

# **Gaudy Night Study Guide**

**Gaudy Night by Dorothy L. Sayers**

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# Plot Summary

Gaudy Night, by Dorothy L. Sayers, is an interesting mystery novel that begins when Harriet Vane decides to attend a reunion, known as a Gaudy, at Shrewsbury College, a fictitious woman's college at Oxford University. Harriet has not returned to Shrewsbury since graduating. She becomes a famous mystery writer after being acquitted for a murder she did not commit. The man who saves her is Lord Peter Wimsey, who has been trying to get her to marry him for the past five years.

Harriet is nervous about her return to Shrewsbury, wondering how she will be received by the faculty, students and staff. She is only attending because a classmate of hers is very ill and is attending the Gaudy before going overseas for surgery. In spite of her fears and nervousness, the reunion goes well. The only thing that mars the experience is the receipt of a prank letter that she finds just as she is leaving. She promises to attend future events at the school.

The Gaudy begins a series of prank poison pen letters written with letters cut out from newspapers, burnings in effigy and obscenities scrawled on walls. When the New Library is to be opened, Harriet receives an invitation and the school asks her to help them with the problem. Harriet goes to the New Library opening and takes up residence in the Guest Room where she stays for the remainder of the term. The College officials want the matter handled discretely without publicity or the authorities.

Harriet agrees to conduct the investigation for them. All evidence from any incident is directed to her and she documents the incidents as they occur, compiling a lengthy dossier.

One term runs into another term as the incidents continue, becoming more serious as one student is driven to try suicide. At this point, Harriet tells the school officials that they need to bring in experts. She eventually brings in her friend, Lord Peter Wimsey who is also an Oxford alum.

The attacks continue, becoming more serious as Harriet and the others try to trap the attacker. Peter does some research that takes him to York checking out clues. When he returns, after an attempt on Harriet's life, he reveals his suspicions and how he arrived at them at a meeting. The culprit confesses, thus bringing an end to the poison pen letters and violence.

Throughout the book, Peter keeps asking Harriet to marry him and she keeps saying no. She becomes more involved with his family and their problems when she meets his nephew, Viscount Gerald Saint-George who attends one of the Oxford colleges. The time spent working on the case has them all re-evaluating their feelings.

Gaudy Nights is quick and interesting reading. The reader will be caught up in the who-did-it and find it difficult to put the book down.



# Chapter 1-2

## Chapter 1-2 Summary

Gaudy Night, by Dorothy L. Sayers, is an interesting mystery novel that begins when Harriet Vane decides to attend a reunion, known as a Gaudy, at Shrewsbury College, a fictitious woman's college at Oxford University. Harriet has not returned to Shrewsbury since graduating. She becomes a famous mystery writer after being acquitted for a murder she did not commit. The man who saves her is Lord Peter Wimsey, who has been trying to get her to marry him for the past five years.

Harriet Vane is a mystery writer who makes First Class at Shrewsbury College. Her friend, Mary Stokes, makes Second Class, marries soon after school and frequently returns for various events and functions. Harriet, who has never returned, decides to attend an event. She has chosen appropriate clothing for the events that will not offend anyone, she thinks as she drives to Oxford.

Harriet arrives, receives her room assignment and unpacks her belongings. She enjoys a bath and is happy that she does not meet anyone that she knows. Harriet dons her cap and gown in preparations for the ceremony. She stops for Mary, who is ill and two others, and they walk slowly. Harriet is thinking that she made a mistake by coming but is warmly greeted by the Dean.

The ceremony for the unveiling of the clock begins. A former classmate, Vera Mollison, tells Harriet that an incident at the school where she taught would make a good plot for a mystery novel and wants to talk to her about it. She talks to Phoebe Tucker about the archaeological digs she has been working on. Harriet finds many of the faculty are fans of her work and want to talk to her.

Chapter Two begins with Harriet dressing for dinner. The days have not gone as badly as she had anticipated. She now must get through the Gaudy Dinner. At the dinner a woman, Miss Schuster-Statt introduces herself as a great fan of Harriet's. She mentions Lord Peter Wimsey and the others want to hear about him. He is the man who secured Harriet's release from Prison. Her thoughts about Lord Peter are broken by the beginning of a speech.

After the dinner, Harriet is invited to coffee with the Dean. The group discusses writing and book sales as well as murder cases. Harriet talks about how she had been wrongly accused of murder. The talk turns to Lord Peter as others in the group want to know what he is like. Harriet is growing increasingly irritated with the discussion. The conversation then turns to other things and goes on until midnight.

Walking back to her room, she finds a sheet of paper fluttering in the wind. It is a cruel drawing of a woman. She throws it away.



## Chapter 1-2 Analysis

Harriet Vane is a successful mystery writer who graduates with Firsts at Shrewsbury College, Oxford. She moves to London, becomes a mystery writer and is mistakenly accused of murder. Lord Peter Wimsey secures her release from prison. She never returns to Oxford until the clock unveiling event because of what has happened to her and only comes to this event because of Mary's illness. Harriet is somewhat nervous about seeing the people. She is also living with a man she is not married to, thinking this will also be the source of gossip.

Things do not go as badly as Harriet had feared. She finds that many of the faculty and attendees are fans of her novels and want to meet and talk to her. At the Dean's coffee, the talk turns to Lord Peter and how he secured her release from prison. The people want to know about him. She is irritated by the discussion but holds her temper and gets through the evening.



# Chapters 3-4

## Chapters 3-4 Summary

Sunday is always the best part of a Gaudy because the official doings are over, leaving people to socialize on their own. Harriet goes to visit Miss Lydgate, the English tutor. They discuss their work, the students and various members of the staff. After leaving Miss Lydgate, she runs into Miss Mollison and Miss Schuster-Statt and has to endure a conversation with them.

Harriet thinks that the weekend at Oxford will get her away from Lord Peter and the marriage issue but finds that people are more interested in him than her. After them she talks with Catherine Freemantle, now Bendeck. She married a farmer and lives on the Welsh border. Harriet realizes that her own prospects for marriage to Peter are much better than the others have had.

At lunch, Harriet sits with Phoebe Tucker. She looks around wondering who dropped the picture she had found the night before. That evening she attends the prayer session in the chapel. It is not as bad as she thinks it will be and when she leaves the college, she says she will return for more events. When she retrieves her cigarette case from her gown, she finds a note calling her a dirty murderess.

Chapter Four has Harriet thinking of her weekend at Shrewsbury. She thinks of the Dean telling her that it is the work she is doing that is important. Harriet also thinks that the one tie to the past is Peter whom she cannot seem to break off with. He wants to marry her and keeps proposing to her.

Peter is out of town when she returns from Oxford and she gives away the theater tickets that he left. When he returns, they go out to dinner and she finds that he has two broken ribs. Peter finds that Harriet has been receiving hate mail like the note at Oxford when a post card falls out of her purse. He burns it and she employs a secretary to sort her mail.

In March Harriet receives a note from the Dean inviting her to the library opening. She tells her that something unpleasant has happened that they want her advice on. They are also receiving poison pen letters and experiencing acts of vandalism. Harriet calls the Dean and finds the letters are like the ones she received. They think the letters are from someone in the college. Harriet promises to be there for the library opening. She decides to bring Peter but finds he is out of town.

## Chapters 3-4 Analysis

Sunday is the last day of the Gaudy and it is basically unstructured. Harriet spends the day talking to different people. The Gaudy does not go as badly as she thinks it will. She has avoided the events at Shrewsbury for all those years thinking they would be



unpleasant and she would be ridiculed and criticized. When she departs, she promises that she will return for other Gaudies.

One the way home, she stops to eat. She remembers leaving her cigarette case in the sleeve of her gown. When she goes to retrieve it, she find a note calling her a dirty murderess and asking if she is not ashamed to show her face. The note is written with letters cut out of the newspaper.

Peter Wimsey is the one thing that ties her to the past. She tries to break away from him and has achieved financial independence on her own but he still wants to get married. She keeps saying no.

Peter discovers she has been receiving poison pen letters and she finds that poison pen letters have been appearing at Shrewsbury. She promises the Dean that she will appear at the opening ceremony for the library and talk to her about the problem. Since Peter is such a good investigator, Harriet decides to ask him along, even though she does not want to encourage or worry him, but he is out of town.



# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary

Harriet drives to Oxford in a blinding rain storm. Arriving, she finds the Dean has reserved the Guest Room in Tudor for her. After tea, Harriet attends a meeting of Fellows and Tutors where they have a collection of the various poison pen letters and documents. A library book has been burned and many of Miss Lydgate's work documents are missing and found scattered about the Senior Common Room. They have been defaced. These actions have been confined to Shrewsbury and have not spread to any of the other woman's colleges. Harriet adds what she found at the Gaudy.

The group feels that the culprit has to be a resident at Oxford and may either be a scout or member of the faculty. Most feel that they can rule out present students. They discuss the scouts and staff members and the fact that the grounds are locked to the outside at night. They all agree with the Warden that none of them is above suspicion. The group discusses the possibility of bringing in the police or private detectives. Harriet says she will help in any way she can but she does not feel that there is much that she, one person, can do.

Harriet knows of a Typing Bureau whose workers are investigators and she recommends them. She does not tell them that they are involved with Peter Wimsey but says she will find out what information she can.

After the meeting, Harriet continues to talk to the Dean. They discuss the fact that there are no mis-spellings in any of the notes. They also discuss the burning of gown in the Quad. The Dean says that they can say what they think to Harriet about she should not tell them what she thinks since she is one of the investigators.

Harriet is placed in charge of gathering evidence. She asks for the floor plans and other items. She also offers to help Miss Lydgate work on her proofs which were destroyed. This will give Harriet an excuse to remain at the college. Harriet talks to different people and finds out what they think.

## Chapter 5 Analysis

Harriet drives up to Oxford for the library opening ceremony and also to help in the investigation of the poison pen letters and acts of vandalism that have taken place. She meets with the faculty of Shrewsbury College and they ask her if she can handle the investigation. Harriet says that it will take a lot of time and be too much for one person but she will do what she can to help. She suggests the use of a Typing Bureau, a group of investigators that Peter Wimsey is involved with and says she will make inquiries.

Harriet offers her assistance to help Miss Lydgate redo her proofs. This, she figures, will provide her with an excuse to remain at Shrewsbury for the week since she is now



involved in the investigation. She talks to various people and learns what she can, since she promised that she would help. There are people who are better trained for the task but they want Harriet and not the police.



# Chapters 6-7

## Chapters 6-7 Summary

Harriet wakes up in the middle of the night calling for Peter. She admits to herself that he keeps his mind on his work while hers is wandering all over. Deciding to walk around, she finds a light on in the New Library which should have been dark. She finds Miss Barton's room and discovers it is empty and while looking out the windows sees the light in the library go out. Harriet and Miss Barton meet in the hall. They split up to investigate the library light.

Harriet meets one of the students in the hallway on her way to the library. The door to the New Library is locked. When they find a way in, they find the books scattered on the floor and obscene sayings painted on the walls. Miss Barton is sent for the Dean while Harriet looks for clues. When the Dean arrives, they decide to clean up the place so it is presentable for the opening ceremony. Harriet rouses Padgett, the handyman, and Miss Burrows, the librarian. She smells turpentine while in Miss Burrows' room.

By the time of the opening ceremony, the New Library shows no signs of the vandalism of the night before. Harriet spends the time watching people come and go in the library. She talks to Annie, one of the scouts, who comments that all of these things began when Harriet returned to the college.

Harriet recommends to the Warden that they have patrols at night. The Warden asks if Harriet can take the time to help them. Harriet says she can stay a few weeks but if they do not make progress, the school should consider professional help.

Chapter Seven reveals that word has spread around the college that the mystery writer will be there for several weeks doing research. She spends much of her time talking to people about different things. Harriet learns what she can from the students, faculty and staff.

Returning from a dance one night, Harriet observes someone on the campus. She chases the men and demands to know what they were doing there. She then finds a drunk female student lying on the ground. The student is Miss Cattermole and they take her to her room and then go to the chapel. They find another figure from the poltergeist with a knife stuck through the stomach. The man is Mr. Pomfret and he says he will have tea or cocktails with Harriet the next day.

## Chapters 6-7 Analysis

Harriet is dismayed to have dreamed of Peter. She feels that her own subconscious has betrayed her but when she asks herself what Peter would be doing, she concludes that he would be concentrating on the case.



When Harriet notices a light on in the New Library, she decides to investigate. She finds Miss Barton and they find the New Library has been vandalized in advance of the opening ceremony. Neither of the women is armed and Harriet realizes that they could be in physical danger.

The college authorities do not want to bring in the police because they do not want the publicity. Harriet tells the Warden that she will stay the week to help out, but they should consider bringing in professionals if the problem is still occurring at the end of the term.

Harriet stays at the college for several weeks with the world spreading that she is there doing research. She talks to students, faculty and staff learning what she can and patrolling the different areas. One night she finds two men climbing the fence and follows them. One of the men, Mr. Pomfret, says he will join her for tea the next day. They also find a cloth figure with a knife stuck in its stomach as the crimes continue. Again, Harriet has little regard for her own personal safety when she follows the men. It turns out that she is not in any danger, but she could have been.



# Chapter 8

## Chapter 8 Summary

Miss Pyke's cap and gown are missing from the Senior Common Room and she has to borrow one for the lecture. They also try to identify a semi-formal black evening gown. Harriet tells them the story of the cloth figure that was found the previous evening. She does not tell them about the note found with pasted letters and Latin verse.

Harriet goes to talk to Miss Cattermole in her room. When she walks out of the room, she walks into Mr. Pomfret who has been attending a lecture. He walks over when he sees her. She agrees to meet him for tea that afternoon. Before leaving, he introduces her to Mr. Farringdon who is with Miss Flaxman. They invite Mr. Pomfret and Harriet to a party that afternoon and they accept the invitation.

Talking to Miss Cattermole, Harriet finds that she hates college and only came because she was engaged to Mr. Farringdon and her parents wanted her to have a university education.

In the hall, Harriet meets Jukes, a former employee, who is trying to blackmail Mr. Pomfret for climbing the wall the night before. They throw Jukes out and leave for the party at New College. The students there are all familiar with Harriet's novels and eager to talk to her.

The next morning she asks Annie the scout about Jukes. She shows the black dress that they found but nobody knows whom it belongs to. Everyone provides what alibis they can for the time period in question.

After shopping and spending a few quiet minutes in the cathedral, she is almost knocked over by a man when she walks out. The man is Peter Wimsey's nephew and after he replaces what he has broken he finds out who Harriet is.

## Chapter 8 Analysis

Now there is another incident to add to the list. Miss Pyke's cap and gown are missing from the Senior Common Room. Harriet continues her investigation by asking questions and seeing if anyone can identify the black evening gown.

Harriet is slightly amused by the interplay between Miss Flaxman, Farringdon and Pomfret concerning the party. Farringdon does not want Pomfret to attend, Miss Flaxman does not want Harriet to attend because she wants Pomfret to herself. The only one who wants to be there is Harriet who is curious about what is going on.



Harriet continues talking to people and asking questions, learning whatever she can. She is really not making much headway in the investigation but the school make it clear that they prefer to handle the situation this way rather than bringing in the authorities.

While shopping, Harriet meets Peter's nephew who does not know who Harriet is and talks freely about Peter and his wanting the right wife or none. He cannot understand how any woman would not want his uncle let alone the one that keeps telling him no. Harriet is more or less amused by the incident while Peter's nephew is apologizing all over the place.



# Chapter 9

## Chapter 9 Summary

Juke's home is raided by the police while Annie is there. They recover items stolen from students. The subject is being discussed over lunch by the Dean, Harriet, Miss Lydgate and others.

The end of the term is near and the investigation has not progressed very far. Miss de Vine and Harriet have a discussion about making mistakes and the fact that writing is an emotional experience.

Lord Saint George invites Harriet to lunch claiming he is still upset over what he said at their prior meeting. When she goes to St. Aldate to meet him, she finds that he has been in an accident and is hospitalized. Saint George had made arrangements for one of his friends, Mr. Danvers, to take Harriet to lunch. After the lunch, she goes to visit Saint George and brings him his mail, a letter from Uncle Peter. Harriet reads the letter to him. He had asked his uncle for a loan to cover some bad debt. His uncle will cover his checks until he returns to England and then they will talk.

Back in her room, Harriet sits down to write to Peter. It takes six drafts before she is satisfied with what she has written. She then goes on to her research on Sheridan Le Fanu. In the middle of this, the lights go out in Tudor. They find that the main fuse has been removed. They see a figure running across the quad and watch the lights go out in Burleigh. Thinking Queen Elizabeth will be next, Harriet goes there looking for the fuse box. Lights in other parts of the Quad go out as Harriet finds the Dean.

Padgett tells them that a chisel was used on the fuses and that his wife is on the phone trying to locate new fuses. By the time the new fuses have arrived, there are several acts of vandalism such as broken windows.

## Chapter 9 Analysis

Harriet and Miss de Vine have an interesting talk about making errors. They conclude that people make little errors continually and that that is part of life. However, people only make fundamental errors out of lack of interest. Neither believes in a marriage where one person becomes the job of the other.

Saint George invites Harriet to lunch but when she arrives she finds he is hospitalized from an auto accident. She delivers a letter from his uncle and the letter represents what she does not like about Peter, basically the condescending superiority and arrogance of his caste. Harriet agrees to write a letter to Peter for Saint George since his injuries make it difficult for him to write. She has a difficult time writing the letter. If she wanted to, she could rub his nose in the dirt, but she decides not to.



The poltergeist strikes again at Shrewsbury, this time by removing the main fuses from the buildings, leaving the College in darkness. Harriet and the others try to catch the culprit but do not. There is some damage to property such as smashed glass. Like everyone else, Harriet grabs a torch and runs out in the corridor when the power outage occurs.



# Chapter 10-11

## Chapter 10-11 Summary

The incident with the power outage lasts for a total of an hour. Most people establish alibis. Miss Barton chases a figure across the Quad and is knocked down. She cannot describe the person. Various people describe where they were and what they were doing when the lights went out. The Warden asks the guilty party to come forward voluntarily.

A vulgar saying and a note saying ha-ha is found in the Senior Common Room. People discuss the incident the next day.

Harriet receives a letter from Peter explaining some of the problems with Gerald and thanking her for her help. She goes to see Gerald and finds him struggling with the paperwork of the bills. He has also received a letter from Peter and tells Harriet that he has not paid the insurance on the car, even though he told his father that he did. He has to rely on Uncle Peter to pay his bills because his father will not.

Harriet tells Gerald about the problems at Shrewsbury. Gerald says he may have met the culprit at the end of the last term and tells Harriet the story.

Since the school term is nearing an end, the Dean does not anticipate problems during vacation. Harriet says her goodbyes after lunch and leaves Oxford.

In Chapter Eleven, Harriet is back in London. She works on her new novel. Reggie Pomfret, in London, asks her to dinner and a show and she accepts. She finds she enjoys the evening with him because he is not a part of the literary world. She invites him in for a drink. He hands her a letter that has been slipped under the door. She reads it after he leaves. It is from Peter who again asks her to marry him. She writes and tells him no and then explains somewhat what is happening at Shrewsbury. She does not tell him the whole story but assures him that it is not dangerous.

Peter reads the letter over and over in Rome. A man approaches him and they talk. The man is a Count who apparently provides Peter with information he needs.

Harriet meets Mr. Arbuthnot, a friend of Peter's, and learns that Peter is attached to the Foreign Office. Bored with London, Harriet returns to Shrewsbury right before the beginning of the summer term. While walking around, Harriet encounters a girl who is scaling the wall. She does not get her name.

## Chapter 10-11 Analysis

Harriet is still trying to solve the problems at Shrewsbury. The confusion caused by the power outage makes it difficult for anyone to narrow in on the culprit.





Harriet has gotten herself into the middle of Peter's family problems with his nephew, Gerald. Even though it is a position she does not want to be in, she tries to be as helpful as possible without prying. Peter again asks her to marry him and she again says no. He is still in Rome on business. Harriet learns from an acquaintance of his that he is attached to the Foreign Office.

Harriet tires of the scene in London and returns to Shrewsbury. She is still working as an investigator on the problem there. She mentions the mutilated newspaper that is found just as she is leaving at the end of the last term, but it has been too long and nobody can shed any light on it.

When she finds the girl scaling the wall, she sends her away. She does not get the girl's name or apparently remembers the story Gerald had told her about the girl he met that he thought might be involved.



# Chapter 12

## Chapter 12 Summary

The new term and the opening of the New Library brings with it a rearrangement of living quarters. They also organize a system of patrols. They do receive some poison pen letters via post. There are several other incidents. All are reported to Harriet who keeps notes on the incidents. At this stage, the students are focused on their studies and not the poison pen letters.

Harriet encourages Gerald to work at his studies and refuses an offer to meet his parents. When she meets Pomfret, he wants to know why she has been avoiding him. He fancies himself romantically involved with her and brushes off the ten year age difference when she mentions it. They are approached by the Proctor who, after learning they are not involved in the tree climbing incidents, leaves them alone. Harriet says she is flattered by what Pomfret has said but it cannot be, she cannot marry him. After Pomfret leaves, Harriet laughs about the incident.

When Harriet returns to the College, she finds the Warden and Dean waiting for her. One of the students, Miss Newland, is missing. This is the girl that Harriet found trying to scale the wall. The group finds a total of thirty poison pen letters in her room. She has been receiving them since before Harriet's arrival. The letters are calling her a failure and prodding her to suicide. People are out searching for Miss Newland, including the police. They search the river and find her tangled in the weeds and pull her to safety.

Later on Harriet comments that Miss Newland jumped out of the canoe when she saw them coming.

## Chapter 12 Analysis

As the incidents continue at Shrewsbury, the reports continue to go to Harriet, who documents as much as she can. She is not really making much progress in her investigation but there has been a reshuffling of living quarters and organized patrols that they think will limit the acts of vandalism. People continue to receive poison pen letters via the mail.

Harriet is caught off guard by the romantic declarations of Pomfret. She had not thought of him in that way. She mentions the ten year age difference but he brushes it off as nothing. Harriet, who never thought there would be anyone but Peter, says she is flattered by what Pomfret has said.

There is another near tragedy due to the poison pen letters. Miss Newland is missing when Harriet returns to the college. They have been worried about her and find a stack of thirty poison pen letters in her room, goading her toward suicide. A search by the faculty, students and police finds her in the river. They pull her to safety. The letters

apparently have taken their toll on her and she is not one to discuss her problems with anyone.



# Chapter 13-14

## Chapter 13-14 Summary

Harriet tells the Warden and others that they must bring in official help, even if it means publicity and a scandal. She says she has tried and failed and that official help is needed. The Warden asks her to call in the private detectives and Harriet says she will. When she calls she finds the only person she knew at the firm left over a year ago. Since she does not want to talk to a stranger, she hangs up.

Harriet, not knowing who to call, wishes she could talk to Peter. He would know who to call. She decides to find his last letter with the phone number of his hotel in Rome, when Miss de Vine shows her another poison pen letter that she found. Harriet places a call to Peter leaving word that she is to be found when the call goes through. The call goes through at lunch time. The hotel tells her that Peter left for Warsaw three days earlier.

She calls Mr. Freddy Arbuthnot to ask for help in locating Peter. He tells her if she wants to send a letter to Peter, he will see that it is forwarded to him. She does just this, asking him to recommend a detective and wanting to know when he will return to England.

One of the College's benefactors will be coming to dinner. They cannot tell Dr. Threep not to come. At the dinner, they find the Vice-Chancellor telling Dr. Threep about the poison pen letters.

Chapter Fourteen has the characters talking about the storm of the previous evening. They all attend the University Sermon and find it soothing after the uproar of the storm. Walking out on the Quad, Harriet sees Peter Wimsey in his cap and gown. She introduces him to the Dean and he tells her he will see her later. They meet in the Dean's sitting room. He had received her letter at the Foreign Office and knew that he was coming to Oxford. He thanks her for being kind to Gerald and asks her to go to Denver to see the estate where he was born.

They decide to meet at the Magdalen Bridge later that afternoon. Harriet brings her notes on the investigation with her to show Peter. They go punting on the river and Peter meets some old friends. Peter looks for a place where they can talk about the case.

## Chapter 13-14 Analysis

The attempted suicide of Miss Newland adds more seriousness to the situation. Harriet tells the College group that she can no longer handle the investigation on her own and that they need to bring in experts. They agree and ask her to contact the detective agency she had mentioned. When Harriet does, she finds the only person she knew there has been gone for a year.



Harriet finally admits to herself how much she wishes she could talk to Peter. She needs his advice and really wishes that he was there to help her. Calling his hotel in Rome, they tell her he has gone to Warsaw. She then has Mr. Arbuthnot forward a letter to him. Harriet wants to tell Peter how much she wishes he was there but does not. Surprisingly, Peter appears at Oxford a few days later. He finds Harriet's letter waiting for him at the Foreign Office and knows that he is coming to Oxford and will see her.

She seems genuinely concerned for Peter and his welfare. He appears to be tired and has her fretting about whether or not he is getting enough rest. For once she sees Peter's weaknesses when he talks about his family and that makes him more acceptable to her. She agrees to go to his family estate to see where he was born. Later that afternoon, they go punting on the river.

He suspects that she has been seeing one of the younger male students and has sent him on his way. She confirms that.



# Chapters 15-16

## Chapters 15-16 Summary

They find a quiet place on shore for a picnic and talk when Miss Schuster-Slatt and a group of her friends appear. When they depart, Peter looks at Harriet's notes and the various documents. After Peter finishes reading, she asks him what to do. He says that they must find the motive and that she should give him the evening to think it over.

Peter falls asleep and Harriet watches the various boats on the river. She lets him sleep for two hours since he is so fatigued. He says they must hurry if they are to be on time for dinner and she asks why they cannot eat somewhere along the way since they have no appointments. They do that and continue to enjoy their time upon the water. The talk turns to her latest novel and how she is stuck. They discuss various different scenarios. They decide to meet again the next evening since Peter is having lunch with Gerald the next day.

In Chapter Sixteen, Harriet is awakened by Carrie and Annie who are sent by the Dean. They are babbling something about a mess in the science room and something that got away. Harriet puts on a dressing gown and goes to meet the Dean. It seems that Annie had awakened and seen a light in the science lab and a shadow in the window. She wakes Carrie and the two of them go to the lab and see a figure all in black when they peek through the curtains. Carrie goes for the Dean and the Dean sends them to get Harriet.

They break into the science room. The culprit has exited through the window. On one of the tables they find a newspaper, glue and box of letters cut from newspapers. There are also several poison pen letters with one in progress. They try to re-enact the scene that Annie and Carrie stumbled upon.

Harriet has Peter view the science room the next morning. They take pictures and dust for fingerprints, saying that the culprit probably wore gloves. Peter says that the unfinished poison pen letter was meant for Harriet. They want to know why the letters were being done in the science room and not in the culprit's own room.

Peter's assistant finds a big black hairpin. Harriet says that Miss de Vine uses those kinds of hairpins. The light was on in her room when Harriet went to the science room, but Harriet didn't see her. The Dean finds a second hairpin. Peter warns Harriet to be careful, saying it is more dangerous for her if the culprit knows that he is working on the case.

## Chapters 15-16 Analysis

Harriet is thinking about Peter. She actually enjoys the time she spends with him on the water and resents the intrusions of the others. When he falls asleep she knows it is from



sheer exhaustion and she lets him sleep. When he awakes, they go for dinner and talk. If their talk becomes a little too intrusive into his private ground, he changes the subject. She has an enjoyable day with him and at times finds herself thinking of how much she really likes him.

Annie and Carrie surprise the culprit in the science room in the act of pasting the poison pen letters. The next morning, Harriet has Peter view the scene. They find that one of the poison pen letters was meant for Harriet.

Peter is concerned about Harriet's safety and warns her to be careful. He feels that the fact that he is there working on the case puts Harriet in more danger. She at first accuses him of being overprotective then remembers how Miss Barton was knocked down by a figure running on the Quad and appreciates his concern.



# Chapter 17

## Chapter 17 Summary

The women are gathering outside the Senior Common Room in preparation for dinner. Peter is joining them for dinner and some of the women are nervous. Peter appears, having spent the afternoon with Gerald. The Dean handles the introductions. During the dinner, Harriet listens to the Warden and Peter talk. When Dr. Baring brings up philosophy, Peter, not taking the bait, says it is not one of his subjects.

After dinner the group moves to the Senior Common Room for coffee. All feel that the dinner has gone well even though some of the women have been nervous. When Harriet asks Peter what he wants her to do he tells her to be her usual self in speaking the truth and sticking to the point.

The conversation continues in the Senior Common Room. They talk about murder victims and social principles and their private loyalties and loyalties to one's job. When Miss Goodwin, the Secretary, is asked for her opinion, she says that she has submitted her resignation and that she is not the cause of the problems at the college. As she is walking out, Peter asks her to stay. The discussion focuses on truth and the role of truth in science.

One by one people drift away from the Senior Common Room until Peter says he has to leave at eleven o'clock. They walk to Harriet's room where he picks up his cap and gown and then they walk across the Quad. Harriet and Peter both talk about honesty. At the gate they find that Padgett and Wimsey had served in the military together. Peter agrees to return at another time so he and Padgett can talk.

On the way back to her room, Harriet notices a figure wearing a long trailing gown. She follows the figure, watching it walk in the Fellows Garden. She remembers Miss Hillyard wearing a gown of that kind that evening.

## Chapter 17 Analysis

Peter is joining the women for dinner at Shrewsbury and some of them are nervous about meeting him. In spite of their nervousness, the dinner goes well, with Harriet sitting across from Peter, not next to him. He can handle himself with the women on just about every topic.

After dinner as they are walking to the Senior Common Room, she feels first that he is intruding and then that she and Peter are from the same world and that the others are intruding. While in the Senior Common Room she wonders about what Peter values in her. She is very happy to be with Peter in spite of her continual refusals to marry him.



The after dinner discussion covers a variety of topics and by eleven, Peter says he must leave. He and Harriet have a few minutes alone as they walk across the Quad. They discuss honesty which seems to be a trait that each honors in the other. They do not have any time to talk about the case.



# Chapter 18

## Chapter 18 Summary

Some of the students are excited about a good looking young man that they spot from the window. Harriet tells them that it is Viscount Saint-George, Peter's nephew. She sees Miss de Vine walking with Peter and Saint-George, spotting them, heading in their direction. As Miss de Vine walks away, Miss Hillyard appears. Harriet sits in the window seat and watches the scene for ten minutes and then joins Peter and Gerald. Peter asks Gerald to try to identify the woman he bumped into one night.

Harriet learns that Peter will be going to York. Harriet asks if he will take some chapters of her manuscript to her secretary and he says he will. She goes to get the papers and finds Peter gone when she returns. Gerald was teasing Peter who walked away. She and Peter have a few cross words before he leaves, all of which are observed by the women in the Senior Common Room.

In her room Harriet looks over her documents on the investigation and finds a sonnet that Peter was writing mixed in with her notes.

The next evening, while she is dining with a friend from Sommerville, she is called back to Shrewsbury. On her way back, she remembers a comment of Peter's of how not calling back to verify a source can lead to kidnapping. She calls the Warden's staff and finds the Warden is out for the evening and nobody called her at Somerville. Padgett says he will check out the area and will be there if she is attacked while walking back to Shrewsbury. The only logical place for an attack would be in the Fellows Garden.

Walking back to Shrewsbury, she meets Dr. Baring, the Warden and she walks her to her room. She finds Padgett who tells her that there was a woman sitting in the Fellows Garden. The woman was Miss Hillyard and she fled when Harriet appeared with the Warden. Padgett also tells her that he checked the phone equipment and the call came from outside the College.

Harriet discusses the events with Miss Edwards the next day. The only other thing that happened was a heated quarrel between Miss Hillyard and Miss Chilperic, and Miss Edwards saying that the poison pen situation was going to result in murder and they should have brought in the police at the beginning.

## Chapter 18 Analysis

Peter is talking to different students and has Gerald try to identify the woman he encountered one night several months ago. Harriet, somewhat amused, is watching all of this from the window of the Senior Common Room. When she joins the two Wimseys, she finds that Peter is going to York.



Gerald goads his uncle and gets him to react. Harriet tells him that he should not treat his uncle like that. Peter is very good to Gerald and Gerald should appreciate that fact. He is also concerned with what it looks like for her when Peter walks away. Later when Peter complains about Gerald's behavior, she tells Peter not to make a big deal about it. Gerald was only teasing him. She seems to be in the role of trying to keep the peace between the two Wimseys.

Harriet is angry at herself and at Peter and wonders why she brought him to Oxford. She knows that he wants her to accept his protection and she cannot do it. She feels that it would make them both miserable. Now Harriet is happy that he is gone but unhappy that he left her there. She finally tells herself to stop that kind of thinking, that it is getting her nowhere and just upsetting her more. She never even asked him why he had to go to York.

For the first time in their relationship, Harriet begins to see Peter the way other women view him. They see him as an eligible bachelor. She wonders why she never saw this before. This chapter reveals that Harriet's feelings for Peter are very confused and tied to the past memories of being imprisoned for a murder she did not commit.



# Chapters 19-20

## Chapters 19-20 Summary

When Harriet tries to change the character of Wilfrid in her novel according to Peter's suggestions, she finds she has to re-do the whole novel. Peter has returned and says he is looking for a man named Arthur Robinson. The name means nothing to Harriet. Peter asks her out for the day and says they can talk. They plan to spend the day in the English country side.

Harriet asks who Arthur Robinson is. Peter tells her he was a student at York University who had some irregularities in his thesis. Miss de Vine was on the examining committee at he time and there were no problems at Shrewsbury before Miss de Vine's arrival. Peter thought that it was worth looking into.

Harriet then tells Peter the story of the phone call. He tells Harriet that he will show her how to defend herself if she is physically attacked. They stop at a field and Peter teaches her some basics of self-defense. When they stop at a store, Peter buys a dog collar which he wants Harriet to wear at night since it is a good way to prevent strangulation. When he comments that it is the only gift she ever allowed him to buy, she agrees to let him buy her a chess set that she finds.

While the proprietor is wrapping the chess set, Peter plays the piano with both of them singing. Tobias Hume and Reggie Pomfret walk in and cause a ruckus. Pomfret swings at Peter who catches his arm and tells his friend to take him home. The shop keeper returns and asks the two men to leave. Peter says Pomfret can find him at the Mitre in the morning if he care to pursue the situation. Peter and Harriet stop for a beer and Peter writes a note to Pomfret.

In Chapter Twenty, Harriet shows her gift to the women in the Senior Common Room. The Dean says she will have a glass case brought from the science room so Harriet can display the chess pieces in her room.

The next day Harriet sees Peter and Reggie Pomfret walking together on the Mitre. She meets Peter as she leaves the beauty salon and he tells her of his discussion with Pomfret, who is a very distant relative. They sit on the bank of the river and talk. Peter goes to talk to the Warden who afterwards sends for Harriet. He has a suspect in mind but Harriet does not know who. Peter seems to feel that an attack will be made soon and the most likely targets are Harriet, Miss de Vine and another unnamed person. Dr. Baring will warn Miss de Vine of the situation when she returns.

Harriet finds the glass chest and the chess set smashed when she enters her room. She calls Peter who comes right over. She tells Peter of Miss Hillyard's interest in the chessmen. Petr has a call from the Foreign Office and says he will call Harriet later that evening. As Peter leaves, she thinks she sees a figure in the shadow of the Quad.



Miss Hillyard confronts Harriet about her behavior with Peter and she accuses Miss Hillyard of smashing her chess set. There are slivers of the ivory on Miss Hillyard's carpet and in her slippers. Miss Hillyard says she went to Harriet's room to talk about Peter and saw the mess. Harriet calls Peter, says she cannot tell him on the phone what happened, and sleeps in the Infirmary.

## Chapters 19-20 Analysis

Peter returns from York and he and Harriet decide to spend the day in the English countryside. She hears his story of Arthur Robinson and he hears her story about the phone call. He decides to teach her some elements of self-defense and buys her a dog collar to wear at night to prevent strangulation by an attacker. He comments that this is the only thing she ever let him buy her and she again comments that he gave her her life. She almost seems to hold this against him. This seems to be the tie to the past that she cannot overcome.

After Harriet finds the chess set smashed in her room, Peter tells her to be very careful and to sleep someplace else. After he leaves she is confronted by Miss Hillyard who accuses her and Peter of being lovers and says Harriet's behavior is inappropriate. Miss Hillyard accuses Peter of having women all over Europe. Harriet accuses Miss Hillyard of being jealous and in love with Peter herself. Harriet does not know how to handle the situation. Miss Hillyard says she went to Harriet's room to discuss her behavior and found the chess set smashed. Harriet accuses her of the act.

Harriet tells Peter that something has happened and she cannot discuss it on the phone. She literally does not know what to do in this situation.



# Chapter 21

## Chapter 21 Summary

Harriet waits for Peter in the Fellows Garden the next morning. She now views Peter in a different way and sees him as other women see him. When Peter arrives, she tells him of the confrontation with Miss Hillyard, but does not tell him what she said about Peter. They go to her room to survey the damage. Peter says the chess pieces were smashed with a Cuban heel and a French heel. Peter says he will return the slipper to Miss Hillyard with an apology.

When Harriet sweeps up the mess, she learns that one of the students heard grinding noises around nine-thirty. Miss Hillyard approaches with an address from Peter. Both women apologize to each other.

Later that day Saint-George calls. He saw the woman again and cannot find Peter. He refers to the woman as a ghost and says she recognized him. Saint-George is quite spooked by the experience. She invites him to dinner the next day to see if he can identify the "ghost."

She goes to her room and takes out the dog collar when she hears the door rattle. The rattle makes her nervous but the rattle is caused by the wind from the hall window. Harriet walks over to Miss de Vine's room. The lights are on but the room is empty. She is grabbed by the throat. Luckily, she is wearing the dog collar. Everything goes dark.

Harriet regains consciousness in the Infirmary. She has been knocked unconscious by a blow in the head. She drinks what she is given and the next time she wakes up she remembers bits and pieces of what happened and asks about Miss de Vine. Harriet is told she had a heart attack and is resting in the next room. The Dean tells her that when Miss de Vine arrived, she went to her room before going to see Dr. Baring. She found Harriet lying on the floor unconscious. She went running around for help and turned blue. Then they found Annie locked in the coal-hole. They called Peter who arrived at 2 am and had to leave for Paris.

Saint-George comes to visit her and says Peter will return the next day.

## Chapter 21 Analysis

The experience at Shrewsbury and watching the way other women react to Peter has made Harriet view him differently. She had always admired his intellect which she admits is greater than her own. Acknowledging this fact and accepting his advice probably saved her life. She was wearing the dog collar when she was attacked in Miss de Vine's room. She did what Peter said and let her body go limp to throw off her attacker. Both Annie and Harriet agree about the exceptional strength of the attacker. If Harriet had not followed Peter's advice, she might not be alive.

Saint-George obviously likes Harriet and wants things to work out between her and his uncle. He tells her his uncle is aging and she should not wait too much longer.



# Chapter 22-23

## Chapter 22-23 Summary

There is a meeting in the Senior Common Room on Thursday, called by the Warden. Peter will attend the meeting and so will Harriet and Miss de Vine who are up and around by this time.

The meeting begins by Peter saying he will explain how he arrived at his working theory and then his conclusions. He reviews the details of the case, how the events begin at the Gaudy. Most of the details are known to the women, but not the one where Saint-George meets the woman in the Fellows arden. Peter says that Harriet did enough to make the culprit feel that she was dangerous and the attacks during the present term became more dangerous.

Since the incidents began with the arrival of Miss de Vine, Peter brings up the incident of Arthur Robinson and how he felt someone connected with him followed Miss de Vine to Shrewsbury. Peter's research revealed that Robinson changed his name to Wilson and married Charlotte Anne Clarke. They had two daughters, Beatrice and Carola. The picture he produces is of the scout, Annie. Robinson had killed himself several years earlier. Peter blames himself for not making his suspicions about Annie known.

The Warden calls for Annie, wanting to question her then, even though Peter and others are not in favor of it. Annie says her children cut out the letters from the newspapers but they had nothing to do with the messages or anything else. Annie spews her hatred against Miss de Vine and all educated women.

When they are alone, Miss de Vine talks to Harriet about Peter and tells her to stop leading him on. If she is not going to marry him, then permanently break is off.

Chapter Twenty Three has things back to normal the next morning at the school. Peter comes to talk to Harriet. He apologizes to Harriet for the past five years saying he was thinking only of himself. They make plans to attend a concert on Sunday. Peter asks her to marry him again. She does not say no.

## Chapter 22-23 Analysis

Everybody's emotions come tumbling out after Annie Wilson's outburst. Annie hates them on account of her husband, Arthur Robinson, who finally killed himself. She blames Miss de Vine and all educated women. Annie points out that she laughs at all of them and scared them all. Even Harriet could not do anything for herself and had to call Peter.





Harriet is just about sick after listening to Annie and runs from the room. When she returns, Miss de Vine is the only one there. Miss de Vine forces Harriet to confront her situation with Peter. Either marry him or break it off completely.

Harriet has been viewing Peter differently since he arrived at Oxford. She is beginning to realize what other women see when they look at Peter. Annie's outburst and Peter's week at Oxford forces both of them to confront the last five years and their own feelings. Peter apologizes for wanting Harriet for his own selfish reasons. This time when he proposes, she does not say no.



# Characters

## Harriet Vane

Harriet Vane is an Oxford graduate with a First in English. She attends Shrewsbury College then moves to London to write mystery novels. She is wrongly accused of murder and Lord Peter Wimsey secures her release from prison. He takes care of her and helps her get back on her feet and now wants to marry her. Harriet has not been back to Shrewsbury since she finished her studies and is very nervous about attending the Gaudy. She is only attending because one of her former classmates is ill and she wants to see her. She and Shrewsbury College begin receiving poison pen letters and the college asks her to help them solve the problem. Harriet spends several weeks there and then returns for the Trinity Term. When the situation becomes more serious, she turns to Lord Peter for help. He appears at Oxford on business and meets her and becomes involved in the investigation. The week at Oxford with Peter and all that happens causes Harriet to re-evaluate her relationship with him. She notices how the other women react to him and she comes to view him in a different way. When he asks her to marry him again, she accepts.

## Lord Peter Wimsey

Peter is the one who secures Harriet's release from prison. He is famous for solving murders and is Harriet's wealthy boyfriend. Peter wants to marry Harriet but she considers him to be a tie to the past. He does quite a bit of traveling for his work. A friend of his says that he is attached to the Foreign Office which is why he so frequently travels. Peter is also an Oxford graduate and meets Harriet there when he returns from Rome. He wants to take her to see his family estate and she agrees to go. Peter spends some time at Oxford working on the case that Harriet had begun and goes on to solve it. During the time at Oxford, Harriet sees how other women react to Lord Wimsey and her views toward him begin to change. He also apologizes for the last five years saying that he has been selfishly motivated. He tries to explain his reasons and actions to her. At the end, he again asks Harriet to marry him and this time she accepts.

## Annie Wilson

Annie Wilson is a scout, or maid, at Shrewsbury. She was married to Arthur Robinson who had some irregularities in his thesis; these were spotted by Miss de Vine at York University. He eventually kills himself, leaving Annie with two small children. Annie stages the poison pen incidents to try to hurt Miss de Vine whom she blames for her problems.



## **Mr. Reggie Pomfret**

Mr. Pomfret is a student at Oxford whom Harriet meets when she chases two suspicious figures in the dark one night. The next day he introduces her to Mr. Farringdon. Pomfret fancies himself in love with Harriet and proposes and is gently rejected.

## **Lord Gerald Saint-George**

Lord Saint-George is the nephew of Peter Wimsey. He literally bumps into Harriet, almost knocking her down when she walks out of the cathedral in Oxford. He adopts Harriet as his aunt and wants her to marry his uncle.

## **Miss Barton**

Miss Barton is one of the Fellows at Shrewsbury College. She meets Harriet at the Dean's coffee and brings up the subject of murders. Harriet later works with her to solve the poison pen incidents.

## **Padgett**

Padgett is the handyman at Shrewsbury College. He cleans the vandalized library before the opening ceremony and is the one they turn to whenever any incidents occur.

## **Mary Stokes**

Mary Stokes, whose married name is Mary Attwood, was a student at Shrewsbury with Harriet. She graduates with a Second and remains active in college affairs. She is now sick and facing a dangerous operation overseas.

## **Mr. Farringdon**

Mr. Farringdon is a student at New College, Oxford. He was engaged to Miss Cattermole but broke up with her and now is engaged to Miss Flaxman.

## **Miss Lydgate**

Miss Lydgate is the English tutor. The proofs for her book are destroyed by the vandal at Shrewsbury.



## **Objects/Places**

### **Shrewsbury College**

Shrewsbury College is a fictitious woman's college at Oxford University in England.

### **Mecklenburg Square**

Mecklenburg Square is the section of London that Harriet lives in.

### **New Library**

The New Library is located at Shrewsbury College. The building is vandalized the night before the opening ceremony.

### **Senior Common Room**

The Senior Common Room, S.C.R., is a gathering place at Shrewsbury and the site of several incidents, such as Miss Pyke's cap and gown disappearing.

### **St. Aldate**

St. Aldate is the Oxford college attended by Lord Saint George.

### **Guest Room**

The Guest Room in Tudor is where Harriet stays when she is investigating the poison pen letters.

### **Rome, Italy**

Rome is the capitol of Italy and is where Peter Wimsey is working on a case.

### **Fellows Garden**

The Fellows Garden is a garden area at Shrewsbury and the place where Miss Hillyard often sits.



## **London River**

The London River is the river by Shrewsbury College and the site of recreational activities such as boating.

## **English Countryside**

The English countryside is the area around Oxford where Peter and Harriet spend the day.



# Themes

## Suspense

One of the major themes of the novel is suspense, which is to be expected in a who-did-it mystery novel. The suspense grabs the reader right at the beginning during the Gaudy, when Harriet finds the drawing on the Quad. When she leaves, she finds the note in the sleeve of her gown written in letters cut from newspapers and pasted to a sheet of paper. The poison pen letter accuses her of being a dirty murderess and asks how she has the nerve to show her face.

After Harriet leaves, the poison pen letters and pranks continue and Harriet is asked if she will handle the investigation for the College since they do not want any adverse publicity. The pranks and poison pen letters continue. One night, someone pulls the main fuses in each of the buildings, plunging them into darkness. They find a light on in the New Library in the middle of the night, hours before its dedication. They find it has been vandalized with obscenities painted on the walls. Another light on in the middle of the night in the science room reveals that the culprit was interrupted since a box of letters cut from newspapers and several poison pen letters are found. When one of the student recipients of the letters is driven to a suicide attempt, Harriet convinces the school that they need to bring in experts.

When Peter Wimsey arrives and becomes involved in the investigation, the suspense intensifies until they confront the culprit and secure a confession. The suspense continues from the beginning to the end of the novel.

## Relationships

Relationships are also another theme of the novel. Harriet has been in a relationship with Lord Peter Wimsey for over five years. He keeps asking her to marry him and she keeps refusing. Peter is the man who saved her from the gallows when she was wrongly accused of murder. For her, the relationship with him is a tie to the past that she keeps trying to run from. She keeps trying to break off her relationship with him but cannot do it.

When Peter comes to Oxford she begins to see how other women view and react to him. This makes her think. They see an eligible bachelor and she begins to see him differently. Harriet begins to actually enjoy the time they spend together, especially when she sees his weaknesses in his dealings with his nephew and family. Peter apologizes to her for the way he has behaved for the past five years. He wanted her as a possession and his motives were selfish he says.

In addition to watching how others react to Peter, Miss de Vine rattles Harriet when she tells her to do something about the relationship—either marry Peter or break it off

permanently. When Peter asks her to marry him at the end of the book, she accepts him. They are both ready to accept their relationship on new terms.

## Revenge

Another theme of the book is revenge. This is the reason for the poison pen letters and the pranks that become more violent and destructive as the book goes on. The source of the desire for revenge goes back many years when Miss de Vine was on the examining committee for the thesis of Arthur Robinson at York University. She spots some irregularities and the thesis is not allowed.

Anthony Robinson marries Charlotte Anne the daughter of his landlady. They have two children and change their name to Wilson. The man's career is wrecked and he eventually commits suicide. His wife, Annie, blames Miss de Vine and follows her when she comes to Shrewsbury College. Annie hates Miss de Vine and all educated women because of her late husband's experience. She sets out to destroy Miss de Vine in revenge for what she did to Annie's husband when she found the irregularities in his thesis. This is why her acts of violence are directed at so many women, faculty and students, at the college. It is Annie's way of getting revenge for what has happened to her and her family.

# Style

## Point of View

The novel is written in the third person point of view with the author, Dorothy L. Sayers, functioning as the narrator. There is a good deal of dialogue in the book which allows each character to present his/her own views and opinions and allows the reader to get to know the various characters.

The use of the third person is appropriate for this kind of novel. It allows the author to provide details on background, scenery and other information that is useful to the reader. This gives the reader a more complete picture of what is happening, something the reader would not have if the first person point of view was used. Then the knowledge of the reader would be confined to the knowledge of the storyteller. The point of view of the third person is the best choice for this kind of novel.

## Setting

The novel opens in London where Harriet and Peter both live. Harriet lives in an area of London known as Mechlenburg Square. She returns to London on and off throughout the book and there are scenes in clubs, restaurants and theaters when she goes out. There are also scenes in her apartment.

There are also some scenes in Rome where Lord Peter Wimsey is working. He is staying at a hotel there.

Most of the setting for the novel is in and around Oxford University. Harriet had attended Shrewsbury College and returns for a reunion, Saint-George attends St. Aldate College, and Harriet has dinner with a friend at Somerville College, so there are scenes in all of these places. There are also a variety of scenes in various other campus locations. The New Library is the site of vandalism the night before its dedication. The same is true of the science room. Harriet stays in the Guest Room in the Tudor building and there are scenes in her room as well as in the rooms of other students and faculty. Meals are taken in the Hall and most students and faculty gather in the Senior Common Room. This is also where many meetings are held. There are also scenes in the cathedral as well as the chapel. There are also many scenes on the quads which are grassy park-like areas on the campus as well as in the Fellows Gardens and at the Magdalen Bridge. There are also scenes in the town, on the London River and in the English countryside.

## Language and Meaning

Most of the language of the novel is everyday English. It is easy to read and is fast reading for the reader, with plenty of dialogue to allow for the views and opinions of the





various characters. Most of the prose sections of the novel are in simple English with no hidden meanings, which helps the speed of reading for the reader. However, there are many quotes from sonnets and other forms of literature. Each chapter opens with a quote. There are also lines of Latin and French in the book, most of which are not translated. These do not slow the reader down unless the reader dwells on them and tries to translate them. They also do not detract from the action of the novel. Overall, the language of the novel makes reading the novel relatively effortless.

## Structure

The novel is structured into twenty-three chapters. The chapters are not titled except with Roman numerals. Each chapter has a quote under the Roman numeral that is in some way related to the action of the chapter.

There is no Table of Contents, Preface or Foreword. There is an Author's Note in which the author explains how the characters and Shrewsbury College are fictional and not based on real characters at Oxford University.

The simple structure works well for the novel as it adds to the speed of reading the novel. It allows the reader to concentrate on the action of the novel and thus it is appropriate for the book.



## Quotes

If only one could come back to this quiet place, where only intellectual achievement counted; if one could work here steadily and obscurely at some close-knit piece of reasoning, undistracted and uncorrupted by agents, contracts, publishers, blurb-writers, interviewers, fan-mail, autograph-hunters, notoriety-hunters, and competitors; abolishing personal contracts, personal spites, personal jealousies; getting one's teeth into something dull and durable; maturing into solidity like the Shrewsbury beeches—then, one might be able to forget the wreck and chaos of the past, or see it, at any rate in truer proportion. (Chapter 1, pp. 17-18)

True; but Harriet was offered the opportunity of marrying into a job as near her own as made no great difference. And into money enough to make any job supererogatory. Again she saw herself unfairly provided with advantages which more deserving people desired in vain. (Chapter 3, p. 49)

"I feel I am in a very awkward position," said Harriet. "I am willing to give any help I can; but you do realize, don't you, that this kind of inquiry is apt to take a long time, especially if the investigator has to tackle it single-handed. A place like this, where people run in and out everywhere at all hours, is almost impossible to police or patrol efficiently. It would need quite a little squad of inquiry agents—and even if you disguised them as scouts or students a good deal of awkwardness might arise." (Chapter 5, pp. 93-94)

"Thank you. Well, then, Warden; if you feel it is impossible to call in outside help, I suggest that I should stay in College for a week or so, ostensibly to help Miss Lydgate with her book and to do some research on my own account in Bodley. I could then make a few more investigations. If nothing decisive results by the end of the term, I really think the question of engaging professionals will have to be faced." (Chapter 6, p. 132)

It was so abundantly clear that Miss Flaxman did not want Harriet, that Mr. Farringdon did not want Mr. Pomfret, and that Mr. Pomfret did not want to go, that she felt the novelist's malicious enjoyment in a foolish situation. Since none of the party could now very well get out of the situation without open rudeness, the invitation was eventually accepted. Mr. Pomfret stepped into the street to join Mr. Farringdon; Miss Flaxman could scarcely get out of accompanying Miss Vane back through the quadrangle. (Chapter 8, pp. 166-167)

"Well, that's what I mean. You expend the trouble and you don't make any mistakes—and then you experience the ecstasy. But if there's any subject in which you're content with the second-rate, then it isn't really your subject." (Chapter 9, p. 190)

The Warden addressed the College after Chapel, again enjoining discretion, begging the culprit to come forward, and promising that all possible measures should be taken to identify her in case she did not confess." (Chapter 10, p. 213)



She had taken it for granted that she could never again attract any man's fancy, except the eccentric fancy of Peter Wimsey. And to him she was, of course, only the creature of his making and the mirror of his own magnanimity." (Chapter 12, p. 270)

"There will be a next time," said Harriet. "And it may not be suicide; it may be open murder. I told you at the beginning that I did not think the measures adequate. I now say that I refuse to take any further share in the responsibility. I have tried, and I have failed, every time." (Chapter 13, p. 284)

"Peter. I seem to be behaving very stupidly. But the reason why I want to—to get clear of people and feelings and go back to the intellectual side is that that is the only side of life I haven't betrayed and made a mess of." (Chapter 15, p. 324)

"That will be nice. Like the lovers in that Strohheim film, we'll go and sit on the sewer." She could feel his bone and muscle, reassuringly human, under the fine broadcloth. She thought: "He and I belong to the same world, and all these others are the aliens." And then: "Damn it all! this is our private fight—why should they have to join in? But that was absurd. (Chapter 17, p. 365)

Harriet asked herself what all this was about. Oddly enough, it had never yet occurred to her to wonder what other women made of Peter, or he of them. This must argue either very great confidence or very great indifference on her own part; for, when one came to think of it, eligibility was his middle name. (Chapter 18, p. 405)

"It's the only thing you've ever let me give you."

"Except my life—except my life—except my life."

"Damn!" said Peter, and stared out angrily over the windscreen. "It must have been a pretty bitter gift, if you can't let either of us forget it." (Chapter 19, p. 417)

She wondered whether her lover had seen it like that, through the hot unhappy years when she had tried to believe that there was happiness in surrender. Poor Philip—tormented by his own vanities, never loving her till he had killed her feeling for him, yet perilously clutching her as he went down in to the slough of death. (Chapter 21, p. 457)

"I have been afraid," he said, simply; "because I knew that from anything you said to me here, there could be no going back ... But I will ask you now, and if you say No, I promise you that this time I will accept your answer. Harriet; you know that I love you: will you marry me?" (Chapter 23, p. 500)



## Topics for Discussion

Explain what a Gaudy is? Why had Harriet not attended any in the years since she left Shrewsbury College?

What problem is Harriet asked to help Shrewsbury College with? Why do they not want to call in the authorities?

Why does Harriet not want to marry Peter Whimsey? Why does she not just break it off with him?

What incident prompts Harriet to tell the College that they must bring in experts to deal with the problem? How do they react?

Why does Lord Wimsey appear at Oxford? How does he know that Harriet was seeing a student and rejected him? What does Harriet say?

Why does Peter conclude that Harriet is in danger, along with Miss de Vine? In what way does Harriet follow Peter's advice?

At the end of the novel when Peter asks Harriet to marry him, she does not say no. What happens that causes them both to re-evaluate their relationship?