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Abstract

Finds parallels in the life of Lord Peter Wimsey (as delineated in Sayers's novels) to the shamanistic journey. In particular, Lord Peter's war experiences have made him a type of Wounded Healer.

Additional Keywords

Sayers, Dorothy L.—Characters—Peter Wimsey; Shamanism—Relation to Peter Wimsey; World War I in Dorothy L. Sayers; Wounded Healer—Relation to Peter Wimsey

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"All Nerves and Nose"

Lord Peter Wimsey as Wounded Healer in the Novels of Dorothy L. Sayers
Nancy-Lou Patterson

Dorothy L. Sayers' first detective novel, *Whose Body?* (1923), opens with the words, "Oh, damn!" spoken by Lord Peter Wimsey. The jauntiness, affection, and whimsicality of his personality dominate the first half of the novel, but in Chapter VIII, Lord Peter awakens his valet Bunter "in the small hours" with a "hoarse whisper": he raves, "Listen! Oh, my God! I can't hear -- I can't hear anything for the noise of the guns. Can't they stop the guns?" (WB, 199) Bunter responds, "It's all right, Major," and gradually restores his dreaming master to normal sleep. For those who first read the novel within five years of the war's end, this striking scene was a touch of sharp realism in a work which is otherwise relatively light in tone despite its macabre subject matter. But there is more to this motif than realism.

I would suggest that the key to Lord Peter's detective career is his burial alive and rescue in World War I. He has returned, as it were, from the dead. After a period of complete breakdown, he finds a way of recovery through detective investigation. This factor is introduced in *Whose Body?*, and in nearly every other of the eleven novels in which he appears, a central or major clue is revealed in a scene in which his special *bona fides* as a "wounded healer," one familiar with death, is invoked.

The phrase "wounded healer" is borrowed from the language of shamanism, the oldest of human religious systems. Its structure is deeply rooted in the human psyche: through the many phases and variations of religious history its permutations continue to express themselves, not least in Christianity. The concept of the "suffering servant," enshrined in *Isaiah* 53, is understood by Christians as an Old Testament prefiguration of the role of Christ as one whose sufferings enable the healing of others. When Lord Peter, as an *alter Christus*, becomes an agent of justice, he does so in an exchange of pain with both sinned-against and sinning.

Joan Halifax describes "the inner journey shamans take during a life crisis and the ways in which they order the chaos and confusion of the voyage into Cosmos."² Like the "great detectives," shamans have power through a knowledge deeper and higher than that of other people. This knowledge is awakened in a series of stages. First, "the call to power necessitates a separation from the mundane world." (Halifax, 6) In the case of Lord Peter, this separation takes him from aristocratic England to the muddy trenches of France.

Lord Peter has made "the descent to the Realm of Death;" he has undergone the requisite "trial by fire," -- gunfire -- and he has been submitted to the "assimilation by the elemental forces," (Halifax,

7) specifically, to burial alive in the earth. There is a sexual element in this downward way, a "sacred marriage with the untamed spirit of the opposite sex." This marriage sequence begins for Lord Peter with the moment when he conceives an instant attraction for a girl who is accused of murder -- Harriet Vane -- in the novel *Strong Poison* (1930), and ends with their marriage in the final novel, *Busman's Honeymoon* (1937). The theme of Lord Peter's shell-shock experience is gradually woven together with this developing love during intervening novels, and in the concluding novel, the final healing of Lord Peter himself is experienced in Harriet's arms.

In the "sacred way of the wounded healer" which Lord Peter follows, "the map of the hidden cosmos is revealed. The paths to and from the realm of death are repeatedly transversed." (Halifax, 16) In particular, "It is through dreams and visions that the purely sacred is often attained." (Ibid.) Both the first novel, *Whose Body?*, and the last novel, *Busman's Honeymoon*, contain significant dreams. In the latter, Harriet greets her husband as they waken in their honeymoon cottage: "Peter, what were you dreaming about early this morning? It sounded pretty awful,"³ and he replies, "Fifteen of us, marching across a prickly desert, and we were all chained together... I saw the bones of my own feet, and they were black, because we had been hanged in chains a long time ago." (BH, 364) He explains: "It was only the old responsibility dream."

The specific contents of this dream are directly related to vital clues in the solution of the murder, specifically the "prickly desert," and the chain that binds the marchers. But Miss Sayers links the broader imagery to the state of spiritual as well as physical death. For Lord Peter, it was the responsibility which broke him during the war. The Dowager Duchess explains it to Harriet: "He doesn't like responsibility, you know," she says, "and the War and one thing and another was bad for people that way... I suppose if you've been giving orders for nearly four years to people to go and get blown to pieces it gives you a -- what does one call it nowadays? -- an inhibition." (BH, 426-27) But it has been his detective work, with all its inherent responsibility, which has healed him. His uncle's biographical account of him says that he is "all nerves and nose," and this exactly sums him up: "nerves" is the most common term used in the novels for Lord Peter's condition, and his "nose," poked curiously into so many hidden places, forms the cutting edge, as it were, of his detectival procedure.

Joan Halifax explains: "The psyche that is emotionally saturated organizes itself by means of mythological conceptions that form an explanatory



system which gives significance and direction to human suffering." (Halifax, 19) In the shamanic sphere the mythological conceptions are expressed in the shaman's downward paths, embodying the immanent and the transcendent ways. There are two examples of the downward path in the novels. Most obvious is the experience in France, recalled in *Gaudy Night* (1934) when Lord Peter meets the door-keeper of Harriet's Oxford college, who unexpectedly greets him: "Good night, Major Wimsey, sir!" Peter replies, "Last time I saw you, I was being carried away on a stretcher." "That's right, sir," Padgett agrees: "I 'ad the pleasure of 'elping to dig you out." Peter answers ruefully, "Unpleasant sensation, being buried alive."

This experience is reiterated in *Clouds of Witness* (1926) as Lord Peter scours heaven and hell —overworld and underworld — to save his brother from the gallows. As Lord Peter and Bunter walk across the moors, a fog comes up: "How long the nightmare lasted neither of them could have said."⁵ The relationship of this sequence to their war experiences is made clear by the shriek of a horse: "They remembered having heard horses scream like that. There had been a burning stable near Poperinghe —," and at this moment, Peter stumbles into a bog. Bunter saves his master from this plight with the help of farmer Grimethorpe: "To Lord Peter the memory of his entry that night into the farmhouse at Grider's Hole always brought with it a sensation of nightmare." Nightmare again, you see. In the morning, Peter arises and finds the detectival clue — in that very bedroom — which will save his brother's life.

The shaman's upward path, which leads to the heavens, is also followed by Lord Peter in *Clouds of Witness*. In shamanic tradition, this can take two forms: flight, symbolized by association with birds, and climbing the cosmic tree, which is the analogue of the vertical structure of the cosmos. It is flight which figures powerfully in the concluding chapters of *Clouds of Witness*: the "bird" is an airplane, in which Lord Peter and an intrepid aviator cross the Atlantic with a final piece of evidence, a year before such a trip was actually taken for the first time by Charles Lindburgh.

The motif of the shamanic ascent is given its most forceful expression in *The Nine Tailors* (1934) when at the climactic moment of the novel, Lord Peter climbs the bell tower of Fenchurch St. Paul, to receive his terrible revelation of how the victim in the novel met his death. Peter exits the bell chamber "Staggering, feeling as though his bones had been turned to water, and with blood running from his nose and ears,"⁶ and "as he flung the door to behind him, the demonic clamour sank back into the pit." Bones, blood, demons, the pit: this is the very constellation of shamanic imagery of the initiatory ordeal. Lord Peter's agony is not gratuitous: as a bell-ringer, he himself has been an unknowing agent of death. The note of responsibility, sounded again and again in the novels, emerges here with all its ironic implications.

One can follow the responsibility motif

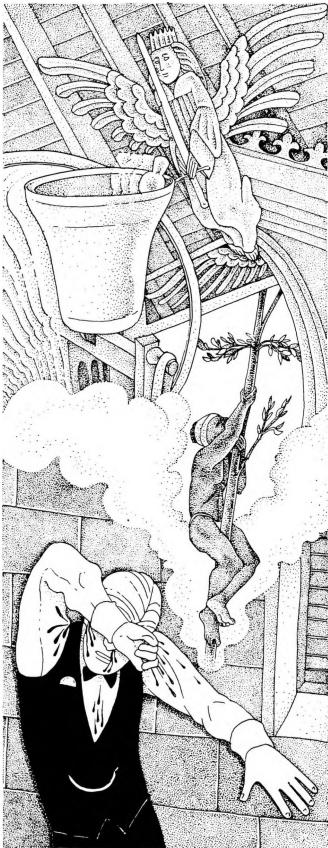
throughout the series; it becomes a central feature in the third novel, *Unnatural Death* (1927). Here, Peter is looking for his detective assistant, Miss Alexandra Climpson, and his search brings him to her parish church, St. Onesimus. Seated with the rector, Mr. Tredgold, in the churchyard, on a recumbent slab which covers a dead body, Lord Peter asks about the culpability of a murderer who has given "a little push off, so to speak" to a dying woman. Mr. Tredgold, who like all Miss Sayers' clergy is fit to tread golden streets of Heaven, replies that "Sin is in the intention, not the deed."

Peter's deeper concern now emerges -- there has been a second murder because he has pursued the murderer for the first, but Mr. Tredgold advises him to "Leave the consequences to God. And try to think charitably, even of wicked people." The rector "watched him as he trotted away among the graves. 'Dear, dear,' he said, 'how nice they are... And much more nervous and sensitive than people think.' The graves with their hint of death and burial are combined with a recognition of Lord Peter's nerves. We learn later that Miss Climpson, as Lord Peter's surrogate, has in fact received a revelation of the murderer's identity on her visit to St. Onesimus Church. Curiously, in the light of Joan Halifax's statement that the shamanic "journey's mythic end is the sun," (Halifax, 24) *Unnatural Death* concludes with an eclipse of the sun. Lord Peter's distress has not yet been erased; that awaits the moment of sunrise with which the final novel, *Busman's Honeymoon*, concludes.

Lord Peter continues to suffer remorse for the events in *Unnatural Death* in *Gaudy Night*, when, chatting about his investigations in the common room of Shrewsbury College, he speaks about "my own victims," those killed by the murderer he had pursued in the previous case. (UD, 355) Later in the same conversation, Miss de Vine tells a story of one of her own "victims" of interference, thus revealing an essential clue to the mystery of the College's Poison Pen. The common theme of these conversations is the nightmare of responsibility, the dark side of Lord Peter's self-cure through detective investigation.

As Paul Delagardie is made to say in his biographical note: "You cannot get murderers hanged for your private entertainment. Peter's intellect pulled him one way and his nerves another, till I began to be afraid they would pull him to pieces. At the end of every case we had the old nightmares and shell-shock over again." The fourth novel, which follows *Unnatural Death* in the series, is the *Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* (1928). Here shell-shock arises from reiterated motif to central theme, embodied in Captain George Fentiman.

The first chapter of this novel closes with the discovery of the dead body of George Fentiman's ninety-year-old grandfather, lying in repose before the fire-place. In a grotesque response to this event, George is led out screaming, "We're all dead and we never noticed it!" In contrast with the



shock of the elderly club members, "The younger men felt no sense of outrage; they knew too much."⁸ Eventually, George suffers a major breakdown; he wanders away from home, enters a police station, and gives himself up as the murderer. The police surgeon sums it up: "Nervous shock with well-marked delusions." (UBC, 272) At this moment the central clue to the real murderer is revealed.

With the next Wimsey novel, *Strong Poison* (1930), a new element is introduced: Harriet Vane. Lord Peter's distress now becomes focussed on her. He loves her because, under threat of death herself, she alone can understand him -- if only she will. But of course his importunate proposal of marriage, made in the prison interview room, thrusts her away; she cannot accept him under these circumstances.

In his investigation of the case, the word "nightmare" signals his distress: he "was accustomed to say, when he was an old man and more talkative even than usual, that the recollection of that Christmas at Duke's Denver had haunted him in nightmares, every night regularly, for the following twenty years."⁹ The Christmas at Denver is thus, not unexpectedly, an occasion for the revelation of an important clue. The novel concludes, after a sleepless night of meditation by Wimsey, with, first, the rising of the sun -- "the reluctant winter dawn struggled wanly over the piled roofs of London," second, the solution to the murder.

In the six novels which follow this pivotal book, the shell-shock motif is increasingly interwoven with the love theme. The process begins with a diffusion of affect, in which the symbolic elements are displaced or projected to other characters. In *The Five Red Herrings* (1931), the various elements -- military memories, shock, and "Nerves,"¹⁰ as well as an apology to the accused, are present, but only the last of these is experienced by Lord Peter.

The primary investigator in *Have His Carcase* (1932) is Harriet, who has also gone on holiday -- a "solitary walking-tour,"¹¹ where on "a solitary rock" she discovers a solitary corpse. After reporting it, she checks into a resort hotel, where she is surprised to encounter Lord Peter when she descends to the dining room for breakfast. In the next to the last chapter there is a striking reference to Lord Peter's war: "Ever seen a horse that has suddenly had fresh blood splashed all over it? Not pretty. Definitely not."¹² This reminiscence immediately precedes a vital revelation about the murder victim.

Lord Peter is on his own again in *Murder Must Advertise* (1933), fulfilling the shaman's role as shape-shifter in three disguises: he assumes the role of Mr. Death Bredon, a mild-mannered copywriter, the role of his own fictitious cousin, a dangerous dope-dealer, and the role -- most appropriately -- of Harlequin. Miss Sayers writes, "From this abominable impersonation he could not now free himself, since at the sound of his name or the sight of his unmasked face, all the doors in that other dream-city -- the City of dreadful night

--would be closed to him."¹³ As might be expected, there is a clue in this hell: "One other piece of information Dian had indeed given him, but at that moment he could not interpret it."

By contrast, in *Gaudy Night* Harriet is very much the central figure. She is invited to her Oxford college to investigate an escalating series of incidents, and this time, Lord Peter having learned his lesson, she goes alone. Finally, well into the novel, she looks up and there he is. The themes of love and death now come together, and as the novel concludes, they are engaged. Finally, in *Busman's Honeymoon*, they are married. When the "detective interruptions" are concluded, they drive to Lord Peter's ancestral home, where the dowager duchess describes in detail the course of his original breakdown.

The novel concludes with the night before the execution of the murderer. Lord Peter has been out driving, and then sitting in the kitchen, shivering, while Harriet waits to see if he will come to her of his own accord. He finds his peace at last, while "Through the eastern side of the casement, the sky grew pale with the forerunners of dawn." (BH, 445) In an echo of his first words in the first novel, "Quite suddenly, he said, 'Oh, damn!' and began to cry -- ... so she held him, crouched at her knees, against her breast." (BH, 446) Thus these two familiars of death find healing in one another's arms.

Notes

1. Dorothy L. Sayers, *Whose Body?* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1976), p. 17. Hereafter WB.
2. Joan Halifax, *Shaman: The Wounded Healer* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981), p. 5.
3. Dorothy L. Sayers, *Busman's Honeymoon* (Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1976), p. 363. Hereafter BH.
4. Dorothy L. Sayers, *Gaudy Night* (Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1976), p. 370.
5. Dorothy L. Sayers, *Clouds of Witness* (Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1974), p. 224.
6. Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Nine Tailors* (Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1975), p. 343.
7. Dorothy L. Sayers, *Unnatural Death* (Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1976), pp. 229-30. Hereafter UD.
8. Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* (Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1977), p. 20. Hereafter UBC.
9. Dorothy L. Sayers, *Strong Poison* (Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1977), p. 146. Advancing age is a central motif in this novel: see my "Changing, Fearfully Changing," *University of Waterloo Courier* (September 1985), pp. 11-17.
10. Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Five Red Herrings* (Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1974), p. 256.
11. Dorothy L. Sayers, *Have His Carcase* (Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1976), p. 7.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 437. See Philip L. Scowcroft, "Wimsey's War," *Sidelights on Sayers* (Witham, Essex, England: The Dorothy L. Sayers Historical and Literary Society, 1981), for a discussion of Lord Peter's war.
13. Dorothy L. Sayers, *Murder Must Advertise* (Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1975), p. 188.