

Genre Conventions and Plot Structure in Dorothy L. Sayers' *Strong Poison*

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Introduction

Detective fiction has captured people for over 100 years. But what makes people come back and reread a book or follow a whole series of books? Researchers believe that there are several different reasons why people continue to read detective novels (Knight 107-109). One of the reasons could be that the detective genre has a pattern that most authors follow. The plot is an important part of this pattern since it will give rise to expectations and suspense (Abrams 234). Knight agrees with the fact that some readers read detective fiction simply for its structural form (108). So what does the plot structure look like in the detective novel *Strong Poison* by Dorothy L. Sayers and is the plot structured to create optimum suspense for the reader? This essay will discuss these questions but also compare *Strong Poison* to the detective novel genre conventions to see how much Sayers has followed them.

Strong Poison was first published in 1930 during the golden age of detective fiction and it belongs to the clue-puzzle subgenre. It features the amateur detective Lord Peter Wimsey and is the fifth book in a series of twelve books about him. For the first time in the series the character Harriet Vane, a detective novelist, is introduced. According to Janet Hitchman in *Such a Strange Lady* Sayers created Miss Vane as an image of herself (98). Already at the beginning of the book Lord Peter's infatuation with Miss Vane is clear to the reader. He repeatedly proposes to her but she is more hesitant and constantly turns down his proposals. Perhaps Sayers created the resemblance between herself and Miss Vane because she thought no one else could fall in love with Wimsey (Hitchman 98).

Dorothy Leigh Sayers was born in 1893 in Oxford as the only child of a clergyman and his wife. Her father started to educate her at an early age at home but later she was sent to a boarding-school in Salisbury. Before graduation she was given a scholarship to a college in Oxford for her excellent grades. In 1915 she graduated from Somerville College and was among one of the first women to be awarded a Bachelor's degree. Five years later she also received a Masters' degree from the University of Oxford. After graduating she supported herself through several teaching jobs and eventually settled in London working with advertising. Her first work to be published was a collection of poems named *OPI* (1916). It was not until 1923 Sayers managed to get a novel published. Her first novel *Whose Body?* is the first in the series about Lord Peter. She wrote several novels, articles, critical essays, short stories and plays, such as the religious drama *The Man Born to Be King* but also translated other authors' works, for example Dante's *Divina Commedia*. When she died she left a few unfinished novels behind. The last book in the series about Lord Peter Wimsey was finished after Sayers' death by fellow author Jill Patton Walsh. Sayers' personal life was rather

controversial; in 1923 she gave birth to a son but never had the intention of marrying the father of the child. In 1926 she married the sixteen-year-older divorced journalist Atherton Fleming (Reynolds 153). She died in 1957 at the age of sixty-three.

The first section of this essay will be dedicated to the comparison of *Strong Poison* to genre conventions of the general detective novel and the clue-puzzle subgenre. The strong conventions that regulate the genre control amongst other things the characterization of the victim and the perpetrator, as well as the setting. All these things together create the plot and since the conventions are strict this leads to the idea that the plot structure also should be strict. The plot structure has to be able to fit in all the conventions within the plot. By using the Freytag Triangle, which is a simple and well-known structure that is easy to work with, I hope to be able to see if *Strong Poison* follows an old and well used pattern or not. After the part of genre conventions there will be a brief history of the Freytag Triangle. The last part of the essay will be dedicated to the application of the Freytag Triangle to the plotline in *Strong Poison*.

Genre conventions

The detective fiction genre can be divided into several different main categories and subgenres. Knight makes a difference between crime fiction and detective novels (146). In crime fiction it is the feelings of the criminal that is the most important thing. The reader already knows who committed the crime and is allowed to follow the criminal's emotions during the event and afterwards when the police are hunting him or her (Knight 125). In contrast, in detective novels solving the crime is most important. The genre of detective novels can be roughly separated into three parts. These parts in turn can be divided into different subgenres. The first part is made up of detective novels written before the golden age of detective fiction which is roughly from the middle of the nineteenth century to the end of the First World War. It is followed by those written during the golden age and the third part consists of those written after the Second World War. This division makes it easier to see a pattern in the evolution of the detective novel. Authors wrote or write in a way that is coloured by the social circumstances of the time that they live in. This will be discussed further below under the heading Realism and Social Conflicts. The golden age of detective fiction can in general be said to have lasted from after the end of the First World War until the start of the Second World War. During this period the clue-puzzle detective novel was the most popular type, together with the newly created American hard-boiled detective fiction. Raymond

Chandler, one of the most important authors within the hard-boiled detective subgenre, did not like the conventional clue-puzzle detective story (Chandler 224). In contrast to this boring formula there was, according to Chandler, something better and more realistic, i.e. the private eye (234). These two different lines still exist and sometimes overlap.

The Detection Club was a club for writers of clue-puzzle detective novels in Britain during the golden age. Sayers developed a set of rules for the Detection Club about what a clue-puzzle detective novel must contain. For a book to be a true clue-puzzle detective novel it should to a great extent follow these rules. Not only Sayers set up such criteria; S.S. Van Dine and Howard Haycraft are other authors who developed such lists, all of which have several criteria in common. It is not only the clue-puzzle subgenre that is governed by strict rules and conventions; the entire detective genre is regulated. These conventions make it hard to introduce new themes to the genre and it was not until the latter part of the twentieth century that more radical changes began. Traditions have always been a strong part of detective fiction, for good and bad.

The Story

The story in a detective novel is told in a reversed order (Haycraft 228). First the reader finds out that a crime has been committed and then it is up to the detective to discover clues and reconstruct events to establish how it happens and who did it. The author should abide the moral standards held by society in general, for instance that the good guys win and the bad ones will be punished (Resnicow, rule 11). This creates a sense of fair play for the readers who have certain expectations on the book.

Strong Poison does not deviate from these points. Lord Peter catches the murderer and society can sigh of relief. Since the main point in a detective novel is to solve a crime the book must be completed in a satisfying way without any loose ends (Resnicow, rule 12). The ending of *Strong Poison* may not satisfy all readers because Sayers does not tie together all the loose ends. This will be discussed in a greater extent under the heading Falling Action and the Stable Situation.

Realism and Social Conflicts

The appearance of realism in detective novels has been a gradual process. Haycraft considers that after the First World War the genre developed away from “the tinselled trappings of romanticism” (112). But it still was not very true to reality. The world of the private eye was too harsh and violent whereas the clue-puzzle books showed no evidence of the troubled world outside the faultless and

perfect upper classes of society. This escapism probably gave comfort to people in turbulent times. There was no criticism of any sort to disturb the perfect picture that was created. But after the Second World War this situation became untenable; reality was forcing its way through every home with the introduction of the television. There was a need for depicting a more real world and authors also wanted to criticise society in their novels. This gave rise to a darker detective novel. Currently more and more conventions are being broken down by new authors and there is no taboo about what can be criticised in a book.

Strong Poison follows the conventions of social criticism made for the golden age subgenre but not today's more critical point of view. Lord Peter lives in a semi-real upper-class world where the only bad thing is that Harriet Vane is wrongly accused of murder.

A Sense of Humour and Romantic Feelings

Today both humour and romance are often present in detective novels. The American author Janet Evanovich in a good way exemplifies the combination of humour, romantic problems and detection in her books about the bounty hunter Stephanie Plum. The statutes for these elements are the same as it is for realism in detective fiction; it is approved of now but during the 1920s and 1930s it was frowned upon. According to the golden age conventions there should not be a love interest in a clue-puzzle detective novel and if there was one it should only concern a peripheral couple (Knight 88).

Sayers actually broke one of the rules that she herself had written when she introduced two love interests in *Strong Poison*. In the book love has a central position through Wimsey's interest in Miss Vane and the engagement between Chief Inspector Parker and Lady Mary Wimsey. Knight notes that in most cases humour is absent in clue-puzzle detective novels but “[t]he hero may be witty at times” (88). This is true for Wimsey and Miss Vane. Sometimes they can exclaim some dry one-liner. In accordance with the golden age conventions there are not many jokes in the novel but an example is when Lord Peter visits Miss Vane in prison for the first time. He asks her if he can come back and visit her again and she answers “I will give the footman orders to admit you [...] you will always find me at home” (52).

Murder as the Crime

Several versions of different crimes have been used in detective fiction but the most frequent one is murder. Van Dine considers that murder makes it easier to extend the plot so that it will become a

full novel and not only a short story or a book with several subplots (190). There has also been a great variation of murder weapons. Only the author's own fantasy is the limit but the murder weapon should not be too farfetched since it must be believable and within the limits of fair play for the reader. Preferably it should not be remote-controlled either, since that can be hard to point towards a suspect. Sayers' imaginative solution to this problem is to kill Mr Boyes with arsenic which in that time seems to have been rather easily accessible. Moreover, he was killed with a sort of arsenic that has not been dyed as arsenic was then in Great Britain. By this Sayers specifies the murder weapon from something general into a more specific one.

The Detective

The single most important thing in a detective novel is the detective (Van Dine 190). Many different types of detectives have been introduced in the history of the detective novel, from the rather eccentric detectives during the nineteenth century via the amateur and the hard-boiled detectives during the golden age to today's detectives that works within the police force. Sir Conan Arthur Doyle's Sherlock Holmes and Sir Edgar Allan Poe's C. Auguste Dupin were the models on which most of the nineteenth century detectives were based (Haycraft 229). The ideal, at the time, was that the detective could be considered to be a thinking machine. He was an eccentric, intelligent loner from the upper classes of society. These traits lived on in the clue-puzzle detective but were evolved into a more realistic man. In the golden age the detective is an intelligent gentleman who also comes from the upper classes and works as an amateur detective. Since he is an amateur he does not get paid. Velardi in the beginning of his online article "Plot, Character and Setting: A Study of Mystery and Detective Fiction" embroiders the description further with words such as overindulging, keenly observant and "distinctive physically in one way or another".

During the golden age two new sorts of detectives were also introduced: the spinster detective and in America the private eye. The latter was a rough man working for money. In today's detective books both the private eye and the gentleman detective live on, for example Sara Paretsky's V.I. Warshawski is a private eye, while P.D. James' Adam Dalgliesh's heritage can be traced from the clue-puzzle detective. Furthermore, the detectives of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries can be of any race, gender, sexual preference, social position and some even have a family, with spouse and children, to come home to.

Lord Peter Wimsey is the archetypical gentleman detective of the golden age. His family is apart of the aristocracy in Great Britain and as he himself states, "[i]t's my hobby [...] [to] investigating things" (52). He is certainly intelligent and this manifests itself in the way he solves

the crime by thinking. Hitchman, based on Sayers' descriptions in her books and letters, believes Lord Peter to be a man about six feet tall, with blondish hair, a nose shaped like a beak and a rather long face (89). The last two traits are the sort of physically distinctive traits that was pointed out by Velardi in the paragraph above. Hitchman also states that there is nothing Lord Wimsey can not do. He is a good horseman, drives his car in the fantastic way and appreciates everything good in life (89).

Van Dine opposes the occurrence of several detectives in a novel (190). But on the other hand he also thinks that if only one of the detectives' minds is represented then it is acceptable but still not the optimum solution (190). In *Strong Poison* there are actually several detectives that work alongside Lord Peter. Miss Climpson, Miss Murchison and Bunter all help him to solve the case. But it is Wimsey's mind that is represented since he is the head detective and protagonist. The two women are excellent examples of typical spinster detectives. They are both equipped with sharp minds and are not afraid of poking their noses in other people's business. Many women were spinsters after the First World War due to the vast number of young men that were killed in the war.

Methods of Solving the Crime

Scientific methods should be used when solving the crimes in combination with the brilliant logical mind of the detective. It is most important according to Van Dine that the solution should not occur "by accident or coincidence or unmotivated confession" (190). That would be cheating the reader and take away the sense of fair play between reader and author.

In *Strong Poison* a broad spectrum of different methods are used to help Lord Peter in his quest for the truth. Some are based on science as the analysis of the arsenic. Other methods are illegal actions, for example when Miss Murchison picks the lock to the deed box. But most of the time Lord Peter just does some plain ordinary thinking and is blessed with the occurrences of some coincidences. Wimsey definitely has luck on his side when Miss Murchison forgets to return the skeleton keys after having opened the deed box and this enables her to open the hidden compartment in Mr Urquhart's office.

Sayers plays with the fact that there should not be any supernatural or unnatural events in a clue-puzzle detective novel (Van Dine 190). She lets Miss Climpson use spiritualism to help her find the will.

The Victim

In most detective novels the victim is never given any space for personal introduction and often dies already in the first chapter. After the murder there is a short summary of the character but never with any psychological depth. The victim should be important enough to be worthy writing about but not too important; otherwise there will be objections to his death. W. H. Auden is quoted in Marty Roth's book *Foul and Fair Play* about how the victim "has to involve everyone in suspicion, which require that he be a bad character; and he has to make everyone feel guilty, which require that he be a good character" (138). The victim should fit in with the social class that the book is about. He or she is to be rich but not too rich just enough so that the suspects can feel a plausible envy and hostility towards the victim (Knight 87).

Philip Boyes is quite a dislikeable character. Early on in the trial it is pointed out that he has more or less forced Miss Vane to live in an immoral relationship with him. When he asked her to marry him she turned him down. The fact that he tries to improve makes him partly good. This episode embodies Auden's thought about the victim being both good and bad.

Motive

In the golden age it was considered that the motive must be personal and not a part of an international conspiracy (Van Dine 192). But this has changed with the internationalisation of the world. However, it is crucial that the motive is of such nature that the reader will be able to figure it out. Moreover, the murder can never be an accident or suicide since that would trick the reader (Van Dine 192). Resnicow has noticed that "[the] motive must be strong enough to induce an amateur to commit murder" (rule 2).

The motive in *Strong Poison* is straightforward and follows Van Dine's rules. As the saying goes money is the root of all evil and particularly so in *Strong Poison*. Due to bad speculations Mr Urquhart kills his own cousin to be able to cover his tracks.

The Guilty Party

Since the detective genre has been around for over 100 years, to create a murderer, who when revealed by the detective comes as a surprise for the reader, can be difficult. E. A. Poe's concept of the most unlikely character being the guilty one has been used a lot within the genre. But it has been overused so authors of today need to twist and bend to be able to surprise the reader. In the spirit of

fair play for the reader the murderer may never be the butler which would make it too simple. Neither may the perpetrator be a couple of twins where one could have taken the other's place, a professional criminal or a member of any secret deviating society (Van Dine 191-192). Finally the killer must be in the story from the start and not come in as a surprise at the end; otherwise, the reader would never have a chance to guess who the murderer is (Van Dine 191-192). A single perpetrator is most common, but there can be a helper or co-conspirator. In his Background part of his online article Velardi feels that both killer and victim are unwanted in society and should be eliminated. The murderer actually makes the society a favour by killing the victim. The killer is probably highly intelligent to be able to plan and execute a murder that often puzzles the detective (Resnicow, rule 2). This character must also be, as Roth puts it, "a sleeper, passing as a member of respectable society" (149). Even if there may only be one murderer in the book there must be several suspects who can be suspected to have done the horrible deed.

Roth's comment fits the character of Mr Urquhart, a respectable solicitor in the eyes of society but under the surface dark thoughts and hidden motives are lurking. Almost right from the start of the book a feeling of discomfort is conveyed in connection with Mr Urquhart. The first thing we find out about Mr Urquhart is that he has been letting Mr Boyes stay at his house for quite some time before the murder. This is nice enough but the book continues with Mr Urquhart's strange behaviour in connection with the dinner, which later will be pointed out to be the place of the Mr Boyes' poisoning. Question marks are also raised about his involvement in the Megatherium Trust scandal that caused a lot of people to lose their money. In the end when the whole story is revealed it is quite clear that society will be better off without Mr Urquhart but also without Mr Boyes who would not conform to Christian morals or society's conventions.

Clues

Many authors leave clues for the reader to find as an aid to solve the crime. Clues are not found in all subgenres, such as the hard-boiled detective novel, but are essential for the clue-puzzle novel. The reader must be given a chance to solve the crime before the detective. The reader has an advantage over the detective is when an omniscient third-person narrator is used. This sort of narrator makes it is possible for the reader to know more than detective at an earlier stage in the book. The clues are often hidden and can be found with a little effort. But they should not be too difficult to find because that would undermine the whole idea. Many readers actually reread the books just to discover the clues (Knight 89). Van Dine, on the other hand, feels that "all clues must

be plainly stated and described” (189). Although it can not be too simple, either, because then it would take away the challenge and fun of reading a detective novel.

Examples of clues in *Strong Poison* are Mr Boyes’ and Mr Urquhart’s curious last dinner and the several attacks Mr Boyes has had before he dies. At first these attacks, which the doctors in the beginning believe to be gastric troubles, point towards Miss Vane having tried to poison him several times but since the reader believes in her innocence, this means that somebody else probably has tried to poison Mr Boyes. Other examples are the typewriter in Mr Urquhart’s office and his shady business with forging a will and the involvement in the Megatherium Trust.

The Setting

Most detective novels have a limited setting, often a small village on the countryside. A closed setting is needed to limit the number of suspects. But this is not applicable for the hard-boiled subgenre where the setting is a large city such as Los Angeles. Clue-puzzle books are usually set in upper middle-class or upper-class houses in the middle of nowhere where a group of people has been invited to spend the weekend or likewise with the victim to be. This creates extra suspension since the murderer must be a member of the family or a close friend to the victim. The setting that Sayers uses for her series about Lord Peter Wimsey is the city of London. But she does not use the whole of London, only Mayfair (Knight 87). There are quite a number of references to streets and squares in London, for example Woburn Square where Mr Urquhart lives and Miss Vane’s flat is on Doughty Street.

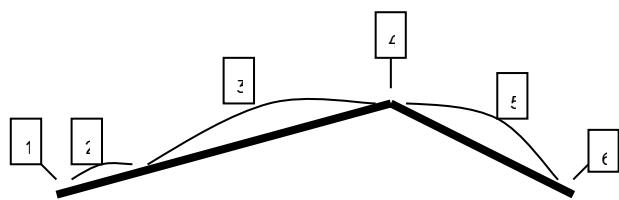
It is clear that *Strong Poison* keeps within the limit of the genre conventions. The book follows nearly all rules for the clue-puzzle subgenre; the only exception is the central position of love as mentioned before. When compared with present day conventions *Strong Poison* may seem dated since the conventions have changed but most of them are still found in the book.

Freytag’s Triangle

It can not be easy to include all things regulated in the conventions and still be able to produce a plot structure that is not following a pattern. I will use the Freytag Triangle to see whether *Strong Poison* follows this sort of pattern or not. The Freytag Triangle will also allow me to be able to see how the suspension is plotted. The Freytag Triangle was created in 1863 by the German literary critic Gustav Freytag. Freytag used a triangle to illustrate how a five-act tragedy was structured in

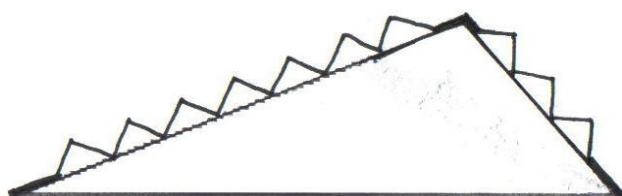
his *Technique of the Drama*. Even though it was only used for plays in the beginning it is applicable to most literary works. It is a standard form and commonly used within literary analysis. The Triangle's construction has evolved since the nineteenth century but it still bears Freytag's name. Freytag's original triangle (Figure 1) was quite simple but nowadays the more advanced version is preferred. The new version as seen in Figure 2 is jagged. These small peaks represent small climaxes within the rising and falling action. They are a way for the author to keep the reader interested. The Freytag Triangle has different stages and they will be defined below in each subheading under plot structure.

Figure 1 Freytag's Triangle -the original (based on figure by Meadows 22)



- | | |
|--|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The unstable situation 2. Exposition 3. Rising action | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Climax 5. Falling action 6. The stable situation |
|--|---|

Figure 2 Freytag's Triangle –the new version (based on figure by Meadows 23)



Plot Structure in *Strong Poison*

The plot is often used as a device to achieve an effect that is typical of the genre that the book belongs to (Abrams 233). The plot can consist of a main narrative only or be divided into a main narrative with subplots. The subplots may be analysed in the same fashion as the main

narrative. The Freytag Triangle can likewise be subdivided and be applied to each subplot (Meadows 23). Although this essay, due to limitations in length, will not deal with the application of the Freytag Triangle to the subplots of *Strong Poison*, it should be mentioned that there are two subplots in the novel. Both subplots concern the issue of love. The first of the two subplots is the love story between Lord Wimsey and Miss Vane. The second subplot is the complications between Chief Inspector Parker and Lady Mary Wimsey and their path towards getting engaged. These are small subplots but still cannot be considered to be a part of the main narrative.

I would argue that there are two different sorts of suspension in *Strong Poison*. The first sort concerns the question whether Miss Vane will be acquitted or not, who is the true murderer and how was the deed done. It starts at the beginning of the book and comes to a closure at the end of the book. This longer form of suspension corresponds to the overall structure of the Freytag Triangle. The other kind can be called a “suspension of the moment”. In the Freytag Triangle this sort of suspension is represented by the small peaks within the rising and falling action. Problems related to the investigation are good examples of this sort of suspension. The many instances of “suspension of the moment” arise and resolve along the plotline and only last for a couple of chapters or even just a couple of pages. They do not have a continuous presence throughout the book as the first kind of suspension.

The Unstable Situation and Exposition: The Trial of Harriet Vane

The first stage at the beginning of the triangle is the unstable situation. This unstable situation is the origin of everything that will happen later in the plot. The unstable situation is followed by the exposition which is like an introduction. Characters, setting and background to the unstable situation are introduced by the narrator.

In *Strong Poison* the unstable situation and exposition are fairly straightforward, but Sayers added a few twists. The presentation of the unstable situation is rather special since *Strong Poison* is a part of a series of books. Followers of the series already know the protagonist Lord Peter Wimsey and at first the unstable situation does not concern him at all. The reader finds out that a woman named Harriet Vane is in great trouble since she is being accused of murder, but who is she? She has not been mentioned before in any of the previous books and soon it is realised that she is only the second protagonist. Lord Peter himself is not introduced until a few pages later.

The exposition is Miss Vane’s trial and it is the judge, not the narrator, who gives a summary of the case, including the victim, the circumstances and the murderer under the pretext that he is summing up the case for the jury who is about to decide whether Miss Vane is guilty or

not. The narrator's presence is only noticed when the judge stops speaking and then the narrator adds small details about the court room, the judge, the jury and the audience.

There is a rising motion of suspense throughout the exposition. The more the reader finds out about the trial the more interesting it becomes. At the end of the exposition there is a small climax when the jury leaves the court room to deliberate on Miss Vane's verdict (31). This is a very intense moment; by now the reader has become acquainted with Harriet Vane, learnt to sympathise with her and wonders what will become of her. Sayers prolongs the feeling of suspense by letting the jury consider the verdict for half of the third chapter. By letting the jury disagree on a verdict Sayers solves the problem of how to continue the book and it also gives Lord Peter a chance to help Miss Vane. The rest of Chapter three ties up loose ends from the trial and with the end of the chapter comes also the end of the exposition. It can be argued that the exposition does not finish until Wimsey is actually approved by Miss Vane and her attorneys to conduct a new inquiry. But looked from the point of view of the suspension concerning Harriet Vane at this point there is a clear dip or release in suspension. As mentioned before, the exposition functions to introduce things and when the trial is over the main points and characters have been introduced.

Rising Action: Lord Wimsey Detects

The following stage in the Triangle after exposition is the rising action which is the largest part of the plot. The part of rising action consists of a whole series of events. There are two different reasons to why a series of events evolves. One reason is that one event propels another event and so on, for example that one clue leads to another in a detective novel. The other reason is that one cause/event has initiated several events. A good example of this from the genre that this paper focuses on is when several people are killed by the same murderer. As the name rising action implies every event will increase the tension of the work. But to relieve the reader from being constantly on his/her toes there are small climaxes incorporated in the text.

In this passage it will be shown how the book is a good example of Figure 2. In *Strong Poison* the part of rising action is almost two thirds of the book which is approximately 200 pages. During these 200 pages there are in total eight small climaxes spread over sixteen chapters. The average length of a climax is about a page or so. But there are variations in length as will be seen below. A pattern can be seen in the placement of the small climaxes; they are often located towards the end of a chapter. A chapter can deal with several issues concerning the investigation, so my analysis will only have brief descriptions of the issues related to the climaxes.

The rising action starts with the fact that Lord Peter asks Miss Vane's attorneys to conduct a new inquiry to be able to catch the true murderer. This first chapter functions as a steppingstone for the investigation. Lord Peter only has about a month to solve the case due to the fact that after those thirty days the new trial will commence. This time limit restricts the length of the book and creates a greater tension since there is only a short limited amount of time (cf. Resnicow, rule 15).

The first small climax appears at the end of Chapter seven after quite a long passage. During this long passage there is an almost constant addition of suspense. The climax is that there is a chance for Wimsey to get a woman, an employee who works for his detective assistant Miss Climpson, to work undercover in Mr Norman Urquhart's office. In this way Lord Peter can keep an eye on Mr Urquhart's business without him knowing it. Mr Urquhart, the victim Philip Boyes' cousin and attorney, has been acting rather suspiciously about their rich Aunt Rosanna Wrayburn's will. She is the great-aunt to both Mr Urquhart and Mr Boyes and since she has no children of her own one of the two men will inherit her large fortune.

The next climax is found already in the following Chapter eight. Here the police have found the bar that Mr Boyes went to on the night of the poisoning. He made a quick stop there after visiting Miss Vane and before going back home to Mr Urquhart's house. Now there is a chance that someone at the bar might have seen if Mr Boyes perhaps took the arsenic himself. With this information the reader is enticed to believe that Mr Boyes killed himself, and if that is the case, Miss Vane can be acquitted.

The third climax comes at the end of Chapter eleven. Here the reader finds out that Miss Murchison, one of Miss Climpson's employees, has been able to get hired by Mr Urquhart to work as a secretary in his office. She manages to send information to Wimsey about Mr Urquhart having been involved in the Megatherium Trust. The climax is the information about the trust but also the note itself sent from Miss Murchison. It is typed on the same typewriter as the will that Mr Urquhart has presented to Lord Peter. As the chapter closes the reader now knows that there probably is something wrong with Mr Urquhart's affairs but that more information is needed to be absolutely sure. Due to Miss Murchison's note it later turns out that the will is a false one.

Chapter twelve is not really relevant for the plot. The two following chapters deal exclusively with what happens to Miss Murchison. The suspense that erupts in Chapter fourteen's climax was built up in two instead of three chapters. During these chapters Miss Murchison learns to pick locks so that she can get access to the Wrayburn deed box. In the climax Miss Murchison opens the deed box and finds out about the existence of Mrs Wrayburn's true will.

In the succeeding Chapter fifteen comes the fifth climax. The climax itself has

actually very little to do with the rest of the chapter. Miss Climpson is sent out to find the true will and then Wimsey has a conversation with Chief Inspector Parker about Lady Mary Wimsey. In contrast to those events the climax peaks with the news that the police have found the white powder that Mr Boyes mixed in his drink when he visited the bar. An analysis of the powder shows that is only bicarbonate of soda.

The succeeding chapters sixteen to eighteen only deal with one issue, just as the two chapters thirteen and fourteen where Miss Murchison is in focus. The reader follows Miss Climpson in her search for finding Mrs Wrayburn's true will. She has to go to the small village of Windle to infiltrate the Wrayburn household. The search peaks into the climax in the eighteenth chapter when she after a lot of effort finally finds the will.

The seventh climax stretches over several pages. Almost the entire Chapter nineteen is dominated by the climax. It starts when Miss Climpson succeeds in steaming open the letter with the will in it without getting caught doing so. The will is supposed to be sent to Mr Urquhart and can therefore disappear after the arrival to his office since he does not want it to be discovered. The climax of the suspense continues with the retelling of the will. The suspense peaks here because the reader first wonders if Miss Climpson will manage to look at the will without getting caught. Secondly, after reading the will the reader of the book realises that Mr Urquhart has a motive for murdering Mr Boyes.

The eighth and last of the small climaxes is located in Chapter twenty. The suspense builds up by the fact that Mr Urquhart tries to hide the will in a secret compartment and by chance Miss Murchison walks in on him. It continues with Miss Murchison trying to find the secret compartment without arousing suspicion. The climax is reached when Miss Murchison finds the will and a packet of white powder in the secret compartment (248). Some would argue that this is the climax for the whole book, although I do not agree since this piece of incriminating evidence still has not been analysed. As with the white powder Mr Boyes mixed in his drink at the bar, it may only be bicarbonate of soda. Mr Boyes' powder was also hidden, accidentally, but still it was hidden and only turned out to be nothing. The white powder could be some drug that he is trying to hide or a medicine that has unfortunately been wedged between two pieces of paper that are stored in the compartment. The reader does not know for sure whether Mr Urquhart is guilty or not until the powder has been analysed.

Climax: Figuring out How the Poison Was Administered

The climax is the most intense moment in the plot. Freytag says that the climax “is the place [...] where the results of the rising movement come out strong and decisively” (128). This is the moment in the book when everything is at its peak and the suspension is almost unbearable.

The climax for *Strong Poison* is typical for that of the detective genre and the clue-puzzle subgenre. It is now that all the clues are put together to form an answer as to who is guilty and how the murderer killed the victim. The climax is only a few pages, during which Lord Peter uses a combination of solid scientific methods together with his sharp intelligent mind to solve the case. An analysis of the powder found in Mr Urquhart’s secret compartment is conducted. It is not he himself that performs the test to see if it is arsenic or not but his manservant Bunter who is skilled within many different areas. After receiving a positive answer to the test Wimsey locks himself into his library and stays there all night to deliberate how the poison was administered to Mr Boyes. Through the test all evidence that implies that Mr Urquhart is guilty has been collected. The reader knows now for sure that Mr Urquhart is guilty and that is why this could be considered to be the climax of the book. By finding the guilty party the case is solved and with that the “suspension of the moment”, i.e. the suspension that has to do with the case, has come to an end. This is also the end for the suspension that concerns the question of the identity of the real murderer.

Falling Action and the Stable Situation: Getting Harriet Vane Acquitted

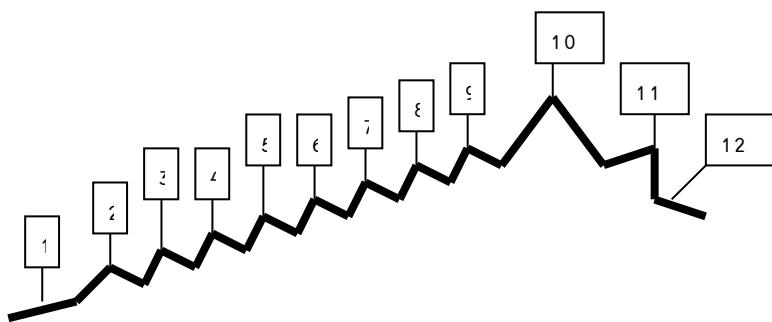
After the peak has been reached in the climax follows the falling action or the *dénouement*. Before the climax the tension was rising but here after the climax it decreases. The part of falling action is usually brief and functions as a path towards the stable situation at the end of the work. There can be several small climaxes within the falling action; it is based on the same principles as rising action except that the tension is decreasing as seen in Figure 2. Most problems are resolved to achieve the stable situation.

The last three chapters of *Strong Poison* are dedicated to falling action and the stable situation. In *Strong Poison* there is only one small climax in falling action (Figure 3). It takes place during Lord Peter’s meeting with Mr Urquhart. The reader still does not know how Mr Boyes was poisoned by Mr Urquhart. A hint is given in the first chapter of falling action when Wimsey asks a favour from a manicurist. This event also functions as an increase in suspension. The suspension peaks when he tells Mr Urquhart how he thinks the arsenic was administered to Mr Boyes. But as that is revealed Lord Peter also confesses to have poisoned Mr Urquhart for the purpose of making Mr Urquhart

give himself away. So the climax continues with this other angle until Lord Wimsey tells Chief Inspector Parker that it was only a lie. Now that the reader knows how the murder was committed that line of suspension comes to an ending.

Everything is resolved into a stable situation in the last chapter of the book. The main narrative comes to a closure when the charges against Miss Vane are withdrawn and she is set free. This also closes the suspense that is associated with the question whether Miss Vane will be hanged or not. Sayers creates a cliff-hanger to be solved in the next book. She never gives the subplot concerning Lord Peter and Miss Vane a closure since even if Miss Vane has been set free but she does not accept his proposal. The cliff-hanger is when Miss Vane's friend Miss Sylvia Marriott predicts that Wimsey will come and visit Miss Vane despite the fact that she turned down his proposal (281). This prophesy would not carry much weight if it was not for her having already been correct in predicting who the true murderer is (101).

Figure 3 The plot structure in *Strong Poison*



The Unstable Situation and Exposition:

1. The unstable situation and exposition: the trial of Harriet Vane

Rising action:

2. The first small climax: a possibility arise
3. The second small climax: the finding of the bar
4. The third small climax: Mr Urquhart's murky business
5. The fourth small climax: Miss Murchison opens the deed box
6. The fifth small climax: Mr Boyes' powder is located
7. The sixth small climax: finding the will
8. The seventh small climax: Miss Climpson in a tight situation and reading of the will

9. The eighth small climax: finding the will – again and the arsenic

Climax:

10. The main climax of the book: Lord Wimsey comes up with the solution

Falling action:

11. The only small climax: the practical aspect of how the poison was administered

The Stable Situation:

12. The stable situation: Harriet Vane is acquitted and released

Conclusion

There are two sets of conventions for the clue-puzzle detective novel to follow. The first set applies to the whole detective fiction genre and the second set is for the clue-puzzle subgenre only. *Strong Poison* follows most of the conventions made for the subgenre, actually all but one. The rule that is broken is the one dealing with love interest whereas she keeps within the limitations of the conventions when it comes to the detective, the setting, the victim and so on. In the comparison between the book and the more general genre conventions the result is that Sayers follows them. But the book seems dated in comparison to today's ideas and topics, for example, in the lack of social realism and criticism. A connection between the strict genre conventions and plot structure can be seen in how the themes related to conventions are placed in the plot. The story itself has to be told in reversed order which affects the plot structure to a great extent. A good example of this is the revealing of the true murderer; this must come as a surprise to the reader and it would spoil the suspension if it was reveal already in the middle of the novel. The use of clues for the reader to pick up is another good example. These are evenly distributed throughout the plot structure.

The application of the Freytag Triangle to the plotline in *Strong Poison* shows that the two are compatible. The only difference is that *Strong Poison* has a rather short falling action containing just one small peak in difference to the stereotypic Freytag Triangle in Figure 2. I do believe that Sayers plotted the novel to achieve optimum suspense for the reader by using two sorts of suspense. The first kind lasts throughout the book whereas the second sort is a “suspension of the moment”. This suspension lets the reader have a momentarily increase and release in tension and is represented as the small peaks in the Freytag triangle. There are three different questions in connection with the first form of suspension. They are will Harriet Vane be acquitted, who is the true killer and how was the murder performed. All these questions come to a closure in different

parts of the book and therefore give the reader a better reading experience because the suspension is kept up for a longer time.

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