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### Abstract

Sayers, like Lewis, used the vehicle of genre fiction to explore something rarely explored in modern fiction: “marriage as a human relationship which has a potential for good, for human growth, individuation, mutuality, and love.” The fulfillment of the potential in the marriage of Peter Wimsey and Harriet Vane is explored in detail.

### Additional Keywords

Lewis, C.S. *That Hideous Strength*; Marriage in C.S. Lewis; Marriage in Dorothy L. Sayers; Sayers, Dorothy L. *Busman’s Honeymoon*; Sayers, Dorothy L. *Gaudy Night*; Annette Harper

# THE REPOSE OF VERY DELICATE BALANCE

## POSTULANTS AND CELEBRANTS OF THE SACRAMENT OF MARRIAGE IN THE DETECTIVE FICTION OF DOROTHY L. SAYERS

BY WILLIAM R. EPPERSON

Walker Percy, in his essay "The Loss of the Creature,"<sup>1</sup> persuades us of the difficulty of truly seeing that which has been dulled to our senses by a preformed "symbolic complex." The Grand Canyon, in his example, exists so strongly as a mental image created by the visualizations of travel bureau folders, post cards, panoramic posters, and our neighbors' descriptions, that it is nearly impossible for us any longer to experience freshly, to encounter, the Canyon as the phenomenon which would form, rather than be formed by, our category of the *awesome*.

Percy suggests various strategies by which we might recover our "sovereignty" over the creatures of our perception, ways of siding up to what has been made common, what has been reduced to cliches for beauty or grandeur, trapping it in a new, uncommon perspective, so that we might recover our sight, our wonder at the flow of phenomena.

The subject of marriage is quite different from Percy's example of the Grand Canyon, but that we have been similarly robbed of our seeing it as it is, or can be, is clear. Marriage is so common, so well known, that it is no longer known at all. Sociological, psychological, and biological studies have illuminated parts of what marriage contains, but mimetic, fictional portrayals which attempt to sum the parts, to show the whole, of this dynamic relationship are rare. The disintegration of the relationship is normally viewed as a more interesting dramatic process, and thus has received more attention in modern fiction.

C. S. Lewis and Dorothy L. Sayers each, in rather contrasting images, indicating differing values, evidenced a belief that the existence and growth of a good is in fact inherently more interesting than disintegration of the same. Their Christian faith reinforces this tendency toward affirmation, and they, in their fiction, portray marriage as a human relationship which has a potential for good, for human growth, individuation, mutuality, and love. But, as Percy's visitors to the Grand Canyon must invent new ways to encounter it, Lewis and Sayers, as authors, must employ strategies by which readers may be surprised into perceiving the values possible within marriage. Strategies, therefore, we have. Lewis glides into insights on marriage, and on much else, by way of science fiction; and Sayers relies on the worn, but never rusty, vehicle of the English detective story: a ruse of murder to cover some highly sensible notions about what she, in her final mystery novel, really wants to talk about -- the good marriage.

Lewis and Sayers each present fictional situations by which their characters proceed through educative stages, advancing from postulants to celebrants of marriage. The notion of a hierarchy of being, including a hierarchy of roles

played by the masculine and feminine within a fundamental human equality, is emphasized far more by Lewis than by Sayers. These authors agree, however, on the principal aims of marriage, aims which are stated explicitly by Lewis, particularly in some of the more didactic passages of *Perelandra* and *That Hideous Strength*. The mystical unities sought with God and with one's mate must proceed from a sense of selfness and lead toward an even greater individuation. Without this growth, love becomes possession, the relationship parasitical, the self poisoned. A prototype of unfallen woman, the Green Lady of Perelandra, is in the process of such growth:

Certainly it must be part of the Divine plan that this happy creature should mature, should become more and more a creature of free choice, should become, in a sense, more distinct from God and from her husband in order thereby to be at one with them in a richer fashion.<sup>2</sup>

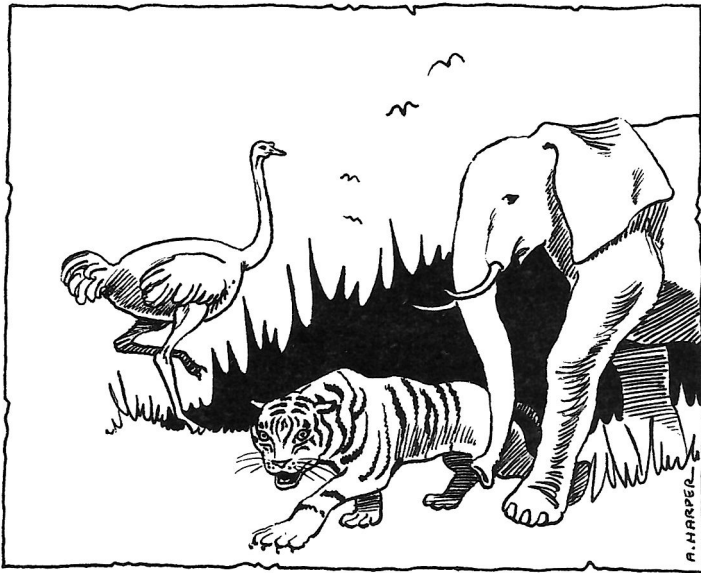
One problem of the marriage of Mark and Jane Studdock, in *That Hideous Strength*, is that Jane had never entered the Divine-human encounter which would deepen her sense of selfness:

The name *me* was the name of a being whose existence she had never suspected, a being that did not yet fully exist but which was demanded. It was a person (not the person she had thought), yet also a thing, a made thing, made to please Another and in Him to please all others, a thing being made at this very moment.<sup>3</sup>

That Mark had exploited her is thus understandable. His own learning to reverence her as "other" rather than as an object conformable to his pleasure is a major step in transforming their relationship from an unsatisfying juxtaposing of isolated individuals to a union promising joy in and reverence of each other.

Learning obedience and humility, Mark and Jane take their places in the hierarchy of roles played by their incarnations of the masculine and the feminine principles, their marriage becomes a part of the great dance of creation. *That Hideous Strength* ends with Mark and Jane being separately prepared to join the orgy of innocence restored, where, as in Milton's Eden, elephants and smaller beasts gambol to the delight of the human lovers, all to the delight of the heavenly Lover.

*Busman's Honeymoon*,<sup>4</sup> the last of the Peter Wimsey novels written by Dorothy L. Sayers, is, as adumbrated by its subtitle, "A Love Story with Detective Interruptions,"



predominately a novel which celebrates the marriage of two highly intelligent and independent persons -- Wimsey and Harriet Vane. The marriage of such a couple was not lightly entered into. Their courtship extended over five and a half years -- between Wimsey's saving Harriet in the novel *Strong Poison* and his formal, Latinate easing her into an acceptance of his proposal of marriage in *Gaudy Night*:

"Placetne, magistra?"

"Placet." 5

Their marriage, as accurately predicted by Miss de Vine in that same novel, would be a "repose of very delicate balance." (*Ibid.*, p. 460) *Busman's Honeymoon* continues the love story, delineating the motions of the balance with Sayers' characteristic subtlety, intelligence, and wit.

Sayers' characters are of quite a different order of sensitivity to one another than are Mark and Jane Studdock. From the beginning of their acquaintance, they have been reluctant to enter a marriage on the basis of the wrong sort of subordination. Harriet Vane owes her life to Wimsey, an advantage he refuses to press as he woos her, and a debt she wisely refuses to repay by matrimony. Their mutual respect is guarantee against emotional prostitution:

"I have been facing one fact for some time," said Harriet, staring out with unseeing eyes into the quad, "and that is, that if I once gave way to Peter, I should go up like straw."

"That," said Miss de Vine, drily, "is moderately obvious. How often has he used that weapon against you?"

"Never," said Harriet, remembering the moments when he might have used it. "Never." (*Ibid.*, p. 459)

Harriet comes close, however, to admitting what Lewis called in *That Hideous Strength*, the "erotic necessity" of some sort of subordination further in this conversation when she says,

"I almost wish he had interfered, instead of being so horribly intelligent. It would be quite a relief to be ridden over rough-shod for a change."

And Miss de Vine answers,

"He will never do that. That's his weakness. He'll never make up your mind for you. You'll have to make your own decisions. You needn't be afraid of losing your independence; he will always force it back on you. If you ever find any kind of repose with him, it can only be the repose of very delicate balance." (*Ibid.*, p. 460)

Miss de Vine concludes that the problem requires Harriet to "bring a scholar's mind to the problem and have done with it," and so, with a scholarly flourish, Sayers prefaces the concluding chapter of *Gaudy Night* with one of Robert Burton's remedies against melancholy -- a form of which has afflicted Wimsey dreadfully since his war experiences -- the remedy, to wit, "that a Lover have his desire." (*Ibid.*, p. 462) Wimsey and Harriet delicately explore their positions with metaphors similar to, yet significantly different from, Lewis' use of music to express the human analogues of Divine Loving. Attending a concert of Bach's *Concerto in D Minor*, Peter finds in the music an escape from what he considers the one sin, joylessness; the music bridges the imposed blocking of their relationship, suggesting that they too can freely enter the personal stream of creative music by providing each other not with harmony, but with counterpoint:

Peter, she felt sure, could hear the whole intricate pattern, every part separately and simultaneously, each independent and equal, separate but inseparable, moving over and under and through, ravishing heart and mind together.

She waited till the last movement had ended and the packed hall was relaxing its attention in applause.

"Peter -- what did you mean when you said that anybody could have the harmony if they would leave us the counterpoint?"

"Why," said he, shaking his head, "that I like my music polyphonic. If you think I meant anything else, you know what I mean."

"Polyphonic music takes a lot of playing. You've got to be more than a fiddler. It needs a musician."

"In this case, two fiddlers -- both musicians."

"I'm not much of a musician, Peter."

"As they used to say in my youth: 'All girls should learn a little music -- enough to play a simple accompaniment.' I admit that Bach isn't a matter of an autocratic virtuoso and a meek accompanist. But do you want to do either?" (*Ibid.*, p. 468)

Mutuality, though not to the exclusion of all hierarchy, will delineate their relationship. When Wimsey poses his crucial question to Harriet again she responds by allowing him to submit to her, revealing Sayers' insight that any hierarchic ordering of human relating must be tempered by the rhythms of the Pauline injunction of "submitting yourselves one to another":

"I promise you that this time I will accept your answer. Harriet; you know that I love you: will you marry me?"

...the shadows of New College walls had swallowed them up before she spoke.

"Tell me one thing, Peter. Will it make you desperately unhappy if I say No?"

"Desperately?...My dear, I will not insult either you or myself with a word like that. I can only tell you that if you will marry me it will give me very great happiness."

She stood still; and he stopped perforce and turned towards her. She laid both hands upon the fronts of his gown, looking into his face while she searched for the word that should carry her over the last difficult breach.

It was he who found it for her. With a gesture of submission he bared his head and stood gravely, the square cap dangling in his hand.

"Placetne, magistra?"

"Placet." (*Ibid.*, p. 469)

"It is pleasing." *Gaudy Night* is over; joylessness avoided, joy and eros may be released.

*Busman's Honeymoon*, a book divided into "Prothalamion" and "Epithalamion," opens in the epistolary manner with comments, both astute and obtuse, from acquaintances of the couple. The Countess of Severn writes to the Dowager Duchess of Denver, Peter's mother, that, "Peter wants more than a devoted admirer to hold his hand and recite verses

to him."<sup>6</sup> The Dowager Duchess herself, not surprisingly, takes note of the mutuality displayed by Peter and Harriet as she recalls how they deliberated on the working of the marriage ceremony:

...Helen got up and left the house, leaving P. and Harriet to wrangle over the word "obey." P. said he would consider it a breach of manners to give orders to his wife, and H. said, "Oh, no -- he'd give orders fast enough if the place was on fire or a tree falling down and he wanted her to stand clear. P. said, in that case they ought both to say "obey," but it would be too much jam for the reporters. Left them to fight it out. When I came back, found Peter had consented to be obeyed on condition he might "endow" and now "share" his worldly goods. (*Ibid.*, p. 21)

In their dialogue at the closing of *Gaudy Night*, Harriet and Peter have discarded the false notion of paying in "base coin for a marriage-portion."<sup>7</sup> Harriet's obligation to Peter is no more to be repaid by contract than grace is to be repaid by servitude. Grace given freely confers selfness, and this is what Harriet has, during the extended courtship period, discovered:

"It isn't only that I have found a value for myself. But when I made you the offer, it meant nothing to me -- now it would mean something."

"If you have found your own value," he said, "that is immeasurably the greatest thing... It has taken me a long time to learn my lesson, Harriet. I have had to pull down, brick by brick, the barriers I had built up by my own selfishness and folly. (*Ibid.*, p. 465)

Having made these discoveries, they are now ready to take on the roles required in the interdependence of mutuality. By merit of his loving, Peter takes his place as Harriet's "Lord"; by merit of her supportive love she becomes, in fact as well as title, "Lady":

"What did you call me?"

"My lord!"

"The last two words in the language I ever expected to get a kick out of. One never values a thing till one's earned it, does one? Listen, heart's lady -- before I've done I mean to be king and emperor."<sup>8</sup>

This "Lord and Lady" hierarchy is, in its context, referring explicitly to their sexual relating. The recognition of hierarchy in this situation does not degenerate into a diminishing of freedom and individuality, for both Peter and Harriet continue to help each other in the pursuit of their separate vocations, extending the image of their relating as a "polyphony" rather than a simple "harmony."<sup>9</sup> But the mutual respect demanded from each is put to test as the detective aspect of *Busman's Honeymoon* provides the crisis which evokes Peter's melancholy. Bunter, the faithful servant who initially served to bring healing to Peter, has learned well the "delicate balance" of serving within a hierarchic structure while gracefully receiving the respect and love due him as a person valued as friend and companion -- equally human. As Harriet supersedes, without supplanting totally, Bunter's role, she must extend to Peter the freedom to choose her as his center, the straight leg of the compass which, in Donne's famous metaphor, allows the circle of man's activity to run true.

Peter's vocation demands his attention away from his bride as the evil shade of murder darkens the very house of their honeymoon. Harriet is tempted to possession, the poisonous perversion of eros that could diminish Peter's individuality by denying him his activity as an agent of justice:

"But, Peter -- need you investigate this? It's rather rotten for you."

"No, I needn't. But I expect I shall. Murders

go to my head like drink. I simply can't keep off them."

"Not even now? They can't expect you, surely! You've got a right to your own life sometimes. And it's such a beastly little crime -- sordid and horrible."

The dialogue proceeds toward a resolution by which each resolves to support the other in combating the evil:

"I can't eat lotos, even with you," he said, pathetically, "with murdered bodies popping up all over the place."

"You shan't, angel, you shan't. Have a nice mouthful of prickly cactus instead. And don't pay any attention to my imbecile efforts to strew your path with rose-leaves. It won't be the first time we've followed the footprints together. Only" -- she faltered a moment, as another devastating matrimonial possibility loomed up like a nightmare -- "whatever you do, you'll let me take a hand, won't you?"

To her relief, he laughed.

"All right, domina. I promise you that. Cactus for both or neither, and no lotos till we can share it." (*Ibid.*, pp. 122-23)

At a later stage of this same conflict, Harriet again helps Peter choose to fulfill his vocation, solidifying the fact that their mutuality will not admit of coercion:

"Say the word, and we'll go right away. We'll leave this miserable business and never meddle again."

"Do you really mean that?" she said, incredulously.

"Of course I mean it. I have said it."

His voice was the voice of a beaten man. She was appalled, seeing what she had done.

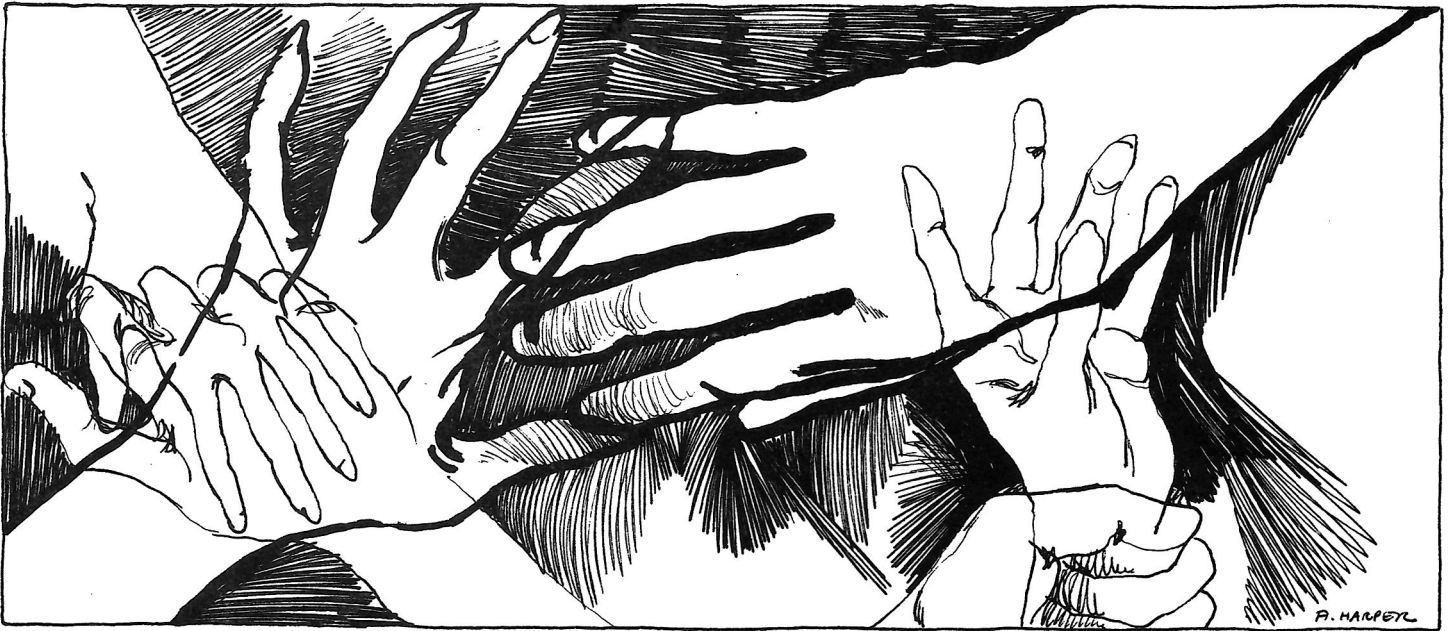
"Peter, you're mad. Never dare to suggest such a thing. Whatever marriage is, it isn't that."

"Isn't what, Harriet?"

"Letting your affection corrupt your judgment. What kind of life could we have if I knew that you had become less than yourself by marrying me?" (*Ibid.*, p. 291)

Recognizing the importance of their mutual freedom, Peter exorcises "possession" from their relationship:





"Listen dear -- for God's sake let's take that word 'possess' and put a brick round its neck and drown it. I will not use it or hear it used -- not even in the crudest physical sense. It's meaningless. We can't possess one another. We can only give and hazard all we have." (*Ibid.*, p. 306)

Having passed these tests, the greater crisis comes when Harriet releases Peter to the furies of his mind as the murderer, the villain of the "detective interruptions," is convicted and sentenced to a speedy execution. Peter has retreated into himself, and joylessness encroaches upon their loving. "Impersonal passion" antithetical to the union of marriage, would serve Peter's disease, and Harriet realizes that "in his present mood...almost any woman would have done." (*Ibid.*, p. 372)

Immediately before the execution, Peter admits his fatigue, his weakness, to Harriet: "It was the first crack in the defenses." (*Ibid.*, p. 374) It may also be an indication of his healing, for the Dowager Duchess has told Harriet that if Peter tells of his breakdown after the war, "then you'll know he's cured." (*Ibid.*, p. 363)

With what is described as a "perfect understanding," the faithful retainer, Bunter, and the Lady, Harriet, allow Peter an awful freedom, the choice of continuing to be haunted by his obsessive melancholy or to find release within the protection of love. Unconstrained, Peter returns from his dark night flight with Bunter to accept from his wife the walled garden of sacramental love:

He stood holding out his hands mechanically to the fire till he could control the chattering of his teeth.

"It's damnable for you, too. I'm sorry. I'd forgotten. That sounds idiotic. But I've always been alone."

"Yes, of course, I'm like that, too. I like to crawl away and hide in a corner."

"Well," he said, with a transitory gleam of himself, "you're my corner and I've come to hide."

"Yes, my dearest."

(*And the trumpets sounded for her on the other side.*) (*Ibid.*, p. 378)

The trumpets signal victory. Polyphony has triumphed in this marriage wherein equals submit to each other in offering the graces of love, respect, freedom. Like Lewis' characters Mark and Jane Studdock, Sayers' lovers progress from postulants to celebrants of the sacrament of marriage. Persons grow in reverence of one another, and the cosmic dance, responding to the rhythms of Divine love, continues through the realm of the human.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>This essay appears as chapter 2 of *The Message in the Bottle* (New York, 1976), see pp. 46-51.

<sup>2</sup>C. S. Lewis, *Perelandra* (New York, 1964), p. 133.

<sup>3</sup>C. S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength* (New York, 1965), p. 319.

<sup>4</sup>Dorothy L. Sayers, *Busman's Honeymoon* (New York, 1937).

<sup>5</sup>Dorothy L. Sayers, *Gaudy Night* (New York, 1936), p. 469.

<sup>6</sup>*Busman's Honeymoon*, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup>*Gaudy Night*, p. 464.

<sup>8</sup>*Busman's Honeymoon*, p. 62.

<sup>9</sup>see "Talboys," in *Lord Peter: A Collection of all the Lord Peter Wimsey Stories*, compiled by James Sandoe (New York, 1972), pp. 431-453. Note that Lewis also indicates that the "erotic necessity of obedience" is to be a demand of the "roles" played out in the realm of Eros:

The man does play the Sky-Father and the women the Earth-Mother; he does play Form, and she Matter. But we must give full value to the word *play*.

.....  
 Outside this ritual or drama he and she are too immortal souls, two free-born adults, two citizens. We should be much mistaken if we supposed that those marriages where this mastery is most asserted and acknowledged in the act of Venus were those where the husband is most likely to be dominant in the married life as a whole; the reverse is perhaps more probable. But within the tire or drama they become a god and a goddess between whom there is no equality--whose relations are asymmetrical. (*The Four Loves* (New York, 1960), pp. 145-146)

The limiting of this acting out of the celestial hierarchy to the sexual act is not, I think, clearly imaged in *That Hideous Strength*, a book which appeared nearly twenty years previous to *The Four Loves*. Some modification of Lewis' view seems evident.

<sup>10</sup>*Busman's Honeymoon*, pp. 121-122.