

The Nine Tailors

D.L.Sayers

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The roots of the detective story - the story based on the presenting of a mystery and then through skilled reasoning exhibiting a clarifying model of great simplicity and necessity, can be traced back to the 19th century, particularly through the short stories of Poe. At the end of that century it was given a systematic, and to some maybe even a definite treatment by Conan Doyle¹. During the 20th century the emerging tradition was trivialized, and thus ensured of a firm popular embrace, which shows no signs of letting up. With trivialization came a stylization and a more or less fixed formula. Any detective story nowadays needs to involve a murder (if not necessarily a body), preferably of a marginal and unlikable character, the event of which is no source of regret but instead one of curiosity. The excitement of the story is then largely forensic, i.e. in reconstructing the past from the haphazard traces it leaves in the present through the skillful posing of relevant questions in response to the forming of provisional theories². The genre is to a large extent associated with the British, especially its idyllic version, as epitomized by Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers, (the continental as well as the American kind tending to be more hard-boiled and 'noir'), where in addition to the mystery the depiction of a charming atmosphere, often gentrified and rural, involving dotty characters and charismatic amateur sleuths, becomes a crucial ingredient of the formula. Of the two ladies (both incidentally born the same year) the latter is obviously considered intellectually superior, at her time a brilliant student at Oxford (but barred from an academic career due to archaic rules) and later an acknowledged translator of Dante. And not surprisingly her stories tend to blur the distinction between regular fictional novels and mystery ones, something to be carried even further by her successor P.D.James.

The Nine Tailors is considered by many to be her best Wimsey story, but is it so good³? The setting is in East Anglia, a flat, Dutchy country of dikes and floods (and indeed at the end of the story the flatlands are indeed flooded, partly as a result of some

¹ for better and for worse, Sherlock Holmes being in spite, or perhaps because of the very lack of literary pretensions one of the most enduring literary creations highlighting the ambiguity between fiction and reality

² This incidentally complies very closely to Collingwoods idea of doing history, so close in fact that he was unable to close his eyes to such a vulgar manifestation, but actually resorted to such similes in presenting his theory. Additionally it also complies quite closely with Popper and his falsification schemes of modern science, and it is a big regret that not more of popular science is actually presented in the form of detective stories, which would give a much truer idea of what science really is. Freud instinctively understood this, as he presented his case-stories as if they were actually detective stories. Freud himself likening his work as that of an archeologist revealing even deeper layers of the subconscious of the patient.

³ Edmund Wilson found it insufferably dull, believing that her reputation for being a good writer mostly stemmed from perpetrating some literary pretensions in a sub-literary genre.

engineering tinkering) dotted with churches with tall steeples and chiming bells. It all starts out in the winter, the day before New Year, with Wimsey and his butler sliding off the road in the wintry slush and being taken on by a distracted vicar and his practical wife. The elaborate ritual of chiming the church bells (each of the nine 'tailors' introduced and described at length) plays an important role in the narrative, and as will transpire, is the unintended source of the murder that has to be investigated. But that is all in the future, in the beginning the old story about the missing necklace is introduced to Whimsey as well as the readers, a story that will unexpectedly hook up with the murder, the resulting mutilated body discovered in a grave, recently dug up. More and more mysterious clues turn up, only in the end to get a coherent explanation. And now add to this some nice conversations (especially that of Wimsey consoling a young lady recently orphaned, whose ambition in life is to become a writer of fiction, and Wimsey remarking that to be able to write you need to be apart socially and have an imagination of sorts liable to scare most people away, a kind of reflection you would not expect in a Christie story) and you get what purports to be a so called 'good read'.

How are such things written? The obvious explanation is that the author starts at the end, presenting a coherent story with twists and then selecting a few of its features to appear haphazardly with obfuscating details. Obviously the clues have to be so skillfully presented as to both confuse the reader and allow the main character to make sense of them through logical means and not just extra-sensory intuition, or at least give that impression. This is not a trivial task, and the great challenge is to make the conclusion come out inevitably in retrospect, as well as catching and keeping the interest of the reader. The challenge is non-trivial, but not insurmountable, and gives to the craft of fiction a purpose that must be appreciated by most of its writers. No wonder the formula has proved to be so successful.

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