gendered nature of such judgements is unmistakable. To these criticisms can be added the all too often repeated claim that Sayers fell in love with Lord Peter Wimsey – a claim that paints Sayers as emotionally over-invested, unable to maintain an objective distance between herself and her own creations. Mann neatly sums up the flawed nature of such thinking when she poses the question: "If Chandler had been a woman writing the same books, would Symons have accused her, as he did Dorothy Sayers, of falling in love with her hero?" (Mann 76).

These dismissive views of Sayers's work are reflective of a broader tendency in discussions of detective fiction, in which negative judgements of Golden Age detective fiction are often bound up with perceptions of the genre as being associated with the feminine. Consider, for example, Chandler's scornful view of the classical mystery story as appealing principally to "flustered old ladies – of both sexes (or no sex) and almost all ages – who like their murders scented with magnolia blossoms and do not care to be reminded that murder is an act of infinite cruelty" (Chandler 235–6). Noting the "faint misogyny" that colours such criticisms, Light suggests that, for Chandler, "the rejection of Englishness between the wars seems to have been a manly necessity" (Light 75). It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that Chandler would scoff at Sayers's approach to detective fiction. In Chandler's view, Sayers recognised the limitations of "her kind of detective story" – the "arid formula" of classical detective fiction – and "[y]et she could not or would not give her characters their heads and let them make their own mystery. It took a much simpler and more direct mind than hers

to do that” (Chandler 232–3). It seems that Chandler could not or would not accept the possibility of a female, English author transcending what he regarded as the limitations of the classical mystery story.

While earlier critics such as Chandler and Symons may have dismissed Sayers’s contributions to the genre, others have offered more nuanced and positive assessments of the Wimsey novels. From the 1990s onwards, there would emerge a number of important studies examining Sayers’s detective fiction in connection with other texts of the interwar period, such as Gill Plain’s *Women’s Fiction of the Second World War: Gender, Power and Resistance* (1996) and Nicola Humble’s *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism* (2001). These studies may be seen as reflective of an upsurge of interest in women’s writing of the interwar period, with critics seeking to reassess and rehabilitate an area of literature initially derided because of its association with femininity, and because of its perceived separation from more artful, highbrow types of fiction. Bogen identifies this upsurge as “the revisionist impulse that has rightly characterized the study of early twentieth-century texts in recent decades and has focused on the discovery and reinstatement of forgotten women writers” (Bogen 256). Alongside such studies, we might also consider the wide range of critical discussions that focus exclusively on Sayers’s work. For example, I make frequent reference to *As Her Whimsey Takes Her* (1979) in this study. Edited by Margaret P. Hannay, this collection of critical essays includes several insightful discussions of various aspects of the Wimsey novels. Another useful study is Catherine Kenney’s *The Remarkable Case of Dorothy L. Sayers* (1990), which charts Sayers’s development as an author of detective fiction and presents a generally positive view of the Wimsey novels.

To these literary analyses can be added several biographical studies, chronicling Sayers’s life and career. For example, Mo Moulton’s *Mutual Admiration Society: How Dorothy L. Sayers and Her Oxford Circle Remade the World for Women* (2019) relates the story of Sayers and her circle of university acquaintances, while Francesca Wade’s *Square Haunting: Five Women, Freedom and London Between the Wars* (2020) features an insightful chapter on Sayers. Wade studies Sayers alongside several other authors of the interwar period, all of whom are connected by the fact that they lived in the same part of London at different times. In addition, I have regularly referred to Barbara Reynolds’s biography of Sayers, *Dorothy L. Sayers: Her Life and*

Soul (1993). While such texts are less focused on sustained literary analysis, they can nevertheless prove useful in shining a light on the social and personal factors that influenced Sayers in writing the Wimsey novels. It is clear, then, that there is now a wealth of useful critical and biographical material related to the Wimsey novels, and that critics have done much to highlight the depth and complexity that Sayers brought to the mystery story. I would argue, however, that much more can be done to draw a fuller, richer picture of how Sayers expands the capabilities of the genre through deeper characterisation.

In particular, I focus on the portrayal of Sayers's series detective, Lord Peter Wimsey. A titled aristocrat who conceals his forensic brilliance behind a mask of exaggerated upper-class idiocy, Lord Peter has often been derided by critics such as Chandler, who disapproved of the "detectives of exquisite and impossible gentility" he considered to populate Golden Age detective fiction. Indeed, writing in 1950, Chandler scoffed at the perceived unreality of the Golden Age sleuth, with an unmistakable allusion to Lord Peter: "He wouldn't do even when his brother was a duke, and he had a title and was a classical scholar of considerable attainments ... The private eye is admittedly an exaggeration – a fantasy. But at least he's an exaggeration of the possible" (qtd. in Mann 75). Again, we are confronted with Chandler's efforts to establish a binary distinction between classical and hard-boiled approaches to detective fiction, to downplay the merits of the former while presenting the latter as more authentic, more artful. As Mann puts it, "Chandler did not accept that his own 'hard-boiled' stories depended on quite as much suspension of disbelief as the soft-boiled European ones" (Mann 75). While Chandler could only see the aristocratic Golden Age sleuth as a ridiculous "fantasy," however, I believe that Sayers created in Lord Peter a detective of unusual complexity, one who anticipates the modern detective as characterised by Marr: a flawed character for whom the thrill of solving puzzles is ultimately counterpointed by the moral and emotional costs of detection, who always has to pay some kind of "psychological penalty" for the reader's pleasure.

1.4 "The last and highest court of appeal in detection": Lord Peter's Fictional Predecessors

While I will examine the characterisation of Lord Peter Wimsey in greater detail in each of my main body chapters, it is useful here to situate Sayers's accomplishments within a broader context by comparing Lord Peter to other fictional sleuths. To begin with, I

would point to Lord Peter's most famous literary predecessor, that great gentleman sleuth, Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes. Holmes is portrayed as brilliant and authoritative, triumphing where the professional detective fails. In *The Sign of Four* (1890), for instance, Holmes declares that "I am the last and highest court of appeal in detection. When Gregson, or Lestrade, or Athelney Jones are out of their depths – which, by the way, is their normal state – the matter is laid before me" (Conan Doyle, *Sign 3*). Holmes's self-assured claim illustrates what Marty Roth has identified as a recurring trend in classical detective fiction, the "police paradox": the expectation that the "official police" will be unable to solve the mystery, and that they will be bested by an "amateur" (Roth 61). While Conan Doyle may not have been the first author to portray a genteel amateur who succeeds where the police cannot, his stories certainly helped to popularise this conception of the detective.

In addition, Holmes has typically been seen as bringing a detached attitude to detection. Consider, for example, his criticisms of Watson's account of their previous case:

Honestly, I cannot congratulate you upon it. 'Detection is, or ought to be, an exact science and should be treated in the same cold and unemotional manner. You have attempted to tinge it with romanticism, which produces much the same effect as if you worked a love-story or an elopement into the fifth proposition of Euclid. (Conan Doyle, *Sign 3*)

What I would emphasise here is the impression that the detective is detached and eminently rational; detection itself is figured as a masculine, logical pursuit, equivalent to science or mathematics. We might easily link this particular conception of the detective to broader expectations concerning the writing of detective fiction, a genre that is typically seen as prioritising intellect over emotion, downplaying the messiness of crime and detection in order to foreground the intellectual thrill of solving puzzles. In the 1928 Introduction, for example, Sayers herself would assert that detective fiction "presents us only with the *fait accompli*, and looks upon death and mutilation with a dispassionate eye" (GSS 37). Indeed, there is a clear meta-fictional aspect to Holmes's recommendation that the narrative of detection should be as "cold and unemotional" as possible. Just as the detective story is "dispassionate," "cold and

unemotional,” so, it would seem, should the detective be detached and eminently rational.²

The connection between the characterisation of the detective and the supposedly “dispassionate” nature of the classical mystery story has been highlighted by Roth, who goes so far as to declare that detection is “narrative without affect” (Roth 18). To illustrate this point, Roth compares detective fiction to Gothic fiction, “a contemporary body of writing that tells a comparable story, but that is all affect,” noting “the obvious resemblances between explained or rationalized Gothic and detective fiction” (33). Indeed, Roth observes that “[t]he statement that detective fiction lacks affect is imprecise; these works often begin in a highly sensational manner” (36). However, Roth also points out that this kind of “affect [...] dissipates as soon as we are offered a solution. In detective fiction, Gothic emotion disappears with the appearance of the detective” (35). In the classical mystery story, Roth’s arguments suggest, sensational affect inevitably gives way to the rational solution that the detective provides; the detective is “a realist and a rationalizer of miracles” (41). We might also note that Roth links the character of “the analytic detective” with “the mask of the scientist”:

The scientism of the early detectives is actually used to provide a context for their seeming indifference to the fear and pain that accompany mystery and crime: “Detection,” says Holmes, “is, or ought to be, an exact science and should be treated in the same cold and unemotional manner” (SF 90). The lack of affect identified earlier as a quality of the genre is also a characteristic of the protagonist [...] (71)

Roth’s analysis thus makes clear the apparent linkage between the characterisation of the detective and the seemingly affectless nature of the classical mystery story – a form critics such as Chandler would deride for its supposedly restrained representations of violent crime. The detective, it seems, is indifferent to the “fear and pain that accompany mystery and crime”; their only real concern is the thrill of the chase, the intellectual enjoyment of a good puzzle. In this thesis, however, I set out to

² It is important, however, not to oversimplify Holmes’s actual characterisation. After all, Conan Doyle continued to write Sherlock Holmes stories well into the early twentieth century, and both Holmes’s character and his relationship to the police would shift considerably across the course of the canon. Mann, for instance, observes that “Sherlock Holmes was to grow from Doyle’s original conception, developing some mannerisms and shedding others, and finding emotion in an originally cold temperament” (Mann 78).

complicate this view of the detective – and of the genre itself – as essentially “dispassionate” and lacking in “affect.”

We can begin to see here one particular conception of the detective: the “scientist” and “rationalizer.” Indeed, Holmes’s scientific nature has frequently been emphasised by critics; Anthea Trodd, for instance, describes Holmes as “an experimental scientist, who can clarify and resolve the problems he encounters” (Trodd 161). Similarly, Roth observes that Holmes begins life as “a version of the engineer-hero of Wells and Dreiser” before being “recast as a Bohemian and aesthete” (Roth 44). This portrayal of the detective as “experimental scientist” and “engineer-hero” is reflective of broader developments in nineteenth-century culture. Sarah Yoon, for instance, identifies a recurring trend in nineteenth-century sensation fiction:

Sensation novels were also a product of the mid-nineteenth-century interest in scientific authority. Hence, the negative aesthetics of sensation novels frequently give way to a rational deductive process, which becomes an identifiable component in detective stories. The reliance on empirical reasoning in such novels highlights the increasing public faith and popular interest in scientific discourse, even as anxieties coalesced over areas seen as testing the limits of the scientifically knowable, such as in deviant psychology, concealed criminality, mental illness, and pharmaceutical influences on the brain. (Yoon 13)

This “public faith and popular interest in scientific discourse” is clearly reflected in what Roth calls “[t]he scientism of the early detectives.” Late nineteenth century sleuths such as Holmes are presented as brilliant, authoritative, and detached, empowered by science to be able to solve any mystery.

While Conan Doyle’s detective may have been detached, aloof, and supremely rational, however, Golden Age authors such as Sayers would offer a very different conception of the detective. The contrast between Lord Peter Wimsey and his illustrious predecessor has been emphasised by critics such as Robert Kuhn McGregor and Ethan Lewis, who summarise Holmes as “the evocation of an age, a paragon of all that the Victorian male might aspire to be” (McGregor and Lewis 22). Lord Peter by contrast, McGregor and Lewis claim, “was more the man of the twenties, brilliant but scarred and unsure” (23). Whereas Holmes’s characterisation may have reflected a late Victorian faith in scientific progress, Lord Peter Wimsey – who is established in Sayers’s first novel as being a veteran of the First World War – was the

product of a very different age. A key feature of the characterisation of Lord Peter is the fact that he is rarely able to maintain a detached attitude toward the cases he investigates; as Routley rather laconically puts it, Lord Peter is “liable to be emotionally upset by the consequences of his own detection” (Routley 140). His initial enthusiasm for detection is often disrupted by a painful awareness of the moral and emotional costs of his own interference.

I would therefore suggest that, rather than aligning Lord Peter with late nineteenth century detectives such as Holmes, we should look toward the mode of detection found in sensation fiction of the mid-nineteenth century. A useful analysis of the detection process in such novels has been offered by Anne-Marie Beller, who observes that “sensation novels during the mid-Victorian period present crime and its solution as an intrinsically personal event” (Beller 50). “Unlike later detectives such as Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes,” Beller goes on to observe, “these characters do not habitually solve crimes as either an occupation or a hobby. They are only drawn into the detection process by personal motives” (51). For Beller, this specific presentation of the detective as self-interested rather than detached “points to the sensation novel’s emphasis on individual self-discovery and the way in which crime and detection is often used as both a catalyst and a metaphor for a crisis in psychological and social constructions of identity” (51). This conception of the detection process as an “intrinsically personal” phenomenon, which may result in disturbing revelations concerning the self, is clearly echoed in the Wimsey novels.

This parallel is perhaps most clearly illustrated by the ninth Wimsey novel, *The Nine Tailors* (1934), in which Lord Peter is invited to a rural village to solve a tantalising mystery: an unidentified corpse has been found buried in the local churchyard. At first, Lord Peter is thrilled by what he considers a “beautiful case,” happily informing the local vicar that “I am uncommonly grateful to you for drawing my attention to it. I wouldn’t have missed it for the world” (NT 104). As the investigation progresses, however, Lord Peter’s initial enthusiasm gives way to a distinct sense of unease. He has failed to uncover the full solution to the mystery, and, to make matters worse, the investigation has brought a hidden scandal to light, and so caused trouble for a local family: “Wimsey felt depressed. So far as he could see, his interference had done no good to anybody and only made extra trouble” (321). Although Lord Peter does ultimately hit on the full solution to the mystery, this discovery affords him little

consolation: with the solution to the mystery comes the disturbing revelation that Lord Peter himself had participated – albeit inadvertently – in the murder he is investigating.

One critic who has emphasised the influence of nineteenth-century sensation fiction on Sayers's detective novels is Christine A. Colón. In *Writing for the Masses: Dorothy L. Sayers and the Victorian Literary Tradition* (2018), Colón highlights the contrast between Sayers's portrayal of her aristocratic sleuth and the traditional image of the detached, Holmesian detective: "Unlike the stereotype of the distant, unaffected detective that developed from Conan Doyle's unflappable Sherlock Holmes, Collins's and Sayers's detectives are, at least eventually, powerfully affected by the cases they investigate" (Colón 142). More specifically, Colón offers a detailed analysis of *The Nine Tailors*, noting its similarities to sensation novels such as Collins's *The Woman in White* (1860):

Just as in *The Woman in White*, the neat conclusion of a typical detective novel where the evil are punished and the good go free is subverted in *The Nine Tailors* by the more psychologically rich characterization of the detective who solves the mystery but must continue to grapple with the effects this detective work has had on his psyche. (154–5)

I would agree with Colón's claim that Sayers brings "a more psychologically rich characterization of the detective" to the mystery story. If the contemporary detective is, as Marr suggests, a troubled figure who must pay a "deep psychological penalty" for the intellectual thrill of solving puzzles, then Sayers clearly anticipates this development with her portrayal of a detective who is not "distant" and "unaffected," but keenly aware of the moral and emotional costs of detection.

It is precisely because Colón offers such a detailed analysis of the novel that I opted, at an early stage, not to focus on *The Nine Tailors* in depth. Instead, I focus on two earlier Wimsey novels in which the detection process becomes "intrinsically personal": *Clouds of Witness* (1926) and *Strong Poison*. In both of these novels, Sayers presents narratives in which Lord Peter has some personal stake in the outcome of the case he is investigating. The former sees Lord Peter undertaking an investigation into his own family as he attempts to clear his brother of a murder charge. The latter marks the beginning of the overarching romance between Lord Peter and the detective novelist Harriet Vane, who is initially introduced as the principal suspect in a murder case. Importantly, both novels reveal Lord Peter to be subject to romantic,

sexual, and familial feeling – thus reinforcing the impression that Lord Peter, far from being a detached and eminently rational super-sleuth in the Dupin–Holmes tradition, is a more flawed and fallible character, recalling the detectives of sensation fiction.

It is important to note, however, that the presentation of Lord Peter as more flawed and fallible than his illustrious predecessor, Sherlock Holmes, can also be seen as reflective of broader developments during the Golden Age, during which, critics have argued, authors reacted against the image of the brilliant Holmesian sleuth. For example, Light claims that the characterisation of Holmes was informed by a conventional vision of heroic masculinity that was rendered obsolete by the First World War. Thus, Light asserts, authors of the Golden Age would search for a new conception of the detective:

Sherlock Holmes, despite his drugs and violin playing, bore a direct relationship to that brotherhood of boy's own [*sic*] adventurers whose public school ethics and optimism of will took them all the way to the Somme. Whatever the traces of *fin de siècle* decadence, readers had been able to assume that Holmes could be a man of action when he chose, an English patriot with a firm knowledge of the Queensberry rules. The post-war world, however, had made the notion of the conquering detective unpalatable to some, and it needed to give way to a more modest, sometimes agonised sense of English manliness. (Light 72)

While Light is perhaps too quick to downplay the more unconventional aspects of Holmes's characterisation, there is certainly some merit to Light's argument that characters such as Lord Peter Wimsey and Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot are reflective of a "quest for a bearable masculinity" which would be "preferable to the bulldog virtues of 1914" (73). These Golden Age sleuths can easily be linked to the shifting conceptions of masculinity and gender roles that would emerge throughout the interwar period.

We might also consider the view presented by Rowland, who echoes Light in asserting that characters such as Poirot and Lord Peter "seem feminised, creating an ambivalence about gender which moves away from prewar styles of male heroism" (Rowland 19). In short, Rowland's argument is that, whereas Holmes might be seen as representative of a conventional vision of heroic masculinity, Golden Age authors such as Sayers and Christie would react against such a vision, creating a new breed of "anti-heroic feminised detective" who "discovers [...] that the law is not a stable,

infallible system for administering justice, and that its instabilities are often bound up with formations of gender” (21). Most importantly, Rowland, while building on Light’s arguments, also points to the highly self-referential nature of Golden Age detective fiction:

The dominant tone is one of generic “play.” It is this “playfulness” with the inherited form, of course, that allows female golden age writers to construct fictions with and against a masculine Holmesian genre. In the play of the feminine works, the cited male novel becomes re-created as a fantasy of masculinity as a stable whole identity, ignoring any ambivalence within the antecedent works. Sherlock Holmes becomes not a masculine model, but a playful mask within a consciously self-referential novel. The genre becomes wittily artificial in its references to itself as *artifice* in an intertextuality of crime fiction. (24)

Rowland’s argument suggests that what matters here, perhaps, is not the actual character of Sherlock Holmes, but rather, the *idea* of Sherlock Holmes – the stereotypical conception of the detective as a paragon of masculine rationality, self-assured, detached, and eminently rational. In the wake of the First World War, authors would react against this model, creating a new kind of detective that parodied and subverted the typical Holmesian sleuth.

1.5 “Detectives of exquisite and impossible gentility”: The Gentleman Detective

It is important to note, however, that Lord Peter is distinguished from several other detectives of the Golden Age by one important feature of his characterisation: his status as an English gentleman. Lord Peter is one of several gentleman detectives to appear during the interwar period, standing alongside Margery Allingham’s Albert Campion and Ngaio Marsh’s Roderick Alleyn. Here, it is perhaps worth acknowledging that these portrayals of the detective as a gentleman contrast sharply with some earlier portrayals of the detective in fiction. During the mid-nineteenth century, in particular, the detective was frequently portrayed as a slippery and potentially untrustworthy figure, reflecting a range of concerns and anxieties surrounding the methods and influence of the police. In an 1862 discussion of sensation novels, for example, Margaret Oliphant would cast the detective in a distinctly negative light:

We have already had specimens, as many as are desirable, of what the detective policeman can do for the enlivenment of literature: and it is into the hands of the literary

Detective that this school of story-telling must inevitably fall at last. He is not a collaborateur whom we welcome with any pleasure into the republic of letters. His appearance is neither favourable to taste nor morals. (qtd. in Trodd 13)

In the mid-nineteenth century, it would seem, the “literary Detective” was emphatically *not* a gentleman. They were a slippery “collaborateur,” not “welcome” in the respectable world of “letters.”

A useful analysis of these issues has been offered by Yoon, whose 2024 study *The Ambivalent Detective in Victorian Sensation Novels: Dickens, Braddon, and Collins* challenges “the popular notion that the detective was either a purely rational figure, embodying scientific rationality, or that he embodied quintessential English values” (Yoon 1–2). In literature of the mid-nineteenth century, Yoon makes clear, attitudes toward the detective are mixed at best; the detective is “both celebrated and reviled, both an embodiment of a new professional elite and a threat to middle-class values” (2). Perceptions of the detective as maintaining law and order are undercut by concerns regarding their influence and methods: “The detective as a literary phenomenon in Victorian sensation fiction simultaneously defends a middle-class conception of social order, even as he resorts to underhand and covert tactics. The strategies employed by the detective sat uncomfortably with proclaimed ideas of English freedom, privacy, and gentlemanly conduct” (2). A key issue which Yoon’s study serves to emphasise is that these fictional portrayals of the detective contrast sharply with the ideal of the English gentleman. While the detective may have been tasked with safeguarding a “middle-class conception of social order,” they were often portrayed as a slippery and morally ambiguous figure who could not be trusted to uphold “gentlemanly” standards of behaviour.

In nineteenth-century sensation fiction, a key focal point for these concerns and anxieties is the middle-class household. Encounters between the police detective and the middle-class household often serve to call the abilities of the detective into question; as Trodd puts it, “the police, inept at solving genteel crime in general, are shown as completely incapable of reading genteel female character” (Trodd 7). Examining narratives of domestic crime and detection in literature of the mid-nineteenth century, Trodd finds that “[t]he threat posed by the police force to the privacy and autonomy of the middle-class home” is often “countered [...] by the insistence that domestic affairs could be managed and redeemed within the home,

whether by genteel amateur investigation [...] or by some process of confession and restitution" (42). "This insistence on domestic administration of justice," Trodd observes, "was sustained by the assumption that the police lacked the moral authority and discrimination to intervene in middle-class crimes, however desirable and appropriate their intervention in crimes committed by members of their own class" (42). In this way, Trodd makes clear the tensions and anxieties surrounding the figure of the professional detective. At stake here is the fact that the professional detective is, in essence, a working-class servant. The intrusion of such a figure was often seen as an unacceptable violation of the sanctity of "the middle-class home"; in addition, there were grave doubts as to whether the professional detective was capable of correctly interpreting "genteel" character.

These tensions are clearly illustrated by the controversy surrounding a real-life police drama, the notorious Road case of 1860. Following the murder of a young boy, Francis Saville Kent, Detective Inspector Jack Whicher of the London police was brought in to assist the local police with their investigation. Whicher, a well-known professional detective, suspected Francis's sixteen-year-old half-sister Constance of the crime, but was unable to prove his case. He would be heavily criticised for his handling of the investigation; in the eyes of many, it was inconceivable that the daughter of a genteel family could have committed such a crime. Constance would later confess to the crime, but by that time Whicher had retired from the police force.

This revealing encounter between the professional detective and the daughter of a genteel family would be re-enacted in Collins's *The Moonstone*. Trodd has pointed out that, while Collins presents a sanitised version of the Road case, replacing the brutal murder of a child with the disappearance of a precious jewel, he is nevertheless "confronting the fears of Road, the general fear of the effects of police intrusion, and the specific fear that the culprit might be the least appropriate person" (Trodd 28). In Collins's fictionalised retelling of the case, the police detective Sergeant Cuff – a character who owes a clear debt to Whicher – emerges as a highly ambiguous figure. On the one hand, he is a respected and talented detective who handles the investigation more skilfully than the "muddle-headed local police-officer" (Collins, *Moonstone* 93). As Yoon sees it, "Sergeant Cuff not only reinstates the social order against deviant others, but he also restores a sense of narrative continuity and cohesion" (Yoon 135). At the same time, Cuff's presence in the middle-class household

is a source of deep discomfort; Mrs Verinder fears that “he is bringing trouble and misery with him,” and, later in the novel, the family steward, Gabriel Betteredge, loses his temper when Cuff casts suspicion on Rachel Verinder, “seiz[ing] the Sergeant by the collar of his coat, and pinn[ing] him against the wall” (Collins, *Moonstone* 105, 133). “Even as Sergeant Cuff becomes an inspiring character in the novel,” Yoon observes, “he remains fraught with moral ambiguities and suspicion” (Yoon 131). Perhaps most damning of all, Cuff fails to uncover the full solution to the mystery because he cannot correctly read the virtuous Rachel’s character: Trodd observes that, although Cuff is right in thinking that Rachel knows something about the jewel’s disappearance, he goes astray in assigning “a ‘coarse’ interpretation” to her behaviour (Trodd 27). The capabilities of the professional detective are thus shown to be limited, and it falls to genteel amateurs such as Franklin Blake to continue the investigation.

It is clear, then, that the intervention of the police detective was a subject of considerable anxiety in mid-nineteenth century fiction. While the professional detective may have been seen as performing a reassuring function in apprehending criminals and upholding the existing social order, the detective is often presented as a slippery and potentially untrustworthy character who may resort to ungentlemanly and dishonourable behaviour in their attempts to uncover the truth. In narratives of domestic crime, additionally, the detective is typically cast as an outsider, whose powers are limited because they cannot correctly read “genteel” character. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that authors of detective fiction would turn their attention to another kind of detective, one who could act as a bridge between the police and the middle- or upper-class household, and who could solve mysteries without offending gentlemanly sensibilities. As critics would have it, Sherlock Holmes is such a detective. Mann, for instance, describes Holmes as “a gentleman with polished manners,” declaring that “he was the first detective to be socially acceptable to the upper classes, for detection was vulgar work, and only an outsider like Holmes or Poirot, or an aristocrat, could plausibly transcend social barriers” (Mann 70). Similarly, Trodd argues that Holmes “represents an acceptable compromise between the power invested in the police and the tradition of the genteel amateur” (Trodd 161). For Trodd, Holmes is “a kind of super-policeman, but one modelled along lines acceptable to a middle-class reading public who had only recently conceded the principle of police rights to intrude in the home” (161). We can see here an important conception of the gentleman

detective. While detection may have been considered “vulgar work,” the gentleman detective, it would seem, can carry out this work in a way that is “socially acceptable,” combining the authority of the professional detective with the sensibilities of the “genteel amateur.”

A particularly significant view of the gentleman detective was offered by Grella, who, writing in 1970, identified an evolution from Dupin and Holmes to the later gentleman detectives of Golden Age fiction, who combine the “personal eccentricity” and intellectual superiority of the typical “Holmesian” sleuth with “the popular conception of the English gentleman” (Grella 37). Strikingly, Grella suggests that a key part of the gentleman detective’s task is to police the boundaries of civilised society, to bring about the “expulsion of the socially undesirable” (41). In the ordered society depicted by the classical mystery story, Grella asserts, gentlemanly behaviour is everything; those who are merely “posing as a gentleman” will be exposed and eliminated (42). By contrast, the gentleman detective is a *true* gentleman, a characteristic that ensures they will succeed where the professional detective fails:

They are ordinary, bourgeois citizens who intrude into a closed, aristocratic society; unable to comprehend the complex and delicate social code, they are invariably stymied. The amateur detective, conversely, always is socially acceptable and comprehends the code of the society he investigates – he can question with delicacy, notice “bad form,” or understand lying like a gentleman to the police; therefore, he always triumphs over the mundane ways of the official forces of law and order. (34)

Grella’s view of the gentleman amateur, and of their relationship to the professional detective, is an especially noteworthy one, and I will return to these comments in Chapter 2. While there is certainly an element of truth to Grella’s argument that, in the Golden Age mystery story, victims and criminals are often those who were deemed “socially unacceptable” by the standards of the era, one of my principal aims in this thesis has been to complicate the view of the gentleman amateur which Grella presents. I believe that a closer examination of Sayers’s detective fiction reveals that the role and characterisation of the gentleman amateur is far more complex than Grella’s article might have us believe. In these novels, as this thesis will show, the gentleman amateur is *not* “always [...] socially acceptable”; Sayers repeatedly calls our attention to the conflict between the requirements of detective work and the

sensibilities of the gentleman, making it clear that Lord Peter cannot be both an effective investigator and a perfect gentleman.

Indeed, I would concur with the assessment offered by Melissa Schaub, who argues that Sayers “figure[s] class-bound standards of behavior as limiting, not admirable” (Schaub, *Middlebrow Feminism* 129). While Lord Peter’s status as a gentleman might be seen as a strength that allows him to triumph where the professional detective would fail, Sayers also makes it clear that Lord Peter’s gentlemanly sensibilities can be a serious weakness. Consider, for example, an early Wimsey novel, *Unnatural Death* (1927), which offers yet another example of the familiar pattern in which Lord Peter’s initial enthusiasm gives way to deep-seated misgivings concerning the costs of the detection process. In this particular case, Lord Peter becomes disturbed when his actions goad a murderer into further crimes. A noteworthy scene sees Lord Peter speaking to a local vicar, explaining the discomfort he feels; Lord Peter laments that “by interfering – finding things out and so on – one may do far worse harm. Start all kinds of things” (*UD* 236). After Lord Peter departs, the vicar, Mr Tredgold, makes a significant remark:

Mr Tredgold watched him as he trotted away between the graves. “Dear, dear,” he said, “how nice they are. So kindly and scrupulous and so vague outside their public-school code. And much more nervous and sensitive than people think. A very difficult class to reach. I must make a special intention for him at Mass to-morrow.” (237)

Mr Tredgold’s comment highlights a significant recurring issue in the Wimsey novels: that the rigid “public-school code” instilled in Lord Peter leaves him poorly equipped to cope with the moral and ethical issues that inevitably arise when working as a detective³.

³ Here, it is worth noting that this thesis principally focuses upon a particular conception of the gentleman, which is closely linked with a “public-school code”. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw the emergence of a modified conception of gentlemanliness, one defined by behaviour as well as breeding – and, as Berberich puts it, “[t]he public schools then institutionalized this new ideal.” (Berberich, *Image* 21) As critics such as Berberich and Schaub have observed, the redefinition of gentlemanliness to include a moral component as well as a social one served an important social purpose, allowing the emerging middle classes to claim gentlemanliness for themselves. It seems, then, that anybody could claim to be a gentleman, as long as they followed a “public-school code”. Indeed, we might consider the eighth Wimsey novel, *Murder Must Advertise* (1933), in which the murderer, Mr

In examining Lord Peter's attitude toward detection, I am indebted to Laura E. Nym Mayhall's reading of the gentleman detective in the works of Sayers, Allingham, and Christie. In Mayhall's view, all three of these authors set out to address the question of what role the aristocrat could play in the shifting context of interwar British society:

Novels by Allingham, Marsh, and Sayers participate in remaking aristocracy by reinterpreting its traditional purposes. Through the genre of detective fiction, these writers created worlds that offered aristocrats new roles that simultaneously served the function of protecting and legitimating the social order – arguably detective fiction's main imperative – and navigating the treacherous terrain between the aristocracy's traditional role as disinterested amateur and its new identity among the professional classes. (Mayhall 777)

Mayhall sees the figure of the gentleman detective in these Golden Age novels as a means of “refashion[ing] the nobility by adapting its virtues to a new age” (787). Mayhall's assessment is insightful, and I would largely agree with her claims that the gentleman detective in these novels may be seen as a response to shifting attitudes toward class: the aristocrat, in search of a new role, is recast as the detective – a more professional and socially useful figure.

I would point out, however, that it is not only in the realm of detective fiction that authors of the interwar period explore the question of how the gentleman might adapt to a post-First World War context; we might equally profitably look, for example, to the work of Ford Madox Ford. Indeed, one of my aims in writing this thesis has been to bring together Ford and Sayers, two writers who would typically be kept apart because they are seen as working in vastly different literary traditions – populist genre fiction and highbrow modernism – and to show how they explore similar concerns in relation

Tallboy, is a graduate of the fictional school Dumbleton – a public school, though apparently one less prestigious than Eton or Harrow. When Lord Peter points out that Tallboy could commit suicide, thus sparing his wife and child the shame of a criminal conviction, Tallboy remarks that “that's the public school way out of it. [...] We'll show 'em that Dumbleton can achieve the Eton touch.” (MMA 380) For Schaub, this scene illustrates “[t]he self-conscious and partially ironic annexation of gentlemanly values by the lower middle class” (Schaub, *Middlebrow Feminism* 16). Certainly, there is something darkly ironic in the suggestion that the way to “achieve the Eton touch” is to commit suicide; we might wonder about a code of manners in which the best kind of gentleman is frequently a dead one.

to the figure of the gentleman. I am especially closely concerned with the *Parade's End* tetralogy (1924–8), a series of texts that Andrew Radford sees as satirising “ancestral feudalism” (Radford 317). Examining the characterisation of Christopher Tietjens, the protagonist of Ford’s tetralogy, Radford finds that Tietjens is portrayed as “tragically limited. Tietjens’s erudition is less part of a profound intellectual and political occupation, and more the trivialising dilettantism of a superfluous country ‘gentleman’” (317). Additionally, Christine Berberich observes that a similar comment might be applied to Edward Ashburnham, a character in Ford’s earlier novel, *The Good Soldier* (1915): “Bereft of a more coherent social role in a world dominated by the upheaval of ‘the Modern’, Ashburnham is left without a clear-cut role, duty, or responsibility” (Berberich, “Modernist Elegy” 203–4). I would argue that these portrayals of the gentleman as a “tragically limited” figure, whose relevance to a changing society is questionable at best, resonate with Sayers’s handling of her aristocratic sleuth. Across the course of the Wimsey novels, Lord Peter is required to move beyond “trivialising dilettantism,” adapting to a new age by taking on the duty and responsibilities of the detective.

In Lord Peter’s case, however, there is a significant complication in that his rigid “public-school code” of manners is out of step with this new age; Mayhall notes that Lord Peter is pushed to move beyond such “outmoded ideals” and “toward a middle-class, professional view of the world” (Mayhall 780). Certainly, it is true that, across the course of the Wimsey novels, Lord Peter increasingly shows a more serious attitude toward detection, which is reframed in professional terms – as a job rather than a mere hobby. However, a key issue I highlight is that Lord Peter never entirely leaves behind the traditional values instilled in him. Even in the final completed Wimsey novels, he retains the sensibilities of a gentleman, and becomes uncomfortable when the role of detective requires him to disregard traditional gentlemanly ideals such as chivalry and personal loyalty.

It is perhaps worth noting that these gentlemanly scruples set Lord Peter apart from another well-known sleuth of the Golden Age, Agatha Christie’s Hercule Poirot. Mayhall makes clear the fundamental difference between the two characters: whereas Lord Peter is an aristocrat, “and to a large extent the prototype” for other aristocratic sleuths, Poirot “came from outside the British class system and spoke to and for an explicitly bourgeois audience” (Mayhall 773). Being both “bourgeois” and a foreigner,

Poirot is not constrained by the same code of manners as Lord Peter. In fact, Poirot often expresses his contempt for the ideals traditionally associated with the English gentleman. In *Murder in Mesopotamia* (1936), for example, Poirot chastises another character when they hesitate to answer his questions about the victim:

“Do not make me the British *clichés*,” Poirot begged. “Do not say it is not the cricket or the football, that to speak anything but well of the dead is not done – that – *enfin* – there is loyalty! Loyalty it is a pestilential thing in crime. Again and again it obscures the truth.” (Christie, *Mesopotamia* 117)

Here, Christie gently satirises stereotypical perceptions of English character. Whereas Lord Peter is all too often constrained by a rigid, gentlemanly code of manners that encompasses ideals such as chivalry and “loyalty,” Poirot scoffs at such “British *clichés*.”

And yet Lord Peter and Poirot, perhaps, have one fundamental characteristic in common: their determination to get at “the truth.” Throughout the Wimsey novels, Sayers frequently calls our attention to Lord Peter’s ruthless determination to uncover the full solution to a mystery, no matter what the cost of his investigation may be – an aspect of his character that acquires particular significance in *Gaudy Night*, a novel that sees Sayers emphasising the epistemic principle of fidelity to the facts, the “doctrine that loyalty to the abstract truth must override all personal considerations” (GN 522). Here, it must be noted that Lord Peter’s uncompromising “loyalty” to the facts could be seen as simply a basic characteristic of the classical detective, and a reflection of the requirements of the mystery story. After all, classical detective fiction has typically been seen as a genre that promises complete closure; the reader will be given an answer to all of the questions that the author has set up. It could therefore be argued that there is nothing particularly significant in a detective such as Lord Peter expressing their determination to uncover the truth at all costs – it is simply what the puzzle plot requires them to do. For example, Rowland asserts: “Golden age detective fiction offers reassurance in being the promise of a rationally determined world. The reader is confident that the novel *will work* to offer a coherent solution tying up all loose ends: the detective is a kind of guarantee for the reader that narrative completion will ensue” (Rowland 21). If Lord Peter’s need to uncover the truth at any cost is merely a way of guaranteeing the “narrative completion” expected of the classical mystery story, then we could easily link this issue to the broader – and oft-repeated – criticism that

the classical detective is more of a plot device than a character, their nature shaped entirely by the requirements of a mechanistic puzzle plot. I would argue, however, that Sayers's approach to the characterisation of her aristocratic sleuth is far more compelling and complex. In particular, Sayers deepens the mystery story by portraying the detective as a morally ambiguous figure who prioritises the "truth" above "all personal considerations," and by showcasing the moral and emotional crises that might arise as a result of their commitment to this principle.

Lord Peter's scrupulous commitment to the facts, and uncompromising disregard for "personal considerations," become particularly intriguing in the context of his relationship with Harriet Vane, a major feature of the later Wimsey novels. For Mayhall, the relationship between the aristocratic Lord Peter Wimsey and the upper-middle-class Harriet Vane is reflective of the breaking down of class boundaries and the modernisation of the aristocracy in Golden Age detective fiction: "In the tradition of the comedy of manners, marriage in these novels between members of the aristocracy and the upper-middle classes becomes a means by which class tensions are relieved. Wimsey, Campion, and Alleyn each marry a 'modern' woman who underscores his own potential for modernizing his own class" (Mayhall 782). Before the relationship between Lord Peter and Harriet Vane can be brought to a successful conclusion, however, Sayers must reckon with the difficult legacy of the feudal gentleman. In earlier Wimsey novels, *Clouds of Witness* and *Strong Poison*, Sayers establishes Lord Peter as being vulnerable to the forces of romantic and sexual attraction – and, in doing so, suggests that the feudal gentleman is vulnerable to an erotic imagination with exploitative, sadistic undercurrents. A key factor in the successful resolution of Lord Peter and Harriet's relationship is that this possessive desire is ultimately held in check by Lord Peter's carefully maintained integrity; in *Gaudy Night*, Sayers makes it clear that Lord Peter will not allow his feelings toward Harriet to compromise his scrupulous dedication to the facts. Sayers thus makes Lord Peter's integrity, his disregard for "personal considerations," vital to the romance plot – and yet, at the same time, she highlights the moral and emotional costs of the detective's commitment to such a principle.

In examining this intriguing intersection between the detection and romance plots in Sayers's later novels, I aim to challenge the widespread view that Sayers's later novels were weakened by her efforts to combine detection with a narrative of

romance. In a discussion of *Busman's Honeymoon*, for instance, Stewart highlights what she sees as “the ultimate problem of incorporating ‘detective-interest’ into a ‘love-story’: the impossibility of insulating the two elements from each other” (Stewart, *Crime Writing* 136). I would argue, however, that the interweaving of detection and romance in Sayers’s later novels is not a “problem” but rather a strength. By drawing together the threads of detection and romance, Sayers is able to emphasise the sense of moral ambiguity that surrounds the figure of the detective, and to deepen the characterisation of her aristocratic sleuth.

Ultimately, I aim to illuminate multiple facets of Sayers’s portrayal of the gentleman detective, and, in doing so, to emphasise the depth and complexity that Sayers brings to the classical mystery story – a genre all too often dismissed as a mere intellectual puzzle. Here, it must be acknowledged that I am indebted to a recent dissertation by Hyla Maddalena, which examines the presentation of the gentleman detective in Marsh and Allingham’s novels in depth. While I have not quoted directly from Maddalena’s work, it has helped me to refine and clarify the scope of my own thesis; my aim has been to offer a similarly in-depth examination of Sayers’s portrayal of the gentleman detective. In doing so, I have focused principally on selected novels from the Wimsey series. I also draw on another of Sayers’s forays into the world of detective fiction: the stand-alone novel *The Documents in the Case* (1930), which is doubly unusual in that it does not feature Lord Peter, and sees Sayers experimenting with an epistolary format. Although *The Documents in the Case* is not a Wimsey novel, I believe that this text can help to further illuminate Sayers’s ambitious approach to detective fiction – and, in particular, her skilful exploitation of the tension between the sensibilities of a gentleman and the moral and emotional costs of detection.

1.6 Thesis Outline

The thesis begins with an introduction to the character of Lord Peter Wimsey, and to the moral and ethical issues with which Sayers’s gentleman sleuth must contend. In this first body chapter (Chapter 2), I set out to challenge the view of the classical mystery story presented by Grella, who identifies a distinct contrast between the professional detective and the self-assured gentleman amateur who, in Grella’s view, polices society, identifying and eliminating those who fail to conform to genteel standards of behaviour. I present a more complex view of the gentleman amateur, showing that Sayers frequently calls our attention to the tension between the

sensibilities of a gentleman and the requirements of detective work; with reference to affect theory, I argue that the negative affect of shame is key to the gentleman amateur's experience of detection in these novels. Across the course of the series, as I will show, Lord Peter's gentlemanly scruples often call for the intervention of a professional detective, and he himself is pushed to adopt a more middle-class, professionalised attitude toward detection. In addition, I place the Wimsey novels in conversation with Ford Madox Ford's *Parade's End* tetralogy, showing how Sayers and Ford each grapple with the question of how the feudal gentleman might adapt to survive in the changing context of post-World War One society.

In Chapter 3, I examine Sayers's early attempts at introducing romance to the mystery story. I show how such attempts are complicated by Lord Peter's status as a member of the upper classes, with Sayers evoking a troublesome legacy of possessive masculine sexuality that is inextricably associated with the feudal gentleman. The chapter begins with a discussion of an early Wimsey novel, *Clouds of Witness*, which features a rural setting with distinctly Gothic undertones. In this setting, Lord Peter, attempting to uncover the secrets of his own family and defend his own brother against a murder charge, is notably out of his depth. While Roth casts the classical detective as a "realist and rationalizer," the antithesis of the Gothic, *Clouds of Witness* is a novel in which the detective almost seems to be infected by Gothic sensibilities. More specifically, this novel reveals that, beneath a veneer of modernity, the gentleman detective is in fact a fallible human being, subject to a self-centred, erotic imagination. This issue recurs in *Strong Poison*, which inaugurates the long-drawn-out relationship between Lord Peter and Harriet Vane. If this particular relationship is to be successfully resolved, then Sayers must confront and resolve the legacy of the feudal gentleman.

Finally, in Chapter 4, I conclude my examination of the gentleman detective by focusing on a late Wimsey novel, *Gaudy Night*, in which Sayers brings the relationship between Lord Peter and Harriet to a successful resolution. In this novel, Sayers emphasises the integrity of the detective: the notion that the detective's duty is to uncover the truth, whatever the moral and emotional costs of their investigation may be. While such a notion is a defining aspect of Lord Peter's character from the beginning of the series, the theme of intellectual integrity assumes new significance in *Gaudy Night*, a novel which is set in a fictitious Oxford college, and which stresses the

scholar's principle of fidelity to the facts. It is through a shared adherence to such principles, in fact, that Lord Peter and Harriet are able to achieve a successful resolution to their relationship. At the same time, however, I will show how Sayers's insistence on the necessity of absolute fidelity to the facts serves to emphasise the sense of moral ambiguity that surrounds the detective in Sayers's fiction. In this way, Sayers is able to draw together the competing threads of detection and romance. While this generic admixture has often been derided as a weakness of Sayers's later novels, I argue that the interweaving of detection and romance is, in fact, a key strength of the Wimsey novels.

2. “Wimsey was ashamed”: Detection, Gentlemanliness, and the First World War

In this chapter, I set out to introduce the reader to the character of Lord Peter Wimsey and the ethical issues with which this aristocratic sleuth must contend. Focusing principally on two early Wimsey novels, *Whose Body?* (1923) and *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* (1928), I examine the complex and ambiguous ways in which Lord Peter’s role as detective intersects with the ideal of the gentleman. In doing so, I aim to challenge the view of classical detective fiction presented by Grella, who suggests that there is usually a clear contrast between amateur and professional detectives – between self-assured, gentlemanly detectives who are “always [...] socially acceptable,” and the “ordinary, bourgeois” police, who are thwarted in their attempts to penetrate the favoured setting of the genre: “a closed, aristocratic” world with a “complex and delicate social code” (Grella 34). I argue that the Wimsey novels present a more complex view of the “gentleman amateur” – which, as this chapter will show, is revealed to be something of a contradiction in terms. Detection, in the Wimsey novels, often emerges as a messy and morally ambiguous business; in order to be a truly effective investigator, Sayers’s writing suggests, the gentleman detective must be prepared to set aside the “complex and delicate social code” instilled by their education and upbringing. This chapter sets out to illustrate that predicament, emphasising the feelings of guilt and shame that complicate Lord Peter’s approach to detection. In examining these issues, I will draw on the theories of affect presented by Silvan Tomkins; while I am not qualified to gauge the accuracy of Tomkins’s psychological insights, I believe that his ideas can help to illuminate the operation of shame in the Wimsey novels.

It is worth noting that the feelings of guilt and shame that inform Lord Peter’s attitude towards detection are closely linked to his past experience as an officer during the First World War – an aspect of the Wimsey novels that has received extensive critical attention. One of the earliest and most notable examinations of the ways in which the legacy of the First World War manifests itself in the Wimsey novels is that offered by Plain, who, writing in the 1990s, argued that “Sayers creates a careful and effective portrait of the survivor as hero. Wimsey’s neurosis stems from the guilt of the First World War officer charged with the task of repeatedly authorising the death of his own men” (Plain, *Women’s Fiction* 46). Because the ultimate outcome of Lord Peter’s

involvement with detection is often the execution of the criminal he has helped to apprehend, the moral and emotional burden imposed on the detective can involve a painful echo of this war-time “guilt.” This sense of guilt is, I believe, a key component of Sayers’s portrayal of the gentleman amateur. Hence, this chapter will conclude with a brief examination of the ways in which Lord Peter’s approach to detection is informed by his war-time experiences, placing Sayers’s detective fiction in conversation with Ford Madox Ford’s *Parade’s End* tetralogy. My principal aim in this chapter, however, is to show how – even setting aside the question of the criminal’s fate – Sayers sets out to enhance the mystery story by portraying detection as a messy and morally ambiguous business, creating a fundamental tension between Lord Peter’s dual roles: the brilliant sleuth and the quintessential English gentleman.

2.1 The Gentleman Detective: An Introduction

In the 1936 play *Busman’s Honeymoon* – the result of a collaboration between Dorothy L. Sayers and her friend, Muriel St Clare Byrne – Lord Peter Wimsey and his wife Harriet Vane arrive at an Elizabethan country cottage where they intend to spend their honeymoon, only to discover that the cottage’s previous owner has been murdered. Thus, the play depicts a clash between personal and professional obligations; Lord Peter is inexorably called back to the business of detection, with painful consequences. With a certain dry understatement, Sayers would observe that “to occupy one’s honeymoon in getting a fellow-creature hanged (however rightly + deservedly) is no very agreeable thing for any gentleman; + it is liable to lead to a certain amount of emotional conflict” (Sayers, “Craft,” n.p.). Sayers’s portrayal of this “emotional conflict” reflects her ambitious goal of expanding the capabilities of the mystery story at a time when, she claims, people were “used to taking detection callously,” and therefore “could not understand why Peter could not merrily get on with the job, or why we chose to remember [*sic*] the play with his distastes + scruples + emotional reactions” (n.p.). What is particularly noteworthy, however, is Sayers’s usage of the word “gentleman.” The “distastes” and “scruples” that Lord Peter expresses throughout *Busman’s Honeymoon* – both the play and the 1937 novel adaptation – serve to re-emphasise a fundamental issue that recurs throughout the Wimsey novels: the conflict between the requirements of detective work and the sensibilities of a “gentleman.” As this chapter will show, the gentleman detective in Sayers’s fiction ultimately emerges, not as a perfect sleuth, but as a flawed character

whose genteel “distastes” and “scruples” may potentially prevent them from completing their self-assigned task.

What makes this clash of values particularly intriguing is the fact that gentlemanliness is often seen as an advantage in detective fiction. More specifically, some critics assert that classical detective fiction typically portrays an insular, upper-class society, meaning that the gentleman detective has a particular advantage: they fundamentally belong to this society and can navigate it with ease. Here, it is worth briefly returning to the tensions and anxieties surrounding the figure of the detective in mid-nineteenth century fiction. In crime fiction of this period, as I noted in Chapter 1, the professional detective frequently emerges as an untrustworthy figure, a working-class servant who intrudes on the genteel household and is ill-equipped to solve affairs outside their own class. By contrast, later detectives such as Sherlock Holmes – who, along with Edgar Allan Poe’s C. Auguste Dupin, would set an important precedent for the conception of the detective as a kind of gentleman amateur – seemingly personify a more socially acceptable approach to detection. According to Symons, for instance, an “aloof, super-intellectual and slightly inhuman detective like Holmes, who occasionally acts outside the law” appealed to readers “because he was a kind of saviour of society, somebody who did illegal things for the right reasons, who was really *one of us*” (Symons 18). It would appear that the ideal detective is a gentleman – somebody who, in spite of their occasional lawlessness, is “really *one of us*.”

We might conclude, then, that the detective was assimilated into middle- or upper-class circles – that authors of detective fiction smoothed over the tensions and anxieties surrounding the figure of the professional detective by presenting a more gentlemanly kind of detective, one who could undertake the necessary work of detection without offending genteel sensibilities. For instance, Trodd, examining portrayals of detection in nineteenth-century crime writing, identifies a recurring “insistence on police inability to read middle-class suspects” and an association of “detective perception” with the “gentlemanly” (Trodd 30). For Trodd, “the way is plain to the rigidified mythology of the police of the ‘Golden Age’ of detective fiction, as George Grella describes it” (30). Certainly, Grella’s 1970 article – which I highlighted in Chapter 1 – reinforces the notion that the classical detective, in spite of their occasional lawlessness, is always portrayed as being “*one of us*.”

In Grella's view, classical detective fiction echoes "the comedy of manners" in portraying an "upper class setting" in which moral judgements are bound up with a carefully observed social code (Grella 33–4). In this "closed, aristocratic" setting, Grella contends, the police are at a disadvantage because "[t]hey are ordinary, bourgeois citizens who intrude into a closed, aristocratic society; unable to comprehend the complex and delicate social code, they are invariably stymied" (34). By contrast, the amateur detective succeeds because they are "always [...] socially acceptable" (34) and can understand this "social code." What is particularly striking about Grella's view of the mystery story is the suggestion that, in classical detective fiction, gentlemanliness is of the utmost importance, and that the detective's quest is often a quest to expose "the cad who passes himself off as a gentleman" (43). Victims and murderers, Grella asserts, are typically "socially undesirable" (41) people who have committed "some breach of the unwritten social or ethical code," and "[e]ven minute infractions, like ungentlemanliness, incur tremendous penalties" (42). These views of detective fiction suggest that the gentleman detective is a *true* gentleman – the yardstick against whom others are measured. They succeed because they are "really *one of us*," unlike the "ordinary, bourgeois" police officer. It must be acknowledged that Grella's arguments are not without foundation: it is true that, in detective fiction, victims and criminals are often coded in terms of the social Other, and that taste can play an important role in the detective's judgements. I would argue, however, that a closer examination of Sayers's aristocratic sleuth reveals a more complex picture than that painted by Grella.

In Sayers's detective fiction, the relationship between the contrasting roles played by Lord Peter – the great detective and the stereotypical English gentleman – is complex and by no means straightforward. On the one hand, Sayers's presentation of the gentleman detective may be seen as a skilful reworking of traditional conceptions of the aristocracy. Terrance L. Lewis, for instance, connects Lord Peter's detective work with "the popular concept of noblesse oblige," which "had been an important aspect of the social construct of the British class structure during the Victorian and Edwardian periods, which carried over to a degree into the interwar period" (Lewis 478–9). However, Lewis also asserts that Lord Peter ultimately moves beyond simple conceptions of "noblesse oblige" to address "what today would be considered social justice concerns," arguing that Sayers's aristocratic sleuth serves as

“an excellent illustration of how upper class British mentalité [sic] tried to make the transition from self-serving service toward the service of social justice” (479). Similarly, Mayhall, who examines Lord Peter in connection with Margery Allingham’s Albert Campion and Ngaio Marsh’s Roderick Alleyn, contends that all three of these fictional detectives are part of a project of “remaking aristocracy by reinterpreting its traditional purposes” (Mayhall 777). For Mayhall, these authors are concerned with the question of what role the aristocracy could play in the changing milieu of interwar British society. Mayhall’s and Lewis’s arguments, then, show that Lord Peter’s detective work may be seen as a continuation – or, perhaps more accurately, a rehabilitation – of the traditional role of the landed gentry. In Sayers’s detective fiction, the aristocrat is re-imagined as a productive and socially useful figure. At the same time, however, the Wimsey novels make it clear that the role of detective can be problematic for the gentleman, as the detective’s relentless pursuit of the truth sometimes calls for behaviour that conflicts with the values associated with gentlemanliness and, more specifically, with a public-school education. In this chapter, then, I will examine this conflict of values, showing that the detective, too, may be found guilty of the crime of “ungentlemanliness.”

Notably, this conflict of values is a key aspect of Lord Peter’s character from the outset: his gentlemanly “distastes” and “scruples” are first revealed to the reader in Sayers’s debut novel, *Whose Body?* According to Sayers herself, she had written this novel “with the avowed intention of producing something ‘less like a conventional detective story and more like a novel’” (Sayers, “Gaudy Night” 24). Writing in 1937, she would lament that, in spite of these grandiose ambitions, *Whose Body?* “is conventional to the last degree”; she humorously adds that “one cannot write a novel unless one has something to say about life, and I had nothing to say about it, because I knew nothing” (24). Sayers’s self-deprecating assessment of the novel has, however, been challenged by writers such as Francesca Wade, who asserts that “*Whose Body?* already displays Sayers’s determination to explore and expand the possibilities” of the mystery story: “Even in this first outing, Lord Peter displays a complexity of character and a relationship with the consequences of his work that was unusual in fictional detectives” (Wade 116). In *Whose Body?*, Wade goes on to argue, “Dorothy L. Sayers laid the groundwork for a new sort of moral detective” (117). At the heart of Lord Peter’s unusually complex “relationship with the consequences of his work” is the tension

between the kind of behaviour demanded by this “work” and the values instilled by his upbringing and education.

This unusual complexity is not immediately apparent, however. In the novel’s opening chapter, Lord Peter emerges as a simple caricature of the English gentleman: we learn that he is a collector of rare books; that he resides in a “block of new, perfect and expensive flats” with his manservant Bunter (*WB* 1); and that he was educated at “Eton and Balliol” (4). On hearing that an unidentified corpse has mysteriously appeared in a Battersea architect’s bath-tub, he announces: “I think I’ll send Bunter to the sale and toddle round to Battersea now an’ try and console the poor little beast” (3). At this point in the novel, Plain asserts, “Lord Peter [...] seems an improbable creation. Caught between two hobbies, he is at his most affected” (Plain, *Women’s Fiction* 49). In this overly “affected” manner, as several critics have observed, there is an unmistakable echo of P. G. Wodehouse’s Bertie Wooster; R. D. Stock and Barbara Stock, for instance, assert that “the concoction of Lord Peter out of Bertie Wooster and Sherlock Holmes is ingenious. Of the former character there is, of course, the apparent flippancy and prattle” (Stock and Stock 15). Lord Peter’s “apparent flippancy,” however, also links him to another fictional detective: Philip Trent, the star of E. C. Bentley’s *Trent’s Last Case* (1913). Stressing the influence of Bentley’s novel, Grella asserts that Trent’s introduction marks the first appearance of “that favorite English detective, the gentleman amateur,” an archetype Grella defines as a combination of “the Holmesian conventions of arcane knowledge, personal eccentricity, and idiosyncratic speech” and “the popular conception of the English gentleman” (Grella 36–7). As Grella points out, Lord Peter himself is a noteworthy example of this “fusion of gentleman and detective” (37). Sayers, then, echoes Bentley in combining the “Holmesian” qualities of the detective with a portrait of the quintessential English gentleman. Indeed, it is worth noting that Trent has been identified as a direct influence on the creation of Lord Peter, and that Sayers herself would acknowledge “how much my poor Peter owes to Trent” (Sayers, “To E. C. Bentley” 387).

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Lord Peter’s characterisation in this debut novel relates to his view of crime. For example, while the unfortunate architect Mr Thipps leaves the room, feeling “quite faint,” Lord Peter examines the anonymous corpse in the bath-tub “with the air of the late Joseph Chamberlain approving a rare orchid” (*WB* 11). This air of connoisseurship is further emphasised when, while

discussing the case with his friend Charles Parker, a member of the official police force, Lord Peter enthuses about the mystery:

“Look here, Wimsey – you’ve been reading detective stories, you’re talking nonsense.”

“No, I ain’t,” said Lord Peter, sleepily, “uncommon good incident for a detective story, though, what? Bunter, we’ll write one, and you shall illustrate it with photographs.” (28)

Lord Peter’s declaration that the mystery would make an “uncommon good incident for a detective story” serves to illustrate the tendency towards self-reflexivity that characterises Golden Age detective fiction; he is, as Catherine Kenney puts it, “floridly dramatizing himself as the stereotypical detective” (Kenney 24). What this passage also illustrates, however, is the sense of connoisseurship that accompanies Lord Peter’s enjoyment of this “uncommon good incident” – something which is further emphasised when he reveals that the corpse was shaved after death:

Pretty, ain’t it? Uncommonly jolly little job for the barber, what? Here, sit down, man, and don’t be an ass, stumpin’ about the room like that. Worse things happen in war. This is only a blinkin’ old shillin’ shocker. But I’ll tell you what, Parker, we’re up against a criminal – *the* criminal – the real artist and blighter with imagination – real, artistic, finished stuff. I’m enjoying this, Parker. (29)

Having adopted a detached, aestheticised view of the crime, Lord Peter finds himself “enjoying” the investigation; he is thrilled by what he sees as the “imagination” and artistry of the hypothetical criminal.

Lord Peter’s enthusiasm for the “real, artistic” crime may be seen as one example of a broader tendency in detective fiction. In examining crime fiction of the 1920s, for instance, Chris Baldick finds that detection is presented as “an entertaining game,” and that “[m]oral indignation at crime, along with sympathy for its victims, is downplayed in the interests of the puzzle itself” (Baldick 145). Turning to Sayers’s detective fiction, Baldick perceives “a more resolutely aesthetic attitude to homicide, voiced through her detective Wimsey, whose connoisseurship of old books and wines extends to his appreciation of distinguished crimes” (145). Baldick goes on to argue that Lord Peter’s “aesthetic indifference to the morality of murder” links the character to 1920s readers, who were “increasingly encouraged to suspend moral considerations for the sake of the sheer entertainment” (146). Another critic who emphasises Lord Peter’s “aesthetic” response to crime is David Trotter, who suggests

that the classic detective story downplays the messiness of crime in order to focus on the puzzle at hand: “The general view would seem to be that the shock detective fiction delivers is strictly hermeneutic. What we confront when the detective arrives at the scene of the crime is not a corpse, not a ruined carpet, but a ripening enigma. The enigma provokes interpretation rather than nausea” (Trotter 21). To illustrate this view, Trotter calls on *Whose Body?*, asserting that “the monocle-flourishing detective authorises the pleasure and comfort we take in ‘plotted revelation’” (Trotter 24). By contrast, the “queasy bystander,” Mr Thipps, “does not have the right hermeneutic attitude” (24). For Trotter, this example illustrates the ways in which classical detective fiction diverges from the hard-boiled tradition, in which, Trotter argues, the detective’s response to crime is governed by a “dialectic of fascination and nausea” (31). While it would be unwise to assume that there are clear-cut boundaries between classical and hard-boiled approaches to detective fiction, a study of the hard-boiled tradition is beyond the scope of this thesis.⁴ What I would emphasise here is the recurring notion that classical detective fiction prioritises the “pleasure and comfort” of a challenging “puzzle,” and that the reader’s enjoyment of this puzzle is legitimised by the gentleman detective’s “appreciation of distinguished crimes.”

It is worth noting, however, that the suspension of “moral considerations” in relation to fictionalised portrayals of crime was a well-established strategy, as evidenced by the series of essays written by Thomas De Quincey and published under the general title “On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts.” In these deliberately provocative essays, De Quincey advocates an aestheticised, intellectualised attitude towards murder. In the second paper (1839), for example, De Quincey’s narrator writes:

A good many years ago you may remember that I came forward in the character of a *dilettante* in murder. Perhaps *dilettante* may be too strong a word. *Connoisseur* is

⁴ Raymond Chandler’s 1944 essay “The Simple Art of Murder,” to which I referred in Chapter 1, is perhaps the best-known example of writers’ efforts to impose a clear-cut boundary between classical and hard-boiled approaches to detective fiction. This supposedly binary distinction has, however, been challenged by several critics; Roth, for instance, would assert that “hard-boiled detective fiction is as private in its characters and concerns and as confined in its social implications as a country-house murder story” (Roth 26). For more on this subject, see Gill Plain’s 2001 study *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body*, which challenges the widely accepted boundary between hard-boiled and classical approaches to detective fiction. Plain argues that these supposedly distinct forms should be “seen [...] not as binary opposites, but as competing discourses emerging from a complex cultural milieu. The mode of detection is different, but not the underlying structure of puzzle and conspiracy” (Plain, *Twentieth-Century* 25).

better suited to the scruples and infirmity of public taste. I suppose there is no harm in *that* at least. A man is not bound to put his eyes, ears, and understanding into his breeches pocket when he meets with a murder. If he is not in a downright comatose state, I suppose he must see that one murder is better or worse than another in point of good taste. Murders have their little differences and shades of merit as well as statues, pictures, oratorios, cameos, intaglios, or what not. (De Quincey 661)

While the tone of De Quincey's writing may have been tongue-in-cheek, such arguments are reflective of a broader development in crime writing during the nineteenth century – what John G. Cawelti has summarised as “a shift from an essentially religious or moral feeling about crime to what might best be called an aesthetic approach to the subject” (Cawelti 54). For Cawelti, “[t]he classic detective story is the fullest embodiment of this attitude because it treats crime as an entertainment” (54–5). However, Cawelti also declares that “[t]his new attitude toward crime was most definitively and brilliantly set forth long before the full flourishing of the detective story” by the first of De Quincey's essays – an essay which, Cawelti asserts, “is a brilliant rationale for a literature like the detective story that transforms the tragic material of crime and sin into an object of mild pleasure and entertainment” (55). A policy of “aesthetic indifference to the morality of murder,” then, is by no means exclusive to detective fiction of the interwar period: on the contrary, Lord Peter's enthusiastic declaration that he is “up against [...] the real artist and blighter with imagination” can be linked to this earlier shift towards a detached, aestheticised view of crime.

In Lord Peter's “appreciation of distinguished crimes,” indeed, we may recognise an echo of Sherlock Holmes. In *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), for example, Holmes enthuses about the mystery to which he has been introduced:

I must thank you for it all. I might not have gone but for you, and so have missed the finest study I ever came across: a study in scarlet, eh? Why shouldn't we use a little art jargon? There's the scarlet thread of murder running through the colourless skein of life, and our duty is to unravel it, and isolate it, and expose every inch of it. And now for lunch, and then for Norman-Neruda. Her attack and her bowing are splendid. What's that little thing of Chopin's she plays so magnificently: Tra-la-la-lira-lira-lay. (Conan Doyle, *Study* 49)

There is a clear parallel between the portrayal of Holmes – who uses “art jargon” to emphasise his appreciation of a particularly complex mystery, and who enjoys good music as well as crime – and that of Sayers’s aristocratic sleuth, “whose connoisseurship of old books and wines,” as Baldick puts it, “extends to his appreciation of distinguished crimes.” It might therefore be suggested that this air of “connoisseurship” is an important recurring feature of the amateur detective – and, in particular, the gentleman amateur, who Grella characterises as a “witty connoisseur” (Grella 37). The gentleman detective, it seems, must have – in Trotter’s words – the “right hermeneutic attitude” toward crime. They must be an aesthete and “connoisseur,” a man of artistic sensibilities; they are set apart from other characters by a more refined, critical attitude, which they apply to murder as well as fine art.

I would point out, however, that Lord Peter’s attitude towards crime is not as “resolutely aesthetic” as Baldick’s view would suggest. In *Whose Body?*, for example, his enjoyment of the investigation is explosively disrupted by the solution to the mystery: the culprit is Sir Julian Freke, “a distinguished neurologist with a highly individual point of view” (*WB* 10). Despite this veneer of respectability, Freke is revealed to be a ruthless and cunning murderer; he has not only murdered two men but also dissected Sir Reuben Levy’s body in an attempt to cover his own tracks, carrying out the crime with meticulous care. When this solution presents itself to Lord Peter, it comes not as a moment of triumph, but as a shattering blow:

Lord Peter Wimsey was not a young man who habitually took himself very seriously, but this time he was frankly appalled. “It’s impossible,” said his reason, feebly; “*credo quia impossibile*,” said his interior certainty with impervious self-satisfaction. “All right,” said conscience, instantly allying itself with blind faith, “what are you going to do about it?” (135)

This shocking revelation, as well as the difficult question of what Lord Peter should do with the knowledge he has gained – “All right, [...] what are you going to do about it?” – precipitates an attack of shell shock. Although the solution to the mystery is not fully revealed to the reader until the conclusion of the novel, it is nevertheless clear that Lord Peter has been badly shaken by his discovery:

“You talked of the Levy murder. Is Levy dead?” [asked Parker.]

“God – yes!” said Peter, with a strong shudder. (141)

Having previously enthused about the “imagination” and artistry of the criminal, Lord Peter is now unable to suppress a “shudder” at the thought of Freke’s monstrous actions.

It is not only the solution to the mystery that disturbs Lord Peter, however. Crucially, the “pleasure and comfort” this “monocle-flourishing detective” derives from the investigation has already been disrupted by his own “distastes” and “scruples,” as evidenced by a noteworthy encounter between Lord Peter and the powerful financier Mr Milligan, who is one of the principal suspects. Here, Lord Peter assesses Milligan and his secretary as possible culprits, while babbling frivolously and inventing an elaborate story about needing to raise money for the restoration of a village church. This kind of subterfuge recurs throughout the Wimsey novels; as Mayhall puts it, Lord Peter “plays to type to distract from his purposes of detection” (Mayhall 779). In *Whose Body?*, however, Sayers makes it clear that Lord Peter’s playing “to type” can have unpleasant consequences, as Lord Peter is taken aback when Milligan actually offers him money:

This unexpected development nearly brought Lord Peter up all standing. To pump, by means of an ingenious lie, a hospitable gentleman whom you are inclined to suspect of a peculiarly malicious murder, and to accept from him in the course of the proceedings a large cheque for a charitable object, has something about it unpalatable to any but the hardened Secret Service agent. (*WB* 62)

This sense of gentlemanly discomfort is further emphasised when, later in the novel, Lord Peter explains to Parker that he is feeling uneasy about his behaviour towards Milligan: “It’s awfully entertainin’ goin’ and pumpin’ him with stuff about a bazaar for church expenses, but when he’s so jolly pleased about it and that, I feel a worm” (124–5). Lord Peter is troubled by the sense that he has behaved unfairly; his initial enthusiasm regarding the “real, artistic, finished” crime contrasts sharply with this growing sense of unease, which, significantly, he expresses in the language of a stereotypical gentleman: “I don’t feel I’m playing the game somehow” (126)

In this way, Sayers makes it clear that Lord Peter’s attitude towards detection is not one of uncomplicated enjoyment. While he may find detection “awfully entertainin’,” his enjoyment is ultimately disrupted by a growing awareness of the ways in which his own actions will affect the lives of the people connected with a case, as he explains to Parker:

It's a hobby to me, you see. I took it up when the bottom of things was rather knocked out for me, because it was so damned exciting, and the worst of it is, I enjoy it – up to a point. If it was all on paper I'd enjoy every bit of it. I love the beginning of a job – when one doesn't know any of the people and it's just exciting and amusing. But if it comes to really running down a live person and getting him hanged, or even quodded, poor devil, there don't seem as if there was any excuse for me buttin' in, since I don't have to make my livin' by it. And I feel as if I oughtn't ever to find it amusin'. But I do. (124)

While Lord Peter may find detection “damned exciting,” he admits that he is “ashamed” of his own attitude: “It *is* a game to me, to begin with, and I go on cheerfully, and then I suddenly see that somebody is going to be hurt, and I want to get out of it” (126). The conflict outlined here resonates with the description of shame offered by Silvan Tomkins, who claims that “shame is an innate auxiliary affect and a specific inhibitor of continuing interest and enjoyment” (Tomkins 353). Shame, according to Tomkins, “operates ordinarily only after interest or enjoyment has been activated, and inhibits one or the other or both. The innate activator of shame is the incomplete reduction of interest or joy” (353). What I would emphasise here is the notion that “shame” emerges when feelings of “interest or enjoyment” are reduced, but not completely eliminated. I would argue that a sense of shame accompanies Lord Peter's attitude towards detection precisely because the sense of “pleasure and comfort” which he derives from detection is never fully eliminated. He feels “ashamed” that he can enjoy detection, in spite of its inherent messiness: “I feel as if I oughtn't ever to find it amusin'. But I do.”

In *Whose Body?*, then, the gentleman amateur's attitude towards detection is complex and ambiguous. On the one hand, the novel makes it clear that detection, for Lord Peter, can be an enjoyable “hobby”; his initial response to the crime is one of detached, aestheticised satisfaction, and he himself admits that “I love the beginning of a job – when one doesn't know any of the people and it's just exciting and amusing.” On the other hand, Sayers calls our attention to the deep misgivings that accompany Lord Peter's attitude towards detection: he is “ashamed” of his initial enthusiasm, and is troubled by the fact that the ultimate outcome of his involvement will be the execution or imprisonment of the “poor devil” he has helped to apprehend. A key factor in these misgivings is the tension between the requirements of detective work, and a gentlemanly code of conduct that emphasises ideals such as “playing the game” – a clash of values that leaves Lord Peter feeling like “a worm.”

It is all the more significant, then, that Parker argues against these gentlemanly “distastes” and “scruples,” ordering Lord Peter to “get this playing-fields-of-Eton complex out of your system once and for all” (*WB* 126). To Parker, Lord Peter’s vacillation, his fears that his attitude towards the investigation may be inappropriate, is “childish” (126). Thus, Parker goes on to admonish Lord Peter:

If you’ve any duty to society in the way of finding out the truth about murders, you must do it in any attitude that comes handy. [...] You want to hunt down a murderer for the sport of the thing and then shake hands with him and say, “Well played – hard luck – you shall have your revenge tomorrow!” Well, you can’t do it like that. Life’s not a football match. You want to be a sportsman. You can’t be a sportsman. You’re a responsible person. (126–7)

For Mayhall, this kind of intervention demonstrates the professional detective’s capability “to ground the enthusiasms of the gentleman sleuth in the real-world consequences of their detection,” and to “prod the aristocratic sleuths towards a middle-class, professional view of the world”; she emphasises Parker’s warning “not to apply outmoded ideals to detecting” (Mayhall 780). If the gentleman detective is to make themselves useful by fulfilling their “duty to society in the way of finding out the truth about murders,” they must be prepared to set aside the “outmoded” values instilled by their “aristocratic” background, and to uncover the truth by any means necessary.

Sayers makes it clear, however, that it is not easy for Lord Peter to put aside these gentlemanly “distastes” and “scruples.” As the detection process nears its conclusion, Lord Peter remains troubled:

Lord Peter settled down to a perusal of his Dante. It afforded him no solace. Lord Peter was hampered in his career as a private detective by a public-school education. Despite Parker’s admonitions, he was not always able to discount it. His mind had been warped in its young growth by “Raffles” and “Sherlock Holmes”, or the sentiments for which they stand. He belonged to a family which had never shot a fox.

“I am an amateur,” said Lord Peter.

Nevertheless, while communing with Dante, he made up his mind. (*WB* 170–1)

In this passage – which sees Lord Peter rather pompously “communings with Dante,” as he struggles with the question of what to do about Sir Julian Freke – Sayers’s tone

is ironic and self-referential. In particular, I would argue that Sayers cuttingly satirises the stereotypical ideal of the English gentleman: Lord Peter, who belongs to a family that has “never shot a fox,” is bound by the rigid code of honour instilled by his upbringing and “public-school education.” He therefore insists on approaching detection as though it were a gentlemanly contest, a sporting match between two evenly matched individuals who share the same values; we might recall Parker’s earlier accusation that Lord Peter would like “to hunt down a murderer for the sport of the thing and then shake hands with him.”

What follows is an important scene in which Lord Peter visits Sir Julian Freke at his Harley Street surgery, under the pretence of seeking medical advice. As Lord Peter waits to see the doctor, he comes across a number of Freke’s patients, including a mother with a sick child: “Enfin! the great Sir Julian sees us, he says – ‘Madame, your little girl is very interesting to me. Say no more. I cure her for nothing – pour ses beaux yeux,’ a-t-il ajouté en riant. Ah, monsieur, c’est un saint, un véritable saint! and Natasha is much, much better” (173). Sayers thus emphasises the implicit dilemma Lord Peter faces. While Freke may be a ruthless murderer, he is also a respected surgeon of genuine talent – and, by exposing Freke as a criminal, Lord Peter will be depriving these patients of his aid. As Stock and Stock put it, Lord Peter “must poise [*sic*] the claims of genius against those of justice” (Stock and Stock 17). Though the novel does ultimately end with Freke being brought to “justice” – thus making it clear that Freke’s “genius” is no excuse for his criminality – Sayers deepens the mystery story by bringing Lord Peter face to face with those who will be directly affected by Freke’s exposure as a criminal, and so highlighting the moral and emotional costs of the detection process. Perhaps most importantly, Lord Peter experiences a dramatic moment of unease when he is finally called in to see the doctor:

Lord Peter bowed to his neighbour, and walked across the waiting-room. As the door of the consulting-room closed behind him, he remembered having once gone, disguised, into the staff-room of a German officer. He experienced the same feeling – the feeling of being caught in a trap, and a mingling of bravado and shame (*WB* 173).

Here, Sayers reinforces the parallel between Lord Peter’s detective work and his war-time experiences. What this passage also serves to emphasise, however, is the fact that the negative affect of “shame” – something that mitigates any sense of “bravado”

or enjoyment Lord Peter might feel – is a key feature of Lord Peter’s experience of detection.

In depicting Lord Peter’s decision to meet Sir Julian Freke in private, significantly, Sayers invokes the notion that the criminal, too, may be a gentleman – a notion that recurs throughout crime writing, as emphasised by Sayers’s reference to E. W. Hornung’s Raffles, the great gentleman criminal who was a keen cricketer as well as an expert burglar. Indeed, it is worth noting that, on the surface, Freke appears to be a gentleman criminal himself. In his written confession, for instance, Freke announces:

Dear Lord Peter, – When I was a young man I used to play chess with an old friend of my father’s. He was a very bad, and a very slow, player, and he could never see when a checkmate was inevitable, but insisted on playing every move out. I never had any patience with that kind of attitude, and I will freely admit now that the game is yours. I must either stay at home and be hanged or escape abroad and live in an idle and insecure obscurity. I prefer to acknowledge defeat. (188)

Freke also thanks Lord Peter for his visit: “I appreciated your motive in calling this afternoon. It conveyed a warning, and I am acting upon it” (205). In his confession, then, Freke portrays himself as a gentleman – a sportsman who has played an intellectual “game” with Lord Peter, and who now graciously acknowledges that he has been beaten. Yet this veneer of respectability is undercut by the monstrous nature of Freke’s crime, and the utter lack of remorse he displays throughout his confession. While Sayers may adopt an ironic, self-referential tone, citing literary precedents such as Raffles, she also takes care to signal that this particular text operates on a higher level of reality. Freke is not a sportsman, but simply a ruthless and cunning murderer, and Lord Peter’s childish adherence to “public-school” values – something that ensures that he feels bound to give Freke a “warning” that the game is up – is a serious flaw. As McGregor and Lewis put it, “[t]he sense of fair play stands Wimsey well in his proper social circle but is a definite impediment to his chosen career as an amateur detective” (McGregor and Lewis 25). Thus, “Parker’s admonitions” are necessary to keep this “amateur” detective on track.

Across the course of the Wimsey novels, in fact, Lord Peter never completely shakes off the ideals instilled by his upbringing and “public-school education” – as evidenced by the fact that, in *Busman’s Honeymoon*, his gentlemanly “distastes” and

“scruples” once again call for the intervention of a professional detective. This time, the task of dealing with the gentleman detective’s “outmoded ideals” falls to Superintendent Kirk, a local police officer who, according to Sayers’s description of the character, “knows the ‘gentry’ inside out” and “can size up Peter’s weakness as well as his strength at a glance” (Sayers, “Appendix B” 212). Kirk’s ability to diagnose Lord Peter’s “weakness” is emphasised when their conversation turns to Miss Titterton, the victim’s spinster niece. When Kirk asks how Miss Titterton reacted to the discovery of her uncle’s body, Lord Peter finds himself hesitating:

Peter was conscious of a curious reluctance. Theoretically, he was quite as ready to hang a woman as a man, but the memory of Miss Titterton, frenziedly clinging to Harriet, was disturbing to him. He was tempted to feel, with Kirk, that marriage was a handicap to a young officer.

“See here, my lord,” said Kirk, his ox-eyes mild but implacable, “I’ve heard one or two things from these other people.”

“Then,” retorted Peter, “why don’t you ask them?”

“I’m going to. Joe, ask Mr MacBride to step here a minute. Now, my lord, you’re a gentleman and you’ve got your feelings. I know all that, and it does you credit. But I’m a police-officer, and I can’t afford to indulge in feelings. They’re a privilege of the upper classes.”

“Upper classes be damned!” said Peter. This stung him, all the more that he knew he deserved it. (*BH* 170–1)

In both the play and the novel, Lord Peter is gently but firmly reprimanded for his hesitation by Kirk, the experienced police officer; in the novel, indeed, an added scene has Lord Peter ruefully admitting to Harriet: “He handled me with kid gloves on. Showed all the proper consideration for my rank and refinement and other inferiorities. My own fault, I asked for it” (174–5). The key issue here is that, while Lord Peter, as a detective, must be “as ready to hang a woman as a man,” such a notion conflicts with the ideal of chivalry imposed on the gentleman. Kirk perceptively recognises this issue: speaking to Joe Sellon, a junior police officer, Kirk points out that, while Lord Peter “sees which way the wind’s blowing,” it is “agin his upbringing to say so” (173). Significantly, Kirk goes on to advise Sellon: “Them sort of feelings [...] commonly don’t do much good, except to complicate things. But they’re pretty, and, if taken the right way, ’armless. You got to learn to get round ’em, when you’re dealing with gentry”

(173). Thus, Sayers presents a distinctive view of the gentleman detective: a flawed character whose “distastes” and “scruples” – while being entirely appropriate to somebody of their class – serve only to “complicate” the investigation, and who must, therefore, be “handled [...] with kid gloves on.”

Sayers also establishes a distinction between the gentleman amateur and the professional detective: such “distastes” and “scruples” are exclusively “a privilege of the upper classes.” This distinction can be usefully connected to the comments Sayers makes in the 1928 Introduction, when she advises writers of detective fiction that they should aim “to keep the story running from beginning to end upon the same emotional level, and it is better to err in the direction of too little feeling than too much” (GSS 38). Sayers goes on to distinguish between professional and amateur detectives:

Here, the writer whose detective is a member of the official force has an advantage: from him a detached attitude is correct; he can suitably retain the impersonal attitude of the surgeon. The sprightly amateur must not be sprightly all the time, lest at some point we should be reminded that this is, after all, a question of somebody's being foully murdered, and that flippancy is indecent. (38)

Whereas the “sprightly amateur” has a tendency towards “flippancy,” Sayers's comments suggest, the professional detective is able to maintain a “detached” and “impersonal attitude” towards the investigation. When Lord Peter's “distastes” and “scruples” threaten to get in the way of the investigation, then, it falls to professional detectives such as Parker or Kirk to intervene and remind the aristocratic sleuth of his responsibilities as a detective.

The effect of such interventions is to emphasise the code of conduct Sayers lays down for the amateur detective: Lord Peter's “duty to society,” his professional responsibility to uncover the truth, must come before anything else. Evaluating Lord Peter's development over the course of the series, Margaret P. Hannay highlights “the increasing internalization of the conscience” initially “represented by the Evangelical Parker; Peter himself comes to believe that it is essential to find the truth and that he must be willing to accept the consequences of his inquiry. This scholarly emphasis on *facts* becomes one of the central themes in *Gaudy Night*” (Hannay 41–2). As Hannay points out, *Gaudy Night* – a novel I discuss further in Chapter 4 – certainly sees Sayers emphasising the scholarly “doctrine that loyalty to the abstract truth must override all personal considerations” (GN 522). This scrupulous commitment to a principle of

intellectual integrity not only guarantees the successful resolution of Lord Peter's relationship with Harriet Vane, but also informs his approach to detection. However, such a principle is potentially problematic for a gentleman from an "Eton and Balliol" background. As the fourth Wimsey novel, *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*, makes clear, the detective's relentless pursuit of the truth and ruthless disregard for "personal" considerations or loyalties are incompatible with the system of values inculcated by a public-school education, a system that emphasises such ideals as loyalty, chivalry, and "playing the game." In *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*, hence, we are shown how Lord Peter's professionalism as a detective might earn his peers' contempt.

2.2 An "infernal little police spy": Detection, Loyalty, and the Reinvention of the Gentleman

In *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*, Sayers presents a complex inheritance drama that begins when the elderly General Fentiman, sitting peacefully in his favourite armchair at the Bellona Club, is found to have died some time earlier. It transpires that the general and his wealthy sister, Lady Dormer, died within hours of each other; depending on whether the general died before or after his sister, her considerable fortune will go either to Lady Dormer's ward, Ann Dorland, or to General Fentiman's grandsons, George and Robert. Throughout the novel, Sayers makes much of the contrast between the two brothers: Robert is "[f]rightfully hearty and all that," according to Lord Peter, and George observes with bitterness that "Robert was thought a damn' good soldier" (*UBC* 14, 100). By contrast, George's life has been turned upside-down by the after-effects of the war; he is struggling with illness and unemployment, and his wife Sheila must work to support them both. In the novel's opening chapter, he bitterly complains to Lord Peter: "I can't help it, Wimsey. I go sick and have to chuck jobs up. Money – I never thought of money before the War, but I swear nowadays I'd commit any damned crime to get hold of a decent income" (2). Lord Peter replies:

"Oh, I wouldn't do that," said Wimsey lightly. "Crime's a skilled occupation, y'know. Even a comparative imbecile like myself can play the giddy sleuth on the amateur Moriarty. If you're thinkin' of puttin' on a false moustache and lammin' a millionaire on the head, don't do it. That disgustin' habit you have of smoking cigarettes down to the last millimetre would betray you anywhere. I'd only have to come on with a magnifyin'

glass and a pair of callipers to say 'The criminal is my dear old friend George Fentiman. Arrest that man!' You might not think it, but I am ready to sacrifice my nearest and dearest in order to curry favour with the police and get a par. in the papers." (2–3)

Here, Lord Peter skilfully deploys his usual façade of upper-class flippancy to distract and calm George, who laughs at these comments: "I wonder anybody cares to know you,' he said. The strain and bitterness had left his voice and he sounded merely amused" (3). As the novel unfolds, however, Lord Peter's claim that he would be prepared to "sacrifice [his] nearest and dearest in order to curry favour with the police" – as well as George's reply, "I wonder anybody cares to know you" – will acquire a greater significance.

Throughout the novel, Lord Peter's attitude towards George Fentiman is conflicted. Despite the stark contrast between Lord Peter's privileged position and the relative poverty of George and Sheila Fentiman, Lord Peter and George have one thing in common – they are both veterans of the First World War. Whereas the elderly solicitor, Mr Murbles, characterises George as "weakly," Lord Peter is able to offer a more sympathetic view: "Well, nervous, anyhow,' said Wimsey, who knew better than the old solicitor the kind of mental and physical strain George Fentiman had undergone. The War pressed hardly upon imaginative men in responsible positions" (14). It is hardly surprising, then, that Lord Peter should admit to Parker: "I like old George. He's an awful pig in some ways, but I quite like him" (158). The contrast between Lord Peter's attitude and that of Parker is most clearly emphasised in Chapter 18:

"Yes," said Wimsey, "George Fentiman. I must be getting emotional in my old age, Charles, for I have an unconquerable dislike to examining the question of George Fentiman's opportunities."

"Bar Robert," pursued Parker ruthlessly, "he was the last interested person to see General Fentiman." (196)

Whereas Parker, who has no personal connection to George Fentiman, is able to "ruthlessly" pursue the investigation, Lord Peter finds himself reluctant to examine the case against his "dear old friend," George Fentiman.

After discussing the case against George Fentiman, Lord Peter finally announces that he is fed up with what has proved to be a difficult and largely fruitless

investigation: “I wash my hands of this case, Charles. There’s nothing for me to do now you have come into it. It bores and annoys me. Let’s talk about something else” (199). However, Lord Peter cannot “wash his hands” (199) so easily. He is drawn back into the case by an unexpected crisis: George Fentiman has disappeared, and, to make matters worse, Lord Peter learns that George had earlier attempted to destroy a bottle containing digitalin – the same substance which was used to poison General Fentiman. Crucially, Lord Peter outrages George’s brother Robert by insisting that the police will have to be told about the bottle and its contents:

“My God! – you wouldn’t—”

“Sit down, Fentiman. Yes, I must. Don’t you see I must? We can’t suppress things. It always means trouble. It’s not even as though they hadn’t got their eye on us already. They’re suspicious—”

“Yes, and why?” burst out Robert violently. “Who put it into their heads? ... For God’s sake don’t start talking about law and justice! Law and justice! You’d sell your best friend for the sake of making a sensational appearance in the witness-box, you infernal little police spy!”

“Chuck that, Fentiman!”

“I’ll not chuck it! You’d go and give away a man to the police – when you know perfectly well he isn’t responsible – just because you can’t afford to be mixed up in anything unpleasant. I know you. Nothing’s too dirty for you to meddle in, provided you can pose as the pious little friend of justice. You make me sick!”

“I tried to keep out of this—”

“You tried! – don’t be a blasted hypocrite! You get out of it now, and stay out – do you hear?” (211)

Finally, Robert demands: “Don’t stand there being righteous and forbearing, you sickening prig. For the last time – are you going to shut up, or are you going to trot round to your policeman friend and earn the thanks of a grateful country for splitting on George?” (211–2). His angered reaction is hardly surprising when we consider that, throughout the novel, Robert has been characterised in terms of the stereotypical English gentleman. When, for example, Parker wonders aloud whether Robert “might possibly have knocked his grandfather down” in the middle of an argument, he instantly dismisses this scenario as an unlikely one: “I don’t think he’d do such a rotten and unsportsmanlike thing” (160). It seems natural, then, that such a bluff, “hearty”

character should lash out against what he sees as unsporting behaviour on Lord Peter's part; as Stock and Stock put it, Lord Peter's "relentless devotion to the truth is more robustly assailed than ever before by the John Bullish Robert Fentiman" (Stock and Stock 17). In effect, this "John Bullish" character acts as the voice of public-school tradition. His fury reminds the reader that Lord Peter's "relentless devotion to the truth" might be seen as a serious breach of the intricate social code associated with the gentleman, and, in particular, with a public-school education.

In order to illustrate exactly what makes Lord Peter's behaviour objectionable, I will turn to other contemporary views of the public-school tradition, such as Alec Waugh's *The Loom of Youth* (1917). Although Waugh's semi-autobiographical work is sometimes seen as a harsh critique of the English public-school system, with a particular focus on the system's prioritisation of sporting prowess above intellectual achievement, Waugh does offer at least one mildly positive comment regarding the effects of a public-school education:

No man who has been through a good school can be an outsider. He may hang round the Empire bar, he may cheat at business; but you can be certain of one thing, he will never let you down. Very few Public School men ever do a mean thing to their friends. And for a system that produces such a spirit there is something to be said after all. (Waugh 90)

This view of the public-school man as somebody who will always stand by their friends is striking. Clearly, such an ideal conflicts with the notion that the amateur detective is "ready to sacrifice [their] nearest and dearest in order to curry favour with the police" – a claim which takes on a new and more unsettling significance after Lord Peter's argument with Robert.

A more specific issue is at stake here, however. In a 1967 study of the English public-school system, Ian Weinberg examines "a set of norms which contribute to the public schoolboy's code and to the cluster of elite norms and values" (Weinberg 112). According to Weinberg, one of these "norms" is "a strong rule against 'squealing' on another boy" (112). A noteworthy illustration of what Weinberg describes as "[t]he taboo against 'squealing'" (113) can be found in Ford Madox Ford's *Parade's End* tetralogy, in which Christopher Tietjens continually refrains from defending himself against the libellous allegations that plague him; in particular, he refuses to expose his wife Sylvia's infidelity. When Tietjens is interrogated by his godfather, General

Campion, in *No More Parades* (1925), he offers a particularly significant self-assessment:

[...] it is not good to have taken one's public school's ethical system seriously. I am really, sir, the English public schoolboy. That's an eighteenth-century product. What with the love of truth that – God help me! – they rammed into me at Clifton and the belief Arnold forced upon Rugby that the vilest of sins – the vilest of all sins – is to peach to the head master! That's me, sir. Other men get over their schooling. I never have. I remain adolescent. These things are obsessions with me. Complexes, sir!
(Ford, *Parade's End* 490)

There are a number of striking parallels between Christopher Tietjens and Sayers's aristocratic sleuth, and I will return to the *Parade's End* tetralogy later in this chapter. What I would like to highlight here is the suggestion that, for somebody from a public-school background, "the vilest of all sins" is to "peach" or inform against others. In *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*, the colloquial language used by Robert Fentiman, who accuses Lord Peter of "splitting on George," serves as a reminder that Lord Peter's refusal to "suppress" incriminating evidence might be seen as a violation of this particular aspect of the public-school "ethical system" – a system in which loyalty to one's peers is strongly emphasised.

In *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*, then, Sayers presents us with a scenario in which Lord Peter fails to behave as a public-school man should do, and is harshly penalised for his breach of manners: Robert lashes out both verbally and physically, condemning Lord Peter as a "hypocrite" and "prig," and landing a blow against him. Lord Peter subsequently discusses the situation with Parker – but an "angry red flush" has appeared on his face, forcing Lord Peter to admit that he has had "a bit of a dust-up with Robert" (*UBC* 213–4). Significantly, Sayers makes it clear that Lord Peter's view of his friend has shifted considerably:

Parker was aware of a thin veil of hostility, drawn between himself and the friend he valued. He knew that for the first time, Wimsey was seeing him as the police. Wimsey was ashamed and his shame made Parker ashamed too.

"You'd better have some breakfast," said Parker. His voice sounded awkward to himself. (214)

What is particularly striking here is the powerful negative affect of "shame," which is transmitted, however briefly, to Parker – echoing Tomkins's claim that "I can be

shamed vicariously if someone else is shamed by another's contempt" (Tomkins 408). If "nausea" is a defining characteristic of the "hard-boiled" detective, as Trotter argues, then I would argue that, by contrast, such feelings of "shame" are a key characteristic of the gentleman detective – in Sayers's detective fiction, at least.

A key aspect of these feelings of "shame" and unease is the clash between the requirements of detection and the system of values associated with a public-school education – an issue that Sayers would also dramatise, in even more explicit terms, in the stand-alone novel *The Documents in the Case* (1930). The only one of Sayers's major crime novels not to feature Lord Peter Wimsey, *The Documents in the Case* is an epistolary novel; it is presented as a collection of documents compiled by Paul Harrison, who is attempting to uncover the truth behind the death of his father, Mr Harrison. Across the course of the novel, it is revealed that Mr Harrison was murdered by Harwood Lathom, an artist who had had an illicit relationship with Mr Harrison's wife Margaret. Another key character in the novel is Lathom's friend John Munting, an aspiring writer who agrees to help Paul Harrison with his investigation. Munting, however, is deeply troubled by the sense that he is essentially betraying Lathom's confidence; during a meeting between himself and Lathom, for example, he feels like "a perfect cad," and finds himself unable to accept a handshake from Lathom: "Either I was being a perfect Judas Iscariot, in which case I hadn't the face to give him my hand, or else *he* was, in which case I felt I would rather be excused" (Sayers, *DC* 216, 220). Significantly, Munting's feelings of discomfort and unease are only intensified by the fact that he and Lathom had been at school together; as Sayers puts it, Munting finds himself "torn between his natural good feeling and the fact that he was at the same public school as the murderer" (Sayers, "To Eustace Barton" [21 January 1930] 302). Sayers would also comment that "by the cussedness of things," the revelation of Lathom's guilt "falls to his share and not to that of the real investigator, the dead man's son, who wouldn't care two hoots about the murderer's feelings" (Sayers, "To Eustace Barton" [9 February 1930] 304). Indeed, Munting's agonised attitude contrasts sharply with that of Paul Harrison, who declares that he has a "business man's liking for facts" (Sayers, *DC* 182). In fact, Paul Harrison is emphatically "not a public-school man," and has no patience for what he calls "the Eton-and-Harrow business" (176). In *The Documents in the Case*, then, Sayers presents the reader with two contrasting

attitudes towards detection: the gentleman who is constrained by “public-school” values, and the “real investigator,” whose sole concern is to uncover the truth.

Throughout the novel, Sayers repeatedly re-emphasises Munting’s hesitation. In a noteworthy passage, for example, Munting reflects at length on his own feelings:

People write books about murders, and the nice young men and women in them enjoy the job of detecting. It is a good game and I like reading the books. But the emotions of the nice young people are so well-regulated, or so perfunctory, or something. They don’t feel like worms and get put off their dinners when they have succeeded in squeezing a damaging admission out of a friend. They don’t seem to suffer from fits of retching terror for fear they should find out something definite. Nor, while struggling with these complicated miseries, do they ever have to fulfil contracts with publishers. Sometimes they are filled with a stern sorrow – a nice, Brutus-like sentiment. I envy their nerves. (232–3)

I believe that this particular passage provides an insight into Sayers’s ambitious approach to detective fiction, helping to explain why she might have felt the need to complicate the narrative with the gentleman detective’s “distastes” and “scruples” and “emotional reactions.” Sayers, I would argue, was dissatisfied with the state of a genre that limited itself to a “perfunctory” level of characterisation, reflected in “the nice young people” who rarely, if ever, seem to be perturbed by the requirements of detective work. Sayers’s aim, therefore, was to propel the genre toward a more plausible level of characterisation by focusing on the powerful feelings of guilt, shame and discomfort that may emerge when the requirements of detection conflict with the gentleman detective’s own deeply held values – reflecting her belief that, if the detective story was to survive and attract a wide readership, it would need to “become once more a novel of manners instead of a pure crossword puzzle” (Sayers, “Gaudy Night” 25).

At the same time, however, Sayers is careful to stress the necessity of apprehending the murderer: despite Munting’s “great unwillingness to interfere,” Paul Harrison recalls, “I persuaded him that he had a duty in the matter” (224). His arguments are supported by Munting’s wife Elizabeth, who not only points out the dangers of allowing a “poisoner” to go free, but also emphasises the brutality of Lathom’s actions: “Do think of the awful cruelty of letting that poor man die such a painful, lingering death, all alone in that place, without a soul to come near him. Anyone who could do that would be an absolute monster. I don’t care what excuse he had”

(225). Indeed, during the scientific experiment that proves Lathom's guilt, Munting is briefly reminded of the grotesque appearance of Mr Harrison's corpse; he declares that "from that moment Lathom was nothing to me any more" (254). It must be acknowledged that, even so, Munting never fully reconciles himself to the requirements of detection. Towards the conclusion of the novel, he receives a telephone call from Lathom; reflecting that "the man had been at school with me – and we had lived in the same rooms – and he was a great painter," he is briefly tempted to give Lathom a warning (257). After refusing to take the call, he bitterly reflects that "I hope Lathom will not ring up again" (258). Nevertheless, Sayers's novel ultimately emphasises the necessity of setting aside gentlemanly sentiments – a theme that is made clearly apparent when Munting, reviewing the development of Lathom and Margaret Harrison's affair, criticises himself for having behaved with "sentimentality and public-school spirit," asserting that he is "heartily ashamed of it" (93)

The Wimsey novels similarly emphasise the necessity of setting aside gentlemanly values and "public-school spirit," as evidenced by Parker's warning that, if Lord Peter is to fulfil his "duty to society in the way of finding out the truth about murders," he cannot behave like "a sportsman"; he must instead be "a responsible person." This shift from "sportsman" to "responsible person," notably, resonates with the questions posed by Berberich, who examines the shifting ideal of the gentleman in twentieth-century literature:

Was it the Great War that shook the English gentleman unpleasantly from his imperial and chivalric reverie? In the trenches of Flanders he might have realized that skills learned on the playing fields of Eton did not help him win or survive the war; neither did his ingrained notion of fair play. But does the First World War really mark the metaphorical death of the English gentleman? Or did he merely grow up, from eternal boyhood into responsible manhood? (Berberich, *Image* 23)

Berberich's questions touch on a theme that often emerges in accounts of the public-school system, which suggest that one effect of such an education is to produce a state of arrested development – of "eternal boyhood." In the autobiographical work *Enemies of Promise* (1938), for instance, Cyril Connolly proposes what he calls "*The Theory of Permanent Adolescence*" (Connolly 271). Summarising this "theory," Connolly argues that "the experiences undergone by boys at the great public schools, their glories and disappointments, are so intense as to dominate their lives and to

arrest their development” (271). Indeed, Connolly’s “theory” is echoed in Christopher Tietjens’s self-deprecating claim: “Other men get over their schooling. I never have. I remain adolescent. These things are obsessions with me. Complexes, sir!” It is particularly striking, then, that the *Parade’s End* tetralogy suggests that it is possible for the gentleman to break away from this state of “eternal boyhood.”

Christopher Tietjens’s self-identification as “the English public schoolboy” – which he considers “an eighteenth-century product” – is consistent with his broader characterisation as, in Trevor Dodman’s words, “an aristocratic English country gentleman living according to an anachronistic eighteenth-century code of conduct that will not, among other things, permit him to divorce” (Dodman 60). By the conclusion of the third novel, *A Man Could Stand Up*— (1926), he has not fully relinquished this archaic “code of conduct,” and continues to insist that he cannot divorce his wife Sylvia: “I can’t divorce my wife. She’s the mother of my child. I can’t live with her, but I can’t divorce her” (Ford, *Parade’s End* 665). Nevertheless, there has been a significant shift in his character. He has resolved to renounce his family’s estate, Groby, and the responsibilities that come with it, and to make a new life for himself and Valentine Wannop:

But to-day the world changed. Feudalism was finished; its last vestiges were gone. It held no place for him. He was going – he was damn well going! – to make a place in it for ... A man could now stand up on a hill, so he and she could surely get into some hole together! (668)

This resolution emerges from Tietjens’s experience of the war; a key factor is his decision to take command of his battalion at a particularly crucial moment, relieving a commanding officer who is unwell and too unreliable to be left in charge. Accepting this responsibility means that Tietjens will receive additional pay – something that unsettles him:

He had a mechanical, normal panic that made him divest himself of money. Gentlemen don’t earn money. Gentlemen, as a matter of fact, don’t do anything. They exist. Perfuming the air like Madonna lilies. Money comes into them as air through petals and foliage. Thus the world is made better and brighter. And, of course, thus political life can be kept clean! ... So you can’t make money. (589)

Here, Ford makes it clear that the decision to assume command of the battalion – and, in doing so, to “earn money” – clashes with Tietjens’s deeply rooted sensibilities as a

gentleman. Nevertheless, Tietjens chooses to accept the money, resolving “to make two hundred and fifty quid towards living with Valentine Wannop” (613). His decision to assume command of the battalion is closely bound up with his resolution to live together with her after the war: “He was perfectly ready for action. Ready to command a battalion. He was presumably a lover. They did things like commanding battalions. And worse!” (630).

An illuminating analysis of Tietjens’s decision to assume command has been offered by Gene M. Moore, who argues that this decision marks a turning point in “Tietjens’ coming to moral maturity,” his movement away from passively “accepting the automatic responsibility that is his by virtue of his class status and his officer’s rank,” and toward “*taking* full personal responsibility for himself and his men” (Moore 61–2). Of particular note is Moore’s claim that “Tietjens’ decision, in effect, amounts to his late graduation from the condition of ‘the English public schoolboy’” (Moore 62). It seems, then, that the English public schoolboy’s ability to make the leap from “eternal boyhood” to “responsible manhood” is dependent on their willingness to accept responsibility – as a matter of choice, rather than circumstance – even when the nature of this responsibility offends their sensibilities as a gentleman.

I would argue that, in the Wimsey novels, Lord Peter similarly evolves beyond “the condition of ‘the English public schoolboy’” – and that this shift is reflected in his decision to take on the responsibilities of a detective, no matter how ugly or messy detection may be. In *Busman’s Honeymoon*, the shift in his attitude towards detection is made apparent when, in spite of Harriet’s objections – “They can’t expect you, surely! You’ve got a right to your own life sometimes. And it’s such a beastly little crime” (*BH* 141) – he insists that he must help the police with their investigation: “That’s why I can’t leave it alone. It’s not picturesque. It’s not exciting. It’s no fun at all. Just dirty, brutal bashing, like a butcher with a pole-axe. It makes me sick. But who the hell am I, to pick and choose what I’ll meddle in?” (141). Here, Lord Peter offers a self-deprecating view of himself: “I call myself in, half the time, out of sheer mischief and inquisitiveness. Lord Peter Wimsey the aristocratic sleuth – my God! The idle rich gentleman who dabbles in detection. That’s what they say – isn’t it?” (141). He goes on to argue, however, that he had “better not justify that view” of himself, asserting that “I can’t wash my hands of a thing, merely because it’s inconvenient to my lordship,” and imploring Harriet: “Don’t say it isn’t my business. It’s everybody’s business” (141).

Lord Peter's determination to investigate this case contrasts with his attitude towards detection in early Wimsey novels, in which he sometimes emerges as a capricious character who pursues detection chiefly because he finds it entertaining, and is thus tempted to "wash his hands" of a case if it "bores and annoys" him. Here, however, he displays a more serious attitude towards detection, announcing that he will not "wash his hands" of the responsibility even if it is "inconvenient" to him.

In a letter discussing *Busman's Honeymoon*, Sayers refers to what she calls "the popular conception of the tom-fool Peter" (Sayers, "To Maurice Browne" 390). Here, it is as though Sayers is pushing back against this "popular conception" by acknowledging – and denouncing – the belief that Lord Peter is merely an "idle rich gentleman who dabbles in detection." We are confronted with a more serious attitude towards detection, which contrasts sharply with the enthusiasm for "real, artistic, finished" crime that Lord Peter had expressed in earlier novels such as *Whose Body?*, with Sayers making it clear that Lord Peter feels an obligation to investigate crime, not because it is necessarily "picturesque" or "exciting," but simply because it is "everybody's business," and he himself is particularly well suited to investigate it. This more serious attitude to detection is also reflected in the "Biographical Note" that began to be appended to new editions of the Wimsey novels from 1935 onwards, in which Lord Peter's uncle, Paul Austin Delagardie, claims that Lord Peter "now admits that his 'hobby' is his legitimate work for society" (GN 563).

This redefinition of detection as a form of "legitimate work" – rather than a "hobby" pursued by an "idle rich gentleman" – can be linked to the wider developments identified by Mayhall, who contends that the presentation of the gentleman detective in novels by Sayers, Allingham, and Marsh points towards an ongoing project of rehabilitating the aristocracy by emphasising the sleuth's usefulness to society: "The pre-dominant aspect of aristocracy revived in these novels is service: the detective as a public servant, acting in a disinterested fashion" (Mayhall 781). Mayhall also argues that the portrayal of the gentleman detective in these novels shows how the aristocracy might be brought into line with middle-class, professional standards:

Together, the novels point toward the transformation of their detectives' status from amateur to professional. We see through these tales a microcosm of the larger phenomenon underway in the 1920s and 1930s: the gradual integration of the British aristocracy into the professional middle classes. Fundamentally, each sleuth grapples

with the question “What is a gentleman?” The term itself had become ambiguous as it shifted from its older association with the service and disinterestedness of a non-commercial class to a more middle-class understanding of the gentleman as one who subscribed to a particular set of values and behavior. (782)

In the Wimsey novels, this reinterpretation of the gentleman sleuth as a “public servant” who conforms to the standards of “the professional middle classes” is clearly reflected in the reformulation of detection as Lord Peter’s “legitimate work for society.” A particularly crucial requirement of this transition is that Lord Peter must set aside the gentlemanly standards imposed by his upbringing and public-school education – what Mayhall has identified as the “outmoded ideals” that Parker encourages him to discard – and instead follow a more professional set of standards: standards which, in *Gaudy Night*, are expressed in explicitly academic terms, as the “doctrine that loyalty to the abstract truth must override all personal considerations.”

It is tempting to argue, then, that across the course of the Wimsey novels, Sayers’s gentleman sleuth does indeed “grow up, from eternal boyhood into responsible manhood.” While Lord Peter is initially hampered by a “playing-fields-of-Eton complex,” displaying a moral scrupulousness that Parker finds “childish,” he eventually adopts a more serious attitude towards detection – which is increasingly presented as a form of “legitimate work,” a professional obligation that surpasses all personal considerations. At the same time, however, his interactions with Kirk make it clear that he is still bound by a gentlemanly code of conduct that emphasises values such as chivalry and “playing the game”; as Plain puts it, he “never entirely loses this anachronistic desire to see fair play” (Plain, *Women’s Fiction* 50). In Sayers’s detective fiction, then, the gentleman amateur never quite completes the transition from “amateur to professional” that Mayhall describes.

A key issue is that, although Lord Peter comes to see detection as his “legitimate work for society,” he never fully reconciles himself to the consequences of this work. As Plain makes clear, Lord Peter is troubled by the fact that his involvement in detection may result in the execution of the criminal he has helped to apprehend: “Detection is an occupation which satisfies Wimsey’s intellect; but, as the end product of his investigations is not simply the apprehension but the death of the convicted criminal, it also remorselessly returns him to the same crisis of responsibility from which he is trying to escape” (Plain, *Women’s Fiction* 47). Indeed, Lord Peter’s

discomfort with the consequences of detection is made clear from the very beginning of the series, when he explains in *Whose Body?* that “if it comes to really running down a live person and getting him hanged, or even quodded, poor devil, there don’t seem as if there was any excuse for me buttin’ in.” Across the course of the Wimsey novels, significantly, Sayers makes it clear that this “crisis of responsibility” is bound up with Lord Peter’s past experiences as an officer during the First World War. In the final section of this chapter, then, I will briefly examine the connection between Lord Peter’s war-time experiences and his “distastes” and “scruples,” drawing out the parallel ways in which detection and war serve to disrupt the ideal of the gentleman.

2.3 “Imaginative men in responsible positions”: Gentlemanliness, Personal Responsibility, and the Legacy of the First World War

While several of the Wimsey novels offer glimpses of Lord Peter’s war-time experiences, Sayers would present a particularly comprehensive account in the “Biographical Note” of 1935. Here, Paul Austin Delagardie recounts the “bad nervous breakdown” Lord Peter suffered during the war, as well as his subsequent efforts “to put himself together again” (GN 562). Recalling Lord Peter’s turn toward detection, Delagardie notes that “he seemed happier for the work” (563). However, Delagardie goes on to highlight the painful consequences of this “work”:

The only trouble about Peter’s new hobby was that it had to be more than a hobby, if it was to be any hobby for a gentleman. You cannot get murderers hanged for your private entertainment. Peter’s intellect pulled him one way and his nerves another, till I began to be afraid they would pull him to pieces. At the end of every case he had the old nightmares and shell-shock over again. (563)

Delagardie’s comments serve to emphasise the redefinition of detection across the course of the Wimsey novels, as a form of “legitimate work for society” rather than a gentleman’s “private entertainment”; as Delagardie puts it, detection would have “to be more than a hobby, if it was to be any hobby for a gentleman.” At the same time, however, Sayers calls our attention to the severe psychological cost of detection – here illustrated by “the old nightmares and shell-shock” that are a legacy of Lord Peter’s war-time experiences. At the heart of this issue is the fact that the process of detection renders Lord Peter complicit in the deaths of the criminals he has helped to apprehend: a painful position of responsibility which recalls his experiences as an officer in the trenches.

From the beginning of the Wimsey series, indeed, Sayers calls our attention to the effects of Lord Peter's war-time experiences, and his consequent struggle with responsibility. When Lord Peter visits Sir Julian Freke at the doctor's Harley Street surgery, for instance, Freke observes that "the strain you put on your nerves during the war has left its mark on you. It has left what I may call old wounds in your brain" (WB 177). Freke goes on to point out a range of contributing factors: "dread of German mines, responsibility for the lives of your men, strained attention and the inability to distinguish small sounds through the overpowering noise of guns" (177). It is worth bearing in mind that Sayers's portrayal of Freke testifies to an awareness of contemporary developments in medical science, and that he is presented as an expert in his field; Eric Sandberg notes that "despite his moral failures, the text casts no doubt on his medical knowledge" (Sandberg 14–15). Freke's diagnosis, then, serves a useful purpose, contextualising Lord Peter's earlier attack of shell-shock and emphasising the fact that, in taking on any kind of personal responsibility, Lord Peter risks re-opening the "old wounds" left by the war.

The effects of Lord Peter's war-time experiences are further emphasised in *Busman's Honeymoon*, as Lord Peter's mother explains to Harriet that his dislike of responsibility is bound up with his war-time experiences:

He doesn't like responsibility, you know, [...] and the War and one thing and another was bad for people that way.... [...] I suppose if you've been giving orders for nearly four years to people to go and get blown to pieces it gives you a – what does one call it nowadays? – an inhibition or an exhibition, or something, of nerves.... (BH 431)

In *Whose Body?* and *Busman's Honeymoon*, then, Sayers makes it clear that one reason why Lord Peter, the gentleman amateur, finds detection so troubling is that the nature of this responsibility recalls the burdens imposed on the officer: the pressure of assuming "responsibility for the lives of your men," of "giving orders" that might well result in the deaths of others. In short, the work of the detective echoes that of the First World War officer: in both situations, the gentleman is thrust into the uncomfortable position of holding power over the lives of others.

Again, we might compare the characterisation of Lord Peter Wimsey to that of Christopher Tietjens – whose war-time experiences similarly emphasise the ways in which the gentleman may be shaken by the pressure of "responsibility for the lives of your men." In *Some Do Not...* (1924), the first novel in the *Parade's End* tetralogy, we

learn that Tietjens's scrupulous personal standards include "clear observation," "exact thought," and "the suppression of emotions" (Ford, *Parade's End* 129). Ford, however, makes it clear that this strategy of "suppression" is potentially flawed:

It has been remarked that the peculiarly English habit of self-suppression in matters of the emotions puts the Englishman at a great disadvantage in moments of unusual stresses. In the smaller matters of the general run of life he will be impeccable and not to be moved; but in sudden confrontations of anything but physical dangers he is apt – he is, indeed, almost certain – to go to pieces very badly. This, at least, was the view of Christopher Tietjens [...] (178)

Tietjens, we learn, has deliberately adopted this "peculiarly English habit," choosing to "so watch over himself as materially to modify his automatic habits," because he believes this strategy "to be the best in the world for the normal life" (178). As Barbara Farnworth puts it, "Tietjens models his character on his ideal, an English gentleman, and carefully monitors his habits to shape his behaviour accordingly" (Farnworth 77). Throughout the *Parade's End* tetralogy, however, Ford repeatedly illustrates the ways in which the unusual stresses of war-time challenge Tietjens's efforts to regulate his own thoughts and behaviour.

A particularly significant incident occurs in the second novel, *No More Parades*, in which Tietjens is shaken by the death of O Nine Morgan, a soldier under his command. Morgan, whose wife is having an affair with a prize-fighter, has previously applied for home-leave – a request Tietjens refused: "If he had given the fellow leave the prize-fighter would have smashed him to bits. The police of Pontardulais had asked that he should not be let come home – because of the prize-fighter" (Ford, *Parade's End* 310). Hence, Tietjens reflects that he is "responsible" for Morgan's death: "It had depended absolutely upon his discretion whether the man should go home or not. The man's life or death had been in his hands" (356). He attempts to rationalise his own actions as having been "perfectly correct" – after all, "the police had urged him not to let the man come home" (356). Nevertheless, the incident continues to prey on Tietjens's mind, and he finds himself plagued by "the accursed obsession of O Nine Morgan" (484); he explains to General Campion, his godfather and superior, that "I had a man killed on me last night. In this very hut; where I'm sitting is the exact spot. It makes me ... It's a sort of ... complex, they call it now..." (473). As Farnworth puts it, Tietjens "is [...] challenged to maintain his English imperturbability in the face of the

extreme conditions of the war, especially O Nine Morgan's death" (Farnworth 81). The ideal of the "English gentleman" is disrupted by the pressure of responsibility for the lives of others, and this disruption is expressed in the medical jargon of the era, as Tietjens diagnoses himself with an "obsession," a "complex" about responsibility. Again, Ford's portrayal of this character finds a clear echo in the Wimsey novels, in which Lord Peter is diagnosed with "an inhibition or an exhibition, or something, of nerves".

Here, it is worth acknowledging that Tietjens suffers another painful brush with responsibility in *A Man Could Stand Up*— (1926), the third novel in the tetralogy. After a German bombardment, Tietjens attempts to rescue a young soldier, Aranjuez, who has been partially buried; however, Aranjuez is subsequently hit by a sniper's bullet, and he loses an eye. Tietjens blames himself for the young soldier's injury:

If I had left him where he was his eye would not have been knocked out. I thought at the time that he might have been drowned, but I ascertained afterwards that the water never rose high enough. So I am responsible for the loss of his eye. It's a sort of monomania. You see, I am talking of it now. It recurs. Continuously. (Ford, *Parade's End* 659)

Like the death of O Nine Morgan, Aranjuez's injury disrupts Tietjens's strategy of taciturnity and gentlemanly self-restraint, as emphasised by his remarks: "I am talking of it now. It recurs. Continuously." In discussing the effect this incident has on Tietjens, Richard A. Cassell offers an illuminating comment; he notes that Tietjens "is no longer in assured command; he realizes that when responsibility involves the lives of others, it is ambiguous at best, at its worst more than he can emotionally bear. He is found vulnerable and rendered cautious" (Cassell 110). Such a comment might equally apply to the Wimsey novels. Although Lord Peter, the gentleman amateur, assumes an increasing degree of personal "responsibility" through his involvement in detection, this "responsibility" is morally "ambiguous" in that it "involves the lives of others"; Lord Peter is thus rendered "vulnerable." In this way, the Wimsey novels disrupt the generic expectation that the gentleman detective will always be "in assured command" of themselves and the situation.

Nowhere is this vulnerability more clearly revealed than in the final completed Wimsey novel, *Busman's Honeymoon*. Whereas the original play ends with the arrest and exposure of the murderer, Frank Crutchley, the novel goes further, tackling the

judicial processes of trial and execution, and showcasing Lord Peter's feelings of guilt and unease. He is shown doing everything possible for Crutchley, even appointing the talented lawyer Sir Impey Biggs for the defence – and, when Crutchley is finally sentenced to death, his fate weighs heavily on Lord Peter. At the conclusion of the novel, Lord Peter sits up with Harriet in the hours before the execution is due to take place, and eventually breaks down in her arms. Such a detailed portrayal of the detective's reaction to the fate of the criminal he has helped to apprehend is unusual, as Knight points out: "Sayers is rare in making her detective [...] recognise with some pain that in identifying a murderer he too has sent someone to death. The knowledge that explains the puzzle seems a sufficient ending to a classic mystery" (Knight, *Crime Fiction, 1800–2000* 88). That Sayers diverges from this convention by depicting the judicial processes of trial and execution, and showcasing the detective's pained reactions, testifies to her determination to elevate the standard of detective fiction by documenting the gentleman amateur's "distastes" and "scruples" and "emotional reactions."

While more could potentially be written about the ways in which Sayers's detective fiction responds to the legacy of the First World War,⁵ and to contemporary developments in medical science, my principal aim in this chapter has been to show how Sayers complicates attitudes towards detection by showcasing the "distastes" and "scruples" that frequently interrupt Lord Peter's enthusiastic appreciation of "distinguished crimes." A key factor in this process is the notion that the requirements of detection may sometimes clash with the gentlemanly values instilled in Lord Peter by his upbringing and education: one cannot be both a "sportsman" and an effective investigator. The Wimsey novels, then, pose a challenge to Grella's portrait of the "gentleman amateur" as a figure who is "always [...] socially acceptable" and can solve the mystery without offending the sensibilities of the "closed, aristocratic society" in which they operate. Indeed, in Sayers's detective fiction, the concept of the gentleman detective almost begins to seem like a contradiction in terms. If the detective's pursuit of the truth frequently calls for behaviour which offends gentlemanly sensibilities, then we might ask: is it really possible to be both a gentleman *and* a detective?

⁵ For detailed discussions of the ways in which Sayers's detective fiction reworks and responds to contemporary ideas about shell shock and the returning soldier, see Freedman ("Dorothy Sayers and the Case of the Shell-Shocked Detective") and Hendrickson ("Whose Trauma?").

As Mayhall's arguments suggest, we might account for this tension by asserting that the notion of the gentleman detective is still a viable one – it is simply that there has been a shift in what it means to be a gentleman. Across the course of the series, it could be argued, Lord Peter moves away from an older conception of the gentleman as the stereotypical public-school man who never betrays their peers and adheres to standards of chivalry and “playing the game,” and towards a modified conception of gentlemanliness informed by middle-class, professionalised standards of behaviour. It is also worth noting that, according to Berberich, a key aspect of gentlemanly behaviour is the principle of “duty before personal interest, the good of the group (read: society) before that of the individual” (Berberich, *Image* 10). Perhaps there is something gentlemanly, after all, about the idea of Lord Peter fulfilling his “duty to society in the way of finding out the truth about murders,” in spite of the discomfort it causes him. These arguments, however, cannot quite account for the uneasy impression that, in the Wimsey novels, detection is often a murky, morally ambiguous business, to such an extent that Lord Peter feels “ashamed” of his own enthusiasm. If “loyalty to the abstract truth” is paramount, then it follows that the detective's relentless pursuit of the truth may sometimes require them to set aside personal loyalties or obligations – perhaps even to betray their peers. It is hardly surprising, then, that in *Gaudy Night*, Lord Peter goes so far as to declare that detection is “[n]o job for a gentleman” (GN 403).

In this chapter, I have shown how Sayers deepens the characterisation of her detective and expands the capabilities of the mystery story by showcasing the painful conflicts that may arise when the requirements of detective work conflict with the expectations imposed on the gentleman. In doing so, I have focused principally on a particular conception of the English gentleman – the stereotypical “English public schoolboy,” the man who will never let down their friends, and who adheres rigorously to the ideals of loyalty, chivalry, and sportsmanship. Throughout the Wimsey novels, however, Sayers frequently alludes to other conceptions of English masculinity. Troublingly, Lord Peter may also be characterised in terms of the feudal gentleman – an archetype which, as Rowland has shown, is associated with exploitative, sexually possessive behaviour. In the following chapter, then, I will focus on the Wimsey novels *Clouds of Witness* and *Strong Poison*, examining Sayers's decision to introduce romance to the series, and showing how this manoeuvre is further complicated by Lord

Peter's characterisation as a feudal gentleman. In doing so, I will show that the introduction of romance provides Sayers with new ways of further deepening the characterisation of the gentleman detective.

3. “The woman he imperiously wanted”: Romance and the Limitations of Gentlemanliness

This chapter focuses on two early Wimsey novels in which Sayers tackles what she would describe as the “problem of the detective in love” (GSS 39). In *Clouds of Witness*, Lord Peter’s friend and colleague, the professional detective Charles Parker, falls in love with Lord Peter’s sister, Lady Mary Wimsey, while *Strong Poison* marks the introduction of Harriet Vane, the detective novelist whom Lord Peter saves from the gallows, and whom he will eventually marry. Examining these two novels in depth, I aim to illustrate the increasingly ambitious nature of Sayers’s approach to detective fiction, and to show how Sayers’s portrayal of her aristocratic sleuth serves to challenge the restrictions that have frequently been imposed on the classical detective. In particular, the classical detective is often seen as a detached outsider, a paragon of masculine rationality; they are supposed to be, as Cawelti puts it, “a detached eccentric with no worldly stake in the outcome of the action” (Cawelti 95). This generic expectation has also been highlighted by Lionel Basney, who notes that “the classical detective tends to remain “objective,” personally detached from the crimes to be investigated. Holmes himself is a “consulting detective” whose professionalism guarantees his neutrality; he is there to solve puzzles” (Basney 25). By contrast, Basney’s analysis of *The Nine Tailors* highlights Lord Peter’s “customary loss of detachment” (25). This recurring “loss of detachment” is a key aspect of the Wimsey novels, and is shown prominently in novels such as *Clouds of Witness* and *Strong Poison*. Both of these novels, as I will show, challenge generic expectations by presenting the reader with narratives in which Lord Peter does, in fact, have some “worldly stake in the outcome of the action.” Consequently, he emerges, not as the brilliant Holmesian sleuth who is there only “to solve puzzles,” but as a flawed and fallible human being who is unable to separate his personal feelings from the mystery at hand.

A key part of this authorial strategy is the introduction of romance to the Wimsey novels – seen most clearly in *Strong Poison*, in which Lord Peter falls in love with Harriet Vane. Here, it must be acknowledged that there is a wealth of existing criticism focused on the relationship between Lord Peter and Harriet. Indeed, I am indebted to the work of critics such as Catherine Kenney, Gayle F. Wald, and Margaret P. Hannay, who have done much to show how the introduction of romance serves to deepen Lord

Peter's characterisation and to expand the possibilities of Sayers's detective fiction – thus reflecting Sayers's stated goal of transforming the mystery story into something more like “a novel of manners” than “a pure crossword puzzle” (Sayers, “Gaudy Night” 25). However, I also set out to add a new dimension to these discussions. Drawing on Rowland's persuasive analysis of *Clouds of Witness*, I aim to show how Sayers's portrayal of the gentleman detective falling in love is complicated by the fact that Lord Peter is descended from a background of aristocratic privilege, and that his behaviour towards Harriet Vane is potentially reminiscent of a self-centred and possessive feudal gentleman – a figure which, Sayers suggests, is distinctly anachronistic. What makes romance in the Wimsey novels particularly intriguing, I argue, is that Sayers specifically presents us with the problem of the *gentleman* detective in love. As I will show, the image of the classical detective – a “detached eccentric” with no interest in anything beyond the “puzzle” and its solution – is further disrupted by a troubling psychosexual undercurrent, as Lord Peter finds himself “imperiously” desiring Harriet Vane (SP 181).

3.1 Detective Fiction and “the love element”: An Introduction

In *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*, a conversation between Lord Peter Wimsey and Ann Dorland offers a revealing insight into contemporary perceptions of detective fiction. As the conversation turns to a discussion of literature, Lord Peter highlights the escapist qualities of genre fiction, noting that “dull men in offices read detective stories. They wouldn't, if murder and police entered into their lives” (UBC 237). Ann Dorland – who is herself a reader of detective fiction – remarks that “a detective story keeps your brain occupied. Rather like chess” (237). Significantly, Lord Peter goes on to recall that, when he had been “in a nursing home – with shell-shock,” he had turned to simple card games “so as to stop thinking” (237–8). He adds that “I read detective stories, too. They were about the only thing I could read. All the others had the War in them – or love ... or some damn' thing I didn't want to think about” (238). Here, Sayers conveys a particular view of detective fiction: a form of escapist literature with a strongly intellectual appeal – a kind of game-playing that “keeps your brain occupied.” This view of detective fiction recurs throughout discussions of the genre; indeed, the notion that detective fiction is particularly appealing to those suffering from “shell-shock” is echoed in Light's argument that, in the wake of the First World War, detective fiction served as “a literature of convalescence,” occupying the

minds of war-weary readers without unduly straining their nerves (Light 70–1). There is something ironic, however, about Sayers’s suggestion that “detective stories” do not touch on painful topics such as “the War” or “love,” given that both subjects feature prominently in the Wimsey novels. As I have shown in Chapter 2, for instance, the legacy of the First World War is a key aspect of Lord Peter’s characterisation. Similarly, romance would become a key part of the Wimsey novels with the introduction of Harriet Vane. This chapter will show that “love,” like “the War,” is key to the development of Lord Peter Wimsey as a character – that Sayers deepens the characterisation of the gentleman detective by tackling the “problem of the detective in love.”

What is particularly significant, however, is that the Wimsey novels specifically present us with the problem of the *gentleman* detective in love. In particular, the relationship between Lord Peter and Harriet is complicated by class – specifically, by the fact that the former is descended from a highly privileged background, in contrast to the latter’s middle-class status. In her portrayal of Lord Peter’s feelings for Harriet, Sayers often evokes a particular conception of masculine sexuality, which is possessive, self-centred, and figured in aristocratic terms. In *Gaudy Night*, for example, Harriet, struggling to choose between a life in academia or a relationship with Lord Peter, reflects on her dilemma: “Could there ever be any alliance between the intellect and the flesh?” (GN 507). She is convinced that Lord Peter could never achieve such a compromise: “If Peter wanted to make the experiment, he must do it without Harriet’s connivance. Six centuries of possessive blood would not be dictated to by a bare forty-five years of over-sensitised intellect” (507). In moments such as these, Sayers alludes to a specific conception of gentlemanliness, which is defined by a kind of feudal possessiveness. Such “possessive” instincts are distinctly anachronistic and must be set aside before Lord Peter and Harriet’s relationship can be successfully resolved, resulting in what Rowland identifies as “an anti-feudal, modern partnership” (Rowland 42). It is worth noting, however, that the threatening spectre of Lord Peter’s “possessive blood” first emerges in an early Wimsey novel, *Clouds of Witness*. Rowland has persuasively argued that this novel portrays “feudal sexuality” as a threat, and that Sayers is critical of “the role of male knight errant. The Harriet Vane novels will develop Sayers’s critique of sexual relations based solely on the male as saviour-hero” (Rowland 125, 126). In this chapter, then, I will focus on

Clouds of Witness and *Strong Poison*, examining Sayers's approach to the issues of gentlemanliness, romance, and sexuality. Drawing on Rowland's arguments, I will show that Sayers's portrayal of "the detective in love" is bound up with a portrayal of the gentleman as a flawed and potentially fallible figure.

Before tackling these issues, however, it is perhaps worth considering the question of why Sayers should have decided to introduce romance to the Wimsey novels. As others have pointed out, such a decision is somewhat surprising, given that Sayers had previously argued against the inclusion of romance in detective fiction. Writing in 1928, in particular, Sayers would portray the mystery story as a "highly artificial" form in which "[a] definite and single problem is set, worked out, and solved," warning that "[t]he farther it escapes from pure analysis, the more difficulty it has in achieving artistic unity" (GSS 37). Asserting that the genre presents a "dispassionate" view of violence, Sayers argues that writers must strive to maintain a consistent tone:

A too violent emotion flung into the glittering mechanism of the detective-story jars the movement by disturbing its delicate balance. The most successful writers are those who contrive to keep the story running from beginning to end upon the same emotional level, and it is better to err in the direction of too little feeling than too much. (38)

Evidently, Sayers is preoccupied with maintaining a delicate balance between the "emotional" and intellectual aspects of the mystery story; she suggests that this "highly artificial" form, with its narrow focus on the solving of a "definite and single" puzzle, will not tolerate the intrusion of "violent emotion." It is unsurprising, then, that Sayers should declare her opposition to the inclusion of romance in detective fiction, asserting that "some of the finest detective-stories are marred by a conventional love-story, irrelevant to the action and perfunctorily worked in" (39). While Sayers does cite a number of texts in which, she argues, romance has been successfully combined with detection – such as Collins's *The Moonstone* – she ultimately asserts that "since the mystery must, by hypothesis, take the first place, the love is better left out." (40)

This view is typical of contemporary discussions of detective fiction. As I showed in Chapter 1, Sayers was one of several authors who, throughout the 1920s, would offer detailed examinations of the genre, outlining what they regarded as its key features, and portraying the mystery story as a highly intellectual form that appealed to educated, highbrow readers. A key feature of these studies is the recurring insistence that the inclusion of romance should be avoided. E. M. Wrong, for instance,

would argue in 1926 that “romance” and “family affairs” are best avoided, “save only when a love affair forms an integral part of the mystery. For in a detective story the true beauty is in mass and line, not in irrelevant ornament without structural value: that should be left for the realists to exploit” (Wrong 30). Similarly, Nicolson would proclaim in 1929 that “the pure detective story to-day is never – and what a relief! – a love story. If the love element is introduced at all, – the connoisseur prefers that it be omitted, – it must be distinctly subordinated” (Nicolson 122–3). For the true “connoisseur” of detective fiction, it seems, romance must be “subordinated” to the intellectual, puzzle-solving aspects of the genre – or, preferably, left out altogether. This prohibition against romance is perhaps most clearly spelled out by Wright, whose list of “Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories” includes the following: “There must be no love interest. The business in hand is to bring a criminal to the bar of justice, not to bring a lovelorn couple to the hymeneal altar” (Wright, “Twenty Rules” 189–90).

Crucially, there is a notably gendered dimension to this kind of genre policing. In stressing the intellectual aspects of the mystery story, authors of the 1920s implicitly cast detective fiction as being superior to other types of genre fiction – most notably, romance. During the interwar period, Light notes, “romance” came to signify a particular type of writing, “aimed ostensibly at a wholly female readership” and focusing on “the trials and tribulations of heterosexual desire” (Light 160). Light points out that romance was criticised by “many critics of the new forms of mass entertainment,” and that there is a gendered aspect to these criticisms; the genre was “debased, because feminine” (160–1). In crime fiction, by contrast, “both men and women of the middle classes could be united in despising romantic literature” (162). Importantly, Light emphasises the fact that classical detective fiction was aligned with masculinity:

Regardless of how many women wrote detective fiction between the wars, it was still considered to be a masculine form, mainly read by men. Neither gushy nor confessional, the crime story laid a stress on those apparently masculine qualities of reason and logic; its modernist emphasis was upon surface, form and contemplation – the antithesis of romance’s depth, substance, and emotional involvement. (162)

While the mystery story may have been positioned as “lowbrow/popular” entertainment, according to Bogen, Light’s comments suggest that detective fiction could position itself as the *better* kind of lowbrow entertainment. In contrast to other

types of genre fiction – such as romance, which was seen as overtly feminine, “gushy” and “confessional,” and therefore “debased” – the mystery story assumed a position of cultural superiority due to its supposed focus on the “masculine qualities of reason and logic.” It is hardly surprising, then, that authors of the 1920s would insist that love stories and detective fiction should be kept apart – an insistence we might link to Bogen’s argument that, within the literary marketplace of the interwar period, authors of detective fiction sought “to position their product as a type of entertainment for an intellectual audience” (Bogen 259). If detective fiction was to maintain its position as a respectable form of lowbrow entertainment, one that appealed to “an intellectual audience” in particular, then it would be necessary to establish a *cordon sanitaire* to keep out the spectre of romance, which threatened to bring with it “depth, substance and emotional involvement,” and so compromise the supposedly “masculine qualities” of the mystery story.

This prohibition against romance is bound up with certain generic expectations regarding the portrayal of the detective: if the true “connoisseur” believes that love stories have no place in detective fiction, then it logically follows that the detective themselves must be fully committed to the business of detection, eschewing romance in favour of intellectual activity. An important precedent for this trend was set by that well-known gentleman detective, Sherlock Holmes – as emphasised by the famous description of Holmes which appears in the short story, “A Scandal in Bohemia” (1891):

It was not that he felt any emotion akin to love for Irene Adler. All emotions, and that one particularly, were abhorrent to his cold, precise, but admirably balanced mind. He was, I take it, the most perfect reasoning and observing machine that the world has seen: but, as a lover, he would have placed himself in a false position. He never spoke of the softer passions, save with a gibe and a sneer. They were admirable things for the observer – excellent for drawing the veil from men’s motives and actions. But for the trained reasoner to admit such intrusions into his own delicate and finely adjusted temperament was to introduce a distracting factor which might throw a doubt upon all his mental results. Grit in a sensitive instrument, or a crack in one of his own high-power lenses, would not be more disturbing than a strong emotion in a nature such as his. And yet there was but one woman to him, and that woman was the late Irene Adler, of dubious and questionable memory. (Conan Doyle, “Scandal” 1)

It is debateable whether Holmes was truly the “cold, precise, but admirably balanced” individual that Watson portrays here; indeed, Knight has pointed out that there was a

“limit” to how much Doyle would portray Holmes as aloof and detached, and that even this particular “passage,” while showing “how this machine-like scientist avoids emotion, ends by almost reconciling him with ordinary human feeling” (Knight, *Form and Ideology* 80). What I would emphasise here, nevertheless, is the suggestion that the detective is a “machine-like” figure who “avoids emotion.” Some authors would insist that the ideal detective conforms to this image – that, as Heather Worthington puts it, “the detective must remain detached, again in the Sherlock Holmes pattern, rejecting emotional entanglements” (Worthington 118). Perhaps the most notable example is Wright, who contends that the mystery story is focused on “mental analysis and the overcoming of difficulties,” and that, consequently, “any interpolation of purely emotional moods” should be avoided – “unless, of course, they are integers of the equation and are subordinated to the main theme. For instance, in none of the best detective novels will you find a love interest, – Sherlock Holmes in mellow mood, holding a lady’s hand and murmuring amorous platitudes, would be unthinkable” (Wright, “Great Detective Stories” 41). What Wright cites, perhaps, is not the actual character of Sherlock Holmes, but rather, the *idea* of Sherlock Holmes – the image of the great detective, “cold, precise,” and completely dedicated to detection. Wright evokes this image in order to reinforce his argument that the appeal of detective fiction is, or should be, exclusively intellectual; the insistence that detective fiction has no room for “purely emotional moods” is reflected in the notion that the detective is a paragon of masculine rationality, standing above “emotional entanglements.”

It is also worth noting that Holmes is not the only fictional detective to be presented in “machine-like” terms. In fact, such portrayals of the detective recur throughout the genre; a particularly noteworthy example is Professor S. F. X. Van Dusen, an early detective created by the American author Jacques Futrelle, who is literally nicknamed “The Thinking Machine” (Futrelle). Roth, who identifies the “thinking machine” as a recurring archetype in detective fiction, offers an illuminating comment:

The image of the machine connotes logic and thus reinforces the definition of the genre as a puzzle, and it connotes science, which adds a dimension of contemporary relevance to the genre. It also excuses the indifference of the heroes to the misery of their fellow characters. Finally, the image of the machine is self-reflexive: it codifies what we already know about the hero from the outside: that he is a fixed, undeveloping character type whose performance is an attractive redundancy. (Roth 43)

Of particular note is Roth's observation that, by characterising the detective in terms of a "machine," authors emphasise "the definition of the genre as a puzzle." Again, there is a clear resonance between the characterisation of the detective and the limitations imposed on the genre by authors and commentators: the recurring notion that the detective is a "machine-like" figure who "avoids emotion" reflects authors' insistence that what matters most in detective fiction is the genre's intellectual, puzzle-solving aspects. Just as the "glittering mechanism" of the mystery would be thrown off balance by any "violent emotion" – as Sayers puts it – so is the mind of the great detective presented as a "delicate and finely adjusted" machine that will not tolerate the intrusion of "strong emotion."

Sayers's aristocratic sleuth, however, could hardly be described as a "thinking machine." From the beginning of the series, as I showed in Chapter 2, the image of the "detached," Holmesian sleuth who avoids "emotional entanglements" is disrupted by Lord Peter's gentlemanly "distastes" and "scruples." In a sense, Lord Peter has less in common with Sherlock Holmes than with Philip Trent, the hero of E. C. Bentley's *Trent's Last Case* (1913) – a novel that, as Worthington puts it, "subverted the Holmesian myth of the super-detective by having its own detective come to the wrong conclusion based on apparently sound evidence and rational thought" (Worthington 115). Bentley himself would claim that he had set out "to write a detective story in which the detective was recognizable as a human being, and was not quite so much the 'heavy' sleuth" (Bentley, *Those Days* 251–2). What appealed most, according to Bentley, was the thought of subverting "the infallibility of the Holmesian method" (254). Thus, though intelligent and perceptive, Trent is shown to be distinctly fallible; he makes mistakes, and is ultimately unable to uncover the full solution to the mystery. Significantly, his fallibility is further emphasised by the fact that he falls in love with Mrs Manderson, the victim's wife and a chief suspect. Sayers herself approved of this development: while she praises the skill with which Collins introduces "the love-story" to *The Moonstone*, she would go on to argue that Bentley "has dealt finely with the still harder problem of the detective in love" (GSS 39). As critics have pointed out, then, the precedent set by Bentley can be seen as a major factor in Sayers's decision to introduce romance to the Wimsey novels; for example, Sayers's biographer, Barbara Reynolds, has suggested that perhaps Sayers "wished to see what she could do with this 'still harder problem' herself" (Reynolds 229). Like Bentley, Sayers subverts "the

Holmesian myth of the super-detective” by presenting a gentleman amateur who is neither detached nor infallible, an authorial manoeuvre that is further reinforced by the introduction of romance.

Importantly, Bentley’s efforts to subvert “the infallibility of the Holmesian method” can be seen as reflecting a broader trend in classical detective fiction. In Chapter 1, I showed how late Victorian portrayals of the detective as an eminently rational figure, a man of science, may be seen as reflective of what Yoon has identified as a contemporary “public faith and popular interest in scientific discourse” (Yoon 13). In Maurizio Ascari’s view, however, this “turn-of-the-century utopian faith in scientific progress” would be “tragically proved wrong by two world wars” (Ascari 17). Accordingly, Golden Age detective fiction is marked by a shift away from “[t]he myth of the infallible detective,” and toward “narratives of fallibility and the subsequent emphasis on vulnerability” (8, 17). As Ascari would have it, Bentley’s portrayal of the detective as flawed and fallible is “a litmus test to assess a deep-seated ideological change that is taking place,” and “the fallible detective interestingly recurs in the 1920s” (13). Indeed, Golden Age authors would themselves claim that the genre was moving beyond portrayals of the detective as “infallible.” Writing in the late 1920s, for example, Sayers believed that the detective was “ceas[ing] to be impenetrable and infallible and becom[ing] a man touched with the feeling of our infirmities,” and that “the rigid technique of the art” was “expand[ing] a little” (GSS 37). For Sayers, the detective was now required to “achieve a tenderer human feeling beneath his frivolity or machine-like efficiency” (38). Other authors would make similar claims: Wright perceived a movement away from “the inspired, intuitive, brilliantly logical super-sleuth of the late nineteenth century” and toward a “more human, more plausible” kind of detective, while Nicolson would claim that “[t]he modern detective is as individual as Sherlock Holmes – though less and less often is he patterned after that famous sleuth. Our detective is made in our image and in that of the author; like ourselves, he can make mistakes; he is no longer omniscient or ubiquitous” (Wright, “Great Detective Stories” 59; Nicolson 116–7). For authors of the Golden Age, then, the genre was shifting away from the “machine-like efficiency” of the Holmesian “super-sleuth,” and toward more fallible, more “plausible” characters. This view of the genre is clearly reflected in the Wimsey novels: like the gentlemanly “distastes” and “scruples” that disrupt Lord Peter’s habitual façade of upper-class “frivolity,” the introduction of

romance in *Strong Poison* can be linked to Sayers's belief that the detective, so far from being "impenetrable and infallible," now needed to "achieve a tenderer human feeling".

In the 1937 essay "Gaudy Night," however, Sayers offers an alternative explanation for her decision to introduce a love interest to the Wimsey novels. Here, she claims that, having grown tired of Lord Peter Wimsey, she "undertook *Strong Poison* [...] with the infanticidal intention of doing away with Peter; that is, of marrying him off and getting rid of him" (Sayers, "Gaudy Night" 26). Certainly, there is some evidence to show that, by the late 1920s, Sayers had grown weary of her aristocratic sleuth: for example, the existence of *The Documents in the Case* (1930), a novel in which Lord Peter is nowhere to be seen, does suggest that Sayers was considering alternative approaches to the genre. In addition, Sayers would admit to her scientific advisor Eustace Barton that Lord Peter's "everlasting breeziness does become a bit of a tax at times!" (Sayers, "To Eustace Barton" [7 May 1928] 274). Nevertheless, Reynolds has questioned Sayers's claim that she planned to dispose of Lord Peter in this fashion:

If this is really the case, it would surely have been rather a shock to Victor Gollancz, with whom she had only then signed a contract undertaking to produce one book a year. Presumably he was expecting the remunerative Lord Peter Wimsey to continue. If this was not specified, did she perhaps intend to write a different kind of detective novel from then on? (Reynolds 229)

Reynolds goes on to suggest that *The Documents in the Case* may have "opened up new vistas. [Sayers] may have hoped, by changing course, to achieve her long-cherished aim of raising the detective story to the level of the novel of manners, from which it had lapsed since the time of Wilkie Collins" (229–30). This suggestion usefully illuminates Sayers's decision to introduce a major love interest to the Wimsey novels: I believe that Sayers, dissatisfied with the limitations imposed on the genre by contemporary authors, set out to create "a different kind of detective novel" by weaving together the threads of detection and romance.

This strategy can be linked to a broader shift in Sayers's approach to detective fiction: as I noted in Chapter 1, Sayers would become increasingly vocal in calling for a more ambitious, highbrow approach to detective fiction, combining the puzzle plot with deeper characterisation. Writing in 1934, for instance, Sayers would argue:

Do you think the detective story is ruined by trying to touch such ultimate values as real beauty, real problems of conduct, real tragedy of pity and terror? If so, the remedy is in your hands. Stop reading and the authors will stop writing, for they have their bread to earn. But there is this to be said: No author who takes the writing of English seriously will be content to spin ropes of sand for ever. One day he will want to put some passion into his work, and if he may not put it into his detective stories, he will go away and write some other kind of thing. (Sayers, "Detective Novel Problems" 226–7)

Sayers's remarks testify to her keen awareness of the pressures exerted by market forces on authors – that, ultimately, authors "have their bread to earn." At the same time, however, Sayers would increasingly portray herself as prioritising her own sense of artistic integrity above the demands of the market.⁶ In describing the writing of *Gaudy Night*, for instance, Sayers declares that "I knew it was useless to try and write with a view to what the public might like: the only thing one can do is to write what one wants to write and hope for the best" (Sayers, "Gaudy Night" 34). I would suggest that Sayers may initially have felt constrained by market forces, and by the rigid constraints imposed on the genre – but as her career as a detective novelist progressed, she felt better able to challenge these generic boundaries, "to write what one wants to write" rather than conforming to traditional views of the mystery story as pure clue-puzzle.

Writing in the late 1930s, then, Sayers would express the belief "that if the detective story was to live and develop it must get back to where it began in the hands of Collins and Le Fanu, and become once more a novel of manners instead of a pure crossword puzzle" (Sayers, "Gaudy Night" 25). As I showed in Chapter 1, Sayers's efforts to transform the mystery story into something more than "a pure crossword puzzle" were potentially risky; in endeavouring to bring a more artful, literary approach to detective fiction, Sayers would be harshly judged by elitist, highbrow critics such as

⁶ An alternative view is offered by Bogen, who links *Gaudy Night* to "a larger boom in middlebrow university fiction (almost always set at Oxford)" (Bogen 262). Bogen's view is that, in writing *Gaudy Night*, Sayers exploited a contemporary interest in voyeuristic portrayals of the women's college, and the novel's success can be attributed to "Sayers's marketing strategies and previous reputation as a best-selling popular novelist" (269). Nevertheless, I would argue that Sayers's efforts to push the boundaries of the mystery story, introducing deeper characterisation and weaving together the threads of detection and romance, testify to her increasing determination to "write what one wants to write" – in contrast to her previously expressed fears that hypothetical readers such as "the Tired Business Man and the Tired Journalist" would be turned away by a mystery story striving for greater depth and complexity.

Q. D. Leavis. Nevertheless, Sayers would insist on the necessity of a more ambitious approach to the genre:

Some people did not agree with us. Mr. Willard Huntington Wright (Van Dine) still believes, for example, that every vestige of humanity should be ruthlessly expunged from the detective novel; but I am sure he is wrong and we are right. It is not only that the reader gets tired after a time of a literature without bowels; in the end the writer gets tired of it too, and that is fatal. (25)

This wry remark neatly illustrates the shift in Sayers's thinking regarding detective fiction: while she had initially echoed authors such as Wright in emphasising the intellectual, puzzle-solving aspects of the genre, and in arguing that the inclusion of romance was best avoided, she would now scoff at Wright's views, rebuking those who felt that "every vestige of humanity should be ruthlessly expunged from the detective novel." The introduction of romance to the Wimsey novels can be seen as part of this increasingly ambitious approach to the mystery story: Sayers's efforts to transform the detective story into something more than "a pure crossword puzzle" are reflected in the movement away from the image of the detective as an infallible and detached "super-sleuth" who stands above "emotional entanglements," and toward a more flawed and fallible kind of detective – "a man touched with the feeling of our infirmities."

Indeed, other critics have cited *Strong Poison* as a turning point in the development of Sayers's detective fiction. For example, a noteworthy essay by Wald examines the development of Lord Peter and Harriet's relationship from *Strong Poison* to *Gaudy Night*, with Wald arguing that the introduction of romance is central to Sayers's establishment of a more complex, "novelistic world [that] presents problems that even Lord Peter Wimsey cannot solve" (Wald 99). In addition, a persuasive essay by Hannay presents Harriet Vane as being crucial to the development of Lord Peter as a character; Hannay contends that Sayers "deliberately set about to change her creature from a cardboard detective into a human being, and that she used the character of Harriet Vane to provide both the necessity and the means for this difficult metamorphosis" (Hannay 38). It must be acknowledged, though, that such arguments potentially overstate the significance of Harriet's introduction: for example, Plain has pointed out that, while Hannay makes "a persuasive argument," we should not "ignore the evolutionary details" that were present in earlier novels (Plain, *Women's Fiction*

52). Indeed, as I showed in Chapter 2, the early Wimsey novels do much to establish the limitations of the gentleman detective by showcasing Lord Peter's fraught relationship with detection, as well as the impact of his war-time experiences on his characterisation. Nevertheless, it remains clear that the introduction of a long-term romantic relationship represents a significant innovation in the development of Sayers's gentleman detective.

I would point out, however, that *Strong Poison* is clearly not Sayers's first attempt at tackling the intriguing "problem of the detective in love." As Mayhall notes, "few have commented on the other significant romantic relationship of these books, that cultivated by Wimsey between his younger sister, Lady Mary, and Inspector Parker of Scotland Yard" (Mayhall 782). Before turning to *Strong Poison*, then, I will take up Mayhall's invitation by first examining the early Wimsey novel *Clouds of Witness*, in which Lady Mary Wimsey is introduced to the series. I aim to show that, while *Clouds of Witness* and *Strong Poison* share several basic plot elements, a comparison of the two novels may serve to illuminate the increasingly ambitious and refined nature of Sayers's approach to detective fiction.

3.2 "Sixteen generations of feudal privilege": Romance and Gentlemanliness in *Clouds of Witness*

In *Clouds of Witness*, the second Wimsey novel, Lord Peter's brother, Gerald, the Duke of Denver, is accused of murder, and Lord Peter must attempt to clear his name. This novel, I would argue, illustrates the extent to which Sayers was influenced by nineteenth-century sensation fiction: *Clouds of Witness* echoes novels such as *The Moonstone* in presenting a narrative of domestic intrigue, in which the detective's quest to uncover the truth is partly a quest to uncover the secrets of an upper-class household. In *Clouds of Witness*, however, there is an additional complication in that it is the detective's own family that is under investigation. In the course of his investigation, for instance, Lord Peter eventually discovers the reason why his brother Gerald refuses to tell anybody what he had been doing on the night of the apparent murder: Gerald has been having an affair with Mrs Grimethorpe, the beautiful but terrified wife of an abusive local farmer, whom McGregor and Lewis have described as "a prisoner of conventions not merely belonging to Victorian days but extending back to the evil days of feudalism" (McGregor and Lewis 50). Sayers thus presents a narrative of domineering, sexually possessive masculinity, and the female as

“prisoner.” Such a narrative clearly evokes Gothic modes of writing – a connection that has been emphasised by Rowland, who identifies *Clouds of Witness* as drawing on “domestic nineteenth-century Gothic” (Rowland 124). Crucially, Sayers also evokes “the evil days of feudalism” through her portrayal of Lord Peter and Gerald; it is principally through these aristocratic men and their interactions with Mrs Grimethorpe, according to Rowland, that Sayers presents “feudal sexuality” as a potential threat. Drawing on Rowland’s analysis of *Clouds of Witness*, then, I will interrogate the troubling intersection between Lord Peter’s desires and his identity as an aristocratic gentleman, an issue that recurs throughout the Harriet Vane novels.

It is worth noting, however, that Gerald is not the only person with secrets to hide; *Clouds of Witness* also introduces us to Lord Peter’s sister, Lady Mary Wimsey. The victim, Denis Cathcart, was Lady Mary’s fiancé. As we eventually learn, Lady Mary had secretly planned to elope with her lover, a Socialist campaigner named Gregory Goyles, whom her family had dismissed as an unsuitable match. When she stumbled across Cathcart’s body, Lady Mary mistakenly assumed that Goyles had killed him. Hence, Lady Mary spends much of the novel trying to shield Goyles; her efforts serve to further complicate the mystery, and Lord Peter and Parker must try to uncover the reasons behind her odd, secretive behaviour. It is here that the similarities between *Clouds of Witness* and *The Moonstone* are most clearly apparent: Lady Mary can be compared to Rachel Verinder, who, similarly, complicates the investigation through her efforts to shield a man she loves, and whom she believes to be guilty. In *The Moonstone*, Lyn Pykett has observed, “[t]he mystery of the disappearance of the Diamond becomes submerged in the mystery of Rachel’s conduct. [...] Rachel thus becomes the mystery, the puzzle to be solved” (Pykett 52). In *Clouds of Witness*, Lady Mary is also presented as a “mystery [...] to be solved,” with Lord Peter admitting at the beginning of the novel that “I know really awfully little about Mary” (CW 44).

We might also consider the role played by the professional detective in both novels. In *Clouds of Witness*, Parker is presented as a “detective from Scotland Yard,” better equipped to handle the investigation than the local police, whom Parker dismisses as “ruffians” (32, 38). In this portrayal of the professional, “Scotland Yard” detective as a man who attempts to unravel the secrets of a genteel household, and who does so with more skill than the bungling local police, we may recognise a clear echo of the role played by Sergeant Cuff in *The Moonstone*. At the same time,

however, there is an important point of contrast between *Clouds of Witness* and Collins's novel. In *The Moonstone*, as I noted in Chapter 1, Sergeant Cuff is effectively penalised for his inability to correctly interpret Rachel Verinder's character. By contrast, Parker fully believes in Lady Mary's innocence, and, in fact, falls in love with her across the course of Sayers's novel. This development not only sets Parker apart from his Victorian predecessor, but also affords Sayers an opportunity to deepen the mystery story by portraying the detective as flawed and fallible. Consider, for example, the scene in which Lady Mary visits Lord Peter's London flat, and Parker is left to interview her alone:

Mr Parker was a little taken aback. Although the face of Lady Mary had been haunting his imagination ever since the inquest, and although the agitation of his feelings had risen to boiling-point during this romantic interview, the official instinct of caution had not wholly deserted him. Holding, as he did, proof of Lady Mary's complicity in the crime, whatever it was, he was not so far gone as to fling all his cards on the table. (137)

It is only when Parker begins properly "questioning" Lady Mary that his attitude shifts: "his nervousness left him; the official reasserted himself" (137). Seen here is the "problem of the detective in love" – a conflict between their "feelings," and their "official instinct" and conduct as a detective.

Here, it is worth noting that Parker and Lady Mary will eventually, with Lord Peter's approval and encouragement, marry. For Mayhall, this relationship is another example of the way in which authors of Golden Age detective fiction used marriage as a means of "widening [...] the definition of the gentleman" and bringing about a "reconciliation of the modern aristocracy with the upper-middle class" (Mayhall 782). I would add, however, that the relationship between Parker and Lady Mary not only reflects a breaking down of rigid class boundaries, but also serves to emphasise a shift in the status of the professional detective. In portraying Parker as a fallible character, one who is capable of falling in love, Sayers effectively renders the professional detective a more sympathetic figure.

This strategy, I would argue, is reminiscent of those Victorian novels in which authors set out to present the professional detective in more humane terms. Consider, for example, Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853), in which the detective Inspector Bucket emerges as a distinctly ambiguous figure. On the one hand, Bucket is the agent

of a corrupt legal system, and the novel emphasises his great powers of surveillance. To the crossing-sweeper Jo, indeed, Bucket is a distinctly menacing figure; as Allan Woodcourt puts it, the terrified Jo, who has been driven away by Bucket, “believes this person to be everywhere, and cognisant of everything” (Dickens 667). At the same time, however, Dickens takes steps to make Bucket a more likeable and sympathetic character, offering the reader glimpses of his home life with “Mrs Bucket – a lady of a natural detective genius” (743). As Yoon puts it, Dickens’s strategy is one of “making the detective relatable and humane” (Yoon 60). As the novel unfolds, additionally, Bucket is increasingly figured as a servant to the upper-class Dedlock family; Trodd finds that, while Bucket is initially presented “as a figure of near-magical power, he is progressively tamed, and ends the novel as a kind of domestic servant” (Trodd 32). For Trodd, Dickens’s approach to the professional detective in this novel is “a strategy of containment,” of “domestic taming” (32, 33). Sayers’s portrayal of the professional detective in the early Wimsey novels represents a similar strategy of “domestic taming”: Parker is made “relatable and humane” through his friendship with Lord Peter and his feelings for Lady Mary, and he is eventually absorbed into the Wimsey family. It would appear that the professional detective, once a slippery and ambiguous figure, has now been “tamed” to the point where they can be assimilated into the upper-class household through marriage.

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that, in *Clouds of Witness* at least, “the detective in love” is clearly not meant to be taken seriously. Throughout the novel, Parker’s feelings for Lady Mary are presented in exaggerated terms, and are often used as a source of humour. Indeed, this trend is continued in *Strong Poison*, in which Lord Peter – who describes Parker as a “perfect Victorian” – finally confronts Parker about his feelings for Lady Mary: “For the last five years or so, [...] you have been looking like a demented sheep at my sister, and starting like a rabbit whenever her name is mentioned. What do you mean by it? It is not ornamental. It is not exhilarating. You unnerve the poor girl” (SP 185–6). Parker’s relationship with Lady Mary becomes almost farcical, with Sayers making it clear that Parker is so constrained by “Victorian” notions of propriety that he is unable to act on his obvious feelings for her. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that, in *Clouds of Witness*, Sayers depicts a conflict between Parker’s feelings for Lady Mary, and his “official instinct” as a detective. In Chapter 2, I identified a recurring trend in which the professional detective is frequently

required to act as the voice of reason – to remind the gentleman amateur of their responsibilities as a detective, and to ensure that the investigation can continue to progress. In the 1928 Introduction, additionally, Sayers had suggested that it is easier for the professional detective than the gentleman amateur to “suitably retain the impersonal attitude of the surgeon” (GSS 38). It is all the more striking, then, that in *Clouds of Witness*, Sayers presents us with a contrasting situation in which the professional detective struggles to maintain this “impersonal attitude”; the intensity of Parker’s feelings for Lady Mary threatens to undermine his professionalism as a detective.

Parker’s attitude towards the investigation contrasts sharply with that of Lord Peter. At the beginning of the novel, Lord Peter advises Parker to “cut out the considerations of delicacy. We’re goin’ to work this case like any other. If anything unpleasant turns up, I’d rather you saw it than anybody else. It’s an uncommonly pretty little case, on its merits, and I’m goin’ to put some damn good work into it” (CW 40). Lord Peter thus makes it clear that he will treat this case like any other, and that his sole concern is to uncover the facts – an attitude continually re-emphasised throughout the novel. At a particularly stressful moment, for instance, Lord Peter explodes: “I’ll have the truth of this beastly business if we all go to the gallows together!” (132). While the lives of his own family may be at stake, Lord Peter is seemingly able to maintain an “impersonal attitude” toward the investigation. It is hardly surprising, then, that McGregor and Lewis should go so far as to claim that “[t]he fragile, sensitive Wimsey, mindful of the consequence of his discoveries, is virtually nonexistent [*sic*] in this novel” (McGregor and Lewis 57). However, I would dispute this claim. While it is true that Lord Peter appears to be largely unaffected by this case, a closer reading reveals that he is not entirely comfortable with this situation. Consider, for example, the argument between Lord Peter and Parker in Chapter 6 of the novel:

“If you can think,” said Mr Parker, with some heat, “that that woman” – he indicated the photographs – “had any hand in murdering Cathcart, I don’t care what your evidence is, you – hang it all, Wimsey, she’s your own sister.”

“Gerald is my brother,” said Wimsey quietly. “You don’t suppose I’m exactly enjoying this business, do you? But I think we shall get along very much better if we try to keep our tempers.” (CW 122)

What this argument serves to emphasise is the fact that Lord Peter, far from being “a detached eccentric with no worldly stake in the outcome of the action,” has a personal stake in the outcome of this particular case – something that inevitably affects his attitude toward detection. In the previous novel, *Whose Body?*, Lord Peter had explained to Parker that “I love the beginning of a job – when one doesn’t know any of the people and it’s just exciting and amusing” (*WB* 124). In *Clouds of Witness*, however, Sayers presents the reader with a different kind of investigation – a case in which, from the very beginning, Lord Peter *does* “know [...] the people” under investigation, and, in fact, is intimately connected to them. The result is that, with characteristic understatement, he is not “exactly enjoying this business.”

Even more revealing is the later scene in which Lord Peter visits his brother Gerald, who is being held at York prison. Here, Gerald not only refuses to explain his whereabouts on the night of Cathcart’s death – “I’m not bound to say where I was. I’m presumed innocent, aren’t I, till they prove me guilty?” – but also accuses Lord Peter of behaving frivolously, treating the case as “an opportunity to play Sherlock Holmes” and “makin’ a public spectacle” of himself (*CW* 186–7). Infuriated by this accusation, Lord Peter bursts out:

“Hell!” said Lord Peter, with such vehemence that the wooden-faced warder actually jumped. “It’s you that’s makin’ the spectacle! It need never have started, but for you. Do you think / like havin’ my brother and sister dragged through the Courts, and reporters swarmin’ over the place, and paragraphs and news-bills with your name staring at me from every corner, and all this ghastly business, endin’ up in a great show in the House of Lords, with a lot of people togged up in scarlet and ermine, and all the rest of the damnfool jiggery-pokery? People are beginnin’ to look oddly at me in the Club, and I can jolly well hear ’em whisperin’ that ‘Denver’s attitude looks jolly fishy, b’gad!’ Cut it out, Jerry.” (187)

Lord Peter and Gerald are left “star[ing] angrily at one another” – a moment of tension which soon passes, with Lord Peter “recovering himself” and apologising for his outburst: “I’m frightfully sorry. I didn’t mean to let myself go like that” (188). Nevertheless, this momentary loss of self-control is revealing; Sayers makes it clear that, in tackling an investigation of such a personal nature – in seeing his own “brother and sister dragged through the Courts” – Lord Peter is subject to considerable

emotional strain. The archetypal image of the detached, Holmesian sleuth is disrupted, however briefly, by Lord Peter's angry outburst.

This loss of detachment can be seen as part of a recurring pattern in the Wimsey novels – and, as Basney's comments make clear, this pattern sets Lord Peter apart from other fictional detectives of the Golden Age. Here, I will return to the arguments presented by Beller, who, as I noted in Chapter 1, has shown that mid-nineteenth century sensation fiction typically presents detection as “an intrinsically personal event” (Beller 50). Crucially, Beller also highlights the contrast between these portrayals of detection as “intrinsically personal,” and later conceptions of the detective as detached observer, identifying a recurring trend in Golden Age detective fiction:

In many detective novels of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, the figure of the detective customarily solves crimes that are separate from himself or herself. In novels from the Golden Age of detective fiction in the first part of the twentieth century, detectives such as Hercule Poirot, Miss Marple, and Roderick Alleyn function primarily as objective observers and, whether amateur or professional, generally remain detached from the invested emotional responses generated by the crime. (50)

Significantly, however, Beller adds a footnote, pointing out that Lord Peter represents an “obvious” exception to this rule: “Not only does Wimsey investigate the crimes in *Strong Poison* and *Gaudy Night* chiefly through personal attachment to Harriet Vane but also habitually succumbs to nervous exhaustion akin to mental breakdown after most of his cases” (60). In the Wimsey novels, then, there is a recurring pattern in which Sayers deepens the characterisation of her lead detective by presenting narratives in which Lord Peter is unable to “remain detached”; the result is that he emerges, not as the traditional, “objective” investigator who is largely exempt from “invested emotional responses,” but as a more flawed and vulnerable figure, comparable to the personally invested detectives of sensation fiction. While *Strong Poison* – in which Lord Peter falls in love with the chief suspect, Harriet Vane – is, as Beller's observations make clear, a particularly noteworthy example of this trend, I would point out that *Clouds of Witness* can be seen as another example. In this early novel, Sayers portrays the detective – both the professional and the gentleman amateur – as flawed and potentially fallible. Lord Peter's relationship with his own family, and Parker's feelings for Lady Mary, both serve to undermine the traditional conception of the detective as detached and eminently rational.

As well as illustrating the limitations of the detective, however, *Clouds of Witness* also calls our attention to the limitations of the gentleman – and the feudal gentleman in particular. Here, Sayers’s novel can be usefully compared to Ford Madox Ford’s *The Good Soldier* (1915), a novel Berberich summarises as an “epitaph to the ideal of the Victorian gentleman” (Berberich, “Modernist Elegy” 207). A key character in this novel is Edward Ashburnham – the “Good Soldier” of the novel’s title – who appears to be the epitome of the country gentleman; the novel’s American narrator, Dowell, describes Ashburnham as “an excellent magistrate, a first rate soldier, one of the best landlords, so they said, in Hampshire, England” (Ford, *Good Soldier* 18). In particular, Ashburnham strives to live up to the traditional image of the feudal landlord – and is distressed that his wife Leonora does not appear to share “[h]is own theory – the feudal theory of an overlord doing his best by his dependents, the dependents meanwhile doing their best for the overlord” (119–20). Ashburnham, Dowell explains, thus seeks “some other woman who would give him the moral support that he needed” (127). With a keen sense of irony, Dowell observes that “[h]e found several – for there were quite a number of ladies in his set who were capable of agreeing with this handsome and fine fellow that the duties of a feudal gentleman were feudal” (127–8). It is precisely this ideal of the handsome, fine “feudal gentleman” that Ford undermines: Berberich usefully examines Ford’s portrayal of Ashburnham in detail, showing how Ford “dismantles traditional codes of gentlemanliness by subverting the ideal through bitter irony” (Berberich, “Modernist Elegy” 206). While Ashburnham may appear to be a chivalrous and sentimental lover, for example, this image is undercut by his repeated unfaithfulness to Leonora, as Berberich points out: “His chivalric attitude towards women is consequently revealed as nothing deeper than serial womanising” (204). Indeed, Ford’s subversion of “traditional codes of gentlemanliness” is emphasised by the fact that Ashburnham’s supposedly admirable desire to fulfil “the duties of a feudal gentleman” is linked to his infidelity.

A particularly noteworthy incident in Ford’s novel is the Kilsythe case, in which Ashburnham, travelling by train, attempts to “comfort” a distressed young woman: “That was his job in life. He was desperately unhappy himself and it seemed to him the most natural thing in the world that they should pool their sorrows. He was quite democratic; the idea of the difference in their station never seems to have occurred to him” (Ford, *Good Soldier* 122). As Dowell notes, “[t]he girl, however, had not forgotten

the difference of her station" (122). When Ashburnham embraces and kisses her, she is horrified: "All her life, by her mother, by other girls, by schoolteachers, by the whole tradition of her class she had been warned against gentlemen. She was being kissed by a gentleman. She screamed, tore herself away; sprang up and pulled a communication cord" (122). Berberich has offered an illuminating comment regarding this scene:

This incident also has its roots in earlier literature and shows that servant girls, too, have had their share of emancipation from lordly rights of caddish gentlemen since the days of Richardson's *Pamela*. Society is here shown as having moved on from the days of gentlemen having the freedom to take whatever took their fancy. Ashburnham, for once well-meaning rather than selfish and caddish, falls victim to that. (Berberich, "Modernist Elegy" 207)

It is debateable whether Sayers "dismantles traditional codes of gentlemanliness" quite as thoroughly as Ford does. Instead, I would argue that we may recognise an echo of this scene in novels such as *Clouds of Witness* and *Strong Poison*, as Sayers, too, makes it clear that society has "moved on from the days of gentlemen having the freedom to take whatever took their fancy."

In *Clouds of Witness*, Sayers can be seen to satirise the ideal of the "feudal gentleman" through her portrayal of Gerald, Duke of Denver, who is described by his brother, Lord Peter, as "a good, clean, decent, thorough-bred public schoolboy, and a shocking ass" (CW 46). In accordance with the expectations imposed on the typical "public schoolboy," Gerald feels a chivalric urge to shield Mrs Grimethorpe; he therefore fails to give a satisfactory account of his whereabouts on the night Cathcart was killed, and so endangers himself. When Lord Peter finally uncovers the truth about Gerald's affair, Sayers emphasises the image of "Denver, with his kind, stupid, English-gentleman ideas about honour," remaining "obstinately" silent, and so "setting in motion the enormous, creaking machinery of a trial by his noble peers in order to safeguard a woman's reputation" (216). In this way, Sayers undercuts the ideal of the English gentleman: while Gerald may be "kind," his stubborn adherence to "English-gentleman ideas about honour" is shown to be inflexible to the point of "stupid[ity]," and he ultimately emerges as an unimaginative "ass" who places both himself and Mrs Grimethorpe in danger.

As I showed in Chapter 2, however, Lord Peter is not necessarily exempt from Sayers's satirical treatment. When Lord Peter first encounters Mrs Grimethorpe, indeed, he feels compelled to "stay and protect" her from her abusive husband, and it is with some difficulty that she persuades him to leave: "Peter cast Public School tradition to the winds, caught up his stick, and went" (97). It is only "a strong conviction that he could only make matters worse for her" that prevents him from returning (97). When Lord Peter uncovers the truth about her relationship with Gerald, additionally, he asks Mrs Grimethorpe to establish Gerald's innocence by testifying in court. Sayers makes it clear, however, that in revealing her relationship with Gerald, Mrs Grimethorpe would risk being killed by her abusive husband. Her conversation with Lord Peter is underscored by the knowledge that he cannot guarantee her safety:

"I will try, but I can promise nothing. I will do everything that is possible to protect you. If you care at all for my brother—"

"I don't know. I am so horribly afraid. He was kind and good to me. He was – so different. But I am afraid – I'm afraid." (223)

In this novel, then, Sayers undermines the ideal of the gentleman and "public schoolboy." While "Public School tradition" may demand that Lord Peter and Gerald protect Mrs Grimethorpe, they are ultimately unable to do so. The gentleman thus emerges as a rather ineffectual figure.

In fact, the "feudal gentleman" may be outright dangerous. In particular, Rowland has argued that, in *Clouds of Witness*, Sayers uses "the detecting plot to explore fears of aristocratic feudality as sexual and class exploitation" (Rowland 125). Identifying Mrs Grimethorpe as "the focus of masculine feudal desire," Rowland observes that "feudal sexuality imperils her and the pressure on the woman to come to the duke's aid in court nearly proves fatal" (125). If Sayers presents "feudal sexuality" as a threat, then Lord Peter's first reaction to the sight of Mrs Grimethorpe – a key scene that Rowland emphasises – is all the more striking:

Medusa was beautiful, says the tale, and so was this woman; a broad white forehead under massed, dusky hair, black eyes glowing under straight brows, a wide, passionate mouth – a shape so wonderful that even in that strenuous moment sixteen generations of feudal privilege stirred in Lord Peter's blood. His hands closed over hers instinctively, but she pulled herself hurriedly away and shrank back. (CW 96)

As Rowland points out, Lord Peter's "erotic desires" are here presented "in explicitly feudal terms" (Rowland 125). Lord Peter is thus implicated in what Rowland identifies as "a feudal stain of exploitative class and sexual predation" (126). In *Clouds of Witness*, then, Sayers evokes – to use Berberich's words – the "lordly rights of caddish gentlemen," while simultaneously making it clear that such a concept is out of place in modern society. The Gothic undertones of *Clouds of Witness* serve to further emphasise the dangers of upper-class masculinity; like Ford, Sayers suggests that the "feudal gentleman," in spite of their supposedly chivalrous attitude, is, in reality, a flawed and fallible individual subject to an erotic imagination with sadistic undercurrents.

This human shortcoming is re-emphasised toward the end of the novel, when Lord Peter speaks to Parker:

"Horribly self-centred, you are," grumbled Mr Parker.

"I know. I always was from a child. But what worries me is that I seem to be gettin' so susceptible. When Barbara turned me down—"

"You're cured," said his friend brutally. "As a matter of fact, I've noticed it for some time." (CW 293)

Here, Sayers offers the reader a brief glimpse of Lord Peter's past; in the "Biographical Note" which was appended to new editions of the Wimsey novels from 1935 onwards, Sayers would explain that Lord Peter had had his heart broken by his first love, Barbara, who married another man while he was serving in the First World War. This exchange between Lord Peter and Parker, however, makes it clear that Lord Peter has been "cured" of this past heartbreak – and that, far from being the brilliant Holmesian sleuth who stands above "emotional entanglements," he is, in reality, a fallible human being, "susceptible" to the pressures of romantic and sexual attraction. Thus, Sayers hints at the possibility of future romance. Indeed, the spectre of "feudal sexuality" will re-emerge in a later novel, *Strong Poison*, in which Sayers not only returns to the "problem of the detective in love," but also reaffirms the limitations of the gentleman. In *Strong Poison*, as I will show, Sayers's portrayal of the relationship between Lord Peter and Harriet Vane makes it even more apparent that society has "moved on from the days of gentlemen having the freedom to take whatever took their fancy."

3.3 “I am changing, changing, fearfully changing”: Romance and the Gentleman Detective in *Strong Poison*

In *Strong Poison*, the fifth Wimsey novel, Harriet Vane, a successful detective novelist, has been accused of poisoning her former lover, Philip Boyes, and Lord Peter takes it on himself to clear her name. On the surface, then, the plot of *Strong Poison* is comparable to that of *Clouds of Witness*; in both novels, the gentleman amateur is challenged to prove the innocence of a wrongly suspected individual who has been imprisoned, and is being tried for murder. However, there is an important point of contrast between the two novels: in Harriet’s case, the proceedings are fraught with specifically gendered complications, an issue made particularly apparent by the trial scene that opens *Strong Poison*. Harriet’s private life is harshly scrutinised, and she is judged on the basis of her unconventional lifestyle; the elderly and unsympathetic judge describes, with distaste, Harriet’s decision to live with a man to whom she was not married, while acknowledging that “in such a situation, the woman always has to pay more heavily than the man” (*SP* 5). As Wade puts it, “[t]he case is really a trial of Harriet’s lifestyle; the judge’s implication is that an educated and highly successful working woman who rejects conformity in her living arrangements [...] is likely to be willing to undermine social order to the extent of murdering her ex-lover” (Wade 136). The events of *Strong Poison*, then, clearly support Rowland’s claim that, in detective fiction of the Golden Age, “the law is not a stable, infallible system for administering justice, and [...] its instabilities are often bound up with formations of gender” (Rowland 21). Compared to Gerald, a titled aristocrat, a woman such as Harriet is far more vulnerable to the potential failings of the legal system.

Indeed, the events of *Strong Poison* serve to complicate Parker’s role; as Parker himself points out, he and Lord Peter have found themselves “on opposite sides” (*SP* 63). Here, we might recall the events of the previous Wimsey novel, *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*, in which, as I showed in Chapter 2, Lord Peter’s involvement with George and Robert Fentiman leads him to recognise, “for the first time,” Parker’s identification with “the police” (*UBC* 214). In *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* and *Strong Poison*, Sayers not only shows how marginalised individuals such as George Fentiman – a neurasthenic veteran whose history of illness leads others to suspect him of murder – and Harriet Vane, a “successful working woman” who has made unconventional choices in her private life, may be unjustly

targeted by the legal system, but also calls our attention to Parker's status as a member of "the police." If "the law is not a stable, infallible system for administering justice," then it is striking that Parker is, in essence, an agent of this potentially fallible system.

Admittedly, Sayers is also careful to make it clear that Parker respects Lord Peter's judgement, and that he is keen to see justice done. In *Strong Poison*, he earnestly assures Lord Peter: "I'll do my best. And if you find out anything which really proves that we've been on the wrong track, you'll let us know, won't you? We don't want to make large and ignominious public mistakes" (SP 63). Nevertheless, it is difficult to separate Parker from the gendered "instabilities" of the "law," and to escape from the impression that the friendship between Lord Peter and Parker has been disrupted by the latter's association with the police.⁷ While the professional detective may have become a more humane and likeable character, they remain, inescapably, the agent of a flawed and fallible legal system. We may recognise, therefore, a variation on the "police paradox" described by Roth: in situations where a marginalised individual has been unjustly targeted by the legal system, the need for the amateur detective to intervene and correct the "mistakes" of the official police force is all the greater.

An intriguing analysis of *Strong Poison* has been offered by Roth, who contends that novels such as *Strong Poison* and *Trent's Last Case* present us with "a redemptive fiction," a kind of fairy-tale romance, comparable to "the story of Perseus and Andromeda, or St. George and the Dragon. [...] If the hero kills the dragon, he wins the woman" (Roth 130). What this argument perhaps overlooks, however, is the fact that *Strong Poison* does not end with the successful resolution of Lord Peter and Harriet's relationship. Sayers herself would claim that, while she had originally intended to end the novel with Lord Peter's marriage to Harriet Vane, she found herself unable to accept such a conclusion: "I could not marry Peter off to the young woman he had (in the conventional Perseus manner) rescued from death and infamy, because I could find no form of words in which she could accept him without loss of self-respect" (Sayers, "Gaudy Night" 27). While "the conventional rules of detective fiction" might

⁷ Indeed, it is perhaps worth noting that, following *Strong Poison*, Parker essentially retreats to the background of the Wimsey novels. In many later novels, Parker is either absent, or relegated to brief appearances. The notable exception is *Murder Must Advertise*, in which Sayers not only gives Parker a major role but also offers the reader a glimpse of his home life with Lady Mary.

demand that the characters “fall into one another’s arms” at the end of the novel, Sayers asserts, such an ending would have been “false and degrading” to the characters she had created (27). The relationship between Lord Peter and Harriet Vane, then, will not conform to the “conventional Perseus” narrative, in which the hero “wins the woman” through his chivalrous deeds. As I will show in Chapter 4, indeed, it is not until *Gaudy Night* that Harriet is able to accept Lord Peter’s proposal of marriage “without loss of self-respect.”

Thus, *Strong Poison* illustrates the limitations of the gentleman detective, who is ultimately unable to secure the object of his desires; as Rowland puts it, Lord Peter “is found to be insufficiently distanced from ‘knight errant’ forms of masculinity for Harriet to accept him as a potential partner” (Rowland 29). The “feudal gentleman” has yet to evolve into an acceptable “partner.” In *Strong Poison*, however, Sayers emphasises not only Lord Peter’s fallibility as a *gentleman*, but also as a *detective*. For one thing, the novel re-emphasises Lord Peter’s unease with the consequences of detection, as he reflects: “I’m beginning to dislike this job of getting people hanged. It’s damnable for their friends ... I won’t think about hanging. It’s unnerving” (*SP* 131). More importantly, *Strong Poison* presents the reader with a much more serious approach to the “problem of the detective in love.” Whereas Parker’s feelings for Lady Mary are principally treated as a source of comedy, the same cannot be said of Lord Peter’s feelings for Harriet; in *Strong Poison*, Lord Peter emerges, not as the detached and infallible “super-sleuth” who stands above “emotional entanglements,” but as a frustrated and powerless individual, yearning for something he cannot have and questioning his own ability to detect. Just as Sayers challenges the boundaries of detective fiction by allowing romance to intrude on the “glittering mechanism” of the mystery story, so is the mind of the great detective – that supposedly perfect “thinking machine” – thrown off-balance by the intrusion of romance.

To illustrate this sense of disruption, I will return to a particularly noteworthy passage from *Strong Poison*, which I highlighted in Chapter 1. In this passage, Lord Peter, returning from an investigative trip to fashionable Bloomsbury, experiences a dramatic moment of self-recognition:

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 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. (98–9)

This longer passage reflects Sayers’s belief that the Golden Age detective was “ceas[ing] to be impenetrable and infallible.” Here, Lord Peter is neither “impenetrable” nor “infallible”; Sayers provides the reader with full access to his thoughts, and his confusion and “helplessness” are fully apparent:

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. (99)

It is perhaps worth considering Wald’s analysis of this passage: “Sayers links Peter’s crisis of self confidence, here almost a moment of sexual failure, with novelistic *Bildung*. She also exploits the ambiguity of Wimsey’s situation; is ‘what he had undertaken’ the pursuit of the man who killed Philip Boyes or marriage to Harriet Vane?” (Wald 103). The sense of “novelistic *Bildung*” identified by Wald serves to emphasise the extent to which Sayers expands the possibilities of detective fiction by introducing a love story. Whereas the image of the detective as a “thinking machine,” according to Roth, suggests that the detective is “a fixed, undeveloping character type,” Lord Peter here recognises that he is “changing” and developing – making it clear that he is not a mere “thinking machine,” but “a man touched with the feeling of our infirmities.” Even if he succeeds in “his present enterprise” – as he eventually does – he can “never be the same again.”

I would also argue that, again, there is a resonance between the characterisation of the detective and the workings of the genre. Sayers’s detective fiction, too, is “changing,” being propelled into fresh territory by the introduction of romance: while *Strong Poison* does ultimately end with “the satisfactory resolution of the detective story,” as Wald notes, “Sayers lets the love interest loose in the world, opening up the possibilities for further confrontation with the detective story” (103). The introduction of romance marks a significant shift in Sayers’s approach to the genre, and her detective novels can “never be the same again.”

What is particularly noteworthy is the shift in focus that marks this part of the novel; as Lord Peter struggles to make progress, “fumbling” and “grasping uncertainly,” the novel turns its attention from the external to the internal, putting the detective’s thoughts and feelings on display. Here, there is perhaps an echo of *The Moonstone*, in which Rachel Verinder’s feelings for Franklin Blake are a key aspect of the plot. “While the male characters work to detect the thief,” Pykett observes, “Rachel is engaged in a psychic drama of detecting what she perceives as the awful truth about herself” – namely, the “guilty secret” of her feelings toward Franklin Blake, who she believes to be a criminal (Pykett 53). Pykett goes on to point out that, “[a]s is the case with most sensation heroines, the drama of Rachel’s feelings and sensations is displayed as a spectacle to the reader, and is the source of some of the novel’s most sensational writing” (53). In *Strong Poison*, similarly, the narrative foregrounds not only the work of detecting the murderer, but also the “psychic drama” of Lord Peter’s “personal feelings.” His gaze turns inwards as he detects his own feelings, and those feelings are “displayed as a spectacle to the reader.” Here, it is worth noting that Lord Peter’s feelings are also visible to other characters within the novel. Bunter, for example, is aware that Lord Peter has fallen in love with Harriet Vane – prompting Lord Peter to ask: “It seems that I am being obvious. I have no wish to be anything of the kind. If you see me being obvious, will you drop me a hint?” (*SP* 87). Lord Peter then steps “anxiously” to the mirror to inspect his own reflection (87). For Wald, “[t]his crucial moment [...] demystifies the Golden Age detective, whose power over others derives in part from the inscrutability of his own brain” (Wald 102). In *Strong Poison*, then, Sayers disrupts the image of the “impenetrable and infallible” super-sleuth in more ways than one – by making it clear that Lord Peter’s “personal feelings” are “obvious” to those around him, and by providing the reader with detailed access to the “spectacle” of Lord Peter’s inner turmoil.

With its close focus on the great detective’s anguish and helplessness, *Strong Poison* further emphasises the fact that Lord Peter’s usual performance of upper-class frivolity is just that – a performance. Sayers herself would acknowledge this issue in the essay “Gaudy Night,” in which she looks back on the early Wimsey novels with a rather self-deprecating air. Airily describing herself as “putting my puppet through all his tricks,” Sayers asserts that Lord Peter “remain[ed] static except for a repertory of tricks and attitudes,” and that this would eventually make him “a monstrous weariness

to his maker” (Sayers, “Gaudy Night” 26). After writing *Strong Poison*, and finding herself confronted with the dilemma of how to resolve Lord Peter and Harriet’s relationship, Sayers claims, she realised that she would have to “perform a major operation” on Lord Peter – to transform her “puppet” into “a complete human being” (27). Crucially, however, Sayers acknowledges that she had provided herself with a useful starting point for this ambitious “operation”: “When I came to examine the patient, he showed the embryonic buds of a character of sorts. Even at the beginning he had not been the complete silly ass: he had only played the silly ass, which was not the same thing” (28). Indeed, Lord Peter often casts himself in the role of “the silly ass,” an exaggerated performance that can aid him in his role as a detective by camouflaging his intellect (as I showed in Chapter 2). This façade of upper-class frivolity recurs throughout *Strong Poison*, especially when Lord Peter meets with Harriet; Schaub has pointed out that Lord Peter “plays almost a parody of his own already exaggerated persona during the prison visits so as to amuse her” (Schaub, “Politics of Sentiment” 20). By maintaining this kind of “exaggerated” performance, Schaub goes on to argue, Lord Peter can also “mask, at some emotional cost to himself, his fears of failing to clear Harriet, which prey on him throughout the novel” (20–1). It seems that Lord Peter can still play “the silly ass,” when he needs to do so – and yet *Strong Poison* dramatically undermines this façade of upper-class frivolity by presenting readers with the “spectacle” of the detective’s clouded “personal feelings.”

Above all, *Strong Poison* makes it clear that Lord Peter is beginning to tire of continually playing “the silly ass”: he is self-conscious about how he might be perceived by Harriet Vane, and he resents the fact that others do not seem to see beyond his usual mask of upper-class facetiousness. This dissatisfaction is most clearly shown when Parker is unable to take Lord Peter’s feelings seriously:

“Good Lord,” exclaimed Parker, “you don’t seriously say—”

“Oh, no!” retorted Wimsey, bitterly. “I’m not expected to be serious. A buffoon, that’s what I am. I now know exactly what Jack Point feels like. I used to think the *Yeoman* [sic] sentimental tosh, but it is all too true. Would you like to see me dance in motley?” (SP 62)

There is a meta-fictional aspect to Lord Peter’s unhappiness; his irritation that he is “not expected to be serious” can be seen as reflective of Sayers’s dissatisfaction with

Lord Peter's "everlasting breeziness," as well as her efforts to deepen his characterisation by emphasising a more "serious" version of her aristocratic sleuth. It is particularly telling that Lord Peter compares himself to Jack Point, a character in the Gilbert and Sullivan opera *The Yeomen of the Guard* (1888). While Gilbert and Sullivan are known for producing a series of light comedy operas, *The Yeomen of the Guard* is widely seen as being slightly more serious in tone than their other works; a key character in this opera is Jack Point, a professional jester who is jilted. In a notable speech, Point bitterly reflects on the ironic fact that he is paid to amuse others, even when he feels broken-hearted:

I am a salaried wit; and is there aught in nature more ridiculous? A poor dull, heart-broken man, who must needs be merry, or he will be whipped; who must rejoice, lest he starve; who must jest you, jibe you, quip you, crank you, wrack you, riddle you, from hour to hour, from day to day, from year to year, lest he dwindle, perish, starve, pine and die! Why, when there's naught else to laugh at, I laugh at myself till I ache for it!
(*Corgi Book* 313–4)

The fact that Lord Peter compares himself to such a character makes it clear that he is tired of having to continually maintain his performance as an exaggerated "buffoon"; he has begun to resent the confining mask he wears, and is eager to adopt a more serious role.

To illustrate Lord Peter's predicament, I will again turn to the theories of Silvan Tomkins. According to Tomkins, "[t]here are no roles, in any society, which do not sometimes or for some individuals create acute awareness of discrepancy between the demands of the role and one's ability to meet these demands" (Tomkins 436). Here, Tomkins draws on *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (1956) by Erving Goffman – a sociological text in which the author analyses social interaction through the lens of theatrical performance – and asserts that "the self is to *some* extent an actor in a play in which he is not always perfectly cast" (436). Crucially, Tomkins goes on to offer several different examples of individuals who may struggle to meet the demands of the societal role they have assumed – such as "the soldier who does not want to kill or who wishes to run away," or "the judge who is not certain the law he applies is just or that he is himself without sin" – and concludes that "all of these are actors who do not know their lines perfectly or who cannot speak them with complete conviction" (436–7). For Tomkins, "[s]uch actors are forever vulnerable to the lure of

abandoning the mask and crying out their humiliation” (437). I would argue that these claims are echoed in *Strong Poison*, with Lord Peter emerging as an actor who struggles to meet the demands of the various roles he has assumed. For one thing, Lord Peter’s ability to play the role of the brilliant, Holmesian super-sleuth is compromised, as his “personal feelings” interfere with his detective abilities, leaving him “fumbling – grasping uncertainly.” Perhaps more importantly, the intensity of these feelings, as well as Lord Peter’s desire to be taken seriously as a potential suitor for Harriet Vane, means that Lord Peter can no longer play the “buffoon” with “complete conviction.” As he grapples with his feelings for Harriet, and with the difficult task in front of him, “abandoning the mask” is a tempting prospect.

Nowhere is this more clearly apparent than in a key passage in which Lord Peter, alone in his London flat, confronts his own reflection. Here, Sayers again makes a “spectacle” of the detective’s “personal feelings,” presenting the reader with another detailed insight into Lord Peter’s mental state:

It was the 30th of December, and he still had no plan. The stately volumes on his shelves, rank after rank of saint, historian, poet, philosopher, mocked his impotence. All that wisdom and all that beauty, and they could not show him how to save the woman he imperiously wanted, from a sordid death by hanging. And he had thought himself rather clever at that kind of thing. The enormous and complicated imbecility of things was all round him like a trap. He ground his teeth and raged helplessly, striding about the suave, wealthy, futile room. (*SP* 181)

As Lord Peter examines his reflection in the mirror, noting his “fair, foolish face” and impeccably tailored clothing, he is suddenly seized by the urge “to smash the mirror and smash the face – to break out into great animal howls and gestures” (181–2). As critics have argued, this animalistic “impulse” signifies his desire to break free of his self-imposed role as the “buffoon.” Hannay, for example, observes that Lord Peter “is ready to remove the Wooster mask which has made even Parker unable to believe he is serious about Harriet” (Hannay 46). Similarly, Kenney argues that this scene points toward “Sayers’s intention to transform this perfect image of an English gentleman and consummate thinking machine into a real human being” (Kenney 84). While the image in the mirror evokes “the guise of the stereotypical English gentleman,” Kenney notes, “Wimsey sees the image as repressive and wishes to be free of it” (85). Lord Peter’s predicament means that he can no longer play his typical roles – the “English

gentleman” and the great detective, the “consummate thinking machine” – with “complete conviction.” He thus falls prey to what Tomkins summarises as “the lure of abandoning the mask and crying out” in “humiliation.”

More generally, this scene serves to emphasise the frustration Lord Peter experiences throughout *Strong Poison*: having failed to make any progress in the case, and with time rapidly running out, he can only rage “helplessly” at his predicament. It is worth noting that, while Lord Peter does eventually solve the mystery, he succeeds only with the help of his female agents, Miss Murchison and Miss Climpson, who play a vital role in securing much-needed evidence; Miss Climpson, in particular, effectively takes over Lord Peter’s role as detective for a significant portion of the novel. For much of *Strong Poison*, then, Lord Peter is disempowered, making little progress as a detective or as a lover. This sense of failure has been emphasised by critics such as Hannay and Kenney, who illustrate the extent to which Sayers deepens the characterisation of her detective by drawing out his limitations: Hannay argues that the introduction of Harriet Vane provides Sayers with a new way “to reveal Peter’s personal frailties, making him more human and less cardboard” (Hannay 45). “This process,” Hannay goes on to argue, “is carefully begun in *Strong Poison*. For the first time we see our great detective at a loss” (46). Similarly, Kenney asserts that “Wimsey’s unsuccessful attempts to woo Vane [...] humble the former superman, who has been used to getting whatever he wants” (Kenney 84). In *Strong Poison*, then, the “great detective” emerges not as an infallible “super-sleuth,” but as a frustrated and powerless individual. His – admittedly temporary – failure to detect is only emphasised by the narrator’s dryly understated remark that “he had thought himself rather clever at that sort of thing.”

This sense of frustration and powerlessness, I would point out, invests the details of Lord Peter’s London flat with a new significance. In this scene, Sayers provides the reader with a description of his luxuriously appointed flat – a reminder that, as Kenney puts it, Lord Peter “has been used to getting whatever he wants.” Now, however, these signifiers of wealth and privilege contrast ironically with the fact that he cannot have the one thing he desires most – “the woman he imperiously wanted.” Thus, his “suave” and “wealthy” room seems merely “futile,” and his extensive collection of books “mock[s] his impotence.” The language that Sayers uses, too, is revealing; we might recall Wald’s suggestion that Lord Peter’s “crisis of self

confidence” is “almost a moment of sexual failure.” What emerges in this later passage is not just the frustration of the great detective who has failed to solve the case, but also the “impotence” of the feudal gentleman who cannot have the woman he “imperiously” desires.

Above all, it is striking that Lord Peter is specifically described as “imperiously” desiring Harriet Vane. Hannay, too, has highlighted this choice of words, pointing out that Lord Peter appears “to care as much about his own inability to achieve his ends as about Harriet herself; as yet he has none of the sympathetic understanding he achieves in *Gaudy Night*” (Hannay 46). Indeed, this lack of “sympathetic understanding” recurs throughout *Strong Poison*, as Lord Peter continually tries to persuade Harriet to marry him. More specifically, I would add that Sayers’s usage of the term “imperiously” also serves to remind the reader that Lord Peter is associated with a background of aristocratic privilege. We might recognise, indeed, an echo of *Clouds of Witness*, in which Lord Peter’s encounter with Mrs Grimethorpe not only reveals the gentleman detective’s capacity for sexual desire, but also calls our attention to the “sixteen generations of feudal privilege” from which he is descended. It is this troublesome legacy of “feudal privilege” that must inevitably inform any consideration of Lord Peter’s feelings for Harriet. In her portrayal of a gentleman who persistently strives to win over the woman he “imperiously” desires, Sayers perhaps evokes what Berberich describes as the “lordly rights of caddish gentlemen” who had “the freedom to take whatever took their fancy.”

The introduction of romance to the Wimsey novels, then, is significant on more than one level. On the one hand, as critics such as Hannay and Kenney have made clear, Lord Peter’s feelings for Harriet Vane do much to deepen the characterisation of the gentleman detective – to distance Lord Peter from the traditional image of the detective as a detached “thinking machine” who stands apart from “emotional entanglements.” At the same time, however, Lord Peter’s feelings toward Harriet also serve to reaffirm the flaws and limitations of the gentleman. In his efforts to capture the woman he “imperiously” desires, Lord Peter risks behaving like a self-centred and possessive feudal gentleman.

It is telling, for example, that when Lord Peter is visiting Harriet in prison for the final time, he cites his own background of aristocratic privilege as he tries to persuade her to marry him:

And as for the family traditions – they’re on my side, for what they’re worth. Anything a Wimsey does is right and Heaven help the person who gets in the way. We’ve got a damned old family motto about it – “I hold by my Whimsy” – quite right too. [...] I do jolly well intend to do what I like about marrying. Who’s to stop me? (*SP* 264–5).

According to Lord Peter, his background of “feudal privilege” authorises him to do as he pleases. There is one person, however, who *can* stop him from “marrying” whoever he likes: Harriet herself, who is, as yet, unable to accept his proposal. Exhausted by his persistence, she finally pleads that “I only want to get out of this and be left alone” (265). Significantly, Lord Peter concedes: “I won’t worry you. Not fair. Abusing my privilege and so on” (265). While his tone may be as breezy as ever, it is striking that Lord Peter describes himself as “[a]busing my privilege”: throughout *Strong Poison*, indeed, Lord Peter often seems to be rather self-centred and possessive, as he repeatedly visits Harriet in prison and attempts to win over this captive woman.

It is all the more significant, then, that the novel does not end with Lord Peter and Harriet’s marriage. As Sayers makes clear, Harriet’s circumstances make it impossible for her to accept his proposal – something which, crucially, Lord Peter ultimately recognises and accepts. When Harriet is finally released at the end of the novel, he is nowhere to be seen. While Harriet demonstrates her “basic honesty and integrity” by refusing “to fall into Wimsey’s protective arms,” as Kenney puts it, Lord Peter “demonstrates his own integrity” by “leaving without comment before she is released from custody” (Kenney 89). Harriet’s friend Eiluned Price offers a revealing comment: “He’s not going to do the King Cophetua stunt, and I take off my hat to him. If you want him, you’ll have to send for him” (*SP* 281). By referring to the story of “King Cophetua” – a tale in which a wealthy king falls in love with a beggar girl, and rescues her from poverty – Sayers makes it clear that the relationship between Harriet Vane and Lord Peter Wimsey will not conform to the conventional narrative in which a powerful gentleman quickly and easily captures the woman who has caught his eye.

When Harriet finally accepts Lord Peter’s proposal of marriage, in fact, he is presented not as a feudal gentleman, but as a scholar. In the essay “Gaudy Night,” Sayers explains that, before the relationship between the two characters could move forward, she would need to find “some device [...] for putting Harriet back on a footing of equality with her lover” (Sayers, “Gaudy Night” 29). The University of Oxford, the setting of *Gaudy Night*, would provide Sayers with such a “device”: in this kind of

setting, Lord Peter and Harriet can meet as equals who share an academic background and a set of values. As I noted in Chapter 2, Sayers emphasises the scholarly “doctrine that loyalty to the abstract truth must override all personal considerations” (*GN* 522). Key to the successful resolution of the relationship between Lord Peter and Harriet is a shared code of scrupulous personal integrity; as Sayers makes clear, both share the beliefs that “loyalty to the abstract truth” is of paramount importance, and that professional obligations must always be prioritised above “personal considerations.” Crucially, however, Sayers also makes it clear that such principles can have painful consequences. In Chapter 4, indeed, I will show how Lord Peter’s uncompromising “loyalty to the abstract truth” adds to the sense of moral ambiguity that surrounds detection in the Wimsey novels. In the later Wimsey novels, the gentleman detective is a fundamentally ambiguous figure: Lord Peter is a romantic and gentlemanly hero, and, at the same time, a ruthless figure whose quest to uncover the truth often results in the death of the criminal he has helped to apprehend. In negotiating her relationship with Lord Peter, Harriet must reckon with this uneasy confluence of roles.

4. “Bringing not peace but a sword”: Gentlemanliness, Romance, and the Moral Ambiguity of the Detective in *Gaudy Night*

In this final chapter, I focus principally on a late Wimsey novel, *Gaudy Night*, which is unusual in that it features no murder, and is closely concerned with the resolution of Lord Peter Wimsey and Harriet Vane’s relationship. In this novel, the threads of detection and romance are in fact closely intertwined, an aspect of Sayers’s writing that has frequently been criticised. Even Howard Haycraft, normally an admirer of Sayers, would contend that, in attempting to combine Lord Peter’s “intensive and finally successful wooing of his Harriet” with “a psychological and [...] murderless mystery,” Sayers had “intruded unwittingly on the dangerous no-man’s-land which is neither good detection nor good legitimate fiction” (Haycraft 138). I argue, however, that in overstepping the rigid boundaries typically imposed on the mystery story, Sayers enriches, rather than weakens, her detective fiction. In particular, I believe that, as a result of Sayers’s efforts to draw together the threads of detection and romance, to unify the intellectual and emotional aspects of the mystery story, the sense of moral ambiguity that surrounds the figure of the detective is made fully apparent in Sayers’s later novels. This chapter, then, focuses closely on the characterisation of Lord Peter Wimsey, and on the writing techniques Sayers deploys in *Gaudy Night*.

4.1 A More “psychologically complex” Situation: Lord Peter and Harriet’s Relationship

Gaudy Night explores the competing demands of work and romance for the educated woman, with Sayers declaring that – as Harriet Vane puts it – “one should do one’s own job, however trivial, and not persuade one’s self into doing somebody else’s, however noble” (GN 55). More importantly, the novel is also concerned with the question of *how* to “do one’s own job.” Sayers’s message is made particularly clear when, for instance, Harriet speaks to a college don, Miss de Vine, about “the difficulty of combining intellectual and emotional interests” (210). Significantly, Harriet and Miss de Vine agree that “[o]ne can’t be pitiful where one’s own job is concerned. [...] However painful it is, there’s always one thing one has to deal with sincerely” (212). This uncompromising insistence on the necessity of doing “one’s own job” properly – even when the results are “painful” – runs throughout *Gaudy Night*, a novel in which Sayers insists that professional obligations must always come before personal considerations. Such a message is heavily informed by the novel’s academic setting;

as Sayers herself would put it, the message is “that the same intellectual honesty that is essential to scholarship is essential also to the conduct of life” (Sayers, “Gaudy Night” 33). As I will show, however, this insistence on “intellectual honesty” serves to reinforce the sense of moral ambiguity that surrounds the figure of the detective in Sayers’s novels. Sayers makes it clear that Lord Peter cannot afford to be “pitiful” where detection – his “job” – is concerned; as a detective, he is obliged to uncover the truth at any cost, no matter how “painful” the results may be.

What is particularly noteworthy about *Gaudy Night* is that this principle is key to the narrative of romance, as well as the process of detection. In focusing on the theme of “intellectual integrity,” Sayers asserts, she had “found a universal theme which could be made integral both to the detective plot and to the ‘love-interest’ which I had, somehow or other, to unite with it” (Sayers, “Gaudy Night” 29). For Sayers, “[t]he new and exciting thing was to bring the love-problem into line with the detective-problem, so that the same key should unlock both at once” (31). *Gaudy Night*, then, represents a significant step forward, in terms of Sayers’s increasingly ambitious approach to detective fiction. As I noted in Chapter 3, Sayers had previously highlighted the difficulties of balancing the intellectual and emotional aspects of detective fiction, suggesting that “the glittering mechanism of the detective-story” would only be upset by the intrusion of “violent emotion.” Now, however, Sayers would suggest that the intellectual and emotional aspects of the detective story did not necessarily have to be balanced – that, in fact, they might be one and the same, united by a shared insistence on the necessity of “intellectual honesty.”

It is worth noting that not all critics would approve of Sayers’s efforts to bring together “the love-problem” and “the detective-problem” in this way. Writing in the 1970s, for example, Routley declares that “I don’t think the combination of detection with a major treatment of the crisis of courtship has ever succeeded” (Routley 156). Routley contends that Sayers and Allingham both “spoiled” their work by attempting to combine narratives of detection with romance; he adds that “I have never thought *Gaudy Night* to be Dorothy Sayers’s best book” (156). More recently, a similarly critical note is sounded by Heather Worthington, who asserts that the efforts of Golden Age authors to move beyond “flat and two-dimensional” characterisation could lead to a “loss of focus” (Worthington 118). Indeed, in Worthington’s view, “Sayers’s texts at times struggle to balance the romantic with the detective elements and the strong clue-

puzzle structure is weakened” (119). I would argue, however, that it is precisely this uneasy combination of “the romantic with the detective elements” that makes Sayers’s later novels so compelling. Far from resulting in a “loss of focus,” the combination of detection and romance allows Sayers to more clearly emphasise the inherently ambiguous nature of the modern detective. Before I examine this issue, however, it will be useful to first provide a brief overview of the development of the relationship between Lord Peter and Harriet.

In *Gaudy Night*, Sayers sets out to tackle a problem that had plagued her for some time: the question of what to do with Lord Peter and Harriet. As I noted in Chapter 3, the two characters refuse to “fall into one another’s arms” at the end of *Strong Poison*, with Sayers asserting that such a “conventional” ending would have been “false and degrading” to the characters she had created (Sayers, “Gaudy Night” 27). Harriet would later reappear in the seventh Wimsey novel, *Have His Carcase* (1932), in which her walking holiday is interrupted by a grisly discovery: she stumbles across the body of a murdered man on a beach, and she and Lord Peter must work together to solve the mystery. By the conclusion of *Have His Carcase*, the immediate problem of the murder mystery has been solved; the broader problem of Lord Peter and Harriet’s fraught relationship, however, has yet to be definitively resolved. Writing in January 1934, Sayers would assert that “the situation [...] is psychologically so difficult that it really needs a whole book to examine and resolve” (Sayers, “To Donald Tovey” [18 January 1934] 340). A crucial development would come when Sayers’s long-time friend, Muriel St Clare Byrne, proposed that they collaborate in writing a play; the result of this collaboration was the 1936 play *Busman’s Honeymoon*, in which Lord Peter and Harriet spend their honeymoon solving a murder mystery as well as navigating the complexities of their new marriage. If this new play revolved around Lord Peter and Harriet’s honeymoon, then Sayers – as Mo Moulton puts it – would have to show readers “why Harriet had decided, at last, to accept one of Peter’s many proposals. This she would do in *Gaudy Night*, written after *Busman’s Honeymoon* was completed but before it was performed” (Moulton 190). The time had come to bring the “psychologically” complex relationship between Lord Peter and Harriet to a definitive conclusion.

Published in 1935, *Gaudy Night* is principally focused on the character of Harriet Vane, who is struggling to reconcile the competing demands of the heart and

mind. When Lord Peter and Harriet discuss the question of what “to do about the people who are cursed with both hearts and brains,” for instance, Harriet cynically asserts: “I’m beginning to believe they’ve got to choose. [...] I don’t think the compromise works” (GN 77). While attending a reunion at her former college, additionally, Harriet is seized by the urge to “come back to this quiet place, where only intellectual achievement counted,” to “work here steadily and obscurely at some close-knit piece of reasoning, undistracted and uncorrupted” (20). “The glory of a college,” Harriet thinks, “was that nothing drastic ever happened in it” (65). This nostalgic view of the college as a place of “intellectual achievement,” a “quiet” and secure refuge from a chaotic outer world, is, however, challenged when Shrewsbury College is subjected to a wave of vandalism and “poison-pen” attacks. These attacks are made all the more disturbing by the fact that, based on the available evidence, the culprit must be somebody associated with the college; hence, these events would appear to confirm a stereotypical view of educated women as being “warped and repressed” (88). The college secretary, Mrs Goodwin, for instance, pronounces that “these disorders do tend to occur in celibate, or chiefly celibate communities. It is a kind of compensation, I suppose, for the lack of other excitements” (238). As a result, Harriet is caught between the desire to commit to a life of “intellectual achievement” alone, and her fears that such a lifestyle may be unhealthy: “Well, then, what about this business of choosing one way of life? Must one, after all, seek a compromise, merely to preserve one’s sanity?” (88). A major preoccupation of the novel is the question of whether an educated woman such as Harriet Vane can achieve a “compromise” between the demands of the mind and those of the heart.

While Harriet may be drawn to a life of “intellectual achievement,” Sayers works to emphasise the sexual tension between Harriet and Lord Peter. Consider, for example, the passage in Chapter 21 of *Gaudy Night*, in which Harriet sees Lord Peter in a new light:

She had first met Peter at a moment when every physical feeling had been battered out of her by the brutality of circumstance; by this accident she had been aware of him from the beginning as a mind and spirit localised in a body. Never – not even in those later dizzying moments on the river – had she considered him primarily as a male animal or calculated the promise implicit in the veiled eyes, the long, flexible mouth, the curiously vital hands. Nor, since of her he had always asked and never demanded, had she felt in him any domination but that of intellect. But now, as he advanced

towards her along the flower-bordered path, she saw him with new eyes – the eyes of women who had seen him before they knew him – saw him, as they saw him, dynamically. Miss Hillyard, Miss Edwards, Miss de Vine, the Dean even, each in her own way had recognised the same thing: six centuries of possessiveness, fastened under the yoke of urbanity. (497–8)

This new view of Lord Peter has been emphasised by Nicola Humble, who argues that, in *Gaudy Night*, Sayers sets out “to legitimize the continually frivolous Wimsey as an object of readerly desire – to at last take him seriously” (Humble 204). For Humble, this new presentation of Lord Peter as a legitimate “object of readerly desire” is reflective of a broader trend in interwar women’s writing, in which “male bodies [are] eroticized by a frank female regard,” pointing to an “immediate post-war adjustment in gender power relations” (204). As Humble notes, however, “these admiring gazes point also to the fact that masculinity remained a potent cultural force for many interwar women’s middlebrow novels – a force for women to emulate as well as adore” (204–5). I would add that, in *Gaudy Night*, it is specifically *feudal* “masculinity” with which we are confronted: in presenting Lord Peter as an “object of readerly desire,” Sayers also calls our attention to the “six centuries of possessiveness” from which he is descended. As I showed in Chapter 3, this background of feudal “possessiveness” inevitably complicates any attempt to negotiate a relationship between Lord Peter and Harriet, a woman of lower social standing.

Here, it is perhaps worth noting that *Gaudy Night* is in some ways comparable to Winifred Holtby’s *South Riding* (1936). In Chapter 1, I highlighted the similarities between Sayers’s literary style and that of Holtby; both of these authors adhere to the conventions of realist storytelling, and are indebted to nineteenth-century literary traditions. It is not only in terms of literary style that we might compare these authors, however. In *South Riding*, Holtby introduces the reader to Sarah Burton, a schoolteacher taking up a new appointment as the headmistress of a local girls’ school. Although Sarah has had some experience of romance, she is determined to commit herself to work: “Well, I’ve done with all that, she thought, as the red and grey huddle of Kiplington spread itself into a fair-sized watering-place. No chance of a love-affair here in the South Riding and a good thing too. I was born to be a spinster, and by God, I’m going to spin” (Holtby 51). As the novel unfolds, Sarah is pitted against the landowner Robert Carne, “a gentleman farmer – survival of the feudal system”

(112). The novel repeatedly emphasises the tension between these characters, their clash of values: “I dislike, I oppose everything he stands for, she told herself – feudalism, patronage, chivalry, exploitation ... We are natural and inevitable enemies” (183). Yet Sarah’s dedication to her work is tested when she falls in love with Robert Carne. Like *Gaudy Night*, then, *South Riding* explores the possibility of romance between a middle-class woman and a gentleman, a “survival of the feudal system.” Both of these novels explore the competing demands of work and romance for the intellectual woman, as well as the question of whether the “feudal” gentleman can survive in a post-First World War context.

A key feature of *Gaudy Night* is that the novel is almost entirely focalised through Harriet’s perspective. Throughout the novel, Sayers works to draw the reader into Harriet’s point of view, emphasising the inner conflict Harriet experiences as she struggles to unravel both the “poison-pen” mystery and her own contradictory feelings. Consider, for example, the passage in which Harriet, rifling through Lord Peter’s pockets, discovers a copy of *Religio Medici* (1643), a collection of essays in which Sir Thomas Browne discusses, among other topics, his medical profession and the Christian faith. As Harriet peruses the book, she finds herself shaken by Browne’s comments on love:

She flicked the pages over hurriedly. “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 a possibility of satisfaction.” That was a most uncomfortable passage, whichever way you looked at it. She turned back to the first page and began to read steadily, with critical attention to grammar and style, so as to occupy the upper current of her mind without prying too closely into what might be going on beneath the surface. (GN 362–3)

The tone of Sayers’s writing is ambitious and highbrow, as she calls on this seventeenth-century text to illustrate and emphasise Harriet’s predicament. The close personal relationship between Lord Peter and Harriet is reflected in Browne’s portrait of a desire for intimacy – a desire so potent that it cannot be fully satisfied, and must therefore “proceed without a possibility of satisfaction.” Such a discussion is deeply “uncomfortable” for Harriet, who is unable to confront her own “desires”; throughout *Gaudy Night*, she strives to bury herself in intellectual activity, and to distract herself

from thoughts of “what might be going on beneath the surface” of her own mind. Yet Harriet’s romantic and sexual “desires” cannot be so easily suppressed.

Later in the novel, indeed, the quotation from Browne resurfaces when Harriet finds herself assaulted by a jumble of competing thoughts:

It’s a good thing Peter’s gone ... but I wish he hadn’t gone and left me in this ghastly place where people go off their heads and write horrible letters.... “When I am from him I am dead till I be with him.” ... No, it won’t do to feel like that.... I won’t get mixed up with that kind of thing again.... I’ll stay out of it.... I’ll stay here ... where people go queer in their heads.... Oh, God, what have I done, that I should be such a misery to myself and other people? Nothing more than thousands of women... (436–7)

Here, Sayers effectively deploys the stream-of-consciousness technique to illustrate the inner turmoil Harriet is facing, as she struggles to work through a range of conflicting impulses. The use of such a technique makes clear Sayers’s increased focus on the inner lives of her characters – a development that has been emphasised by Kenney, who, in examining the development of Sayers’s detective fiction, identifies “a [...] turn toward psychological realism,” a “movement away from the artificial puzzle-plot and into the mysterious regions of the human heart” (Kenney 82). Like me, Kenney believes that this development is clearly illustrated by *Gaudy Night*, in which “the inward disturbance of everyone in the story – particularly of Harriet herself – far exceeds the surface display of violence” (82–3). *Gaudy Night*, then, illustrates Sayers’s ambitious goal of deepening the mystery story by turning her authorial gaze “inward,” to more closely scrutinise the inner lives of characters such as Harriet Vane.

While *Gaudy Night* is almost entirely focalised through Harriet’s perspective, however, Sayers is also working to deepen the characterisation of Lord Peter Wimsey. For instance, Harriet initially regards Lord Peter as an outsider, and is therefore reluctant to expose both herself and Oxford to his scrutiny:

And when there were ugly phantoms lurking in the corners of one’s mind, skeletons that one dared not show to anybody, even to Peter—

Well, of course not to Peter; he was the last person. And he at any rate, had no niche in the grey stones of Oxford. He stood for London, for the swift, rattling, clattering, excitable and devilishly upsetting world of strain and uproar. (GN 273)

Hence, Harriet is taken by surprise when she encounters Lord Peter on her way back from the University Sermon. When he later meets with her in private, however, his deep-seated connection with Oxford is clearly emphasised:

When she said "Come in!" the commonplace formula seemed to take on a startling significance. For good or evil, she had called in something explosive from the outside world to break up the ordered tranquillity of the place; she had sold the breach to an alien force; she had sided with London against Oxford and with the world against the cloister.

But when he entered, she knew that the image had been a false one. He came into the quiet room as though he belonged there, and had never belonged to any other place. (337)

Lord Peter's affinity with the academic sphere is further emphasised when he criticises the outer world – "God! how I loathe haste and violence and all that ghastly, slippery cleverness. Unsound, unscholarly, insincere" – and expresses a desire to "root one's self in here among the grass and stones and do something worth doing, even if it was only restoring a lost breathing for the love of the job and nothing else" (339). Lord Peter's disdain for "unscholarly" behaviour, and his desire to "do something worth doing," clearly echo Harriet's own views; indeed, she is "astonished" to find him "saying exactly what I've been feeling all this time" (339). This discovery of shared values is noteworthy. A key factor in the successful resolution of Lord Peter and Harriet's relationship is the fact that they both belong to Oxford and share its values – including a contempt for "unscholarly" and "insincere" behaviour.

Lord Peter's affinity with Oxford is not the only facet of his character that Harriet uncovers, however. For much of the novel, Lord Peter is conspicuously absent; Harriet, who initially assumes that he must be engaged in detection, is surprised to learn that, in fact, he is working for the Foreign Office. This demanding role has taken its toll on Lord Peter, with the result that a new side of his character is revealed to Harriet. When he first arrives at their private meeting, he greets her "with a faint echo of the old, flippant manner" (337). Nevertheless, Harriet recognises that he is "tired to death" (337). When Lord Peter self-deprecatingly explains that he has been working for the Foreign Office as a kind of unofficial diplomat, a "professional funny man," Harriet notes:

“I didn’t know this, Peter. I’ve just discovered that I’ve been too selfish even to try and know anything. But it isn’t like you to sound so dreadfully discouraged. You look—”

“Spare me, Harriet. Don’t say I’m getting to look my age. That won’t do. An eternal childishness is my one diplomatic asset.” (337–8)

Here, Sayers makes it clear that Lord Peter’s outwardly “flippant manner,” his “eternal childishness,” is a highly useful “asset”, which he exploits in diplomacy as well as detection. However, Sayers also emphasises the fact that this “flippant manner” is nothing more than a brittle façade that may serve to conceal Lord Peter’s weaknesses, and which he is now too “tired” to maintain. Indeed, as the conversation unfolds, Lord Peter speaks to Harriet with an unusual frankness, revealing his private anxieties regarding the current state of international politics, as well as his pessimistic belief that the future of the Wimsey estate is in doubt. Harriet is struck by these disclosures: “She had fought him for five years, and found out nothing but his strength; now, within half an hour he had exposed all his weaknesses, one after the other” (342). In *Gaudy Night*, then, Sayers sets out to deepen Lord Peter’s characterisation by situating him within an academic context – in which he can meet Harriet on equal terms – and by calling our attention to the “weaknesses” that might typically be concealed by his outward façade of upper-class flippancy. This authorial strategy is reflective of Sayers’s belief that, if the series were to go on, she would need to deepen Lord Peter’s character – that Lord Peter would have “to become a complete human being” (Sayers, “Gaudy Night” 27).

In *Gaudy Night*, then, we are confronted with Sayers’s efforts to transform the detective story by deepening the characterisation of her protagonists, and by incorporating more “psychologically” complex emotions – developments that are clearly reflected in Harriet’s own novel writing. In *Have His Carcase*, for instance, Harriet is asked by her editor to add a love story to her latest novel. Harriet, however, finds herself unable to tackle this fictional romance, which is uncomfortably reminiscent of her present situation:

Now, a person whose previous experience of love has been disappointing, and who has just been through a harassing scene with another suitor and is, further, busily engaged in investigating the rather sordid love-affairs of a third party who has been brought to a violent and blood-boltered end, is in no mood to sit down and deal

competently with the raptures of two innocents holding hands in a rose-garden. (*HHC* 188)

Harriet thus refuses her editor's request to introduce a love interest. For Stewart, this refusal is a self-reflexive manoeuvre, intended to emphasise the superiority of Sayers's own, more restrained approach to the inclusion of romance in detective fiction: "In setting down this technical challenge and foregrounding it as a problem for Harriet, Sayers implicitly presents her own practice in *Have his Carcase* [*sic*] as the more skilful example" (Stewart, "Defining Detective Fiction" 112). This argument is not without merit. As I noted in Chapter 3, Sayers had previously argued that the inclusion of romance in detective fiction was usually best avoided, asserting that "some of the finest detective-stories are marred by a conventional love-story, irrelevant to the action and perfunctorily worked in" (*GSS* 39). It is not unreasonable, then, to argue that we are meant to see Harriet's refusal to incorporate an "irrelevant" and "perfunctorily worked in" love story as the correct choice. But, in fact, this is not where the development of this theme in Sayers's writing ends. I would point out that in *Gaudy Night*, Sayers will suggest that Harriet's refusal to tackle complex human emotions – a refusal which stems, in part, from her own unresolved feelings regarding her past and present experiences of romance – is preventing her from achieving her full creative potential as both an author and a detective.

In *Gaudy Night*, indeed, Harriet becomes increasingly dissatisfied with her writing. Reviewing some of her past novels, for instance, Harriet finds that they are "clever and superficial," and concludes that they could have been better written, "if she had not been afraid of giving herself away" (*GN* 75). Harriet also struggles with her current novel, feeling that the surface-level characterisation of her protagonists does not adequately reflect the complexities of human behaviour. She finds that the narrative is "beginning to take on an unnatural, an incredible symmetry. Human beings were not like that; human problems were not like that" (254). Significantly, when she explains the problem to Lord Peter, he advises her to invest her characters with more "violent and lifelike feelings," to "abandon the jig-saw kind of story and write a book about human beings for a change" (367). Lord Peter argues that Harriet must push herself to write a messier and more challenging, but ultimately more artistically satisfying kind of novel:

"I'll think about that. It would hurt like hell."

“What would that matter, if it made a good book?”

She was taken aback, not by what he said, but by his saying it. She had never imagined that he regarded her work very seriously, and she had certainly not expected him to take this ruthless attitude about it. The protective male? He was being about as protective as a can-opener.

“You haven’t yet,” he went on, “written the book you could write if you tried. Probably you couldn’t write it when you were too close to things. But you could do it now, if you had the-the—”

“The guts?”

“Exactly.”

“I don’t think I could face it.”

“Yes, you could. And you’ll get no peace till you do. I’ve been running away from myself for twenty years, and it doesn’t work. What’s the good of making mistakes if you don’t use them? Have a shot. Start on Wilfrid.” (368)

Sayers thus makes it clear that Harriet’s insistence on “running away” from the uncomfortable subject of romance, of restricting herself to a conventional, plot-oriented approach to detective fiction, is a severe aesthetic limitation, and that she must strive toward a more complex, “lifelike” level of characterisation – even if doing so will “hurt like hell.”

Across the course of *Gaudy Night*, then, Harriet strives to redevelop her own writing in accordance with Lord Peter’s suggestions:

She had spent portions of four days in altering and humanising Wilfrid, and to-day, after a distressful morning with him, had reached the dismal conclusion that she would have to rewrite the whole thing from the beginning. Wilfrid’s tormented humanity stood out now against the competent vacuity of the other characters like a wound. Moreover, with the reduction of Wilfrid’s motives to what was psychologically credible, a large lump of the plot had fallen out, leaving a gap through which one could catch glimpses of new and exciting jungles of intrigue. She stood aimlessly staring in the window of the antique shop. Wilfrid was becoming like one of those coveted ivory chessmen. You probed into his interior and discovered an intricate and delicate carved sphere of sensibilities, and, as you turned it in your fingers, you found another inside that, and within that, another again.

Behind the table where the chessmen stood was a Jacobean dresser in black oak, and, as she stood at gaze, a set of features limned themselves pallidly against the dark background, like Pepper's ghost. (453)

Harriet's efforts to redevelop the character of "Wilfrid" clearly parallel Sayers's own efforts to invest the character of Lord Peter Wimsey with greater depth – a parallel that is only emphasised by the fact that Lord Peter appears in the window just as Harriet is contemplating her writing. Sayers, I would conclude, is quite literally striving towards deeper characterisation; in later novels such as *Gaudy Night*, her aim is explicitly to probe into the "interior" lives of her characters, to uncover the deeper and more complex "sensibilities" lying beneath their surfaces.

I would argue that this manoeuvre – this attempt to look beyond the surface, to uncover a more complex "interior" reality – is reminiscent of what many critics regard as the defining concerns and strategies of modernist literature. While a detailed survey of modernist writing and its critical reception is beyond the scope of this thesis, I would point to Virginia Woolf's remarks regarding the representation of character in fiction. In essays such as "Modern Fiction" (1919) and "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" (1924), Woolf criticises the "materialists," those authors whom she regards as being solely concerned with external reality: "It is because they are concerned not with the spirit but with the body that they have disappointed us" (Woolf, "Modern Fiction" 104). For Woolf, "the Edwardians were never interested in character in itself; or in the book in itself. They were interested in something outside. Their books, then, were incomplete as books" (Woolf, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" 327). The "Edwardians," Woolf goes on to claim, are those who look "very powerfully, searchingly, and sympathetically" at external reality, but "never at life, never at human nature" (330). Woolf's suggestion is clear: literature must turn its gaze from the "outside" to the inside. It is this shift in perspective that modernist authors, critics assert, seek to achieve; as Herta Newman puts it, "the moderns, [...] as Woolf so urgently recommends, shift significantly, from the outside to the inside and from the material to the spiritual. They recognize, as the Edwardians do not, the primacy of the internal life and devise a method that should reveal its deepest secrets" (Newman 9).⁸ I would suggest that this turn "from the

⁸ It is worth noting, however, that – according to Newman – Woolf was not fully satisfied with the literary techniques deployed by "the moderns," with these efforts to turn "from the outside to the inside": "Clearly the concern with consciousness does not in itself insure the creation of a meaningful reality" (Newman 9).

outside to the inside,” this increased focus on “the internal life,” is echoed in Sayers’s later detective novels. For instance, in Harriet’s concern that the plot-oriented nature of the classical mystery story does not adequately capture the complexities of human behaviour – “Human beings were not like that; human problems were not like that” – we may recognise an echo of Woolf’s argument that those authors who focus solely on the “outside” are unable to convey the realities of “life,” of “human nature.” Like Woolf, Sayers is concerned with the question of how to achieve a more “psychologically credible” level of characterisation.

In examining the defining concerns and strategies of modernist writing, it is worth noting that modernism is often seen as being closely connected with the rise of psychoanalysis, linked by a shared concern with the hidden “secrets” of “the internal life.” David Lodge, for example, identifies a link between modernist techniques and Freudian thought:

The Freudian model of the mind was structured like geological strata: unconscious, ego, superego – in ascending order. It therefore encouraged the idea that consciousness had a dimension of depth, which it was the task of literature, as of psychoanalysis, to explore. For modernist writers, the effort to plumb these depths, to get closer to psychological reality, paradoxically entailed an abandonment of the traditional properties and strategies of literary realism. The traditional plot, which demonstrates that all effects have their logical causes, is discarded or destabilised, and poetic devices of symbolism and leitmotif and intertextual allusion are used instead to give formal unity to the representation of experience, which is itself seen as essentially chaotic. (Lodge 61)

Here, it must be acknowledged that the relationship between modernist writing and psychoanalysis is by no means straightforward. For one thing, the influence of psychoanalysis was resisted by some authors who have been categorised as modernist; John Farrell notes that “[t]he most prominent artists of the 1920s, confronting the arrival of psychoanalysis as adults, were strikingly hostile to it, including Pound, Lawrence and Joyce” (Farrell 126). Ultimately, the relationship between modernist literature and psychoanalysis is a complex subject, one that is continually being re-evaluated; as Matt Ffytche puts it, “new psychoanalytic readings of modernism, and archaeologies of modernist contact with psychoanalysis, are still in the process of unfolding” (Ffytche 428). Again, however, a detailed survey of modernist writing is beyond the scope of this thesis. What I would emphasise here is the notion

that modernist literature seeks to “plumb” the hidden “depths” of the mind in order “to get closer to psychological reality.” Consider, for example, Woolf’s review of Dorothy Richardson’s *The Tunnel* (1919), in which Woolf would assert that “we are exacting. We want to be rid of realism, to penetrate without its help into the regions beneath it” (Woolf, “The Tunnel” 122). I would argue that the efforts of modernist writers to “penetrate” the surface in this way – “to get closer to psychological reality” – are echoed in Sayers’s efforts to bring a more “psychologically credible” level of characterisation to the mystery story; indeed, Kenney contends that, in *Gaudy Night*, Sayers completes “the transformation of the detective story into a modern psychological novel” (Kenney 83). More specifically, the modernist belief that the mind has “a dimension of depth” which literature must “plumb” finds an echo in Sayers’s suggestion that, if the mystery story is to be “psychologically credible,” authors must probe into the “interior” of their character to uncover deep and layered “sensibilities.”

Crucially, however, there are limits to Sayers’s experimentation with literary form. In many respects, Sayers continues to adhere to realist conventions – something that is particularly apparent in her views on plotting. In the 1946 essay “Aristotle on Detective Fiction,” for instance, Sayers asserts that the mystery story

should have a beginning, a middle and an end. Herein the detective story is sharply distinguished from the kind of modern novel which, beginning at the end, rambles backwards and forwards without particular direction and ends on an indeterminate note, and for no ascertainable reason except the publisher’s refusal to provide more printing and paper for seven-and-sixpence. (Sayers, “Aristotle” 181)

While Sayers’s tone is tongue-in-cheek, it is noteworthy that she presents the linear plotting of detective fiction as a strength of the genre, while scoffing at what she regards as the directionless and “indeterminate” nature of more “modern,” experimental approaches to literature. Clearly, Sayers would not have aimed to move away from what Lodge summarises as “[t]he traditional plot, which demonstrates that all effects have their logical causes.” Sayers’s aim was not to abandon the linear, carefully structured plot typically expected of the mystery story, but rather to combine this kind of plotting with a more “psychologically credible” level of characterisation. In *Gaudy Night*, this aim is achieved through Sayers’s focus on the theme of “intellectual integrity,” which is key to the narrative of romance as well as the narrative of detection; in both of these plot threads, Sayers emphasises the scholarly “doctrine that loyalty to

the abstract truth must override all personal considerations” (GN 522). As I will show, however, Lord Peter’s adherence to such a principle may be seen as reinforcing the sense of moral ambiguity that surrounds the figure of the detective.

4.2. “As protective as a can-opener”: The Moral Ambiguity of the Detective

As mentioned earlier, *Gaudy Night* provides us with an apt description of the detective in late Sayers when Harriet – struck by the bluntness of Lord Peter’s advice regarding her writing – reflects that “she had certainly not expected him to take this ruthless attitude about it. The protective male? He was being about as protective as a can-opener.” Lord Peter’s advice is significant on more than one level. On the one hand, the seriousness with which he regards Harriet’s work, as well as her willingness to respond to his suggestions, signifies their increasing closeness and their compatibility as partners. Indeed, toward the conclusion of the novel, Lord Peter finds himself shaken by Harriet’s “anxious assurance” that she is working to develop her novel in accordance with his suggestions: “My dear – if anything I have said ... If you have let me come as far as your work and your life...” (GN 554). On the other hand, their discussion also serves as a way of re-emphasising Lord Peter’s “ruthless” nature, and I would argue that the image of Lord Peter as a “can-opener” neatly encapsulates the sense of moral ambiguity surrounding the figure of the detective, as suggested by Heta Pyrhönen’s striking claim that the “detective’s character partly derives from the reasons making him or her the right kind of ‘can opener’ for an author’s purposes” (Pyrhönen 96). While the detective ostensibly serves a protective function, serving to uphold law and order, they can also be seen, less reassuringly, as a “can-opener”: a “ruthless” and potentially threatening figure who pries into other people’s lives and cuttingly exposes their secrets.

It must be noted, however, that *Gaudy Night* may be seen as presenting the detective in a positive light: the detective, we might conclude, is an authoritative figure whose intervention is both necessary and reassuring. When Harriet attends a reunion at Shrewsbury College, for instance, she is interrogated about her own experience of detection by Miss Barton, a don who “is interested in the sociological aspects of crime, and very eager for the reform of the penal code” (GN 36). Recalling the events of *Have His Carcase*, Harriet asserts that the murderer “was a cunning, avaricious brute, and quite ready to go on and do it again, if he hadn’t been stopped” (36). Another former student points out that this is “an unanswerable argument” in favour of apprehending

criminals, “whatever the law does with them afterwards” (36). As the discussion unfolds, Miss de Vine offers an even more significant comment: “Surely, [...] whatever comes of it, and whatever anybody feels about it, the important thing is to get at the facts” (37). Sayers’s insistence on this principle – which, as we will see, is echoed in Lord Peter’s attitude towards detection – recurs throughout the novel.

As the narrative unfolds, the necessity of the detective’s intervention is further emphasised by the mystery of the “poison-pen” attacks – a mystery made all the more disturbing by the possibility that the culprit may be a don or student. As Harriet attempts to disentangle the mystery, she becomes increasingly paranoid and suspicious:

The situation was becoming a nightmare. Faces had grown sly and distorted overnight; eyes fearful; the most innocent words charged with suspicion. At any moment some new terror might break bounds and carry all before it.

She was suddenly afraid of all these women; *horti conclusi, fontes signati*, they were walled in, sealed down, by walls and seals that shut her out. (315–6)

Here, Sayers offers a subversion of the novel’s opening epitaph, a quotation from the sermons of John Donne:

The University is a Paradise, Rivers of Knowledge are there, Arts and Sciences flow from thence. Counsell Tables are *Horti conclusi*, (as it is said in the Canticles). *Gardens that are walled in*, and they are *Fontes signati*, *Wells that are sealed up*; bottomless depths of unsearchable Counsels there. (n. p.)

Again, we are confronted with Sayers’s usage of quotations from earlier eras of literature, a technique that may be seen to be reflective of her efforts to bring a more highbrow and literary tone to the mystery story. It is perhaps unsurprising, indeed, that Q. D. Leavis would scoff at Sayers’s usage of such quotations: “Literature gets heavily drawn upon in Miss Sayers’s writings, and her attitude to it is revealing. She displays knowingness about literature without any sensitiveness to it or any feeling for quality” (Leavis, “Case” 335–6). Evidently, Leavis’s view was that “Miss Sayers’s writings” did not qualify as “Literature,” and that “[i]mpressive literary excerpts, generally 17th century” were out of place in detective fiction (336). Sayers’s usage of quotations from Donne, however, serves to emphasise the fact that this vision of the University as a “Paradise” of learning has been disrupted by the mysterious attacks plaguing

Shrewsbury, and the “sealed” nature of the women’s college now seems oppressive and frightening. This shift is further emphasised when, in Chapter 14, Harriet attends the University Sermon; she reflects: “‘The University is a Paradise’ – true, but – ‘then saw I that there was a way to hell even from the gates of Heaven’...” (GN 332)

In this notably Gothic context, Lord Peter serves a reassuring function; his intervention ultimately operates to lift the veil of suspicion that has made the college seem so dangerous and oppressive. At first glance, then, *Gaudy Night* appears to chime with the view of the classical detective story proposed by Cawelti, who asserts that the detective has a “terrifying ability to expose hidden secrets,” and that this power “relates to the convention of aristocratic and eccentric detachment from the ordinary concerns of human life” (Cawelti 95). “Because his skill threatens to uncover some secret guilt on the part of a character with whom the reader identifies,” Cawelti goes on to argue, “it is reassuring that, despite this terrifying superiority,” the detective “uses his powers not to threaten but to uphold the reader’s self-esteem by proving the guilt of a specific individual rather than exposing some general guilt in which the reader might be implicated” (95). The detective, then, performs a “reassuring” function by identifying the guilty:

The special drama of crime in the classical detective story lies in the way it threatens the serene domestic circles of bourgeois life with anarchy and chaos. The official guardians of this order, the police, turn out to be inefficient bunglers, and the finger of suspicion points to everybody. The ordered rationality of society momentarily seems a flimsy surface over a seething pit of guilt and crime. Then the detective intervenes and proves that the general suspicion is false. He proves the social order is not responsible for the crime because it was the act of a particular individual with his own private motives. (96)

Cawelti’s argument, while emphasising the potentially “terrifying” nature of the detective – a “detached” intellectual with extraordinary powers of perception – suggests that the detective ultimately emerges as a “reassuring” figure who serves to restore a sense of “ordered rationality.” In Cawelti’s view, the detective enters closed settings such as “the isolated country house” or “the walled-in college quadrangle” to “restore the pleasant social order” (97). On the surface, Lord Peter’s role in *Gaudy Night* seems to conform to this view, as he proves that the “poison-pen” attacks are

“the act of a particular individual” with a “private” grudge, rather than an indictment of the existing “social order.”

In Chapter 17, for instance, Lord Peter – with Harriet’s help – carefully steers the conversation toward the subject of intellectual integrity, leading Miss de Vine to recall a past incident in which she had been forced to penalise a promising scholar who had committed an act of academic fraud. Later in the novel, Lord Peter explains to the dons that this incident is the key to the mystery: the scholar, Arthur Robinson, had subsequently committed suicide. The culprit behind the attacks is his embittered widow, Annie, a scout at the college. Lord Peter points out that he had created “an opportunity for the story’s appearance,” adding:

Incidentally, I established for a certainty, what I was sure of in my own mind from the start, that there was not a woman in this Common Room, married or single, who would be ready to place personal loyalties above professional honour. That was a point which it seemed necessary to make clear – not so much to me, as to yourselves. (GN 530–1)

Thus, Lord Peter may be seen as serving a reassuring function. He reminds the college staff of their shared commitment to “professional” loyalties, and his intervention puts an end to the suspicion and paranoia that has plagued the college:

The Senior Common Room, recovering a little from its shock, went quietly about the business of the term. They were all normal again. They had never been anything else. Now that the distorting-glass of suspicion was removed, they were kindly, intelligent human beings – not seeing, perhaps, very much farther beyond their own interests than the ordinary man beyond his job or the ordinary woman beyond her own household – but as understandable and pleasant as daily bread. (548)

Here, we may recognise an echo of Cawelti’s view of the classical detective story, as Lord Peter uses his “terrifying” powers to remove “the distorting-glass of suspicion” and show the dons that they are all “normal” after all. He emerges as an “aristocratic and eccentric” figure whose intervention serves to restore a sense of normalcy to Shrewsbury College.

However, I would argue that Sayers ultimately presents a much more ambiguous view of the detective, as is made apparent when, for example, Harriet and the dean encounter Lord Peter in Chapter 14. After Lord Peter has left, the dean suggests to Harriet that he should be brought to Shrewsbury College: “Bring him along,

if he'll come, and let him turn the whole lot of us inside out. A man with manners like that could twist the whole High Table round his little finger" (335). What is even more telling is her speculative remark: "Perhaps the eager interest behind that penetrating eye was due to his suspicions of me. And I put it all down to my personal fascination! The man's dangerous, though he doesn't look it" (336). Significantly, Harriet replies: "That's why he's dangerous" (336). While the tone of these comments may be tongue-in-cheek, they convey a significant message: the detective is "dangerous" precisely because they seem so unassuming. Throughout the Wimsey novels, we are shown how Lord Peter's polished "manners" only increase his effectiveness as a detective.

It is hardly surprising, then, that throughout Chapter 17, there is a distinct sense of unease surrounding Lord Peter's presence within Shrewsbury College. As the dons await his arrival, for instance, Harriet notices that they are tense and uneasy:

She thought they all seemed apprehensive and some even hostile. They tended to avoid one another's eyes; yet they gathered together as though for protection against a common menace. She suddenly found it absurd that anybody should be alarmed by Peter Wimsey; she saw them as a harmless collection of nervous patients in a dentist's waiting-room. (391)

While Harriet may find it "absurd that anybody should be alarmed by Peter Wimsey," this sense of discomfort persists throughout the evening. When Lord Peter, Harriet, and the dons gather in the Senior Common Room, for instance, Harriet reflects:

They were all listening, really, and at the same time most of them were trying to pretend that he was there as an ordinary guest – that he was not an enemy, not a spy. They were trying to prevent him from becoming openly the centre of attention as he was already the centre of consciousness. (405)

Underlying this pleasant social occasion is the uneasy impression that the detective is an "enemy" – a "spy" who has penetrated the college in order to probe its secrets.

Throughout the conversation, the reader is continually reminded of the reason for Peter's presence. Harriet's observations call our attention to the fact that he is engaged in detective work:

For a few minutes Harriet lost the thread of the discussion, which now became general. That it had been deliberately pushed to this point, she could see; but what Peter wanted to make of it, she had no idea. Yet he was obviously interested. His eyes, under their half-closed lids, were alert. He was like a cat waiting at a mouse-hole. Or

was she half-consciously connecting him with his own blazon? “Sable: three mice courant argent; a crescent for difference. The crest, a domestick catt....”

“Of course,” said Miss Hillyard, in a hard, sarcastic voice, “if you think private loyalties should come before loyalty to one’s job....”

(“Couched as to spring, proper.”). That was what he had been waiting for, then. One could almost see the silken fur ripple. (409–10)

The reader is confronted with a particularly striking heraldic image of the detective: a predator waiting for its prey to expose itself.

Harriet’s perspective also serves to re-emphasise the discomfort caused by Lord Peter’s presence:

There was a laugh, and a momentary silence. Harriet could feel a nervous tension in the room – little threads of anxiety and expectation strung out, meeting, crossing, quivering. Now, they were all saying to themselves, now something is going to be said about IT. The ground has been surveyed, the coffee has been cleared out of the road, the combatants are stripped for action – now, this amiable gentleman with the well-filled tongue will come out in his true colours as an inquisitor, and it is all going to be very uncomfortable.

Lord Peter took out his handkerchief, polished his monocle carefully, readjusted it, looked rather severely at the Warden, and lifted up his voice in emphatic, pained and querulous complaint about the Corporation dump. (419)

Here, the “nervous tension” that has been present throughout the conversation is broken by a comedic moment, as Lord Peter’s indignant “complaint” bathetically subverts the expectations of the reader and those around him. What is significant, however, is the fact that those expectations are there to be undermined in the first place. In this chapter, we are shown how Lord Peter dazzles the Shrewsbury women with his polished “manners,” and yet both they and Harriet are continually aware of his true purpose in visiting the college. Of note is the language used to describe Lord Peter throughout the chapter: troublingly, the detective is characterised as an “enemy,” a “spy” and an “inquisitor.”

It is worth noting that the image of the “amiable” detective who skilfully masks their “true colours” is a common one in Golden Age detective fiction. At the conclusion of Agatha Christie’s *Three Act Tragedy* (1935), for example, Hercule Poirot’s friend, Mr

Satterthwaite, asks Poirot: “Why do you sometimes speak perfectly good English and at other times not?” (Christie, *Three Act* 191). Poirot explains:

It is true that I can speak the exact, the idiomatic English. But, my friend, to speak the broken English is an enormous asset. It leads people to despise you. They say – a foreigner – he can’t even speak English properly. It is not my policy to terrify people – instead I invite their gentle ridicule. Also I boast! An Englishman he says often, “A fellow who thinks as much of himself as that cannot be worth much.” That is the English point of view. It is not at all true. And so, you see, I put people off their guard. (191)

Cawelti’s claims regarding the “terrifying” powers of the detective are reflected in Poirot’s explanation. In order not to “terrify people,” the detective makes themselves appear foolish and unassuming; in doing so, they “put people off their guard.” Lord Peter adopts a similar strategy, while playing a very different kind of role; whereas Poirot exploits the prejudices of “the English” by presenting himself as a ridiculous “foreigner,” Lord Peter conceals his “true colours” beneath a façade of upper-class, Wodehousian idiocy.

In *Gaudy Night*, it is made clear that Harriet can see through this façade. In Chapter 2, for example, another former student recalls an encounter with Lord Peter, who was “giving a perfect imitation of the silly-ass-about-town” (*GN* 38). Harriet explains that “he was either frightfully bored or detecting something” (38). This “frivolous mood,” she asserts, is “mostly camouflage – but one doesn’t always know for what” (38). This exchange has been highlighted by Hannay, who, as I noted in Chapter 3, argues that Sayers uses Harriet’s perspective as a way of developing Lord Peter’s characterisation, “making him more human and less cardboard” (Hannay 45). Certainly, Hannay makes a valid point when she asserts that “Harriet provides the author with an indirect way to undercut the Bertie Wooster pose” (47). I would add, however, that Harriet’s perspective also allows Sayers to emphasise the ruthlessness that underlies Lord Peter’s outwardly flippant manner, as evidenced by Lord Peter and Harriet’s discussion of her writing, in which Harriet is struck by his “ruthless attitude.” Significantly, Sayers refers back to this discussion when, in Chapter 17, Lord Peter speaks to Miss Barton, and Harriet overhears part of the conversation:

“But do you really feel comfortable about it, Lord Peter?”

“No – I shouldn’t recommend it as a comfortable occupation. But is your or my or anybody’s comfort of very great importance?”

Miss Barton probably took that for flippancy; Harriet recognised the ruthless voice that had said, “What does it matter if it hurts ...” (GN 404)

Here, Sayers re-emphasises the “ruthless attitude” underlying Lord Peter’s outward “flippancy,” which reinforces the sense of ambiguity surrounding the role of the detective in her fiction.

Indeed, Lord Peter himself makes it clear that the detective’s quest for the truth may have painful results when he speaks to Miss Barton – the don who has clashed with Harriet on “the vexed subject of the amateur’s right to investigate crimes” (151) – and points out that “[t]he execution of the guilty is unpleasant – but not nearly so disturbing as the slaughter of the innocents” (406). Offering to present Miss Barton with “a more serviceable weapon,” he explains that he is referring to his own “victims,” rather than those of the murderer (406). Here, Sayers alludes to an earlier Wimsey novel, *Unnatural Death*, in which Lord Peter investigates the death of an elderly woman, Agatha Dawson. Although Lord Peter is intrigued by the mystery, there is no real evidence to go on; thus, he explains to Parker that “I shall use up-to-date psychological methods. Like the people in the Psalms, I lay traps; I catch men. I shall let the alleged criminal convict herself” (UD 55). His plan is to place an advertisement in the morning papers, inviting two young women connected with the case to come forward, and so provoke the criminal into exposing themselves: “By this means, we shall kill two birds with one stone” (56). Such a remark proves darkly appropriate when one of the women named in the advertisement is found dead. We are therefore presented with a conflict of emotions: while Lord Peter remains intrigued by the mystery, he is troubled by the sense that “my beastly interference started the crimes all over again” (237).

Through an intertextual reference to this earlier novel in *Gaudy Night*, Sayers is thus able to highlight the ethical issues that surround the process of detection; Lord Peter tells the dons that, when he began to “meddle,” the murderer, Mary Whittaker, “set to work again, killed two innocent people to cover her tracks,” and eventually “killed herself. If I’d left her alone, there might have been only one death instead of four” (GN 406). Lord Peter does point out that “it isn’t as simple as all that. If she hadn’t killed those others, we should probably never have caught her” (407). The dons, however, make explicit what Peter is implying:

“You are suggesting, I think,” said the Warden, while Miss Barton rebelliously grappled with this problem, “that those innocent victims died for the people; sacrificed to a social principle.”

“At any rate, to *your* social principles,” said Miss Barton

“Thank you. I thought you were going to say, to my inquisitiveness.”

“I might have done so,” said Miss Barton, frankly. “But you lay claim to a principle, so we’ll stick to that.” (407)

At stake here is the question of Lord Peter’s detective “principles,” and the consequences of his adherence to those principles. While Sayers has already established, in previous novels, his instinctive determination to uncover the truth at any cost, this particular aspect of his character is given new emphasis in *Gaudy Night* because it resonates with what Sayers would describe as “that habit of intellectual integrity which is at once the foundation and the result of scholarship” (Sayers, “Gaudy Night” 29). Lord Peter’s conversation with the dons makes this resonance apparent:

“Shake hands,” said Wimsey. “Now we have found common ground to stand on. Establish the facts, no matter what comes of it.”

“On that ground, Lord Peter,” said the Warden, “your inquisitiveness becomes a principle. And a very dangerous one.” (GN 408–9)

Lord Peter’s approach to detection is echoed in the words of Miss Edwards, the Science tutor, who insists on the scientist’s principle that “[t]o suppress a fact is to publish a falsehood” (409). As the Warden points out, however, Peter’s ruthless determination to get at “the facts” at any cost can be a “very dangerous” principle – an issue that is further emphasised by his reference to the events of *Unnatural Death*. All too often, the end result of Lord Peter’s “inquisitiveness” is death: if not the “execution” of the criminals he apprehends, then the “slaughter” of other people who have been caught in the investigation’s crossfire. Indeed, as Lord Peter himself puts it, “the first thing a principle does – if it really is a principle – is to kill somebody” (401).

With this issue in mind, it is worth considering Sayers’s portrayal of Miss de Vine, who, seen through Harriet’s eyes, is presented as “a soldier knowing no personal loyalties, whose sole allegiance was to the fact” (21). Much like Lord Peter himself, Miss de Vine prioritises facts above “personal loyalties.” Indeed, in Chapter 17, Sayers pointedly calls the reader’s attention to the similarities between the two characters:

“That,” said Miss de Vine, [...] “is a man able to subdue himself to his own ends. I should be sorry for anyone who came up against *his* principles – whatever they are, and if he has any.”

She detached herself from the other two, and went on into the Senior Common Room with a sombre face.

“Curious,” said Harriet. “She is saying about Peter Wimsey exactly what I have always thought about herself.” (402–3)

It is all the more significant, then, that the novel ultimately suggests that Miss de Vine’s past actions were inadequate. Miss de Vine is contrasted with another don, Miss Lydgate, who is defined by her compassionate attitude; when Lord Peter presents his outline of the case to the Senior Common Room, she asks: “Did it never occur to you, Miss de Vine, to inquire what happened to this unhappy man Robinson?” (535). Miss de Vine admits that it did not. Later on, she criticises herself for this lapse in judgement, and Lord Peter offers some noteworthy remarks:

“I can have nothing to say,” said he. “Like you and every member of this Common Room, I admit the principle and the consequences must follow.”

“That won’t do,” said the Fellow, bluntly. “One ought to take some thought for other people. Miss Lydgate would have done what I did in the first place; but she would have made it her business to see what became of that unhappy man and his wife.”

“Miss Lydgate is a very great and a very rare person. But she could not prevent other people from suffering for her principles. That seems to be what principles are for, somehow.... I don’t claim, you know,” he added, with something of his familiar diffidence, “to be a Christian or anything of that kind. But there’s one thing in the Bible that seems to me to be a mere statement of brutal fact – I mean, about bringing not peace but a sword.” (544)

Here, Lord Peter alludes to the Biblical passage which highlights the absolute loyalty that Christ would demand of his followers, a loyalty that must surpass all personal connections. This passage emphasises the divisions and conflict that such an expectation will bring about, with Christ asserting that “a man’s foes *shall be* they of his own household” (*Authorized King James Version*, Matthew 10:36). This reference, then, is highly appropriate; in *Gaudy Night*, Sayers insists that there are some loyalties or obligations which must come before any “personal considerations,” while simultaneously calling our attention to the painful “consequences” of this principle.

Indeed, the sense of moral ambiguity that surrounds the role of the modern detective – that ruthless “can-opener” – in Sayers’s later novels is reinforced by their adherence to this principle. The detective’s job, Sayers makes clear, is not to comfort or reassure people, but simply to “[e]stablish the facts, no matter what comes of it.”

4.3 “Bring a scholar’s mind to the problem”: Gentlemanliness, Intellectual Integrity, and “the love-problem”

At the same time, however, Sayers makes it clear that a rigorous policy of “intellectual honesty” must be followed by both Harriet and Lord Peter, if their relationship is to be successfully resolved. This issue is clearly emphasised toward the end of the novel when, for example, Harriet speaks to Miss de Vine, who points out Harriet’s obvious attraction toward Lord Peter: “Stop me if I’m saying too much. But we have talked a good deal about facing the facts. Isn’t it time you faced the facts about the man?” (*GN* 545). Harriet explains that she has been reluctant to act on these feelings because she does not see herself as a suitable partner for Lord Peter, and is afraid of what a relationship with him might entail: “I don’t think I can stand being hurt any more” (546). Miss de Vine, however, pushes Harriet to adopt a different attitude: “I suggest that you stop hurting other people. Face the facts and state a conclusion. Bring a scholar’s mind to the problem and have done with it” (546). The fact that the “intellectual” and “emotional” aspects of this novel are linked through the common theme of “intellectual integrity” is here emphasised by the fact that Miss de Vine’s advice is expressed in scholarly terms, with the novel suggesting that Harriet’s refusal to confront her own feelings regarding Lord Peter – her inconclusive insistence on “running away” from herself – may be seen as an act of intellectual dishonesty. The scholarly principle of “facing the facts,” no matter how painful they may be, applies to the conclusion of the narrative of romance as well as the narrative of detection; if Harriet is to move forward, she must “[b]ring a scholar’s mind to the problem.”

However, Harriet is not the only character who must “[b]ring a scholar’s mind to the problem” of romance; the need for “intellectual honesty” applies to Lord Peter as well. As I noted in Chapter 3, Lord Peter has been associated with what Rowland describes as “a feudal stain of exploitative class and sexual predation” (Rowland 126). This background of privilege and entitlement is further emphasised when, in *Strong Poison*, Harriet is described as “the woman he imperiously wanted” (*SP* 181). If the

relationship between Lord Peter and Harriet is to be brought to a successful conclusion, Lord Peter must move beyond this kind of imperious, possessive desire.

Here, I would point out that there is a key point of contrast between *Gaudy Night* and *South Riding*: in the latter novel, the possibility of romance between Sarah Burton and Robert Carne, that “gentleman farmer – survival of the feudal system,” is ultimately unfulfilled. At a key point in the novel, the two characters meet by chance in Manchester, during the Christmas holidays. After sharing a romantic evening together, they make plans to meet in Sarah’s hotel room – and yet this prospective sexual encounter is dramatically interrupted when Carne succumbs to the heart condition that troubles him throughout the novel. Following his collapse in the hotel room, Sarah Burton, gazing at his prone body, reflects: “Whether he lived or died the results were equal. He belonged to a past age; his world was in ruins. There was no hope for him – alive or dead” (Holtby 373). Thus, Carne’s illness reinforces a key theme of the novel: that the ideal of the “gentleman farmer” belongs to a “past age,” that the “feudal system” that Carne has striven to maintain is obsolete. This notion is further emphasised when, later in the novel, Carne is killed in an accident; as Fifield observes, “Carne is dead, his reputation damaged and his brand of semi-feudal conservatism extinguished” (Fifield 196). Holtby’s novel, then, clearly suggests that, in a post-First World War society, the ideal of the feudal gentleman is no longer viable.

With Carne’s death, crucially, the possibility of romance is eliminated. At first, Sarah Burton is crushed by his tragic end: “He had tried to hold the South Riding in its old likeness, to preserve tradition, to dam the tide of change. And she had helped to ruin him” (Holtby 507). Yet she eventually emerges, somewhat altered by her experiences, but with a renewed commitment to her work: “She had work to do. What held her was not love, nor fear, nor hope of happiness, nor any lofty purpose of achievement. It was the small and nagging knowledge that if she were not present to bully architects, the new school buildings would not fulfil her dreams” (508). In *South Riding*, then, Holtby subverts the expected narrative of romance. It is work, not romance, that must ultimately dominate the life of the educated woman.

By contrast, Sayers presents a more optimistic vision in which Harriet does not have to choose between the demands of the heart and those of the mind. In *Gaudy Night*, Sayers makes it clear that Harriet will be able to continue her literary career, and to pursue a relationship with a man who respects her intellectual

accomplishments. This resolution is fundamentally linked to Sayers's rehabilitation of the feudal gentleman: Lord Peter is able to adapt to the demands of a new age, to move beyond the feudal "possessiveness" that characterises his background. Throughout *Gaudy Night*, Lord Peter approaches the subject of romance, not as a feudal gentleman, but as a scholar; as Susan J. Leonardi puts it, his "legacy of generations of ownership is firmly controlled by an educated mind" (Leonardi 94). He demonstrates his ultimate suitability as a partner for Harriet by behaving with honesty and integrity – by adhering to the scholarly "doctrine that loyalty to the abstract truth must override all personal considerations."

What makes Lord Peter's scrupulous honesty all the more significant is that, throughout *Gaudy Night*, Harriet's inner turmoil, her struggle to reconcile the demands of the heart with those of the mind, leaves her vulnerable – and, as Sayers would point out, Lord Peter could, if he chose, achieve his goals by exploiting this confusion and emotional vulnerability. Because Harriet is obviously attracted to Lord Peter, Sayers explains, he may be "tempted to use his physical charm to precipitate an emotional surrender from which there could be no subsequent return" (Sayers, "Gaudy Night" 32). Yet Lord Peter never takes advantage of this situation, as Harriet herself recognises:

"I have been facing one fact for some time," said Harriet, staring out with unseeing eyes into the quad, "and that is, that if I once gave way to Peter, I should go up like straw."

"That," said Miss de Vine drily, "is moderately obvious. How often has he used that weapon against you?"

"Never," said Harriet, remembering the moments when he might have used it. "Never." (GN 545)

Rather than "imperiously" asserting his authority over Harriet, taking advantage of her attraction toward him, Lord Peter demonstrates his integrity by scrupulously refraining from using this "weapon" against her.

Another key issue is the nature of the "detective-problem" in *Gaudy Night*, and the way it contributes to Harriet's inner turmoil. As I noted, Harriet finds herself tempted to return to Oxford, to commit to a life of "intellectual achievement"; in a noteworthy conversation with Lord Peter, she explains that "the reason why I want to get clear

of people and feelings and go back to the intellectual side is that that is the only side of life I haven't betrayed and made a mess of" (358). At the same time, Harriet is troubled by the possible implications of the "poison-pen" attacks, which seem to confirm the stereotypical view that educated women are "warped and repressed." Harriet is thus caught between the desire to return to academia, to escape from the messiness of "people and feelings," and what Sayers summarises as the fear "that the celibate intellectual life rendered one liable to insanity in its ugliest form" (Sayers, "Gaudy Night" 32). Lord Peter's intervention, however, reveals that the poison-pen attacks are, as Sayers puts it, "the product, not of intellect starved of emotion, but of emotion uncontrolled by intellect" (30). Crucially, the solution to the mystery not only upholds the validity of "the celibate intellectual life," but also serves to emphasise the potential dangers of personal and emotional commitments – of "emotion uncontrolled by intellect." Such a solution may potentially reinforce Harriet's desire "to get clear of people and feelings and go back to the intellectual side" of life. In presenting Harriet with these facts, in other words, Lord Peter is potentially jeopardising his own chances of a relationship with her.

Indeed, Lord Peter is shown to be well aware of this issue. After the conversation with the dons in Chapter 17, for instance, he experiences a brief moment of crisis:

They were half-way across the quad when he said suddenly:

"Harriet. Do you really prize honesty above every other thing?"

"I think I do. I hope so. Why?"

"If you don't, I am the most blazing fool in Christendom. I am busily engaged in sawing off my own branch. If I am honest, I shall probably lose you altogether. If I am not—"

His voice was curiously rough, as though he were trying to control something; not, she thought, bodily pain or passion, but something more fundamental.

"If you are not," said Harriet, "then I shall lose *you*, because you wouldn't be the same person, would you?" (GN 422)

As Lord Peter continues talking, Harriet is left feeling mystified:

"Peter, I haven't an idea what you're talking about."

“All the better. Don’t worry. I won’t behave like this another time. ‘The Duke drained a dipper of brandy-and-water and became again the perfect English gentleman.’ Give me your hand.” (423)

Here, Sayers emphasises Lord Peter’s self-control, as he quickly regains the mask of “the perfect English gentleman.” In Chapter 20, however, he experiences another moment of crisis; as he implores Harriet to focus on the case with no regard for “any personal consideration whatever,” he demands: “But when you have come to a conclusion about all this, will you remember that it was *I* who asked *you* to take a dispassionate view and I who told *you* that of all devils let loose in the world there was no devil like devoted love...” (480). Harriet is struck by his “unwonted excitement” (480). While the fact that *Gaudy Night* is almost entirely focalised through Harriet’s perspective ensures that the reader is given little to no access to Peter’s inner thoughts, these outward signs – his “curiously rough” voice, his “unwonted excitement” – make it clear that he is in the grip of an extraordinary inner struggle – a struggle “to control something [...] fundamental.” His intrinsic “honesty” is clashing with his anxieties regarding the outcome of the case and the effect it will have on Harriet.

Indeed, when Annie is exposed in Chapter 22, Harriet is deeply affected by the explosive scenes that follow:

“Of course he was right!” cried Harriet. Her head was throbbing like an engine. “He’s always right. He said it was dangerous to care for anybody. He said love was a brute and a devil. You’re honest, Peter, aren’t you? Damned honest – Oh, God! let me get out of here. I’m going to be sick” (543).

When Harriet re-emerges, she admits that the experience has been “shattering” (544). If her relationship with Lord Peter is to be successfully resolved, however, this graphic illustration of the dangers of “devoted love” cannot be avoided. “She must come to him as a free agent, if she came at all,” Sayers asserts; thus, Lord Peter must “(through the machinery of the detective plot) show her the final baseness of which love was capable before he could ask her to risk the adventure with him” (Sayers, “*Gaudy Night*” 33)

Ultimately, Lord Peter’s approach to romance is reflective of the novel’s overall message: “However painful it is, there’s always one thing one has to deal with sincerely.” If his relationship with Harriet is to be successfully resolved, he must adhere to a policy of “intellectual honesty” – even though the results may be “painful.” Sayers

would explain that, in *Gaudy Night*, she had devised a situation in which Lord Peter could overcome “Harriet’s defences” with ease:

This was where the theme of intellectual integrity came in. Peter’s honesty of mind had to tell him that if Harriet accepted him under any sort of misapprehension, or through any insincerity on his part, they would be plunged into a situation even more false and intolerable than that from which they started. (32–3)

Hence, the detective plot and the romance plot both serve to convey the message “that the same intellectual honesty that is essential to scholarship is essential also to the conduct of life.” Writing two years earlier, Sayers had similarly emphasised the need for “intellectual honesty”:

[...] 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. And that this is the one fundamental treason which the scholar’s mind must not allow is the bond uniting all the Oxford people in the last resort. (Sayers, “To Muriel St Clare Byrne” 354)

The notion that Lord Peter and Harriet’s relationship could be undermined by an act of “treason to the mind” is made clear in Chapter 17, when Lord Peter, Harriet, and the dons discuss the question of how a woman might feel about a husband who had committed a fraudulent act for their sake. Significantly, Harriet declares: “If anybody did a dishonourable thing and then said he did it for one’s own sake, it would be the last insult. How could one ever feel the same to him again?” (GN 417). What confirms Lord Peter’s suitability as a partner for Harriet, then, is the fact that, unlike Arthur Robinson, he would never do something so “dishonourable” – in the novel’s terms – as suppressing an inconvenient fact; as we have seen, “[t]o suppress a fact is to publish a falsehood.” Sayers’s point is that Lord Peter, that scrupulously “honest scholar,” would not “make a deliberate falsification for personal gain.”

We are thus presented with a complex intersection between the narrative of detection and the narrative of romance. In this novel, Sayers stresses the scholarly principles of prioritising “the abstract truth” above “personal considerations,” of carrying out “one’s own job” with honesty and integrity, even when the results are “painful” – principles that further reinforce the sense of moral ambiguity that surrounds the figure of the detective, a ruthless “can-opener” who must disregard “personal

considerations” in their quest to uncover the truth. At the same time, however, such principles make possible the successful resolution of the relationship between Lord Peter and Harriet. It is through Lord Peter’s adherence to scholarly principles that the feudal gentleman is re-imagined as a viable partner for Harriet. In particular, the feelings of imperious, “possessive” desire with which he has been associated in earlier novels such as *Strong Poison* contrast sharply with the honesty and sympathy he displays in *Gaudy Night* – traits that Miss de Vine emphasises: “You have had the luck to come up against a very unselfish and a very honest man. He has done what you asked him without caring what it costs him and without shirking the issue. He hasn’t tried to disguise the facts or bias your judgment” (545). Indeed, Lord Peter goes so far as to assure Harriet: “If you want to set up your everlasting rest, you are far more likely to find it in the life of the mind than the life of the heart. [...] That is my opinion as an honest scholar, viewing the question academically and on its merits” (358). Rather than “imperiously” asserting his claim to Harriet, attempting to overwhelm her “defences,” Lord Peter presents Harriet with “the facts” and offers her the freedom to choose between “the life of the mind” and “the life of the heart.” He approaches the problem of romance, not as a feudal gentleman, but as a “honest scholar.”

This development is underlined in the novel’s final chapter, when Lord Peter and Harriet meet on top of the Radcliffe Camera. Here, Lord Peter begs Harriet’s “forgiveness,” apologising for his behaviour during the events of *Strong Poison*: “I chose that time, when I should have thought only of you, to thrust myself upon you, to make demands of you, like a damned arrogant fool – as though I had only to ask and have” (550). He goes on to assure Harriet: “You are free now and for ever, as far as I am concerned. You saw yesterday what personal claims might lead to – though I didn’t intend you to see it in quite that brutal way” (553). Harriet’s response is noteworthy:

“Yes,” said Harriet, thoughtfully. “I can’t see you burking a fact to support a thesis.”

“What would be the good? What could I ever have gained by letting you imagine a lie? I set out in a lordly manner to offer you heaven and earth. I find that all I have to give you is Oxford – which was yours already. Look! Go round about her and tell the towers thereof. It has been my humble privilege to clean and polish your property and present her for your inspection upon a silver salver. Enter into your heritage and do not, as is said in another connection, be afraid with any amazement.” (553)

In this scene, Sayers makes it clear that Lord Peter has progressed beyond the kind of imperious, possessive desire hinted at in earlier novels; he casts aside the thought of approaching Harriet “in a lordly manner,” and makes it clear that he has no claim over her. Sayers also emphasises Lord Peter’s scholarly integrity. He is not the kind of person who would suppress an inconvenient fact – such as the ugly reality of “what personal claims might lead to” – to support his own agenda, as Harriet recognises: “I can’t see you burking a fact to support a thesis.”

In addition, Sayers re-emphasises Harriet’s close relationship with the academic sphere: “I find that all I have to give you is Oxford – which was yours already.” Indeed, a key factor in the successful resolution of Lord Peter and Harriet’s relationship is that Harriet, too, displays a sense of scholarly integrity; like Lord Peter, she has “a scholar’s mind.” Here, it is worth quoting from a series of character descriptions written by Sayers, apparently in connection with the play *Busman’s Honeymoon*. Sayers’s description of Harriet’s character is particularly noteworthy:

What she has got & what he loves her for, is an immense intellectual sincerity. [...] It is evident that she will never be happy unless her passions & her reasons can march side by side; & she is lucky to have found a man honest and unselfish enough to refrain from using her heart as a weapon against her conscience. Indeed, in this respect he is the more vulnerable, & it is her honesty that will prevent him from turning the *same weapon* against himself. The fact that they both have the same educational background is probably a considerable factor in the establishment of a common understanding [...] (Sayers, “Appendix B” 209)

It must be noted that Sayers was working on *Gaudy Night* and the play *Busman’s Honeymoon* at the same time; they are what Reynolds would describe as “products of a twin gestation” (Reynolds 263). Hence, it is unsurprising that this description of Harriet is also reflected in *Gaudy Night* – a novel that emphasises the importance of Lord Peter and Harriet’s shared “educational background” to the successful resolution of their relationship.

Indeed, with this description of Harriet in mind, it is worth examining her behaviour in Chapter 17 of *Gaudy Night*. In this chapter, Harriet finds herself caught between her loyalties to Lord Peter and to Shrewsbury College, as evidenced by a conversation between Harriet and the dean:

“[...] Was that genuine, by the way?”

“About tone-deafness? Probably just a little more genuine than he made out.”

“Will he lay traps all evening for us to walk into?”

Harriet realised for a moment how queer the whole situation was. Once again, she felt Wimsey as a dangerous alien and herself on the side of the women who, with so strange a generosity, were welcoming the inquisitor among them. She said, however:

“If he does, he will display all the mechanism in the most obliging manner.”

“After one is inside. That’s very comforting.” (*GN* 402)

Here, we are once again reminded of the ambiguous nature of the detective. While these ironic comments may be tongue-in-cheek, it is noteworthy that the detective is here presented as a charismatic but untrustworthy figure – a manipulator who skilfully lays “traps” for others to “walk into.” However, this exchange also serves to highlight Harriet’s own conflicting feelings regarding Lord Peter. As we have already seen, Harriet has learned that Lord Peter is closely aligned with Oxford, and that her initial perception of him as an “alien force” is a “false one.” Yet the fact remains that, within the specific context of the women’s college, Lord Peter is an outsider – an “inquisitor” who has come to penetrate this closed community and expose its secrets. In this particular context, Harriet cannot help but side with the “women” of the college and against this “dangerous alien.”

Later in the chapter, this sense of discomfort is further emphasised by a revealing private exchange between Lord Peter and Harriet:

“What’s worrying you.”

“Peter – I feel exactly like Judas.”

“Feeling like Judas is part of the job. No job for a gentleman, I’m afraid. Shall we wash our hands like Pilate and be thoroughly respectable?”

She slid her hand under his arm.

“No; we’re in for it now. We’ll be degraded together.”

“That will be nice. Like the lovers in that Stroheim film, we’ll go and sit on the sewer.” She could feel his bone and muscle, reassuringly human, under the fine broadcloth. She thought: “He and I belong to the same world, and all these others are the aliens.” And then: “Damn it all! this is our private fight – why should they have to join in?” But that was absurd. (403)

This exchange serves to highlight the conflict between the requirements of detective work and the expectations imposed on the “gentleman” – a figure typically supposed to uphold ideals such as “fair play” and personal loyalty. This clash of values, as I showed in Chapter 1, frequently arises in literary portrayals of detection. While examining attitudes toward the detective in mid-nineteenth-century literature, for example, Yoon calls our attention to the fundamental issue that “the detective frequently resorted to underhand means of extracting information, which were seen as at odds with the values of English freedom, autonomy, and gentlemanly conduct” (Yoon 3). Here, Harriet’s fear is that, in aligning herself with the “detective” and resorting to “underhand means of extracting information,” she is betraying Shrewsbury College – a close-knit community with which she feels closely identified. At stake here is the fundamental issue that the task of uncovering and apprehending criminals may require the individual to set aside any “personal considerations” – an issue that, as I have shown in previous chapters, recurs throughout the Wimsey novels. In Harriet’s fears that she is behaving “exactly like Judas,” for instance, we may recognise an echo of Sayers’s earlier novel, *The Documents in the Case* (1930), in which the agonised John Munting fears that, in betraying his school friend Lathom’s confidence, he is “being a perfect Judas Iscariot” (DC 220). We might also note the imagery of being “degraded” and “sitting on a sewer,” which only reinforces the sense that detection is “dirty” work, necessarily involving a kind of moral contamination.

What I would emphasise here is the attitude toward detection that this passage conveys. Consider, for example, Lord Peter’s revealing remarks concerning detection: “Feeling like Judas is part of the job. No job for a gentleman, I’m afraid.” In Chapter 2, I suggested that the negative affect of shame was a defining feature of the gentleman amateur’s attitude to detection. At this point in the series, it seems that Lord Peter has accepted these feelings of shame and guilt as an intrinsic feature of the detection process. Admittedly, this acceptance does not necessarily make it easier for Lord Peter to deal with such feelings. Indeed, it must be noted that – as I showed in Chapter 2 – Lord Peter is never entirely able to set aside his gentlemanly “distastes” and “scruples”; even in the final completed Wimsey novel, *Busman’s Honeymoon*, he displays an instinctive urge to see chivalry and “fair play” upheld, meaning that the intervention of a professional detective is needed to set him right. While Sayers may endeavour to deepen Lord Peter’s characterisation by emphasising these “distastes”

and “scruples,” however, she also insists that Lord Peter must adhere to certain professional standards as a detective. Detection is Lord Peter’s “job” – and, as Miss de Vine puts it, “[o]ne can’t be pitiful where one’s own job is concerned.” (GN 212) Crucially, I have shown that Sayers also sets out to tie together the threads of detection and romance by making it clear that Lord Peter does not have to choose between his “job” (his professional integrity as a detective) and his feelings toward Harriet. In *Gaudy Night*, for instance, it is noteworthy that – despite her own discomfort – Harriet turns down Lord Peter’s offer to “wash our hands like Pilate and be thoroughly respectable,” thus demonstrating her own “intellectual sincerity.” I would argue that what is seen here is a conscious commitment to take on the responsibilities of the detective, no matter how distasteful they may be – a commitment that Harriet’s own sense of “intellectual integrity” helps Lord Peter to uphold.

5. Conclusion

In Chapter 15 of *Gaudy Night*, Sayers presents readers with an amusing interlude in which Lord Peter and Harriet are accosted by another former student of Shrewsbury College – Miss Schuster-Slatt, a strident American who, throughout the novel, is presented as a recurring nuisance and a figure of fun. While Lord Peter and Harriet are having tea in their punt, Schuster-Slatt descends on the pair with her “American contingent,” much to Harriet’s embarrassment and consternation, and makes a nuisance of herself: “Wimsey listened and replied with imperturbable urbanity, while Harriet, wishing that the Isis would flood its banks and drown them all, envied his self-command” (GN 353). After Schuster-Slatt has finally left, Lord Peter and Harriet hear her exclaiming: “Well, girls! Didn’t I tell you he was just the perfect English aristocrat?” (353). Lord Peter’s reaction is telling: “I think [...] I had better stop being the perfect English aristocrat and become the great detective after all. Fate seems to be turning my one-day romance into a roaring farce” (354). This scene is obviously comedic; Sayers undercuts Lord Peter and Harriet’s “romance” through this painfully awkward encounter with Schuster-Slatt, who is presented as a stereotypical American – loud, tactless, and naively fascinated by the English aristocracy. However, I would argue that Lord Peter’s response is particularly intriguing in that it highlights the two competing roles he plays throughout the series – “the perfect English aristocrat” and “the great detective.” More importantly, it seems that these roles are incompatible; Lord Peter cannot be both at the same time. This incompatibility between the role of “the great detective” and the expectations imposed on the gentleman is a recurring issue that I have highlighted throughout this thesis.

Even setting aside the tension between these conflicting roles, it is clear that each of these performative guises – “the perfect English aristocrat” and “the great detective” – comes with its own particular challenges, and that Lord Peter cannot always meet the demands of the roles he has assumed. For one thing, while Lord Peter may cast himself in the role of “the great detective,” this performance is frequently disrupted by his acute sensitivity to the consequences of his own detective work – by what Basney calls “Wimsey’s customary loss of detachment” (Basney 25). Perhaps the most striking example of this trend comes in the final completed Wimsey novel, *Busman’s Honeymoon*, in which Lord Peter initially adopts a light-hearted attitude: “Wimsey’s tone was studiously light. ‘When I’m investigating a murder, I hate

to have too much sympathy with the corpse. Personal feelings cramp the style” (*BH* 140). Here, Lord Peter effectively casts himself in the role of the typical Golden Age sleuth – a detached and eminently rational investigator, one who does not allow “[p]ersonal feelings” to affect their enjoyment of a good puzzle. As Sayers makes clear, however, this “studiously light” attitude is nothing more than a carefully maintained façade. At the conclusion of *Busman’s Honeymoon*, the image of the detached and eminently rational sleuth is thoroughly subverted, as Sayers presents the reader with a detailed account of Lord Peter’s pained reaction to the fate of the criminal he has helped to apprehend. Such a conclusion challenges the view of detective fiction presented by Roth, who would contend that the genre is a form of “narrative without affect,” and that this fundamental lack of affect is reflected in the detective’s “seeming indifference to the fear and pain that accompany mystery and crime” (Roth 18, 71). As I have shown, Sayers repeatedly presents us with narratives in which the “seeming indifference” of the detective is disrupted by potent feelings of guilt and shame. In short, detection is invaded by affect.

It is with such considerations in mind that I turned to affect theory in order to further illuminate the ambitious nature of Sayers’s approach to the mystery story. Here, it will be useful to return to the arguments presented by Silvan Tomkins – in particular, to Tomkins’s claim that “the self is to *some* extent an actor in a play in which he is not always perfectly cast” (Tomkins 436). In Tomkins’s view, as I noted in Chapter 3, those playing roles to which they are ill-suited are vulnerable to

feelings of shame or guilt or self-contempt [which] must constantly be suppressed lest the mask of the actor fall from the face. There are no roles, in any society, which do not sometimes or for some individuals create acute awareness of discrepancy between the demands of the role and one’s ability to meet these demands. (436)

As I have shown in this thesis, such comments might easily apply to the roles Lord Peter assumes – “the perfect English aristocrat” and the brilliant Holmesian sleuth. Throughout the series, Lord Peter is often found struggling to meet the demands of these restrictive roles.

As I noted in Chapter 3, Tomkins lists several examples of individuals who might struggle with their assigned role – such as “the soldier who does not want to kill or who wishes to run away,” or “the judge who is not certain the law he applies is just or that he is himself without sin” – and asserts that “[s]uch actors are forever vulnerable to the

lure of abandoning the mask and crying out their humiliation” (436–7). This description, as I have shown, resonates strongly with Sayers’s portrayal of her aristocratic sleuth, who often plays the role of “the perfect English aristocrat” or “the great detective,” but who is, in reality, a flawed and fallible human being. Throughout the Wimsey novels, as I have shown, Sayers deepens the characterisation of the detective by highlighting – in Tomkins’s words – the “discrepancy” between the demands of these roles, and Lord Peter’s “ability to meet these demands.” This discrepancy is especially clearly highlighted in the final chapter of *Busman’s Honeymoon*, in which Lord Peter, sitting up with Harriet, uneasily awaiting the hour of the murderer’s execution, despondently reflects: “If there *is* a God or a judgement – what next? What have we done?” (*BH* 449). In Tomkins’s words, Lord Peter “is not certain the law he applies is just or that he is himself without sin.” Sayers presents us with a detective who is acutely aware of the cost of his own interference, who continually questions whether he has the right to detect at all.

It must be remembered, however, that this more fully fleshed-out conception of the detective does not suddenly spring into being toward the end of the Wimsey series, and that detection may also be invaded by affect in the early Wimsey novels. With reference to the fourth Wimsey novel, *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*, for instance, I have shown that the negative affect of shame is a key feature of the gentleman detective’s experience of detection. It is clear, then, that Sayers did not remake her detective from scratch; rather, she simply built on the foundations she had laid down in earlier novels. Certainly, I concur with Wade’s assessment that, even in Sayers’s debut novel, “Lord Peter displays a complexity of character and a relationship with the consequences of his work that was unusual in fictional detectives” (Wade 116). From the beginning of the series, as Wade puts it, Sayers “laid the groundwork for a new sort of moral detective” (117). The unusual complexity of this “new sort of moral detective” is closely informed by Lord Peter’s status as an aristocrat and gentleman; even in the early Wimsey novels, as I have shown, Sayers skilfully exploits the tension between Lord Peter’s gentlemanly sensibilities and the messiness of detective work to deepen the mystery story.

It is clear, then, that Sayers sought to broaden the capabilities of the mystery story from an early stage – even if, writing in the 1920s, she endorsed and laid down many of the restrictive conventions imposed on the genre, publicly suggesting that the

mystery story should prioritise the intellectual thrill of puzzle-solving over deep emotion and complex characterisation. Perhaps Sayers was always intrigued by the prospect of bringing a more highbrow, ambitious approach to the mystery story, even if she initially felt constrained by what she regarded as the difficulties of such an approach, as well as the fear that a more complex and challenging mystery story might fare poorly in the literary marketplace of the interwar period. I would suggest that, as Sayers's career as a detective novelist progressed, her changing status may have given her the sense of security she needed to call openly for a more ambitious and refined approach to the mystery story, one that would combine the intricate and logical plotting of the mystery story with deeper, more psychologically convincing characterisation.

An important factor in Sayers's increasingly ambitious approach to detective fiction was the influence of nineteenth-century authors such as Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens. In the work of these authors, Sayers saw a model for the kind of mystery story she wanted to write: one with a more expansive scope, combining the clue-puzzle with deeper characterisation and an exploration of societal issues. The connection between Sayers's detective fiction and the work of these nineteenth-century authors is a subject that the project addresses, but which I would have liked to investigate in greater detail. Were I to revisit this project as part of my postdoctoral work, I would aim to spend more time studying sensation fiction, so that I could be better equipped to comment on the ways in which Sayers draws on this earlier mode of crime writing.

One major issue that emerged during this project is that the majority of existing Sayers manuscripts are held at the Marion E. Wade Center at Wheaton College, Illinois. I was unable to personally access these manuscripts; as a deaf person, I would have found it difficult to travel to the USA, where I would be cut off from my usual network of BSL support providers. I therefore relied on a proxy researcher who could access and transcribe relevant manuscripts on my behalf. Additionally, I had hoped to access an unpublished Sayers manuscript featuring a discussion of Wilkie Collins; however, this manuscript was in very poor condition, and would have been expensive and time-consuming to transcribe. Consequently, the proxy researcher and I agreed that it would not be feasible for them to complete a transcription of this particular manuscript in the time available, and that they should shift their focus to other transcription projects. It was partly because of this setback, and partly because I did

not want to simply repeat the comments Christine A. Colón offers in her discussion of *The Nine Tailors*, that I focused less on the influence of nineteenth-century authors such as Collins than I might have done.

In focusing on Lord Peter's "customary loss of detachment," nevertheless, I have shown how Lord Peter's characterisation may link backward, to the detectives of nineteenth-century sensation fiction – a body of work in which detection is often, as Beller has shown, "an intrinsically personal event" (Beller 50). Certainly, I would agree with Colón's claim that Lord Peter more closely resembles Wilkie Collins's detectives than "the stereotype of the distant, unaffected detective that developed from Conan Doyle's unflappable Sherlock Holmes" (Colón 142). To extend such an argument, I have examined two early Wimsey novels in which the detection process is, from the very beginning, "intrinsically personal." In *Clouds of Witness*, Lord Peter is attempting to clear his brother of a murder charge, and is required to uncover the secrets of his own family, while *Strong Poison* sees Lord Peter falling in love with the chief suspect in a murder mystery. By presenting Lord Peter as being subject to romantic, sexual, and familial feeling, Sayers further reinforces the impression that Lord Peter is a flawed and fallible human being who has less in common with the Holmesian "stereotype of the distant, unaffected detective" than with the detectives of nineteenth-century sensation fiction.

This recurring "loss of detachment" also sets Lord Peter apart from other Golden Age sleuths such as Agatha Christie's Miss Marple. Here, it is worth pointing out that Christie's portrayal of Miss Marple would shift considerably across the course of her lengthy career; Cora Kaplan, for instance, observes that "[t]he early, interwar Miss Marple is a more tentative invention; Christie can be seen to be negotiating, somewhat hesitantly, the level of social transgression her creation would be allowed" (Kaplan 151). By contrast, later novels would portray Miss Marple as a more authoritative figure, set against the backdrop of a changing society. Indeed, in a recent biography of Christie, Lucy Worsley asserts that "as the Sixties progress, Miss Marple, and her creator, grow positively terrifying in the severity of their judgements" (Worsley 326). This more "terrifying" Miss Marple is especially clearly seen in one of Christie's final novels, *Nemesis* (1971). In this novel, a message from a recently deceased acquaintance, Jason Rafiel, invites Miss Marple "to serve the cause of justice" (Christie, *Nemesis* 24). Rafiel's message concludes with a reference to Amos 5:24:

Let justice roll down like waters

And righteousness like an everlasting stream. (24)

This Biblical quotation sets the tone for a novel in which Miss Marple must solve a past crime and exonerate Rafiel's son Michael, who has been wrongly accused of murder. The novel's title emphasises Christie's conception of the detective as the embodiment of "righteousness," an authoritative figure who must bring evil to justice and set right a past wrong; as Kaplan puts it, Miss Marple herself is "*Nemesis*, a divine figure of retributive justice in a humble, seemingly harmless human incarnation" (Kaplan 151). Similarly, Worsley claims that, in this late novel, Miss Marple is "almost inhuman. [...]" Late Miss Marple no longer cares about human justice and human law" (Worsley 328). Here, we may recognise a clear contrast between late Christie and late Sayers. While Christie's later novels may have presented Miss Marple as "almost inhuman," a powerful and authoritative figure of "retributive justice," Sayers's novels increasingly emphasise the limitations of the gentleman detective, a figure who is shown to be all too human. Certainly, it is difficult to imagine Miss Marple asking, as Lord Peter does: "If there *is* a God or a judgment – what next? What have we done?"

We might also consider Christie's portrayal of her other well-known sleuth, Hercule Poirot. In the 1936 novel *The ABC Murders*, for instance, Poirot declares: "For Hercule Poirot nowadays only the cream of crime" (Christie, *ABC* 9). At the beginning of this novel, Poirot explains to a surprised Hastings exactly what kind of crime he would like to investigate:

"As soon as I heard you were coming over I said to myself: something will arise. As in former days we will hunt together, we two. But if so it must be no common affair. It must be something" – he waved his hands excitedly – "something *recherché* – delicate – *fine*..." He gave the last untranslatable word its full flavour.

"Upon my word, Poirot," I said. "Any one would think you were ordering a dinner at the Ritz" (9).

Here, Poirot displays the detached, aestheticised attitude toward crime which, as I showed in Chapter 2, is a recurring feature of the classical detective; Poirot is keen to "hunt" criminals once again, but the crime he investigates "must be no common affair." At the conclusion of the novel, significantly, Christie makes it clear that Poirot's enthusiasm for the crime of distinction remains intact. The novel's final line has Poirot

remarking, with a smile: “So, Hastings – we went hunting once more, did we not? *Vive le sport*” (192). Poirot is clearly untroubled by the fate of the murderer he has helped to apprehend. In this novel, in fact, Poirot actually prevents the murderer, Franklin Clarke, from committing suicide; Clarke is last seen being led away by the police, and the novel does not dwell on his fate. Poirot thus emerges as a brilliant and typically detached sleuth, one who is more concerned with the abstract quality of the crimes they investigate than with the outcome of the detection process. What the novel’s closing scene emphasises is not the moral and emotional costs of detection, but the intellectual satisfaction of “hunting” criminals.

To some extent, this detached attitude toward crime is echoed in the Wimsey novels; as I noted in Chapter 2, Lord Peter often displays the disconnected, aestheticising view of crime that we might typically expect of the gentleman amateur. I have also shown, however, that Lord Peter’s initial enthusiasm for crime is frequently disrupted by a growing awareness of the consequences of his own interference, the moral and emotional costs of his detective work. In *Unnatural Death*, for instance, Lord Peter initially enthuses about the mystery at hand, proclaiming that “I believe this is the case I have always been looking for. The case of cases” (*UD* 91). When Lord Peter’s actions provoke the murderer into committing further crimes, however, his enthusiasm for the distinguished mystery, “[t]he case of cases,” is tempered by a gnawing unease. At the end of the novel, additionally, Lord Peter, after learning that the murderer has committed suicide in prison, is left feeling “cold and sick” (299). Lord Peter thus emerges, not as the brilliant, detached sleuth who finds satisfaction in “hunting” criminals, but as a flawed and fallible human being – one who is “sick[ened]” by all that they have experienced. Such a conclusion is typical of the Wimsey novels, in which, as I have shown, Lord Peter is often deeply affected by the cases he investigates.

This is not to say that Christie’s detective fiction is lacking in depth and complexity; a detailed study of Christie’s work is beyond the scope of this thesis. Rather, my aim has been to highlight the unusual depth and complexity which Sayers brings to the figure of the detective. If Andrew Marr is correct in suggesting that the contemporary detective is a troubled and world-weary figure who carries with them the weight of all that they have seen and done (“Detectives”), then this development is clearly anticipated in Sayers’s portrayal of Lord Peter Wimsey, who often has to pay

some kind of “psychological penalty” for his enjoyment of distinguished puzzles. While this trend is most clearly apparent in *Busman’s Honeymoon*, with its detailed portrayal of Lord Peter’s pained reaction to the execution of the criminal he has helped to apprehend, Sayers’s efforts to highlight the moral and emotional costs of detection are a recurring feature of the Wimsey series.

Although the depth and complexity that Sayers brings to the figure of the detective has been discussed by critics such as Wade, I have deepened and extended such discussions by focusing more specifically on Lord Peter’s status as a *gentleman* detective. In Chapter 1, to begin with, I highlighted some of the tensions and anxieties that surround the figure of the detective in nineteenth-century sensation fiction. As critics such as Yoon and Trodd have made clear, the detective frequently emerges as a morally ambiguous figure in fiction of this period; while they may have been positioned as agents of law and order, there existed grave concerns regarding their power and methods. A key issue here is the fact that the professional detective was, in essence, a working-class figure. Crime narratives of the mid-nineteenth century often suggested that the professional detective’s quest for the truth might lead them to violate the sanctity of the middle- or upper-class household, and that the professional detective was incapable of correctly reading genteel character. It is easy to draw a line between these anxieties and the prevalence of gentleman detectives such as Lord Peter Wimsey in later detective fiction; we might conclude that authors sought to smooth over the tensions and anxieties surrounding the detection process by creating a new kind of detective, one who combined the authority of the professional detective with the sensibilities of the genteel amateur, who could solve crimes while still behaving like a gentleman. Certainly, this was the view presented by Grella, who would insist that, in the insular, aristocratic society supposedly portrayed by the Golden Age mystery story, the gentleman amateur is “always [...] socially acceptable” and will triumph where the professional detective cannot, thanks to their gentlemanly character (Grella 34). Grella’s article clearly suggests that, in Golden Age detective fiction, the once-threatening figure of the detective has been fully assimilated into genteel society – that authors such as Sayers presented self-assured, gentlemanly detectives who could be trusted to defend, rather than destabilise, the status quo.

Here, it must be acknowledged that Grella’s arguments are not entirely without merit. Occasionally, the image of the gentleman detective as an ideal gentleman who

patrols the borders of society, bringing about “an expulsion of the socially undesirable” (41), can be recognised in the Wimsey novels. Perhaps the most notable example is *Busman’s Honeymoon*, in which Harriet remarks to Lord Peter: “Peter, I believe you’re a fraud. You may play at being a great detective and a scholar and a cosmopolitan man-about-town, but at bottom you’re nothing but an English country gentleman, with his soul in the stables and his mind on the parish pump” (*BH* 77). It must be noted that Lord Peter refuses this identification: “No – but my father was one of the old school” (77). In Chapter 5, however, Harriet contemplates Lord Peter’s participation in village life, and the novel returns to a nostalgic vision of Lord Peter as a traditional “country gentleman”:

She understood now why it was that with all his masquing attitudes, all his cosmopolitan self-adaptations, all his odd spiritual reticences and escapes, he yet carried about with him that permanent atmosphere of security. He belonged to an ordered society, and this was it. More than any of the friends in her own world, he spoke the familiar language of her childhood. In London, anybody, at any moment, might do or become anything. But in a village – no matter what village – they were all immutably themselves; parson, organist, sweep, duke’s son and doctor’s daughter, moving like chessmen upon their allotted squares. She was curiously excited. She thought, “I have married England.” Her fingers tightened on his arm. (105)

In *Busman’s Honeymoon*, then, Sayers presents a nostalgic vision of an unchanging pastoral community, “an ordered society.” In this rural setting, it seems, Lord Peter neatly slots into the traditional role of the feudal overlord, the “duke’s son,” and is accepted as such by the villagers: in the character sketches that she wrote for the original theatrical version of the story, Sayers would insist that the villagers “recognize him at once as a hereditary ruler” (Sayers, “Appendix B” 209). While previous novels may have emphasised Lord Peter’s outward façade of “cosmopolitan” modernity, then, Sayers’s final novel presents Lord Peter in a more nostalgic light, as a symbol of tradition, continuity, and “permanent [...] security.”

Sayers’s portrayal of the criminal in *Busman’s Honeymoon* also bears closer investigation. In this novel, the murderer is Frank Crutchley, who, for much of the narrative, maintains a façade of respectability, treating Lord Peter with apparent deference. In reality, however, Crutchley views Lord Peter with contempt, and thinks only of getting money from him; he resents the thought of “truckling to a blasted title”

(BH 316). “Of all the people in the play,” Sayers would write, “he is the only one who resents Peter’s native authority; he is definitely of the post-war breed” (Sayers, “Appendix B” 211). Within the “ordered society” that Sayers conjures up, Crutchley is very much an outlier. In *Busman’s Honeymoon*, then, we may recognise an echo of Grella’s view of the gentleman detective: the detective emerges as a traditional “country gentleman,” while Crutchley’s lack of respect for the traditional social order – for “Peter’s native authority” – is used to emphasise his criminality. Perhaps, after all, the detective is a true gentleman – one whose task is to remove such “socially undesirable” figures.

Nevertheless, I would argue that Grella presents an overly simplistic view of the classical mystery story, which elides the full complexity of the gentleman detective in Sayers’s fiction. One of my aims in writing this thesis has been to challenge Grella’s view by more closely scrutinising Sayers’s portrayal of her aristocratic sleuth, and by drawing out the tension between the conflicting roles Lord Peter plays throughout the series, “the perfect English aristocrat” and “the great detective.” In Sayers’s detective novels, for one thing, the professional detective is not just an ineffectual figure who exists to underline the superiority of the gentleman amateur; rather, the professional detective can play a vital role in reminding the gentleman amateur of their responsibilities as a detective. Such interventions are necessary precisely because the sensibilities of a gentleman are ultimately incompatible with the messiness of detective work. As Sayers makes clear in novels such as *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* and *The Documents in the Case*, the detective’s pursuit of the truth is incompatible with a gentlemanly code of manners that encompasses ideals such as chivalry, loyalty, and fair play. In fact, the nature of the detective in Sayers’s fiction is aptly summarised by Harriet’s view of Lord Peter as an uncomfortably incisive figure, a “can-opener” (GN 368). The ideal detective is not a “perfect English aristocrat,” but a more ruthless and uncompromising figure, a brutal “can-opener” who must be prepared to set aside personal considerations in their unbending efforts to apprehend the criminal. In short, I have shown that the gentleman detective is a much more complex and contradictory figure than Grella’s essay would suggest.

Here, it is worth considering Moulton’s description of the Mutual Admiration Society (MAS), the writing group formed by Sayers and her university friends. Writing in 2019, Moulton would observe that

the members of the MAS were simultaneously insiders and outsiders: members of an elite social class, but women. From that very particular position they were able to develop a distinctive set of ideas about the relationships between high art and popular culture, and between elite intellectual ideas and ordinary life. (Moulton 5)

What I would emphasise here is the complexity of Sayers's "very particular position," as both an insider and an outsider. On the one hand, Sayers belonged to "an elite social class," and her novels are often seen as being reflective of this positioning. More specifically, Sayers has been accused of uncritically venerating the aristocracy – of "enthusing sycophantically over patrician taste," as Light would put it (Light 80). Writing in the 1970s, for instance, Symons would contend that Lord Peter had been "conceived with an immensely snobbish loving seriousness" (Symons 110). Admittedly, these accusations of snobbishness are given weight by novels such as *Busman's Honeymoon*, in which the only villager who does not respect Lord Peter's "native authority" is Frank Crutchley, a callous and unsympathetic character who is eventually exposed as a criminal and sentenced to execution. At the same time, however, Sayers's gender marked her as an outsider, and her novels would frequently question and criticise contemporary gender norms; Schaub notes that, compared to other female authors of the Golden Age, Sayers "is almost universally agreed to be the most conservative," and yet "at the same time she was clearly the most consistently and explicitly feminist author in the group – the only one who wrote published essays with titles like 'Are Women Human?'" (Schaub, *The Female Gentleman* 135). While Sayers may have looked to nineteenth-century fiction for inspiration, she would also emphasise the need to move beyond restrictive attitudes toward marriage and gender roles. Her novels often call for a reworking rather than a simple acceptance of such traditional societal conventions.

I would argue that this process of rewriting and adaptation is also seen clearly in Sayers's increasingly complex and layered portrayal of her gentleman detective, who – like Sayers herself – is both an insider and an outsider. On the surface, Lord Peter very much seems to be an insider; he is a "perfect English aristocrat," a member of "an elite social class." However, his chosen profession of detection frequently renders him an outsider. In novels such as *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*, in which Lord Peter's rigorous integrity, his uncompromising dedication to the facts, enrages the highly traditional Robert Fentiman, Sayers shows how the detective might

offend gentlemanly sensibilities in their quest for the truth – and, in doing so, undermines Grella’s confident assertion that the gentleman detective is “always socially acceptable.” As I have shown, the gentleman detective in Sayers’s fiction emerges as a far more complex and potentially divisive figure, with Sayers making it clear that such messy conflicts are inescapable. If Lord Peter is to become a truly efficient detective, a productive and socially useful figure, he must be prepared to prioritise the truth above all personal loyalties. In this way, Sayers suggests that the gentleman would have to evolve beyond a specifically Victorian or Edwardian conception of the gentleman as a public-school man, a man who always plays fair, and who never lets down their friends. In short, the gentleman would have to evolve to survive.

Lord Peter thus emerges as a dynamic and highly compelling character, one capable of growth and change, a development that is perfectly encapsulated by the striking passage in *Strong Poison* that sees Lord Peter recognising the “triumph of mutability” (SP 99). As I showed in Chapter 3, Sayers’s efforts to deepen the characterisation of the detective are reflected in Lord Peter’s realisation that he is “changing, changing, fearfully changing,” and that “things would never be the same again” (99). Across the Wimsey novels, this process of change and growth unfolds on multiple levels. In portraying the detective as a flawed and fallible character, for one thing, Sayers moves away from older conceptions of the detective as brilliant, superhuman, and infallibly rational – a detached investigator whose knowledge of science would enable them to solve any mystery, reflecting a late Victorian faith in scientific progress. This authorial manoeuvre is reflective of broader trends in Golden Age detective fiction, a body of work in which, as Rowland has shown, female authors such as Sayers would subvert the stereotypical image of the brilliant Holmesian sleuth (Rowland 21, 24). While suggesting that the detective was “changing,” evolving into a richer and more complex character, however, Sayers would also touch on the difficult question of whether or not the traditional figure of the feudal gentleman could possibly adapt to survive in a post-First World War context. In examining Sayers’s portrayal of the gentleman detective, we are confronted by the notion that the gentleman is evolving to suit the needs of a changing society.

In my postdoctoral work, I intend to go further in charting this evolutionary process. For one thing, I would point out that the story of Lord Peter Wimsey did not

necessarily end with *Busman's Honeymoon*, and that Sayers would occasionally return to Lord Peter's universe in the following years. For example, the early war years would see the appearance of "The Wimsey Papers" (1939–40). Published weekly in *The Spectator* between November 1939 and January 1940, "The Wimsey Papers" consisted of a series of letters and diary extracts, offering glimpses of how various characters from the Wimsey novels were reacting to current events. Reynolds explains that "[t]he ostensible aim was to amuse and to boost morale, but there was the underlying serious purpose of directing readers' minds to the aims of peace, reconstruction, educational and social reform and the preservation of traditional values" (Reynolds 298). To the "Papers" can be added several short stories, and – most intriguing of all – *Thrones, Dominations*, a Wimsey novel that Sayers began writing after *Busman's Honeymoon*. This project was never completed in Sayers's lifetime; Sayers abandoned *Thrones, Dominations* some time in 1936, and the novel was eventually completed by the contemporary novelist Jill Paton Walsh. I hope to investigate this corpus of later Wimsey writings in more detail in future work. For now, I will briefly point out that these final additions to the Wimsey series may help to further illuminate Sayers's approach to the figure of the gentleman.

The onset of another global conflict would add a further layer of uncertainty to the question of what the future might hold for the aristocracy; while *Busman's Honeymoon* may present a nostalgic vision of the country gentleman as symbolic of tradition and continuity, it is difficult to escape the feeling that this sense of "permanent [...] security" is illusory. Indeed, Kenney observes that "Wimsey will be called away by the Foreign Office on the Monday morning, and there is a valedictory scent in the air, a suppressed [*sic*] urgency about the coming conflict" (Kenney 119). The uncertainty that surrounds the future of the "English country gentleman" is made more clearly apparent in "The Wimsey Papers," an epistolary narrative set during the early days of World War Two. In an extract from Lord Peter's private diary, we learn about what his older brother, the stuffy and highly conventional Gerald, has been doing with the family estate:

My brother writes that he is planting oak-trees in the Long Coppice. I acknowledge that there is something in him that is indomitable. He is persuaded that the next generation, if not this, will see the end of our stewardship, and for him (being what he is) that means the end of everything that was England. Even if we, by some miracle, are not left ruined

beyond repair, even if a new kind of society does not take the soil from us and hand it over to God knows what kind of commercial spoliation, his personal situation is hopeless, because he can place no confidence in his heir. He knows well enough that Jerry would not care if the whole place were surrendered to ribbon-building or ragwort. But what the land requires, the land shall have, so long as he is alive to serve it. All the same – oaks! (Sayers, “The Wimsey Papers” 70–1)

The future of the Wimsey estate is clearly in doubt. Gerald, the Duke of Denver, “can place no confidence in his heir” – Lord Peter’s young and capricious nephew, Lord Saint-George. Certainly, Lord Peter himself seems to be less than optimistic, given that he is astonished to find his brother planting “oak-trees,” a traditional symbol of longevity. What is perhaps even more revealing is that, in another diary extract, Lord Peter announces that, “in case of accident,” he has composed an “epitaph” for himself: “HERE LIES AN ANACHRONISM IN THE VAGUE EXPECTATION OF ETERNITY” (75; capitals in original). Such a quote could potentially serve as an “epitaph” for, more generally, the figure of the gentleman – a figure that would increasingly come to seem like an “anachronism” in the context of interwar society.

The notion that the feudal gentleman had become anachronistic recurs throughout texts of the interwar period – not just in detective fiction. In Holtby’s *South Riding*, for example, the death of the landowner Robert Carne only serves to further emphasise Holtby’s suggestion that the feudal gentleman belongs to the past, that such a figure cannot survive into the present day. After Carne’s death, his main political opponent, the calculating businessman Anthony Snaith, reflects on Carne’s demise. Snaith likens Carne to an “ancient ash,” an “[o]ld, thin, decaying” tree that stands outside his house:

The Carnes of Maythorpe, he thought, were like that tree – rooted deep in the earth; they understood that; their leaves and branches were lifted high and all men saw them, a conspicuous growth, proud, decorative. What they could not see, what they had never learned to recognise, were the winds that blew from all the ends of the world, Canada, Argentine, Denmark, New Zealand, Russia. They would survive. But the wind and the rain and the storms from west to east, taxes and tariffs and subsidies and quotas, beef from the Argentine, wool from Australia, economic nationalism, fashions and crazes – all those imponderable influences of which their slow, strong, rigid minds took no heed – these would destroy them. If Carne were dead, or if he were in flight,

what difference did that make? He was defeated. The tree must be cut down. (Holtby 444–5)

Here, Holtby clearly suggests that the gentry is a spent force. The kind of feudal conservatism for which Carne had stood belongs to a rapidly disappearing world; the gentry is too insular, too “slow” and “rigid,” to adapt to a new age of increasing industrialisation and globalisation.

These gloomy predictions regarding the future of the gentry are, to some extent, echoed in the Wimsey novels. In *Gaudy Night*, for instance, Lord Peter cynically declares: “Our kind of show is dead and done for. What the hell good does it do anybody these days?” (GN 341). We might also consider the character sketches written by Sayers for *Busman’s Honeymoon*, in which she would offer a revealing description of Lord Peter’s physical features:

The steadiness of the grey eyes & long, humorous mouth is reassuring, & there is certainly no lack of physical health or vitality; yet the acuteness of the facial angle, the silvery pallor of hair and skin, the slight droop of the eyelids, the sensitive and restless hands, & above all a certain nervous tautness of gesture & carriage – these signs perhaps convey a warning that the family blood will not stand very much more of this kind of thing, & that in marrying a commoner he has shown no more than a proper consideration for posterity. (Sayers, “Appendix B” 208)

Sayers’s comments regarding “the family blood” clearly suggest that the aristocracy is a force in decline, weakened by centuries of stubborn adherence to tradition. Yet Sayers ultimately offers a more optimistic vision, suggesting that the gentry could be rejuvenated through the addition of fresh blood – that the future of the aristocracy would be safeguarded through Lord Peter and Harriet’s marriage.

Certainly, Sayers would make it clear that the Wimsey estate could ultimately be left in the hands of Lord Peter and his family. In summarising the development of Lord Peter’s character across the course of the Wimsey novels, Plain identifies “a progress from an outward-looking but selfish denial of the private, through a more inward acknowledgement of personal need, to the recognition of and submission to the law of public service” (Plain, *Women’s Fiction* 46). While examining *Gaudy Night*, in particular, Plain finds that, by this point in the series, Lord Peter “has reassumed his interaction with the patriarchal order, performing the duties prescribed to a man of his class and education” (57). Had the Wimsey novels continued beyond *Busman’s*

Honeymoon, it is likely that this process of reintegration – of Lord Peter’s increasing “submission to the law of public service” – would have continued, with Lord Peter being set up to take over the family estate. Indeed, in *Gaudy Night*, Lord Peter himself suggests that he would be prepared to take charge of the estate if necessary, and that he “might prove a more honest steward” than his impulsive nephew Lord Saint-George (GN 219). Writing in November 1935, additionally, Sayers, outlining her ideas for future Wimsey projects, would refer to “the distressing business about Saint-George, which will leave Peter heir to those damned strawberry leaves” (Sayers, “To Donald Tovey” [22 November 1935] 361).⁹ It appears that Sayers envisioned a scenario in which *something* would happen to Lord Saint-George, positioning Lord Peter to replace his nephew as “steward” of the Wimsey estate.¹⁰ In such a scenario, there is a noticeable parallel with the political crisis caused by the abdication of King Edward VIII, and the subsequent ascension of Edward’s younger brother George to the throne. This parallel has been highlighted by Alzina Stone Dale, who claims that Sayers was unsympathetic toward Edward VIII, and saw him as “a lightweight whose loss was good riddance because he had not ‘played the game’” (Dale 73). In Dale’s view, “[t]he parallel with the Wimseys was clear: if Lord St. George did not inherit the duchy, it would go to Lord Peter and his sons, who could be trusted to do their duty” (73). Here, we might recall Berberich’s claim that “one of the keywords for every (prospective) gentleman” was “duty before personal interest, the good of the group (read: society) before that of the individual” (Berberich, *Image* 10). It seems that these later Wimsey works were potentially laying out a future in which Lord Peter would do his duty by the nation, taking charge of the Wimsey estate, and so establishing himself as a *true* gentleman.

I would point out, however, that while Sayers may have been concerned with safeguarding the future of the aristocracy – in line with Reynolds’s claim that “The Wimsey Papers” were intended to encourage “the preservation of traditional values” – it is telling that the future supposedly lies with Lord Peter and Harriet’s marriage – a distinctly unconventional relationship that eschews traditional conceptions of possessive feudal sexuality in favour of a partnership between intellectual equals.

⁹ *Gaudy Night* also includes a reference to “strawberry leaves.” The online Lord Peter Wimsey Companion, a resource available to members of the Dorothy L. Sayers Society, explains that this phrase refers “to the ornamentation on a ducal coronet, eight strawberry leaves” (“Strawberry leaves”).

¹⁰ Indeed, it is perhaps worth noting that this exact scenario plays out in the continuation novels by Jill Paton Walsh. In these novels, Lord Peter becomes the Duke of Denver following the deaths of Gerald and Lord Saint-George.

Indeed, Sayers's efforts to reinvent the institution of marriage have been highlighted by Plain, who argues that "Sayers attempts to reclaim the institution of marriage as a sanctuary" (Plain, *Women's Fiction* 58). "It is essentially a conservative strategy," according to Plain, "but it must be seen as a rehabilitation and rewriting of the old, rather than simply a reactionary return to 'traditional' values" (58). Sayers's portrayal of the marriage of Lord Peter and Harriet, then, serves to emphasise the fact that Sayers often called for "a rehabilitation and rewriting of the old" to suit the demands of a new age, rather than a straightforward acceptance of traditional societal conventions. Indeed, while Sayers may have looked to mid-nineteenth century fiction for guidance, she would simultaneously highlight the need to move away from Victorian gender norms.

These issues would have been highlighted in Sayers's unfinished novel, *Thrones, Dominations*.¹¹ The surviving fragment written by Sayers features a noteworthy conversation between Lord Peter and his brother Gerald, which highlights Lord Saint-George's unsuitability as an heir. Speaking to Lord Peter, Gerald makes it clear that he hopes Harriet will produce children to secure the future of the Wimsey estate:

"I suppose you realize that you're next."

"I realize it perfectly," said Peter. "I assure you, I have no wish to see Jerry break his neck. Country estates aren't in my line and never were."

"You run your London property pretty well, though."

"Yes – but it is London. I rather like handling houses and people. But pig and plough – no."

"Well," said the Duke, "I'm glad you're married, anyway."

Peter's eyes narrowed.

"I didn't marry with the idea of founding a dynasty."

¹¹ Unfortunately, I could not directly access the surviving original fragment of *Thrones, Dominations*; as previously noted, it would have been highly difficult for me to travel to the Marion E. Wade Center, where the relevant manuscripts are held. Hence, I am extremely grateful to Seona Ford, the Chair of the Dorothy L. Sayers Society, who supplied me with useful material from the society archives – namely, with what appears to be a full transcript of the fragment, written up by a Society member, Robin Leidner.

“I did,” said the Duke. He got up and walked heavily across to the fireplace. “Don’t blame Helen. I made several kinds of fool of myself and she got fed up with me. But I wish Winifred had been another boy.”

“Looking at the matter logically,” said his brother, “either one is the parish bull or one is not. But our generation was neither one thing nor the other. You want me to secure the collateral line for you in case of accident. All right. A Victorian would simply have ordered his wife to do her duty. The young men and women of today would refuse to recognize any duty in the matter.” (Sayers, “Thrones, Dominations” 3–4)

Lord Peter goes on to assert that “the decision isn’t in my hands and I don’t intend that it shall be. If my wife has children, she shall have them for the fun of it, and not as a legal instrument for securing the orderly devolution of property” (4). In this scene, then, Sayers emphasises the contrast between Lord Peter and his brother; whereas Gerald fully conforms to the traditional image of the country gentleman, Lord Peter emerges as a more modern figure, linked with town rather than country – even if, as Harriet believes, he is a true “English country gentleman” beneath this veneer of “cosmopolitan” modernity. This scene also serves to emphasise the fact that Sayers sets out to remake the institution of marriage, with Lord Peter insisting that he has not married solely to “secure the collateral line,” and he will not conform to the traditional conception of marriage, in which the husband orders “his wife to do her duty.” In short, Lord Peter is “neither one thing nor the other.” While he may not be fully aligned with the “young men and women of today,” he also distances himself from the restrictive gender norms of the “Victorian” era.

In this thesis, I have shown that Sayers would apply a similar strategy of “rehabilitation and rewriting” to the figure of the gentleman, remaking this traditional ideal to suit the needs of a new age. This remaking is a complex and layered process, unfolding in both the detection and romance plots – two supposedly distinct elements that are ultimately linked by Sayers’s overarching emphasis on the need for intellectual integrity, for a scholarly adherence to facts above all else. More specifically, Lord Peter is required to evolve beyond the kind of sadistic, possessive sexuality that has historically been associated with the feudal gentleman, and to move away from a more specifically Victorian or Edwardian conception of gentlemanliness, one which would emphasise ideals such as chivalry, personal loyalty, and fair play. I would generally agree with Mayhall’s assertion that, over the course of the series, Lord Peter is

increasingly pushed to move away from obsolete, public-school ideals, and to adopt a more middle-class, professionalised attitude (Mayhall 780); if he is to succeed as a detective, Sayers makes clear, he must be prepared to set aside a traditional, gentlemanly code of manners that encompasses such ideals as chivalry and personal loyalty. At the same time, I have complicated such a view by showing that Lord Peter never fully completes the transition from flawed and fallible amateur to detached professional. Even as Sayers insists on the necessity of putting facts above personal feelings, of ruthlessly pursuing the truth at any cost, she simultaneously deepens the mystery story – and the figure of the detective – by emphasising the moral and emotional costs of such a principle. Across the course of the series, Lord Peter never truly becomes desensitised to these costs, and the conflict between the messiness of detective work and the sensibilities of a gentleman is never fully resolved. Rather, Lord Peter simply comes to accept that this conflict is an intrinsic part of detection – that detection is “[n]o job for a gentleman” (*GN* 403).

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