

Mysteries Human and Divine

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Adapted from the introduction to [The Gospel in Dorothy L. Sayers: Selections from Her Novels, Plays, Letters, and Essays](#)

For almost a century, the murder mysteries of Dorothy L. Sayers have kept enthusiasts hungrily turning pages. Many of these readers never guess how seriously Sayers took the business of wielding words:

Even the spate of futile words that pours out from the ephemeral press and the commercial-fiction-mongers has a real and terrible power; it can become a dope as dangerous as drugs or drink; it can rot the mind, sap the reason, send the will to sleep; it can pull down empires and set the neck of the people under the heel of tyranny.

It took a lifetime for Dorothy L. Sayers to explore the power of words, first as a novelist, and then as an essayist, playwright, apologist, theologian and translator. Sayers was born 1893, and grew up in Huntingdonshire, where her father was rector of an Anglican church. She was an only child, educated by her parents and governesses in a home steeped in the atmosphere of the church. At sixteen she entered the Godolphin School in Salisbury, and then went on to achieve a certificate of first class honors in medieval French literature from the all-women Somerville College at Oxford in 1915.

Following several years of unemployment, living on an allowance from her parents and doing odd translation jobs, she became an advertising copywriter for S. H. Benson's in London, a large and prosperous agency. By all accounts she was successful, coming up with jingles and tag lines for Coleman's Mustard and Guinness Beer (My goodness, My Guinness!). In her off hours she started working on her first mystery novel, *Whose Body?*, published in 1923.

After a series of unhappy relationships, Sayers bore a son out of wedlock in 1924. For the rest of her life Sayers kept her son a secret from her parents and the public, although she was in constant contact with her cousin, who fostered the child. It is significant, in light of what must have been an unremitting guilt, that Sayers would write with intensity of the role of the conscience, repentance, and salvation throughout her life, in her fiction and plays as well as her essays.

In 1926, Sayers married Captain Oswald Atherton “Mac” Fleming, a Scottish journalist and World War I veteran. From her lively letters to her mother, it appears that hilarious jaunts in Sayers’s old motorcycle and sidecar typified the early years of their marriage. Unfortunately, his health declined – perhaps due to being wounded and gassed in the war – and when he could no longer work, Mac drank heavily. Sayers continued to care for him until his death in 1950.

Those who know Dorothy L. Sayers as a writer of religious essays often wonder how she could also write popular fiction. At first, the books were a simply way to make a living, cashing in on the detective story craze of the twenties, but Sayers, like G. K. Chesterton, found murder mysteries a vehicle to explore the choices characters make between good and evil. In the introduction to a collection that she edited, she wrote that such stories “make you feel that it is good to be alive, and that, while alive, it is better, on the whole, for you to be good.”

Gaudy Night (1935) and *Busman’s Honeymoon* (1936), her last two published mysteries, are Sayers best-known works today. In these books her characters have developed realistic human complexity, and Sayers has clearly drifted from the intellectual puzzle detective story into the realm of the novel. Indeed, *Busman’s Honeymoon*, which was originally a stage play, is subtitled *A Love Story with Detective Interruptions*. In it, the formerly happy-go-lucky Lord Peter Wimsey agonizes over sending a criminal to face the death penalty. Wimsey visits the condemned man to ask his forgiveness on the night before the execution, and is met with curses. It takes hours of painful brooding before he returns to Harriet. Will he open himself to his new wife and admit his vulnerability? She knows she cannot force him, but waits to see if he will turn to her for comfort. In the pre-dawn hours he finally ascends the stairs. These scenes are more reminiscent of Jane Austen than Arthur Conan Doyle.

Although Sayers would publish a few more detective short stories in the next years, she had come to the end of what she wanted to express in the genre. Instead she turned to writing plays with Christian themes. To promote one such play, *The Zeal of Thy House*, Sayers wrote several pieces for newspapers insisting that the gospel is an exciting story. The most outstanding is “The Dogma Is the Drama,” in which she writes:

Let us, in Heaven's name, drag out the Divine Drama from under the dreadful accumulation of slip-shod thinking and trashy sentiment heaped upon it, and set it on an open stage to startle the world into some sort of vigorous reaction. If the pious are the first to be shocked, so much the worse for the pious—others will pass into the Kingdom of Heaven before them.

It was this fresh perspective and bold prose that built her reputation as an apologist and theologian, much to her chagrin. *She* called herself a playwright.

In 1941 the BBC commissioned Sayers to write a series of radio plays on the life of Christ. Broadcast between Christmas 1941 and October 1942, they stirred up a storm of controversy.

Sayers's characters spoke contemporary English, not the words of the King James Version of the Bible. She worked directly from the Greek sources, and this gave the broadcasts an immediacy that brought the gospel, in all its raw violence and beauty, into two million living rooms.

The director of religious broadcasting at the BBC, Dr. James Welch, wrote to the Archbishop of Canterbury about the dramas, "My serious judgment is that these plays have done more for the preaching of the Gospel to the unconverted than any other single effort of the churches or religious broadcasting since the last war – that is a big statement, but my experience forces me to make it."

The plays, later published as *The Man Born to Be King: A Play-Cycle on the Life of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ* were popular, but fan letters made Sayers irritable. In a letter to a friend she enclosed this imaginary retort, "Why do you want a letter from me telling you about God? You will never bother to check up on it and find out whether I am giving you a personal opinion or the Church's doctrine, and your minds are so confused that you would rather hear the former than the latter. Go away and do some work, and let me get on with mine."

Not long afterward, hearing the missile attack siren, Sayers grabbed a handy book on her way to the air raid shelter in her backyard. It was the beginning of her last great love affair with words. The book was Dante's *Inferno*. This epic saga of sin, repentance, and salvation lit her imagination. In a blaze of enthusiasm, she taught herself to read medieval Italian so that she could make her own translation of the *Divine Comedy*.

It is no wonder that her play *The Just Vengeance*, performed a year after the cataclysmic end of World War II, broods on Dantean themes of original sin, inherited guilt, and shared responsibility. The Christ figure's final speech resounds as Sayers's own profession of faith and hope:

Come then, and take again your own sweet will
That once was buried in the spicy grave
With Me, and now is risen with Me, more sweet
Than myrrh and cassia; come, receive again
All your desires, but better than your dreams,
All your lost loves, but lovelier than you knew,
All your fond hopes, but higher than your hearts
Could dare to frame them; all your City of God
Built by your faith, but nobler than you planned.

Sayers finished the first book of her Divine Comedy translation, *Hell*, in 1949, surprising reviewers with fearless poetry that used the original rhyme scheme and meter, a feat hitherto considered impossible. The second volume, *Purgatory*, was published in 1955, along with

Introductory Papers on Dante, a collection of her lectures. These books, with her introductions and notes, are still in print; more than a million readers have benefited from her work.

As she began to translate *Paradise*, Dorothy L. Sayers died of a sudden heart attack on December 17, 1957, at the age of sixty-four. She had completed twenty of the thirty-four cantos of Dante's allegory of the soul's ascent to God.

Sayer's enduring aspiration was to present the gospel as vital and stimulating to unbelievers and back-pew Christians. As she wrote to C.S. Lewis:

You must not look at them from above, or outside, and say: "Poor creatures; they would obviously be the better for so-and-so – I must try and make up a dose for them." You've got to come galloping out shouting excitedly: "Look here! Look what I've found! Come and have a bit of it – it's grand – you'll love it – I can't keep it to myself, and anyhow, I want to know what you think of it."

Throughout her life, she harnessed the power of language, not to drug the minds of her readers, but to shake them awake and point them towards this grand discovery: the gospel.

