



---

**SCRIBBLERWORKS**  
official website of **SARAH BEACH**

*Harriet in Rehearsal: Hilary Thorpe in  
The Nine Tailors*  
by Sarah Beach

Before delving into my discussion of Hilary Thorpe, it would be useful for me to explain my own introduction to the novels of Dorothy L. Sayers. Although I had seen the early television adaptations of Lord Peter tales, I had not yet read any of the books. By chance, the first one I read was *Gaudy Night*. I liked this book very much, for it spoke to the woman and scholar in me. As a result, for me the character of Harriet Vane was never an (annoying) addition to Lord Peter's universe: she was always a necessary part of it. When, eventually, I read *The Nine Tailors* I perceived a resemblance between Hilary Thorpe and Harriet Vane, both in presentation and in character.

Although Hilary is only fifteen<sup>1</sup> to Harriet's twenty-nine<sup>2</sup> (and older), she is described in similar terms as those applied to the older heroine. Hilary also parallels Harriet in education and vocational intention – her ambition is to be successful writer. The characters of both (particularly as writers) are described in like fashion, with perhaps the inevitable result that Lord Peter's reaction to the younger female resembles his to Harriet, without the romantic-emotional overtones and without the brittleness of Harriet's struggle with gratitude. These are the occurrences which have led me to regard Hilary Thorpe as a rehearsal for the major presentation of Harriet Vane in *Gaudy Night*.

On the simple ground of describing appearance, Sayers uses much the same language of both females. Through the eyes of Mr. Godfrey, Sayers gives us the general perception of Hilary (while also indicating other qualities of Hilary's appearance).

*Hilary pulled off her hat and let her thick bobbed hair blow out behind her, so that she looked like one of the floating singing angels in the church below. Mr. Godfrey had no eyes for this resemblance; he thought Miss Hilary's angular face and straight hair rather unattractive, if the truth were known.*  
(NT, 64)

---

<sup>1</sup> "There's one daughter, Miss Hilary. She'll be fifteen this month." *The Nine Tailors*; New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1962 (1934), p. 43. Hereafter cited as NT.

<sup>2</sup> *Strong Poison*; New York: Avon Books, 1968 (1930), p. 7. Hereafter SP.

This "rather unattractive" phrasing somehow delivers its blow more softly than Freddy Arbuthnot's blunt comment on his first viewing Harriet in *Strong Poison*: "*The girl's not even pretty.*" (SP, 17) Both of these frank appraisals are tempered by comments indicating an underlying appeal to the features of Hilary and Harriet. Neither is dismissed as "plain."

The initial description of Hilary conveys this appeal as something she will grow into: "*A red-haired girl of fifteen, dressed in black, came in ... She was tall and thin and rather gawky, though with promise of becoming someday a striking-looking woman.*" (NT, 56) Letitia Martin, the Dean of Shrewsbury College, describes to Miss Joan Edwards Harriet at her wedding, giving an image of both what Harriet was and what she had become: "*I had never imagined that Harriet Vane could look so impressive. I'm always apt to think of her, still, as a gawky and dishevelled First-Year, all bones, with a discontented expression.*"<sup>3</sup>[3] The Dowager Duchess of Denver had initially described Harriet as "*so interesting and a really remarkable face, though perhaps not strictly good looking, and all the more interesting for that, because good-looking people are so often coms.*" (SP, 27) Even Bunter observed to his mother in a letter that the new-wed Lady Peter "is not pretty, but what you would call striking-looking." (BH, 14) Both young women are presented as being "gawky", and "thin" or "all bones", but where Hilary has the promise of being "striking-looking", Harriet becomes so.

From the matter of their appearance we move to the similarities in the education of Hilary and Harriet. For both young women were blessed (particularly considering the social status of women's education in Britain in the 1930s) with fathers who were concerned that their daughters be educated.

Before her father's death, Hilary has a conversation with him about this matter. Their family has not been well off, due to the misfortune of the theft of Mrs. Wilbraham's emeralds: the Thorpes made good the financial loss to Mrs. Wilbraham and it virtually broke them. However, Sir Henry reassures Hilary:

*"There'll be enough to send you to Oxford, I dare say. Girls don't seem to cost much there – your uncle will see to it."*

*"Yes – and I'm going to get a scholarship anyway."* (NT, 66)

Later in the novel, after Lord Peter becomes Hilary's trustee for the Wilbraham legacy left her, he uses the legacy's financial influence to convince Hilary's reluctant uncle (and guardian) to comply with Sir Henry's desire concerning the girl's education. Harriet benefitted from a similar regard, as the Dowager describes in her diary:

*Talked about her people – quiet country doctor and wife. Father made quite good income, but never thought of saving anything (thought he'd live for ever, I suppose) – very anxious, however, H. should have good education – just as well, as things turned out.* (BH, 24)

---

<sup>3</sup> *Busman's Honeymoon*; New York: Avon Books, 1968 (1937), p. 16. Hereafter BH.

And of course, Harriet chose that her "good education" be from Oxford.

Yet, in more than their choice of University do Hilary and Harriet display a similar education. Throughout the books in which she appears, Harriet displays a broad education that allows her to follow Lord Peter's quotations from the classics to Shakespeare to Donne to *Kai Lung*. We are not given to see Hilary in equally broad display, but we are given one quick glimpse of how easily her education is at home in her.

When she finds a paper in the bell tower written over with an odd text, it includes a peculiar phrase which confuses Mr. Godfrey, her companion there: "*Hell gapes, Erebus now lies open.*" He puzzles over this: "*This here, now, about Erebus – what do you take that to mean? 'It's a kind of old name for hell,' said Hilary.*" (NT, 63-64) Admittedly, given the parallel construction of the phrase, she might have been able to simply deduce that "Erebus" meant "Hell", but I believe it to be something she knew because she was acquainted with the name Erebus.

Sayers could have ended her parallels between Hilary and Harriet with the matters of appearance and education. But she went on to give both similar intentions in career and manner of living. Hilary desires to be a writer and Harriet is one; additionally both intend to maintain their financial independence. In the same conversation with her father that touched on her education, Hilary declares

*"And I don't want money. I'd rather make my own living. Miss Bowler says she doesn't think anything of a woman who can't be independent." (Miss Bowler was the English mistress and idol of the moment.) "I'm going to be a writer, Dad. Miss Bowler says she wouldn't wonder if I'd got it in me." (NT, 66)*

Harriet is of course presented from her first appearance as a writer. Additionally, she has achieved that independence at which Hilary aims. The judge at her trial conveys that much of Harriet's accomplishment:

*You have been told that she is a young woman of great ability ... who, through no fault of her own was left ... to make her own way in the world. Since that time ... she has worked industriously to keep herself, and it is much to her credit that she has, by her own exertions, made herself independent in a legitimate way, owning nothing to anybody and accepting help from no one. (SP, 7)*

Harriet herself put it more succinctly to the Dowager. "*Ever since I left college, I've never spent a penny I hadn't earned.*" (BH, 20) This assertion of financial independence perhaps grows from an intellectual detachment both young women display in their characters.

Intellectual detachment is presented not simply as a facet of the characters of Hilary and Harriet, but as an almost crucial element in their make-up as writers. Lord Peter notes this in Hilary during their first encounter. She knows he has returned to look into the mystery of the unidentified body found in her mother's grave, and she perceives that he wants to inspect the grave.

*"I'd rather like to look at it again. You see, I'm wondering just exactly how*

*the- the--"*

*"How they got the body there? Yes, I thought you'd be wondering that. I've been wondering, too. Uncle doesn't think it's nice of me to wonder anything of the sort. But it really makes things easier to do a little wondering, I mean, if you're once interested in a thing it makes it seem less real. That's not the right word, though."*

*"Less personal?"*

*"Yes, that's what I mean. You begin to imagine how it all happened, and gradually it gets to feel more like something you made up."*

*"H'm!" said Wimsey. "If that's the way your mind works, you'll be a writer one day."*

*"Do you think so? How funny! That's what I want to be. But why?"*

*"Because you have the creative imagination, which works outwards, till finally you will be able to stand outside your own experience and see it as something you have made, existing independently of yourself. You're lucky."*

*"Do you really think so?" Hilary looked excited.*

*"Yes – but your luck will come more at the end of life than at the beginning, because the other sort of people start by thinking you dreamy and romantic, and then they'll be surprised to discover that you are really hard and heartless. They'll be quite wrong both times – but they won't ever know it, and you won't know it at first, and it'll worry you." (NT, 105-106)*

I have quoted this passage at length because it foreshadows two conversations that Harriet has in *Gandy Night*. In the first, Harriet demonstrates that detachment Hilary discussed; in the second, Harriet displays that "worry" Lord Peter mentions to Hilary.

*"But surely," persisted Miss Barton, "you must feel that terrible crimes and the sufferings of innocent suspects ought to be taken seriously, and not just made into an intellectual game."*

*"I do take them seriously in real life. Everybody must. But should you say that anybody who had tragic experience of sex, for example, should never write an artificial drawing-room comedy?"*

*"But isn't that different?" said Miss Barton, frowning. "There is a lighter side to love; whereas there's no lighter side to murder."*

*"Perhaps not, in the sense of a comic side. But there is a purely intellectual side to detection."<sup>4</sup>*

Here Harriet speaks from experience, for if she had not indulged in Hilary's activity of making events "less personal" she herself might have found "the sufferings of innocent suspects" (that is, herself in the Boyes case) unendurable. It is surprising that Miss Barton's reference to "the suffering of innocent suspects" does not anger Harriet, for after all her experience in gaol was no picnic. But instead, Harriet's sense of intellectual detachment comes into play, and she can, in Lord

---

<sup>4</sup> *Gandy Night*, New York: Avon Books, 1968 (1936), p. 30. Hereafter GN.

Peter's words, "*stand outside [her] own experience and see it as something [she has] made, existing independently of [her]self.*" (NT, 106)

Later, Miss de Vine commends Harriet for this detachment.

*"Detachment is a rare virtue, and very few people find it loveable, either in themselves or in others. If you ever find a person who likes you in spite of it – still more, because of it – that liking has very great value, because it is perfectly sincere, and because, with that person, you will never need to be anything but sincere yourself."*

*"That is probably very true," said Harriet, "but what makes you say it?"*

*"Not any desire to offend you, believe me. But I imagine you come across a number of people who are disconcerted by the difference between what you do feel and what they fancy you ought to feel. It is fatal to pay the smallest attention to them."*

*"Yes," said Harriet, "but I am one of them. I disconcert myself very much. I never know what I do feel."*

*"I don't think it matters, provided one doesn't try to persuade one's self into appropriate feelings." (GN, 34-35)*

Although Miss de Vine is not here concerned with "the creative imagination, which works outwards," she has focused on the social effects of it, just as Lord Peter had with Hilary: outsiders do not understand the writer's ability to separate the heart and the intellect (at least to the degree of keeping the one from doing serious damage to the other). It is not an easy chore, as Lord Peter indicates ("it'll worry you") and as Harriet confesses ("I disconcert myself very much"). Yet, Miss de Vine decrees that ability to be "a rare virtue."

It is perhaps that "virtue" in these two ladies which appeals to Lord Peter. Certainly, his intellectual pursuit of detection has commended him to them. When both first meet him, they make reference to his detecting career. Harriet, bruised in spirit, meets with Lord Peter in the visiting room of the prison. After the establishing of credentials, he indicates he will be investigating her case: "*I mean to say, I rather enjoy investigating things, if you know what I mean.' 'I know. Being a writer of detective stories, I have naturally studied your career with interest.'"* (SP, 35) Hilary, also displays a knowledge of Wimsey beyond the usual "cricket and crime" reference. She easily greets him, saying, "*I'm ever so glad to meet you, Lord Peter. Dad used to read all about your cases – he'd have loved to have a talk with you.*" (NT, 104)

Yet if both acknowledge their appreciation of Lord Peter's detecting activities, he reciprocates when they display an aptitude for detection. In *Have His Carcase*, Harriet discovers the body of Paul Alexis, keeps her head while collecting evidence (and then generates the newspaper stories of the discovery). Shortly thereafter Wimsey arrives in Wilvercombe and greets her thus: "*Good morning, Sherlock. Where is the dressing-gown? How many pipes of shag have you consumed? The hypodermic*

is on the dressing-room table."<sup>5</sup> Admittedly, he is being a shade bitter about the fact she did not contact him (what with the reference to the hypodermic), but he is also acknowledging her competence with the accolade of a Holmes reference. Hilary also receives similar praise. Realizing that the odd bit of writing she discovered in the bell tower might be a clue, she smuggles it to Lord Peter. His response to this perspicacity is to comment, "*A colleague, as Sherlock Holmes would say, after my own heart.*" (NT, 186)

After his own heart indeed. Both of these quick-witted women stimulate him. By way of example: with whom is he having this exchange?

"I ought to call and thank him personally."  
"That means you want to ask him questions."  
"If you do see through people as clearly as that, you oughtn't to make it so brutally plain to them."  
"... What are you looking at? The distance from the South gateway?"  
"Uncomfortably discerning woman – yes, I was."<sup>6</sup>

It could easily have been Harriet, but in this case it is Hilary. In any case, these stimulating women also provoke Lord Peter's protective instincts, at least when it comes to the news hounds. After the body is discovered in the grave of Lady Thorpe, a persistent reporter (from the ever-present *Morning Star*) lingers near Hilary.

Lord Peter turned suddenly and savagely on the young man from the **Morning Star**, who still hovered at a little distance. "See here, my lad, if you don't make a noise like a hoop and roll away, I shall have something to say to your editor. I will not have this young lady followed about and bothered by you. Go right away." (NT, 105)

In like fashion, Lord Peter's hackles are raised when, after his engagement to Harriet, the news hounds unearth Harriet's trial. Yet, Harriet's detachment comes into play, as the Dowager observes: "*Disgusting newspapers have raked up all that old story about Harriet and Philip Boyes. Peter furious. Harriet says, 'Only to be expected.'*" (BH, 24) Just as Hilary had responded with detachment to the news hound ("*That lad's a sticker,*" said Miss Thorpe. "*He badgered poor Uncle nearly out of his senses this morning.*" (NT, 105)), so does Harriet, taking the intrusion in stride and letting it "exist independently of herself."

Sayers, in *Strong Poison* and *Have His Carcase* has presented Lord Peter as being in love with a difficult young woman. Not "pretty" but "interesting looking," she was a best selling mystery writer with an University education, whose intellect could keep up with Lord Peter's. But in those two novels, Harriet was burdened with an uncomfortable load of gratitude and bruised emotions. In

---

<sup>5</sup> *Have His Carcase*; New York: Avon Books, 1968 (1932), p. 40.

<sup>6</sup> NT, 106-107

order for their relationship to progress further, Sayers needed to discover more about Harriet, to get beyond Harriet's prickly defenses and uncover the inner nature that drove the woman – and which was the true attraction for Lord Peter. Whether or not she did it intentionally, Sayers wrote Hilary Thorpe as a younger, sunnier version of Harriet. Hilary, out of the limelight of the main detecting story of *The Nine Tailors* and without the emotional traumas that smoldered in Harriet, provided Sayers with the opportunity to sketch out more of Harriet's character before bringing it into full play in *Gaudy Night*. In a way, the presentation of Hilary Thorpe allowed Sayers to recreate Harriet Vane in mid-stream, to practice, to rehearse, Harriet's underlying nature and character before resolving the relationship between Lord Peter and his lady.