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Beneath That Ancient Roof: The House as Symbol in Dorothy L. Sayers' *Busman's Honeymoon*

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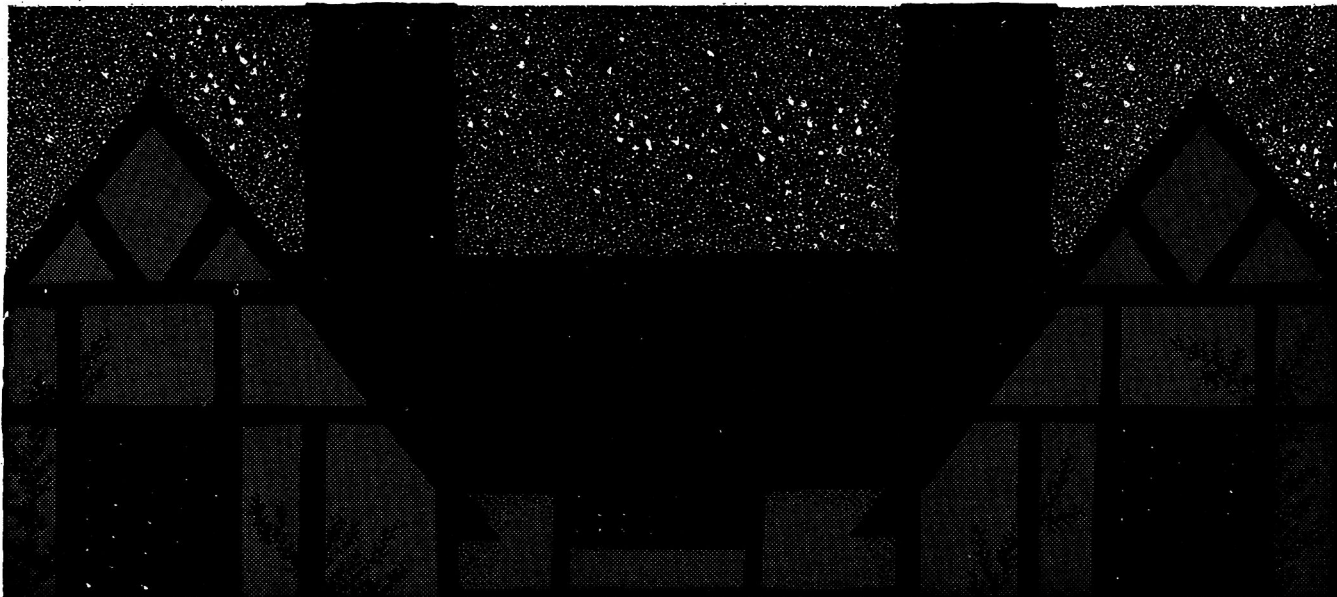


Abstract

Examines the symbolic significance of houses, especially Talboys, the house in which Peter Wimsey and Harriet Vane spend their honeymoon.

Additional Keywords

Houses in Busman's Honeymoon; Sayers, Dorothy L. Busman's Honeymoon—Symbolism; Nancy-Lou Patterson



Beneath That Ancient Roof

The House as Symbol in Dorothy L. Sayers' Busman's Honeymoon

Nancy-Lou Patterson

The New House is almost a major character in my story.

C.S. Lewis, Suprised by Joy¹

Dorothy L. Sayers's last detective novel, Busman's Honeymoon, began as a play of the same name, and was set in the conventional stage interior, with the murder weapon in full view. It is not surprising, then, that the setting--an Elizabethan farmhouse in a country village--figures largely in the novel. But it plays a role more significant than that of mere setting. It is a symbol in its own right, structuring the action and giving a three-dimensional order to the relationships of the major characters.

The novel opens with an epistolary Prothalamion which includes "Extracts from the Diary of Honoria Lucasta, Dowager Duchess of Denver" as she records the preparations for the marriage of her son Lord Peter Wimsey (an amateur detective) and his bride Harriet Deborah Vane (a detective novelist). The Dowager Duchess describes her efforts to prepare a fine eighteenth century house for the couple to use in London. In between mentions of bed-draperies, servants, and chandeliers, we learn of another house:

Harriet, who has been down to the country to look at a water-mill (something to do with her new book), said she had motored back through Herts, and paid a visit to her old home at Great Pagford.²

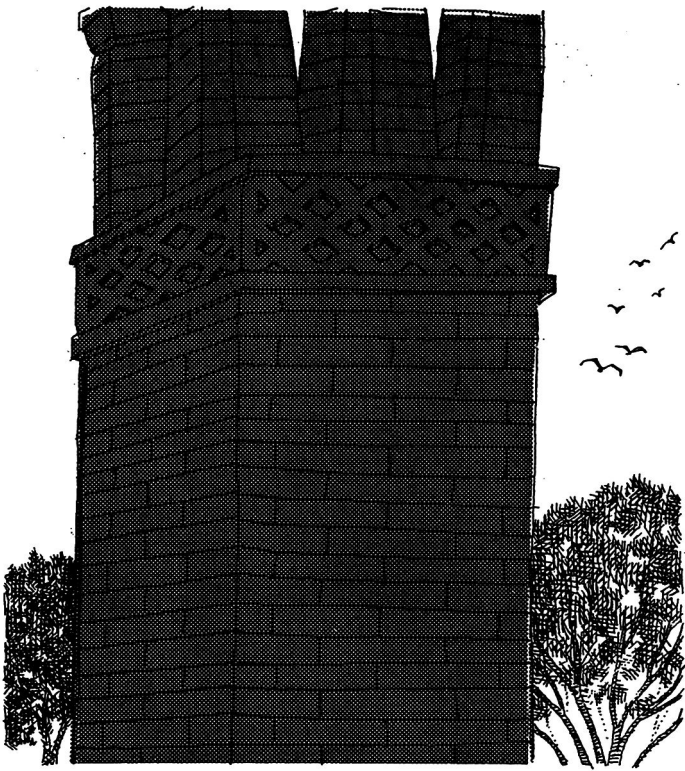
There follows the first mention of Talboys:

H. said her own childish ambition had been to make enough money to buy quaint old farmhouse called Talboys in the next village...Elizabethan, very pretty. (p. 32)

Herts is the abbreviation of Hertfordshire, the easternmost of the "Western Home Counties," and lies to the immediate northwest of Greater London. Needless to say, there is no Great Pagford there. The area has been inhabited for centuries: a horse cut in white chalk in that county dates from the tenth century, and before that the Romans built roads and settlements. Most of the medieval villages were built of "grey or golden-tinted stone."³

Harriet asks Peter to buy the house for her: the Dowager Duchess reports that "she thought Peter 'liked giving people things'" (p. 32) and remarks that Peter will at last be repaid for his "five-and-a-half years' arrears of patience" in waiting for Harriet to forgive him the gift of her life. This passage makes clear the centrality of Talboys as a symbol of Peter and Harriet's relationship.

By August 24, Lord Peter's agent has been instructed to negotiate for Talboys with its present owner, "man called Noakes." (p. 33) By September 20 the price is settled. "Many alterations and repairs needed, but fabric sound." (p. 36) Talboys is to be used for the honeymoon, "nobody to know anything about it," (p. 37) and the furniture will be lent for the use of the honeymooners: "own



roof more suited to English gentleman" (p. 37) than a hotel, as the Dowager Duchess quotes Lord Peter. Valet Bunter's plan to make Talboys ready is aborted when reporters begin to shadow him in hopes of discovering where the honeymoon is to be: "better take Talboys (including drains) on trust." (p. 38) And, the payment made, the house is theirs. The concern with drains is a commonplace in British life: C.S. Lewis wrote of his boyhood home: "the drains were wrong, the chimneys were wrong, and there was a draught in every room." (Lewis, *loc. cit.*)

As a result of the lack of an advance visit, Bunter prepares to depart still "anxious about the arrangements--or lack of them--at Talboys." (p. 44) On the trip to great Pagford Harriet recalls the beginning of her own and Lord Peter's delicate marital negotiations--their talk about "this question of children." (p. 47) Her recollections are interspersed with childhood memories:

This is Great Pagford, where we used to live. Look! that's our old house with the three steps up to the door--there's a doctor there still, you can see the surgery lamp... After two miles you take the right hand turn for Pagford Parva, and then it's another three miles to Pagglesham, and sharp left by a big barn and straight on up the lane. (p. 50)

The progress to Talboys is from larger to smaller--from London to the country. Great Pagford is, as its name suggests, located on an old ford or river crossing: "A town, with a wide stone bridge, and lights reflected in the river." (p. 49) The River (which Lord

Peter calls the Rubicon, suggesting that he, like the conqueror of Rome, is passing within the near limits of his goal) is the River Pagg, perhaps suggesting the Latin word pa-gus, or country (the Pagg is named on p. 246). Great Pagford gives way to Pagford Parva (Pagford minor or lessor). Pagglesham is a hamlet or very small village, there, at last is the house. Though the couple, escorted by Bunter, arrives in darkness, the house is described as Harriet remembers it:

Yes--the house--a huddle of black gables, with two piled chimney-stacks, blotting out the stars. One would open the door and step straight in through the sanded entry into the big kitchen with its wooden settles and its great oak rafters, hung with home-cured hams. Only, Darby and Joan were dead by now...(p. 51)

But in fact, "There was no light in any of the windows at Talboys." (p. 51) The arrival is awkward: Harriet is anxious, and Bunter silently reproachful. There is a gate, there are "flowerbeds, carefully tended and filled with chrysanthemums and dahlias." (p. 52) Nobody answers Lord Peter's "brisk fantasia upon the horn" (p. 52) of his car. Harriet blames herself. "Her idea in the first place. Her house. Her honeymoon. Her--and this was the incalculable factor in the thing--her husband." (p. 52) Idea, house, honeymoon, husband: these are equated in Harriet's mind.

Peter, meanwhile, sensibly reflects his country upbringing by suggesting they try the rear door. In the end, the party is admitted, albeit reluctantly, by Mrs. Ruddle, a neighbor. Noakes, who "Got some kind of squeeze on the old people and put the brokers in" (p. 59) is away, she says. Peter and Harriet drive off to fetch the key from Noakes's niece, whose cottage is described as being "like the uglier kind of doll's house." (p. 60) The London house prepared by the Dowager Duchess has suggested Lord Peter's identity--"My dear lady, Peter is not the Ideal Man; he is an eighteenth-century Whig gentleman, born a little out of his time⁴--and "a very handsome block of flats with sunshine balconies and vita-glass and things" (p. 60) has pictured the urban side of his life. In the same way, Agnes Twitterton's ugly little house announces her even before she appears in person.

With the key in hand, the newlyweds return to Talboys and, with Bunter lighting the way with an electric torch:

The party entered into a wide stone passage strongly permeated by an odour of dry-rot and beer. On the right, a door led into a vast, low-ceilinged, stone-paved kitchen, its rafters black with time...(p. 65)

This unpleasant reality contrasts with Harriet's warm memory, quoted above. The stone entry and the kitchen rafters are seen, and

in a moment "Two ancient oak-settles" (p.66) appear in the sitting-room, moved there, we presume, from their earlier position in the kitchen by the usurping Noakes. A settle is a large high-backed bench which serves to reflect the heat of a fire-place or grate, while protecting the back of a seated person from draughts, which we have seen already to be a problem in British houses. Sayers lingers over the rest of the furniture, which was Noakes's own--"auction-sale bargains"--reflecting his taste and life-style. Among "this collection of bric-a-brac" is "an un-naturally distorted cactus" which is important to the "detective interruptions" of the novel, but not to the "love story."

The house itself, however, is important. Another of its features, mentioned in Harriet's memory description, is its chimneys: these too are a subject of concern in British households. Mrs. Ruddle reports that "these 'here great chimbleys ate up too much of the 'eat.'" (pp. 66-67) Noakes used oil-stoves instead. Two other features are also reported, and we achieve a sense of the lower and upper extent of the house: Mrs. Ruddle says "Bert--jest shet that cellar door as you goes by--sech a perishin' draught as it do send up," (p. 67) and "if your ladyship will come this way...I'll show you the bedrooms." She opens "a door in the panelling" and admonishes, "Mind the stair, m'lady, but there--I'm forgetting' you knows the house." (p. 67)

These chambers are to be made ready for the wedding night: Mrs. Ruddle promises to "jest pop the bed again the fire" (p. 67)--"the sheets is aired beautiful, though linen." (p. 68) Bunter takes a hand as well: he empties and relines drawers, sets out new candles, and, in a beautiful passage that pays homage to his as well as Lord Peter's taste,

He took away Mr. Noakes's chunk of yellow soap, his towels and the ewer, and presently returned with fresh towels and water, a virgin tablet of soap in cellophane, a small kettle and a spirit lamp...(p. 70)

Despite these preparations with their echoes of cleanliness, warmth and light (as well as of virginity and spirit), Harriet notes that "The room, though spacious and beautiful in its half-timbered style, was cold." (p. 70) She hopes "a good roaring fire" will cure the problem.

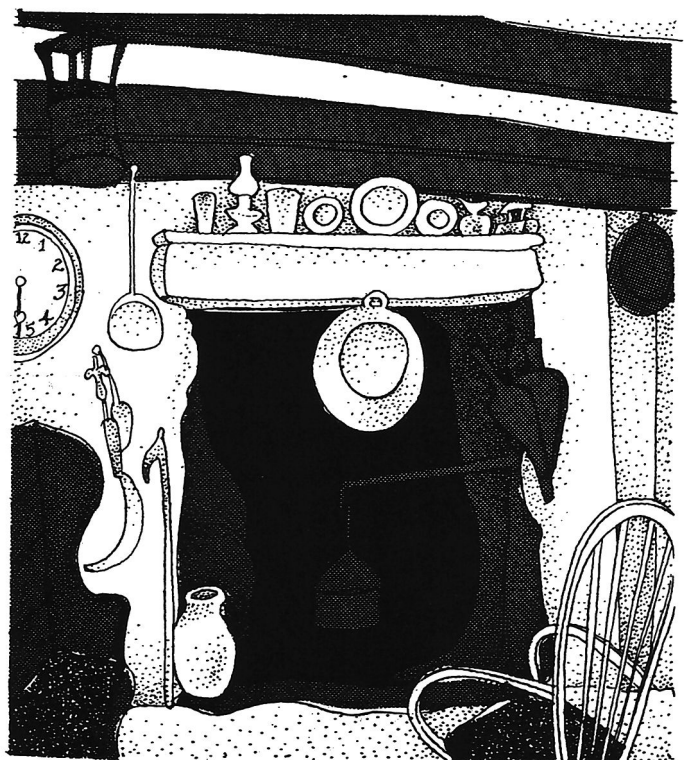
But the chimneys prove to be recalcitrant. When Lord Peter comes in from the woodshed he finds "smoke billowing out into the passage." (p. 71) The chimneys are blocked. Peter, however, is undaunted.

"Send for the sweep to-morrow, Bunter. Heat up some of the turtle soup on the oil-stove and give us the foie gras, the quails in aspic and a bottle of hock in the kitchen." (p. 72)

In the meantime, Harriet has discovered that they are to lie on a goosefeather bed. The reference is to a British folk ballad, but the goosefeather bed functions as a secondary symbol in this novel: The house represents the marriage relationship and the bed is the place of its consummation. Goosefeathers were a feature of medieval rural life.⁵ Bunter adds the additional discovery that the chimney "in her ladyship's room was clear," because "nothing had been burned in it since the days of Queen Elizabeth." (p. 73) The bedroom, then, is directly related to the medieval past, along with lordship and ladyship. In fact, Bunter has "succeeded in kindling upon the hearthstone a small fire of wood" (p. 74)--a new fire for a new marriage. Supper ordered by Lord Peter and prepared by Bunter proceeds in a jolly manner, with Bunter included at the table.

When Harriet enters her room, she finds heated water, "two brass candlesticks which bore their flaming ministers bravely," (p. 75) and the four poster bed with "its patchwork quilt of faded blues and scarlets." (p. 79) The candles increase the sense of a spiritual element in the events: they refer to Psalm 104:4: "who maketh his angels spirits; his ministers a flaming fire." Patchwork, a British custom, makes its earliest appearance in the Levens Hall bedcoverings of Cumberland, England, dated at the beginning of the eighteenth century⁶ "The sheets, worn thin by age, were of fine linen, and somewhere in the room there was a scent of lavender." (p. 80) In this room and in this bed, redolent of traditional comforts and securities, Peter joins his lady.

Bunter's bed is less comfortable: he is wrapped in great-coats and a rug and lies on



"a couple of arm-chairs." (p. 80) He is to be more satisfactorily settled later on: "Mrs. Ruddle had made up a bed for him in one of the back rooms." (p. 227) But on this first night at Talboys, despairing of early sleep, he pens a letter to his mother. The chapter closes with a prophetic sentence: "of the sleepers beneath that ancient roof, he that had the hardest and coldest couch enjoyed the quietest of slumbers." (p. 81) The reader is to discover that Sayers is not referring to the contrast between Bunter, sleeping alone on arm-chairs, and Peter and Harriet on a goosefeather bed in their nuptial embraces, but between all these living occupants and the corpse of Noakes in the cellar, on the "hardest and coldest couch" of a stone floor, whose "quietest slumbers" are those of death.

In these introductory chapters, the house has served to focus the action. The plan to buy it is carried out, and the honeymoon of the novel's title is to take place there. The entranceway of Talboys becomes the entrance of the couple into their wedded state: Harriet, Lord Peter, and Bunter each responding in their own way. The kitchen is presented both a Harriet remembers it from her childhood and as it is at the time of the novel's action. Lord Peter's childhood is represented by his sensible countryfied reactions to the physical problems. The Elizabethan setting presents a background of the stable past, while the oil-stoves and motley furniture provide a foreground of the temporary present. The reference to the cellar door and its perishing draught gives the first hint of the macabre discovery which awaits, and the repeated mentions of the recalcitrant chimneys prepare us for what will prove to be a significant clue. The

murder weapon, is in sight all the time.

The most obvious images of the honeymoon situation, the bedroom and the fourposter goosefeather bed with its chintz hangings and lavender-scented sheets, its candle-fire, warm water, virgin soap (Peter comes to bed freshly washed in cold water--like a school-boy--from the scullery pump) and a fireplace fire of wood, pile sensory signal upon sensory signal of cozy comfort: fragrance, softness, warmth, and delicate light. Here in the height of the house, up a stair, the lovers unite at last, while Bunter reposes on the main floor, where the kitchen and sitting room are located, and the corpse lies in the cellar belowstairs. The three-level structure of the house relates to the old three-story universe: the day-to-day affairs of middle-earth occur on the main floor. Sayers knew this universe well: it furnished the stage setting of medieval religious drama. In the beginning of the York Pageant of the Creation, God's speech sets out the structure:

Here underneath me now an isle I
neven,
Which isle shall be earth. Now all
be at once:
Earth, wholly, and hell; this
highest be heaven,⁷

and in the action of the York Cycle, "God the Father, on the Heavenly level above, casts down Lucifer and his angels through a trap door into Hell, depicted on the lower level of the pageant."⁸ At Talboys, Hell, or the cellar, occupied by a murdered sinner, yawns below, with a cold draught pouring from its door; hell is icy cold at its depth in The Divine Comedy:

The Emperor of the Sorrowful realm was
there,
Out of the girding ice he stood
breast high,⁹

It is Satan's wings which create the cold wind:

...as they flapped and whipped
Three winds went rushing over the icy
flat
And froze up Cocytus...¹⁰

The upper level of the medieval universe, Heaven, suggested by the "flaming ministers" of the candles, by the spirit lamp, by water, by fragrant herbs and sweet-burning wood, offers a paradisaal marriage bed out of the Song of Songs. Sayers is orthodox here too, of course, in making marriage a celestial and supernal symbol. To assure the precision of the imagery, Sayers makes Peter call Harriet "my Shulamite" at the beginning of the next chapter when they awaken in bed together in the morning. The epithet "Shulamite" appears in the Song of Solomon 6:13, in the same chapter which contains the sentence, "I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine." (S.S. 6:3)

Daylight thus introduced, the new day



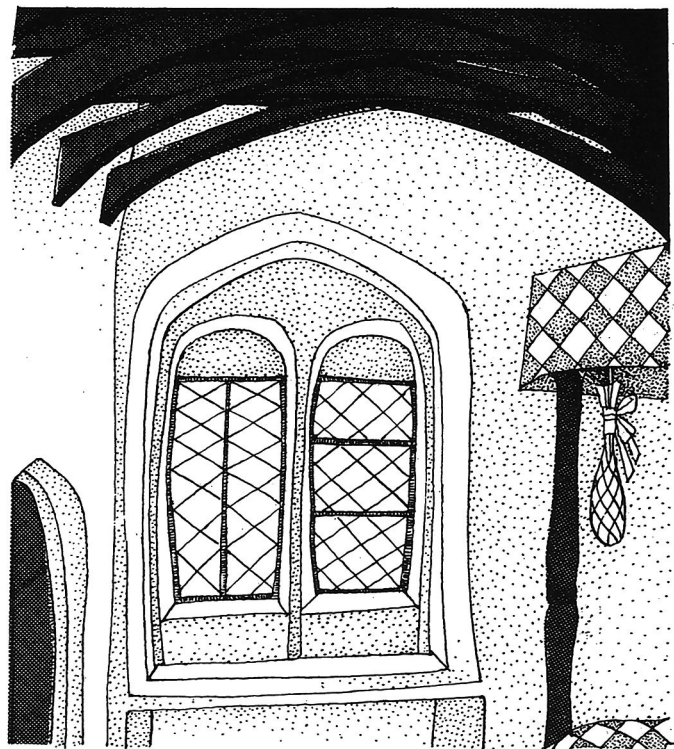
reveals more about the house. Peter's window is so located that he can sit in it and call out to the people below, looking down upon his domain like a whimsical image of God looking down upon His Creation in the medieval mystery play. Meanwhile, the chimney sweep has been summoned. Harriet discovers a backstairs--which becomes nicknamed the "Privy Stair" and re-appears in the short story "Talboys"--leading to the "modern convenience" as well as "at length into the scullery and so to the back door." (p. 91) Outside, there is a well-kept garden:

There were cabbages at the back, and celery trenches, also an asparagus bed well strawed up and a number of scientifically pruned apple-trees. There was also a small cold-house sheltering a hearty vine with half a dozen bunches of black grapes on it and a number of half-hardy plants in pots. (p. 91)

The front of the house (seen by electric torch the night before) gives in daylight "a good show of dahlias and chrysanthemums and a bed of scarlet salvias." (p. 92) The combination of vegetable, fruit, and flower is part of a tradition of Western literature concerning the *locus amoenus* or "pleasant place" which probably begins in European literature with the garden of Alcinoüs in *The Odyssey*: "Beyond the last row of vines were neat beds of all kinds of garden-stuff, ever fresh and green."¹¹ Harriet and Peter (who looks down from the window above) engage in a witty conversation full of garden quotations to emphasize the paradisaical scene.

When the sweep arrives to clear the chimneys, Peter cries, "All my life I have waited to hear those exquisite words, Peter darling, the sweep's come. We are married, by God! We are married." (p. 96) For him, too, the house embodies the marriage. Noakes has sold the Tudor chimney pots and replaced them with small, unsuitable contemporary pots. Since the Tudor setting symbolizes the importance and role of time, we are not surprised that the pots have been sold to make sundials. The emphasis in the novel upon chimneys and hearths calls attention again and again to the house and its symbolism. Oliver Marc, in his study, *The Psychology of the House*, states that "the hearth was placed in the house as a symbol of the vital core of the human being."¹² He continues, "In Europe until the Renaissance, the hearth, like the chimney on the roof, was elaborately decorated by architects and artists, thus emphasizing its importance in the collective psyche of the times." (Marc, op.cit., p. 99) Furthermore, and exactly apposite to the novel: "Today we consider the fireplace the symbol of country life, which is indicative of the severance from nature which city life has imposed." (*Ibid.*) This explains why the bedroom fire was laid by Bunter of wood "upon the hearthstone," rather than of coal in a grate.

In the midst of this scene of domestic



turmoil, with the sweep hard at work, and Peter, Harriet, and Miss Twitterton watching him from indoors, a new character appears. He is Frank Crutchley, and he is, significantly, "peering in the window." (p. 101) That is, he is outside the house while more innocent characters are inside. Like Aggie Twitterton with her ugly "doll's house," Frank Crutchley is given a domicile in the novel, but it is not a house. He works at a garage and sleeps in a room above it which he shares with the other garageman, Williams. The room has a small dormer but no other amenities. (p. 234) When he courts Polly Mason he resorts to "a big old barn with a tiled roof" (p. 355) and his ill-fated affair with Aggie Twitterton has been pursued, significantly, in the churchyard: that is, in the village cemetery. (p. 358) Otherwise Crutchley's environment, the garage, includes a canal and a gas-works, all reinforcing the industrial motif, the sense of something alien to countryside and Tudor period alike. All of this is expressed in advance by his glance through the window of Talboys.

Once inside the house, Crutchley searches "over the room as though seeking counsel." Like Adam (who also fell) he is the gardener, and he is looking nervously for the former master of the garden. He is introduced to the new owners, and proceeds to water the plants, whereupon Mr. Goodacre, the Vicar, arrives, and is also introduced: "You see, padre, we are old-fashioned country-bred people." Lord Peter is not joking and neither is Sayers. She was an old-fashioned country-bred person, and her villages in *Busman's Honeymoon* depict elements of her own childhood. In her sensitive biography of Sayers, Nancy M. Tischler has commented:

An artist with Dorothy L. Sayers' kind of imagination takes the stuff of her life and transforms it into art. She was four years old when her family moved from their comfortable life in Oxford to Bluntisham Rectory in the fen country. Here she came to understand the town without the gown--the small English village.¹³

Sayers passed her later life in another village, "Witham, just outside London." (*Ibid.*) Many commentators have remarked on the similarity of Harriet D. Vane to Dorothy L. Sayers: they are both women, both detective novelists, both reared in the country. Tischler comments on the "established roles and set patterns" of village life: Sayers's father was a vicar, a role paralleled to that of Harriet's father: "He [the vicar] works with his mind like the doctor, but he heals the spirit rather than the body. Like the doctor, he may be one of the few educated men in the country." (*Ibid.*)

Eventually the entire group, including Bunter and Mrs. Ruddle, watches as the sweep fires a shotgun up the chimney, and, in full view of them all, a second central piece of evidence--a fragment, indeed, of the murder weapon, drops upon the hearth. The house is giving up its secrets, or at least coughing them forth. In traditional house symbolism in primitive cultures, the chimney or smoke-hole was the route to the upper world, (Marc, *op. cit.*, p. 100) so there is a certain deus ex machina element in this event. Into the sooty scene comes a creditor, Mr. McBride, to seek repayment of a loan: Noakes' possessions are threatened with being carried away, leaving the house closer to its primaevial state.

Finally, in Chapter VI, after a long "financial" conversation between Lord Peter and the newcomer, the house gives up its deepest secret.

"Excuse me, my lord." Bunter stood on the threshold empty-handed. "I'm afraid we have found Mr. Noakes." (p. 135)

Wimsey is aghast. "Where? Down the cellar?" (p. 130) And so he proves to be. Within moments yet another character arrives: Constable Joe Sellon. Most of the company are now onstage.

In the following chapter Harriet notes with entertainment that her husband, back at his detectival task, has changed his clothes: "Someone has died in our house, so we put on a collar and tie." (p. 140) Death has found a place in the house, along with marriage. Peter meditates on this theme--"You know, that bed must be pretty nearly as old as the house--the original bits of it anyhow. It could tell a good many tales of births and deaths and bridal nights." (p. 140-141) So the house and its bed symbolize the full round of human life and of the generations in their endless repetition. Harriet asks him

about the cellar--"there weren't rats..." (p. 141)--and he reassures her that it is "Just a perfectly good cellar." In the end they decide to stay in their honeymoon house. "Country people are very matter-of-fact about life and death. They live so close to reality." (p. 142) The house is the house of country people: the house, then is reality.

In support, as it were, of this conception, there follows a brief description of its rooms and passages, filled with activity necessitated by the finding of a corpse within its walls. The sitting-room is cleared, a fire kindled, a table set, the cellar door shut, the kitchen used to make sandwiches, the scullery cleared of its contents to ready a table on which to lay the body. Bunter stands at the back door and Mr. McBride strolls the back-yard: "he had the air of inventorying its contents." (p. 143) The house is presented as a fully developed representative of its type. The sixteenth century, the period of the Tudors, "opened in the spirit of the Middle Ages."¹⁴ Writing of "the small informal house or cottage of brick, stone, cob or half timber" associated with the sixteenth century, A.H. Gardner remarks: "There is no more charming sight than this 'vernacular' architecture, preserved in cottage and small house in many a country town and village." (*Ibid.*, p. 67) Writing in the same vein, Stephen Gardiner describes "the familiar Tudor house period" in which the "timber frame structure was revived; it was a peacetime theme."¹⁵ Sayers is appealing to a widely-received convention in choosing the architecture and style of the house.

When Superintendent Kirk arrives to take up the case, all is in order. Peter, Harriet, and MacBride enjoy an amicable supper--Harriet reflects that he is their first dinner guest. They are joined by Kirk for an after dinner conversation of shared quotations. Then, Kirk begins his enquiries with a question about the house. "About them doors, now. You're sure they were both locked when you arrived?" The mystery is the classical locked-door puzzle, and the house provides the doors. Many of the details which supplied elements of atmosphere when the couple arrived, now provide clues to the events of the murder. This is the beginning of the "detective interruptions," and the house plays a part in them as well as in the "love story." Three chapters later, Bunter returns from his own investigations at the village pub, tidies the bedrooms, and the newlywed retire, this time to Peter's room.

But the detectival interruption stretches on. At one point Harriet and Peter escape for a drive in the country, and there they discover a sun-dial made from one of their own Tudor pots. "I think the luck went out of the house with the chimneypots, and it's our job to bring it back," (p. 291) Peter opines, and his notion is echoed by a carter they meet: "The very man wot sold vicar the chimbley-pot, 'e was found dead in his own 'ouse only yesterday." (pp. 299-300) The

dismantling of the house has brought about its own revenge.

Miss Twitterton suffers a little too at the hands of the house, for she is trapped upstairs where she has been arguing with Crutchley when the couple return. The sounds of domestic comfort terrify her, as they once delighted Harriet: "Next door she heard the crackle of a kindled fire, the rattle of curtain rings upon the rods, a subdued click, the pouring of fresh water into the ewer." (pp. 325-326) She flees down the stairs and creeps past the door, where she sees "framed in the glowing circle of the lamplight, the two figures...bright and motionless as a picture." She is discovered, and pours out her heart-broken story of Frank Crutchley's betrayal of her love for him.

There follows an absolute confrontation between Lord Peter and his wife in which they consider--and reject--the idea of running away. Peter proposes it, thinking it is her wish, and she refuses: "Whatever marriage is, it isn't that." (p. 343) In that moment, she gives him the freedom he has given her, and they are fully equals.

Harriet looked at the clock. It seemed to her that she had lived through interminable ages of emotion. but the hands stood at a quarter past eight. Only an hour and a half had gone by since they had entered the house. (p. 345)

So the house is the place where the couple obtain the "Crown Imperial which entitles the chapter.

In the next chapter Peter is already planning "a workable hot-water system" and "a bathroom over the scullery." (p. 346) The problem of drains has been addressed: he is ready to take full possession. Harriet suggests a new kitchen range (for Bunter's sake and there is a discussion of dogs. At this point a second creditor arrives--Mr. Solomons--and proposes to take away the furniture. He and MacBride are invited to supper and the matter approaches settlement. Kirk arrives, and during his conversation with the couple the murder moves close to its solution. Night brings Peter and Harriet to bed again. "The window was still open; for October, the air was strangely mild and still." (p. 362) A cat cries out but Peter stays his hand: he "drew the casement to and fastened it." Below, Bunter "flung a boot from the back bedroom" (p. 362) The stillness and strange warmth as well as the casement contain echoes of Keats's "casement" in The Eve of St. Agnes and of the closing image of C.S. Lewis's That Hideous Strength. The rich sexuality of Keats's poem climaxes as Porphyro gazes on his love, Madeline, where

A casement high and tripled arch'd there
was,
All garlanded with carven imag'ries
Of fruits, and flowers and bunches of
knot-grass

And diamonded with panes of quaint
device¹⁶

and

Full on this casement shone the wintry
moon
And threw warm gules [red] on Madeline's
fair breast.

The lover sees her first at her prayers and then, letting down her hair and slipping off her clothing, she takes to her bed. In That Hideous Strength, Jane, escorted by mating elephants (instead of mating cats) goes through a night "unseasonably warm for the time of year" to the cottage where her husband awaits her:

Then she noticed that the window, the bedroom window, was open. Clothes were piled on a chair inside the room so carelessly that they lay over the sill: the sleeve of a shirt--Mark's shirt--even hung over down the outside wall."¹⁷

In this passage, it is the male who has disrobed.

But the night is not peaceful. Lord Peter is afflicted with a terrible nightmare. Something the house has shown him is teasing at his unconscious. He awakes to find Bunter preparing for the "village funeral" of Noakes. (p. 365) The matter of Solomons and MacBride approaches completion too: the furniture is to be taken away, while the wedding couple absent themselves for the weekend. Harriet watches the departure of the furnishings.

Then, smitten by a sudden pang, she hastened into the pantry. It was already stripped. With the furies at her heels, she bounded down the cellar steps, not even pausing to remember what had once lain at the foot of them. (p. 373)

But all is well: his lordships's "two-and-a-half-dozen of port lay carefully ranged upon racks." (p. 374) Harriet's concern for her husband's port has exorcised any ghosts that might have lingered in the cellar.

As item after item is carried out of the house, little remains except the plants--the huge cactus among them--which are to go to the Vicar. He comments that this especially ugly plant is "on a longer chain." Dream and reality come together, and "Peter's gasp was like a sob." The house's final contents have made the secret known. After a few moments of investigation, Peter gives his orders. "Here are the housekeys. Make sure that Ruddle and Puffet and Crutchley are all inside." (p. 392) Harriet tiptoes about the house on these orders: "She locked the front door, and the house was fast, as it had been on the night of the murder." (p. 393)

In the locked house, Lord Peter shows how Noakes met his death by re-enacting the

murder process, and the murderer, shouting in frenzy, is dragged "from the room." (p. 401) Peter watches from within as the killer is "hauled past the window, still struggling in the four men's hands." (p. 402) Again, being outside the house is a symbol of separation from others, of the guilty from the innocent.

The discovery of the killer is not quite the end of the novel; there is an Epithalamion. Peter and Harriet plan to go "up to Town," after leaving orders for the recovery of the displaced chimney pot, and a conversation about "that bathroom extension." Peter proposes to hire Thipps, a character from the first of Sayers's novels, Whose Body? Harriet is glad to hear that her husband has not "taken...a misliking to Talboys." (p. 408) "While I live," Lord Peter declares, "no owner but ourselves shall ever set foot in it." (p. 409) And indeed, though Busman's Honeymoon is the last of Sayers's novels, the last (and posthumously) published of her short stories describes Peter and Harriet living in Talboys with their three sons, Bredon, Roger, and Paul, having left behind "the stately publicity of town life" for "a really small place in the country,"¹⁸ where Harriet took her husband into her own room (the furthest of the two bedrooms from the main part of the house) and put the two older boys in the dressing-room, making room for an elderly house-guest, Miss Quirk.

In the end, the couple does not go up to Town in Busman's Honeymoon: instead they drive to Duke's Denver, Lord Peter's ancestral home. "At the far end of the avenue, the great house loomed grey against the sunlight--a long Paladian front, its windows still asleep, and behind it the chimney and turrets of rambling wings and odd, fantastic sprouts of architectural fancy." (p. 417) In this house, which of course symbolizes Lord Peter's origins, the most fantastic moment of the fourteen novels occurs: Harriet sees the family ghost, Cousin Matthew. Here the house of Lord Peter's childhood both reveals his past and embodies his identity, the last of the series of houses Sayers has used to personify a person in this novel.

Peter and Harriet complete their honeymoon in Spain while the Dowager Duchess arranges to send furniture from the Hall up to Talboys, and sees to the painting and plastering. The bathroom will be added when the frosts are over. Talboys has one last image to offer in the novel. While the murderer awaits execution, Peter and Harriet return to their Tudor Farmhouse, "admiring the arrangement of the house and furniture," (p. 436) and continuing to search for missing chimney pots. On the night before the hanging, Peter goes for a long desperate drive in his car, alone, while Bunter and Harriet await his return.

The old house was Harriet's companion in her vigil. It waited with her, its evil spirit cast out, itself swept and garnished, ready for the visit of devil or angel. (p. 441)

The reference is to Matthew 12:44 and Luke 11:25:

When an unclean spirit is gone out of a man, he walketh through dry places, seeking rest, and findeth none. Then he saith, I will return into my house from whence I came out; and when he is come, he findeth it empty, swept, and garnished. Then goeth he, and taketh with himself seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter in and dwell there: and the last state of that man is worse than the first.¹⁹

But the last state of Talboys is better than the first: Lord Peter returns. Harriet waits for him to come to her: "She held her breath till she heard his footsteps mount slowly and reluctantly and enter the next room." (p. 442) At last he enters, coming into the bedroom, the heart of the house and its meaning. "You're my corner and I've come to hide," (p. 443) he confesses. The corner is the house: Gaston Bachelard writes in his meditation on The Poetics of Space:

...every corner in a house, every angle in a room, every inch of secluded space in which we like to hide, or withdraw ourselves, is a symbol of solitude for the imagination; that is to say, it is the germ of a room, or of a house.²⁰

Peter and Harriet spend the long night together, waiting in torment for the morning. Their bedroom window appears for the last time: "Through the eastern side of the casement, the sky grew pale with the forerunners of the dawn." (p. 445) We last see Lord Peter in the novels, weeping upon the breast of his wife. Idea, house, husband, wife: the images are complete.

NOTES

- 1 C.S. Lewis, Surprised by Joy (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1955), p. 17.
- 2 Dorothy L. Sayers, Busman's Honeymoon (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1976 [1937]), pp. 31-32. All additional page references to this source are included in the text.
- 3 Book of British Villages (Basingstoke, Hants: Drive Publications Ltd., 1980), p. 427.
- 4 Dorothy L. Sayers, The Mind of the Maker (New York: Meridian Books, 1956 [1941]), p. 128.
- 5 Dorothy Hartley, Lost Country Life (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979), see pp. 234-237 for a description of goose-feather beds.
- 6 Patsy and Myron Orlofsky, Quilts in America, (New York: McGraw Hill, 1974), pp. 6-7.
- 7 A.C. Cawley, ed., Everyman and Medieval Miracle Plays (London: J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd. 1956), p. 4, ll. 24-27.

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Farmer Giles is set in England, in a time before the Saxon debacle, when various British kinglets were still playing at being Roman potentates...and of course when dragons, giants, and all that were in full cry. It is specifically set in a portion of the Thames valley east of Oxford. At the beginning this region is part of the "Middle Kingdom"; at the end it is an independent "Little Kingdom".

A number of places, all of them real, are mentioned in Farmer Giles; and a cursory tour of the area shows a few more points of interest. The towns or parishes of Ham(mo), Oakley, Worminghall, Farthingo(e), and Oxenford (now Oxford) are all mentioned, as well as the Otmoor, an area west of Oxford. It is interesting to note, since Giles was known as Lord of Tame, that a river and town of Thame lie not too far to the west, the Thame flowing into the Thames. In fact, in 1938 Tolkien made reference to "the Little Kingdom (with its capital at Thame)" (Letters, p. 39), which leads one to wonder. However, Farmer Giles itself refers to the Little Kingdom as being in "the valley of the Thames" (p. 66 of the combined edition with Smith of Wootton Major, emphasis mine).

A map of this region allows us to find other places with literary associations as well. Southeast of Ham is the town of Buckland...and it's a good bet that a highly detailed map would reveal more names from the Shire in Oxfordshire. To the south and west of Buckland is the Vale of the White Horse, recalling the emblem of Rohan.

In the same area lies Wantage, where Alfred the great was born. Its true immortality, however, lies in the classic limerick:

There was a young lady of Wantage
Of whom the Town Clerk took advantage.
Said the County Surveyor,
"Of course you must pay her;
You've altered the line of her frontage."

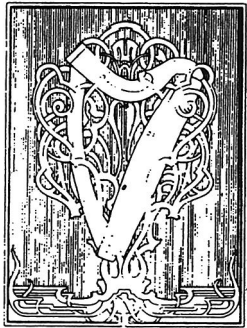
Finally, between Ham and Oxford, lies the town of Wootton, presumably the site of Smith of Wootton Major. There is also, further west, a town of Wootton Under Edge...and of course Tolkien speaks of two Woottons.

Appended to this short article is a map, done in part from descriptions of where places are located, rather than seeing the actual dots on a printed page. In this regard, I am indebted to Ben Urrutia for first calling my attention to the fact that such a map was possible. In addition, also used were (1) Humphrey Carpenter's Tolkien, (2) David Dettman's "A Glossary to Farmer Giles of Ham" (in Minas Tirith Evening-Star, 9.9), (3) Encyclopedia Britannica, XI Ed. (1910), Vol. IX, Map of England and Wales (part III), (4) in Gershon Legman's The Limerick (#987) or in William S. Baring-Gould's The Lure of the Limerick (p. 228); an interesting variant can be found on p. 178 of Louis Untermeyer's Lots of Limericks.

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- 8 E. Martin Browne, Introduction, Religious Drama 2, Mystery and Morality Plays (New York: Meridian Books, 1958), p. 11. C.S. Lewis wrote wryly of Bishop J.A.T. Robinson's attempts to topple this ancient symbolic structure: "We have long abandoned belief in a God who sits on a throne in a localized heaven." C.S. Lewis, "Must Our Image of God Go?", God in the Dock (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans, 1970), p. 184.
- 9 The Comedy of Dante Alighieri, Cantica I, Hell, trans. Dorothy L. Sayers (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1949), Canto XXXIV, ll. 28-29
- 10 Ibid., Canto XXXIV, ll. 50-52.
- 11 The Odyssey, W.H.D. Rowse, trans., (New York: Mentor, 1960), p. 78.
- 12 Oliver Marc, Psychology of the House, trans. Jessie Wood, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977), p. 98.
- 13 Nancy M. Tischler, Dorothy L. Sayers, A Pilgrim Soul (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1980), p. 8.
- 14 A.H. Gardner, Outline of English Architecture (London: B.T. Basford, 1948), Third Edition, p. 62.
- 15 Stephen Gardiner, Evolution of the House Frogmore, St. Albans, Herts: Granada (Paladin), 1976), p. 153.
- 16 John Keats, "The Eve of St. Agnes," v. xxiv, ll. 208-211.
- 17 C.S. Lewis, That Hideous Strength (London: The Bodley Head, 1945), p. 476.
- 18 Dorothy L. Sayers, "Talboys," Striding Folly (London: New English Library, 1973 [1972]), p. 108.
- 19 Mathew 12:43-45. The story is told in Luke in almost the same words.
- 20 Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Space, trans. Maria Jolas, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969 [1958]), p. 136.

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