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Dorothy Sayers'

Gaudy Night

From a Class and Gender Perspective

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Introduction

I first became intrigued by the English detective writer Dorothy Sayers' (1893-1957) impressive life and career – early female graduate from Oxford and the woman behind one of the best British translations of Dante's *Divine Comedy* (1949-62). When I started reading her detective novels I found a richness in both characterization and plot that impressed me.

In 1920, the young writer-to-be was among the first group of women to be awarded a Master's Degree at Oxford University. This was an experience that she later used when describing her heroine Harriet Vane's adventures in *Gaudy Night* (1935), generally considered her most important and personal novel. Sayers writes that "[i]t is the only book I've written embodying any kind of a 'moral' and I do feel rather passionately about this business of the integrity of the mind" (*Reynolds*, 261). In this essay, I intend to read the novel *Gaudy Night* from a class and gender perspective in order to find what this moral really consists of and furthermore to explore Sayers' notion of the integrity of the mind.

Sayers' early detective novels had become popular due to her creation of Lord Peter Wimsey – a fantastic sleuth, who made his first appearance in *Whose Body?* (1923). His skills in the mystery-solving department could easily be compared to those of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes or Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot. Harriet Vane was first introduced in *Strong Poison* (1930) as a future bride for Lord Peter, but Sayers did not marry them off until in *Gaudy Night*.

In *Gaudy Night*, Harriet Vane, a successful mystery writer, returns to Shrewsbury College to attend the annual Gaudy, which is an Oxford reunion of graduates. At the reunion she finds an anonymous note lying on the trim turf showing "a naked figure of exaggeratedly feminine outlines, inflicting savage and humiliating outrage upon some person of indeterminate gender clad in a cap and gown. It was neither sane nor healthy; it was, in fact, a nasty, dirty and lunatic scribble" (43). The description of this picture effectively sets the stage for the kind of

hysteria, paranoia, and fears of sexual repression prevalent in the novel. Harriet, who had been accused of murdering her lover five years previously, believes the notes are an attack on her. However, she later finds out that other female dons and students at Shrewsbury are also receiving threats. Harriet comes back to the college and pursues the investigation. Unable, however, to solve the mystery on her own she calls in her colleague, Lord Peter Wimsey. He sweeps in, solves the mystery and convinces Harriet to marry him.

Harriet bears a strong resemblance to Sayers, both in life and looks. They are both female detective writers, unmarried, living in London with a Master's degree from Oxford and not incredibly beautiful. It was a radical choice for a woman in those days to attend university. According to McClellan,

in the 1930s, only 54 percent of Girton College's women students married, compared to 89 percent of other women. Few of them had children. Such statistics reinforce the fact that 'choosing between a career and marriage was a more definite and final choice in earlier days than it is now'. (343)

Sayers' choice to attend university could indicate a personal choice of not getting married. This could imply that she wished to stress that Harriet was not primarily interested in getting married. On the other hand, *Gaudy Night* is full of Harriet's anxieties in relation to her unmarried status. Trembley argues that she is a conservative woman rather than a feminist and that she struggles to make ends meet as her independence is involuntary (93).

The novel explores an intellectual woman's concerns regarding above all the choice between concentrating on an intellectual career or getting married. "What are you to do with the people who are cursed with both hearts and brains?" (88), exclaims Harriet, showing that she has not found a way yet of combining the growing love she feels for Lord Peter with her intellectual career. The gender stereotypes, as I will show later, are both explicitly and implicitly conveyed in the narrative and cloud Harriet's judgements, affecting her ability to solve the case. In

the present analysis of *Gaudy Night* I will focus upon three distinguishing aspects of the ideology concerning class and gender, namely the narrative portrayal of women at Oxford University in 1930's Britain, how Annie's criminality is presented, and, finally, if class and gender affect the way in which the two main protagonists, Harriet and Lord Peter, act.

Women at universities

The novel *Gaudy Night* is set in Oxford at an imaginary women's college called Shrewsbury, based on the real college Somerville, which Sayers attended. Sayers' choice of discussing intellectual values in an all-female college is, according to Willis, an attempt to "[stake] a claim for women's place as equals in the intellectual life" (par.1). Sayers may have wanted to do this as women's higher education was still a widely contested topic in the 1930s when *Gaudy Night* was published. In fact, Sayers seems to be using the characters' attitude towards women's higher education to signal to the reader whether the character is good or bad. For example, Lord Peter, being one of the good characters, is asked by the Warden if he is at all interested in this question of women's education. He calmly replies, "Is it still a question? It ought not to be" (396). In contrast, Annie, the culprit, clearly dislikes the idea of women's higher education. She says, "it seems to me a dreadful thing to see all these unmarried ladies living together. It isn't natural, is it?" (141). Annie clearly believes that women are meant to remain in their traditional role as primarily wives and mothers.

The attitude towards women's higher education also differs according to class. The upper and middle classes show hardly any opposition towards women at universities, as the example above with Lord Peter shows. Instead, the harshest critics can be found in the working class. Apart from Annie, Padgett, the gatekeeper at Shrewsbury college, compares working with women with working with animals at the Zoo. There is a tendency among the upper and middle classes of being more

positive to women's higher education, while members of the working class are mostly severe critics of educated women.

Virginia Woolf wrote in 1928 that a woman "must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (6). What she says is that women have been held back for centuries just because they have not had the economic means and the possibility to sit down and actually write. Therefore, she argues, this is the reason why women writers are few compared to their male colleagues. Sayers was contemporary with Woolf and the latter's ideas may be applicable to *Gaudy Night*.

In the novel one can see how Sayers is exploring the concept of a room of one's own by setting the narrative in the all-female college of Shrewsbury. Harriet has a very idealized view of Shrewsbury, making it almost into a refuge for women, like a nunnery, where she lives among equals and is in a way protected from the cruel world outside. This small bubble of women's higher education is surrounded by a patriarchal world, where Lord Peter's love and Harriet's personal life exist. As McClellan indicates, "Harriet is plagued by the sense that she's screwed up her personal life – because she *has* screwed up her personal life" (322-323). This means that Harriet could be seeing her stay at Shrewsbury as a way of distancing herself from the outside world, in order to sort out her life and figure out what to do next. One could also, as McClellan points out, "read Harriet's retreat into academia as an escape from traditional gender roles", which would imply that she is not yet keen on becoming Lord Peter's wife (323).

In entering this secluded place, in order to find herself and, as she says, protect the integrity of her mind, Harriet excludes many other things, like dealing with the gender stereotypes or putting aside the class hierarchy. Harriet is constantly struggling with what she has left behind in the outside world, which makes it hard for her to really focus on the case and her personal development. In the end, Harriet returns to the outside world and decides almost immediately to marry Lord Peter. This final turn in Harriet's story in *Gaudy Night* makes it difficult to see how her integrity of the mind can survive such rough treatment in 1930s Britain. Shrewsbury

may have been that *room of one's own* that Woolf was talking about, but what happens when you need to go back into the outside world? Outside the gates of Shrewsbury, and also in a way inside, as I will show, patriarchal rules dominate and women take second position in relation to men.

Inside Shrewsbury, the progressive middle class, which Harriet and the teaching staff are a part of, is aware of this opposition against women's higher education. When Harriet is invited back to solve the case she imagines how the media would portray Shrewsbury college if the scandal leaked out: "[s]oured virginity' – 'unnatural life' – 'semi-demented spinsters' – 'starved appetites and suppressed impulses' – 'unwholesome atmosphere' – she could think of whole sets of epithets, ready-minted for circulation" (88). These stereotypes mirror society's condescending view of women who step outside their gender role. McDermid acknowledges this problem as a very common one during this time in Britain: "While the female educated elite gained in self-confidence, the institutions in which they were taught remained conservative and patriarchal" (113). An all-female college would not be any less patriarchal than its surroundings, and these gender stereotypes dictates the actions of the teaching staff at Shrewsbury.

The gender stereotypes, portraying deviating women in condescending terms, served a very important purpose for patriarchal society. According to the French feminist Simone de Beauvoir, who published her pivotal work in the late 1940s, they were a powerful tool to keep women at home. In the late nineteenth century a general feeling of unease started to emerge because of Britain's international decline. Some said that the causes were domestic, hence the stress on teaching working-class women household management and infant care. According to McDermid it would all lead to an enhancement of national efficiency: "Women should be educated not for self-improvement but to promote social cohesion" (123). This predominant view of women was a key element in the resistance to higher education for women, which was very strong during the first half of the twentieth century. McDermid mentions that university professors declared that women would be a disruptive influence for

the male students at university; doctors insisted that female students' health would suffer from serious study, causing infertility; and parents who feared that their daughters would be radically transformed therefore believed that a girl's proper university was her home. According to de Beauvoir, especially female virginity is a gender stereotype which is very powerful. Virginity is used to control women's sexual behaviour, although to be a virgin for too long was not considered a good thing: "Virginity has [an] erotic attraction only if it is in alliance with youth; otherwise its mystery again becomes disturbing" (632). The unmarried teachers at Shrewsbury college become targets for society's stereotypes.

It is stereotypes that lead Harriet to suspect at first the working-class women at Shrewsbury because they lack the refinement which women of the middle and upper classes have and that would make it impossible to act in such an uncivilized way. It is one of the teachers, Miss Burrows, who first reveals this snobbish attitude: "it is far more likely to be one of the scouts than one of ourselves. I can scarcely imagine that a member of this Common Room would be capable of anything so disgusting" (100). Many of the other teachers are inclined to follow Miss Burrows' initial suspicion. Another example of the culpability of the working class is that the scouts are locked into their dormitory by the end of the working day in order to prevent thefts. Only Annie is excused from this imprisonment, because she has children. She is given a separate lodging, where she can come and go as she pleases.

The attitude shown by the middle-class women towards the working-class women exposes a more general lack of solidarity between women of different social classes. According to Hudson, it was women from the middle class that benefited the most in the beginning of the feminist movement, since they initiated it. In the 1930s working-class women were not fully part of the feminist movement. At the time it was mostly a middle-class women's movement. This is mirrored in the novel as it is Harriet that benefits the most as she gets both a rich man and a happy ending. It is the issue of education, or rather the lack of it, that leads Harriet to cast her suspicions in another direction.

Harriet starts suspecting the teachers at Shrewsbury, because one of the threats is written in Latin. In the chapel, Harriet finds the note stuck with a bread-knife to a doll's tummy. It is a quotation from Virgil's *The Aeneid*, which describes the mythological creature "harpy":

Monsters more fierce offended Heav'n ne'er sent / From hell's abyss, for
human punishment: / With virgin faces, but with wombs obscene, / Foul
paunches, and with ordure still unclean; / With claws for hands, and looks
for ever lean. (Book III, lines 280-284, transl. Dryden)

A harpy was a birdlike creature with a woman's face, tempting Virgil's hero Aeneas as he escapes from the ruins of Troy. Comparing them to harpies is of course another vicious attack on women at universities. Due to this note Harriet rules out all representatives of the working class as she believes that only an educated mind could write in Latin. In fact, it turns out that she is right concerning the note, as it has been written by Annie's late husband Arthur, a history teacher. But to read this note as a proof of a middle-class culprit prevents Harriet from catching Annie. This note directs both the suspicions of the reader and of Harriet towards the teaching staff at Shrewsbury college and more precisely towards Miss Hillyard, the history teacher.

Miss Hillyard is a red herring, there to distract the reader into believing that she is the culprit. Miss Hillyard takes every opportunity to start a debate, very often with Harriet, which leads the latter to suspect her. For example she attacks something which is a very sore point with the teaching staff:

The fact is, though you will never admit it, that everybody in this place has an inferiority complex about married women and children. For all your talk about careers and independence, you all believe in your hearts that we ought to abase ourselves before any woman who has fulfilled her animal functions. (276)

Harriet, like most of the teachers at the college, is unmarried. This unmarried status amongst the teachers can be explained by the marriage bar at the time for teachers

which, curiously enough, is never talked about in the novel. Instead the colleagues' replies to Miss Hillyard's accusations with silence or attempts to change the subject. An invisible social pressure in regard to marriage and motherhood thereby becomes visible.

According to de Beauvoir, "motherhood is considered the natural role for women [...] Her body finally belongs to herself since it is there for the child, motherhood has also a holy dimension, namely the image of the Madonna with child" (593). Mrs Goodwin, the Dean's secretary, is married. Her position is constantly undermined by Miss Hillyard as she has to be home to look after her sick child. "I don't see, observed Miss Hillyard grimly, what else you can expect, if you give jobs to widows with children. [...] And for some reason, these domestic pre-occupations always have to be put before the work." (275). Not surprisingly, Miss Hillyard is considered rather obnoxious by the other teachers but she also exposes another side of herself.

Miss Hillyard has a bitter past with men. She tells Harriet, "[m]ost of us think at some time or other that we know *one*. But the man usually has some other little axe to grind" (62). Harriet is troubled with Miss Hillyard's bitterness, and in fear of becoming like her she examines herself in the mirror: "There had been a look in the History Tutor's eyes that she did not want to discover in her own" (63). Harriet's suspicions of Miss Hillyard are in fact based on the assumption that Miss Hillyard displays a bitter, sexually repressed personality that according to the gender stereotypes would turn her into an insane woman. Harriet's misguided suspicions show that she believes in the gender stereotypes.

Criminality in *Gaudy Night*

When Annie is unmasked as the poison pen writer she makes a swift exit. In fact, there is only a very brief mentioning of Annie's whereabouts after that. It is Lord Peter that informs Harriet, "I understand [...] that the problem is being medically dealt with" (549). Annie has been sent to an asylum and may be there for a long time

depending on how curable her illness is. This swift exit of Annie does not mark the end of the novel. Instead it leaves room for a more important thing, namely Harriet's acceptance of Lord Peter's marriage proposal.

Even if the detective plot may only be there as an excuse for discussing the integrity of the mind, the portrayal of Annie is very problematic when seen from a class and gender perspective. The source of Annie's illness can be traced back to her husband being publicly humiliated by a woman, Miss de Vine. A few years prior to the main narrative, Annie's husband, Arthur Wilson, a promising young scholar with a Master's degree in history, was researching his thesis when he discovered a manuscript that completely disproved his theories. Instead of changing his argument he destroyed the manuscript. Miss de Vine, who was working at the same department at the time, discovered his action and reported him. As a result, he lost his position and had trouble finding other work because his reputation was so discredited. Eventually he committed suicide and thereby abandoned his wife and two daughters. To achieve her revenge, Annie obtains a position as a scout at Shrewsbury College, where Miss de Vine is currently employed.

Annie starts to write poison-pen letters that almost drive a female student to suicide, sends obscene drawings of naked women, destroys school property, and attempts to kill both Miss De Vine and Harriet. Annie is no longer targeting only Miss de Vine but all female academics: "I wish I could kill you all. I wish I could burn down this place and all places like it – where you teach women to take men's jobs and rob them first and kill them afterwards" (539). Annie is shocked to find out that a woman could be responsible for ruining her husband's career because she has been taught at school that women should be obedient house-wives and not be in a position where they can decide over a man's future career.

The source of Annie's illness goes in fact even further back than her husband's ruined career. Annie grew up during the turn of the century, a period when class would very much decide what kind of an education one would get. McDermid states that "[h]igher education widened the gap between women of the middle and

working-classes" (113). Education for women from the middle and working classes was at the beginning of the twentieth century still built on the assumption that their main tasks in life would be as wives and mothers. That meant endless classes of home economics and other household duties that a woman should know in order to become a good mother and obedient house-wife. This was also part of the national efficiency I mentioned earlier that would save the British Empire.

According to McDermid, "those working-class women who sought further education were expected to do so not for reasons of self-improvement, but primarily as a benefit to others" (120). Annie becomes a wife and a mother of two. The traces of such an education are revealed when Annie says to Harriet, "I can't see what girls want with books. Books won't teach them to be good wives" (142). Annie considers higher education a waste of time, since women's lives should be entirely devoted to child-nursing and household chores. Harriet, on the other hand, who comes from a middle-class background, reacts by getting annoyed with Annie. Ironically, in the next novel *Busman's Honeymoon* (1937), Harriet becomes a dutiful house-wife and attentive mother. Annie's comments could in fact be bothering Harriet because she lacks a husband and children. Both Annie and Miss Hillyard are voices that describe the true order of things that the other female characters are either oblivious of or in denial of.

Annie's constant comments about woman's role do not arouse Harriet's suspicions, but as a reader one starts to suspect Annie. In fact, she seems obsessed with the women professors at the college and their lack of traditional female qualities. Harriet, although she takes a strong dislike to Annie's comments, fails to see her as the culprit, leaving Lord Peter to solve it. When Annie is exposed she exclaims, "You can't do anything for yourselves. Even you, you silly old hags – you had to get a man to do your work for you" (541). Annie attacks the guilt and insecurity of the unmarried academic women and we are left with lame objections as if Annie is actually telling the truth.

Annie's final and most desperate attempt to escape suspicion is by locking herself up in the coal cellar and blaming it on the mysterious writer. All the teachers immediately believe that Annie must be telling the truth, even Harriet. Lord Peter is not fooled, however; instead he lets Padgett search the coal cellar to find the key that would prove that Annie locked herself in the cellar. Annie's attempt to escape suspicion has some symbolical power.

Coal, like the one in the cellar, was used to heat up the factories. Coal and the working class were decisive in the progress of industrialization. When Annie locks herself up in the cellar she traps herself in an environment that emphasizes this historical link between working class and coal. One could even go so far as to talk about a teleological notion of society, where humans are shaped to be either upper, middle or working class. Aristotle, founded the idea of one's God-given place in society, saying that slaves could never be anything else than slaves and women would always be half made men, because women's form strives to become a man (Aristotle, 123). Therefore one could interpret Annie's entrapment in the coal cellar as an entrapment in her working-class position in society. It is a static view of the world, which Sayers adopts. Also this final act tells the sad story that university is not yet a place for a working-class woman.

A comparison between Lord Peter and Harriet Vane

A comparison between the two protagonists in *Gaudy Night* shows clearly what Sayers allowed her characters to act according to aspects of class and gender. According to de Beauvoir, gender was a social construction where "[n]o biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch" (295). In a patriarchal society the male is therefore the norm, i. e. the first sex, and the woman is the second sex, defined through its relation to the norm.

In *Gaudy Night* Lord Peter constitutes the clearest example of the male norm. In relation to Harriet, the main protagonist, and the other women in the novel he has the privilege of creating attention, both in regard to his person and the case. For example, he is very much admired by a majority of the teaching staff at Shrewsbury college, both for his charm and for the reputation that precedes him. The Dean informs Harriet that “ I’m told he was looked upon as one of the ablest scholars of his year” (335). Lord Peter has a Master’s degree in History at Oxford. He is not only respected in the university world but also in the world of diplomacy. His reason for not being able to assist Harriet the first time she asks him is that he is called away in his role as a skilful diplomat. Lord Peter jokingly explains his whereabouts to Harriet when they meet again in Oxford: “[s]ome turn goes wrong – some Under-Secretary’s secretary with small discretion and less French uses an ill-considered phrase in an after-dinner speech, and they send on the patter-comedian to talk the house into a good humour again” (338).

This comical description of his whereabouts is telling. Not only is it trying to diminish the fact that Lord Peter is a diplomatic force to be reckoned with, but also that he is not bothering to explain it in a serious way to Harriet. There is no reason to explain something that Harriet does not know anything about anyway. With such a reputation and such manners Lord Peter easily becomes the undisputed authority, and Harriet takes on the role of his little helper. She does not seem to mind, however, as she so frequently acknowledges his superior intelligence. She claims that his intelligence “could always make rings round her own more slowly-moving wits” (350). The class aspect is also important for Lord Peter’s superiority. He acts the part of an upper-class authority, when telling Harriet off at a posh club: “Here, none of that. You can’t cry in this club. It’s never been done [...] They’ll probably close the Ladies’ Rooms altogether” (82). Lord Peter is a regular at the club but he is also a man with an unquestioned right to be there, which is the privilege of being the norm in society.

Harriet, on the other hand, is constantly battling with her right to belong somewhere. At the Gaudy she keeps telling herself, "They can't take this away," meaning her degree (10). The fact that she is pointing it out loudly means that she needs to convince herself. Harriet's insecurity becomes a main theme in the novel. It is a strange contrast to her success as a detective writer. She earns her own money and the contacts with the publisher and living on her own in London brings her into the public sphere. Up until now she has clearly stepped over the boundaries of a traditional women's role at the time.

There are also many heated discussions amongst the teaching staff about women's choice between marriage and education. Questions are raised about how or even if an academic woman can combine integrity of the mind with being a wife and mother. Annie has very clearly chosen marriage and motherhood. She is eager to promote her choice as the best one. "You ought to be married and have [children] of your own," (141) she says to Harriet. Miss De Vine is instead the complete opposite; she is unmarried and has devoted herself entirely to academic life. Harriet's first impression of Miss de Vine is, "[h]ere was a fighter, indeed; but one to whom the quadrangle of Shrewsbury was a native and proper arena [...] she looked as though the word 'compromise' had been omitted from her vocabulary" (21). This impression will prove very true, as Miss de Vine's inability to compromise causes the downfall of Annie's husband. Annie and Miss de Vine, these opposite poles, are linked in the narrative through Annie's husband. The two characters serve as counterpoints to the main theme of this novel - whether a woman can keep the integrity of the mind and still agree to marry and become a mother.

Sayers is making a clear distinction when it comes to gender, and there is no clearer example of that than the marriage between Harriet and Lord Peter. Although Harriet strives for equality, the narrative seems more to convey the idea that she is striving towards society's norm. According to herself the main reason for marrying Lord Peter is love. Harriet, as the woman, is given the choice of only marrying when her heart tells her to. Lord Peter, on the other hand, sees marriage as more of a task.

He makes a habit of proposing to Harriet once or twice a year until she accepts him. When Lord Peter makes his last proposal he talks to her in academic Latin and her replying likewise suggests equality. This is just a front, because Harriet is never his equal, instead she is lured into a false kind of equality. Lord Peter is her superior, as he has solved the case and saved Harriet twice from being killed. Harriet even comments on his intellectual superiority, by admitting that even though he has always asked but never demanded she never felt any form of domination in him "but that of the intellect" (497). According to McClellan, Lord Peter "treats Harriet and her mind as if he owned them; she resents 'the way he walked in and out of her mind as if it was his own flat'" (338). It is impossible to see how the integrity of the mind can be preserved if Harriet gives Lord Peter the privilege of being the more intelligent of the two. Harriet's push for equality is therefore doomed to fail as Lord Peter is not her equal but all the time her superior.

A symbolic episode of their unbalanced relationship is when Lord Peter buys Harriet a dog-collar that later saves her from being strangled by the poison-pen writer. The collar has the same circular shape as a wedding ring. Lord Peter and Harriet joke, when buying the collar, and make hints about being in a slave-master relationship. After the attack, when Harriet is recovering, she daydreams about Lord Peter and the collar: "She had already missed the collar. And she had [a] picture [...] of Peter, standing at her bedside between night and dawn, quite silent, and twisting the thick strap over and over in his hands." (519) Lord Peter saves her by buying this collar and saves her again, from public disfavour, when marrying her. de Beauvoir's explanation of marriage is that

Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society. It is still true that most women are married, or have been, or plan to be, or suffer from not being. The celibate woman is to be explained and defined with reference to marriage, whether she is frustrated, rebellious, or even indifferent in regard to that institution. (445)

Marriage in the 1930s was a very important event in a woman's life. It formed an opinion of her in the eyes of the public. Even if Sayers advocated equality for women intellectuals, Harriet struggles very much to obtain it. She is still drawn in opposite directions; on the one hand, she yearns for the intellectual stimulation and personal isolation of the scholarly life, but on the other, she is increasingly attracted by the promise of sexual and domestic pleasure with Lord Peter. She chooses the latter.

Conclusion

Sayers sets her novel in an all-female college to explore women's place as equals in the intellectual life. The political issue of women's higher education in Britain in the 1930s seems reduced to a literary device, to establish which characters have good or bad intentions, rather than making powerful observations about academic women as equals.

The analysis shows that Sayers does not depict all women as equals, but rather that the women's world inside Shrewsbury was much divided according to class. Sayers makes the working-class woman Annie the culprit while portraying higher education for women from a clearly middle-class perspective, which was very much the case in Britain in the 1930s.

A deeper analysis of Annie shows that she is an outsider at the university because of her class. Sayers leans towards a teleological view of society in her image of Annie's own entrapment in the coal cellar. She is where she belongs, fulfilling her position, as working class, in society. It is a static view of the world, which Sayers adopts. Annie's final action tells the sad story that university is not yet a place for a person from the working class.

Harriet, as well as the rest of the middle-class teaching staff, struggles very hard to find a way in which to overcome their marital handicap, by not being married and pursuing an academic career. The fact that there is a marriage bar for teachers is not even mentioned. Instead the marital status is portrayed as a personal matter, more to do with failure to snare a man.

As I have shown, Shrewsbury, although a refuge for the women - like a room of one's own - is nonetheless surrounded by patriarchal norms. The gender stereotypes that flourish among the teaching staff are just one example of this.

Sayers clearly pointed out that the goal of this novel was to explore the notion of the integrity of the mind. She even calls it the moral of the story. I suggest that her moral in this story is not necessarily to stick to one's integrity, but to marry for love. Harriet does marry without having established herself first as a strong and individual character, which gives the impression that she has no strong intellectual integrity. Instead, her chance of happiness lies in deciding that Lord Peter may marry her, and this is more a signal that she has finally acknowledged her own feelings, rather than defending her integrity.

Even Harriet's idea only to marry when she feels equal to Lord Peter is abandoned, since, as I have shown, their relationship is unbalanced. She fails to solve the case and her mind is constant prey to her feelings towards Lord Peter, making her focus more on him than on her own intellectual growth. Lord Peter is instead the one that solves the case and his position as the male norm and genius is left intact.

The conflict between Annie and Miss de Vine shows that even an absolute integrity of the mind is dangerous for an intellectual woman. In Miss de Vine's case it leads to threats to her life and the destruction of Annie's family. In fact the novel fails to give a good portrayal of a married woman that has not lost her integrity of the mind. Harriet's old class mates have all annihilated themselves after graduation in order to support their husbands and none of the teachers seem to be having a functioning love life.

Apart from the famous moral of a detective story that crime does not pay it is hard to find any moral to this story. The women academics are more concerned with their marital status than they are with their academic careers. However, Sayers depicts many of the female teachers as having an enormous knowledge in their field of research and in Britain in the 1930s even descriptions of such women was rare in books.

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