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Sayers [*married name Fleming*], Dorothy Leigh FREE

(1893–1957)

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Dorothy Leigh Sayers (1893–1957)

by Sir William O. Hutchison, c. 1949–50

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Sayers [*married name Fleming*], Dorothy Leigh (1893–1957), writer and scholar, was born on 13 June 1893 in the old Choir House at 1 Brewer Street, Oxford, the only child of the Revd Henry Sayers (1854–1928) and his wife, Helen Mary, *née* Leigh (1856–1929). The Sayers family came originally from co. Tipperary, Ireland. Henry Sayers, whose father was also a clergyman, was born in Tittleshall, Norfolk, while Helen Sayers, born in Shirley, near Southampton, was the

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daughter of a solicitor who was also a fine Latin scholar. Sayers's mother descended from an old landed family with holdings on the Isle of Wight, and as a writer, Sayers always insisted that the middle initial 'L' be used in her name. With a history of churchmen on one side of the family and a scholarly solicitor for her maternal grandfather, Sayers's interest in both theology and crime might be said to come out of family history.

Early life and education

Dorothy Sayers began life amid the bustle of Oxford, where her father was choirmaster at Christ Church, but when she was four years old Henry Sayers accepted the more remunerative living of Bluntisham-cum-Earith in the remote fen country of East Anglia, which would later provide the backdrop for one of Sayers's finest novels, *The Nine Tailors* (1934). Each year of her childhood from that time on, she saw the bleak fenland washes flooded to protect the pastures enclosed by the Fens' extensive system of dykes, a memory no doubt summoned thirty years later, as she was composing some of the novel's most eloquent scenes. (During Sayers's adolescence, her parents moved even deeper into the fens, when her father became rector at Christchurch in Cambridgeshire.) Life in the spacious Georgian rectory at Bluntisham was both spartan and elegant. There was no running water, but the family and any guests dressed for dinner in the evening. Later in life, Sayers remembered wistfully the cool linen of her mother's well-appointed table and the sheltering old trees of the rectory's gracious gardens. By virtue of her class and location, as well as her lack of siblings, the youthful Dorothy Sayers was essentially isolated from others her own age. Like many future authors, she lived largely a life of books and stories, and from early childhood she showed a special talent for languages and story-telling. Able to read by the age of four, she began devouring books from the rectory's library. The young Dorothy Sayers also wrote sketches and plays which she performed to the delight of an indulgent household. Her closest friend, a cousin eight years her senior named Ivy Shrimpton, who had been brought up on a farm in California, often made extended visits to the rectory. Through a youthful sharing of books, imagination, and confidences, the two girls forged a remarkable friendship that would support Sayers during severely trying times in adulthood.

Dorothy Sayers was educated chiefly at home. Yet perhaps because he had no son, Henry Sayers seems to have always assumed that his precocious daughter would eventually study at Oxford, even though women were not admitted as fully-fledged members of the university until 1920, five years after Dorothy Sayers finished her studies there. Nevertheless, her father began her Latin studies at home, before she was seven, and a succession of governesses instructed her in other areas, including French and German. When she was nearing sixteen, her parents decided it was time for her to go away to school, sending her to the Godolphin School in Salisbury, an unhappy experience which Sayers later recalled in *Cat O' Mally*. Although she was a lifelong believer and communicant, Dorothy Sayers was always repelled by the sanctimonious, an apparently apt description for some teachers at

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Godolphin. No doubt it was her experience there which led her to remark in her first novel that 'the atmosphere of the Close pervades every nook and corner of Salisbury, and no food in that city but seems faintly flavoured with prayer-books' (*Whose Body?*, 1923, 76). In March 1911 measles spread through Godolphin and Dorothy Sayers became acutely ill; she was near death when her mother came to nurse her. This illness seems to have predisposed her thereafter to lose most of her hair during times of stress. She was relieved to go home, where she could recuperate and prepare for her examinations for Oxford. In the autumn of 1912 she went up on the Gilchrist scholarship to Somerville College, Oxford.

Somerville, with its tradition of nurturing strong women who go on to leadership roles in the public arena as well as the arts, suited Dorothy L. Sayers perfectly. Her college days were among her happiest; while at Somerville, she would later write to her son, she acquired a scholarly method and habit of mind which served her throughout life (*Letters*, 15 Jan 1940). She also forged lifelong friendships there, including one with Muriel St Clare Byrne, who was responsible, in the 1930s, for turning Sayers towards a career in the theatre by convincing her to write the Wimsey play *Busman's Honeymoon* (1937), upon which the novel of the same name was based. While at Somerville, Sayers experienced the first of her 'grand passions' for unattainable men, an intense infatuation with the director of the Oxford Bach Choir, Dr H. P. Allen. Another man who caught her eye was a student named Maurice Roy Ridley, a future chaplain of Balliol, who would influence her characterization of Lord Peter Wimsey years later.

Sayers was a distinguished student, and the liberal education she acquired at Oxford is reflected in her particularly literate novels and essays. In 1915 she took a first in modern (medieval) French. Her early work in languages prepared her well for the translations she was to publish, beginning at the end of the 1920s with *Tristan in Brittany* and stretching to the end of her life, with a translation of *Roland* coming out in 1957 even as she was attempting to finish her most significant work in both literary criticism and translation, the first Penguin edition of Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

Early writing and career

Sayers had begun writing verse in childhood and, after her graduation from Oxford, she brought out two slim volumes of poetry, *Op. I* (1916) and *Catholic Tales and Christian Songs* (1918). Her novels reflect a thorough knowledge of English poetry, with special emphasis on Donne, Tennyson, Shakespeare, and Milton, and one of her curious legacies is that many readers must have met the work of some of these writers first, or perhaps only, in the popular novels of Dorothy L. Sayers. Sayers herself was not a great poet, but her early work in traditional poetic devices taught her an attention to form and the careful employment of language which would later distinguish her novels from the average detective story of her day.

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After graduation Sayers tried teaching, beginning in Hull and later in London. She never really cared for the classroom, however, and between these two positions took employment, first as a publisher's apprentice to Basil Blackwell and then as a secretary at a school in France, where she assisted a dashing young Oxford friend with whom she fell in love, Eric Whelpton. Whelpton did not return the feeling, but he provided yet more elements of that great male figure she would later envision and conquer legions of readers with, Lord Peter Death Bredon Wimsey. In the years after college, when Sayers was casting about for her life's work, another future novelist, Doreen Wallace, knew her at Oxford and later recalled her:

I have never known anyone so brimful of the energy of a well-stocked mind: even at 24 ... she knew an enormous amount about all sorts of subjects ... and nothing would content her but fact. There was, however, a lighter side to this impressive character. Long and slim in those days, small head held alert on slender neck, she loped around Oxford looking for fun.

Reynolds, *Dorothy L. Sayers*, 76

This seems very much in line with Basil Blackwell's assessment of Sayers as an editor, that she seemed 'a racehorse harnessed to a cart' (Brabazon, 75). Finally, in 1922, she landed a job as copywriter at S. H. Bensons, then Britain's largest advertising agency, where she was to earn her living over the next decade, while turning out increasingly serious novels at the rate of roughly one per year. At Bensons she again enjoyed some of the fun and camaraderie she had experienced as a student at Oxford. Although she had ethical concerns about advertising, she was good at it. A creator of what became known as the Campaign of the Century, the wildly popular and financially successful Mustard Club scheme for Colman's mustard, she also penned the slogan associated to this day with Guinness stout, 'My goodness, my Guinness!' Her work in advertising also supplied one of the most memorable settings in her fiction, the believable office life at Pym's Publicity in *Murder must Advertise* (1933).

The detective fiction

Some time about 1920, when thrillers were all the rage, Sayers had conceived the idea of writing detective stories for money. Then one day, while she was plotting a story, the immortal Lord Peter Wimsey walked blithely into her mind, as she would later describe the experience, setting up a residence there more permanent than she might have wished or even believed (How I came to invent the character of Lord Peter, *Harcourt Brace News*, 15 July 1936, 1–2). He became, indeed, a permanent occupant of her mind, and perhaps because he was so believable to her and had so conquered her imagination, he became, like Sherlock Holmes before him, eminently believable to untold others.

In fact, to many around the globe, Lord Peter, as scholar, aesthete and wit, represents the very epitome of the English gentleman, and the Englishness of Sayers's novels, and their delineation of English life between the wars account for much of her enduring appeal to those of

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other cultures and eras. As Sayers's essays and plays deal directly with the issues and concerns of her society, so do her novels reflect the very texture of English life in her day.

Sayers was not so successful with men in real life, falling in love in the early 1920s in London with an unsatisfactory sort, a minor writer named John Cournos, who spurned her, and finally becoming pregnant by a man she did not love, Bill White. In 1924 she gave birth in secrecy to their son, whom she named John Anthony, and whom she took care of from a distance through the ministrations of Ivy, the companion of her youth. On 13 April 1926 she married a Fleet Street journalist and photographer, (Oswald) Atherton Fleming (1881–1950), known as Mac, who shortly thereafter began suffering, like Wimsey, from the effects of his experience in the First World War. They never managed to take her son into their home, as she had hoped upon marriage, but John Anthony took the Fleming name and was represented publicly as their adopted son. Despite a troubled marriage, Sayers stayed with Mac Fleming until his death in 1950. This was the sad domestic drama being played out while she composed her ebullient fiction and self-assured essays.

Sayers was an important scholar and critic of mystery and detective fiction, and in her twelve novels—all but one of which features Wimsey—she set out to bring the modern detective story up to the standards of serious literature, while at the same time making it appeal, as she said, not only to those with a 'caviar' taste in art, but also to 'those in the back-kitchens' (The present status of the mystery story, *London Mercury*, Nov 1930, 47). This comment, in characteristically earthy language, shows how little real snobbery she had, although she never suffered fools gladly. In her fiction, she wanted to reach an audience as wide and diverse as possible, and by general agreement she succeeded at this goal more than anyone else working in her genre, arguably surpassing even her own ideal mystery writer, Wilkie Collins, especially in novels like *The Nine Tailors* (1934), which is as much a meditation on time and change as it is a murder mystery, and in *Gaudy Night* (1935), where she combines a sensational detective story with a genuine English novel. In this, Sayers's best work of fiction, the heroine wrestles with a crucial moral choice, while the hero undergoes significant change, so that they may come together in parity by the novel's end, in the manner of Jane Austen. In the course of the novels, Lord Peter also develops from caricature into a fully realized human personality.

Sayers worked in the so-called golden age of mystery in the 1920s and 1930s, but she transcended her own time, and her novels will continue to appeal to readers who appreciate a high level of verbal wit, keen intelligence, fascinating characters, and a realistically rendered, vibrant fictional world. Among the best are those which can stand on their own against more manifestly serious fiction of their day, especially *Gaudy Night* and *Busman's Honeymoon*, as well as *The Nine Tailors*, with the flawed but brilliant *Murder must Advertise* falling somewhere below them. The transitional epistolary novel, *The Documents in the Case* (1930), is one of the finest examples of that form

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Employing one of the oldest of novelistic formats, this book renders contemporary life with both comedy and profundity. It is also a kind of

rehearsal for the four novels featuring Harriet Vane: *Strong Poison* (1930); *Have his Carcase* (1932); *Gaudy Night* (1935), and *Busman's Honeymoon* (1937). Like *Documents*, these books develop an extended treatment of the marriage question and the issue of relationships between men and women, with Harriet and Peter coming to terms gloriously at the end of *Gaudy Night*.

Sayers's novels consider the themes of individual responsibility, order versus anarchy, the spectre of consumption and waste in the modern world (*Murder must Advertise*), the situation of women (*Unnatural Death*, and all the Harriet Vane books), the devastating effects of war (*The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* and Wimsey's character generally), the meaning of work (in the characters of Wimsey, Vane, Miss Climpson, and Jack Munting), and the modern argument between science and religion (see especially *The Documents in the Case*). In all her fiction, she examines the implications of the class system. She also wrote a number of workmanlike short stories which were gathered into several collections, but by comparison with her novels they are thin, both thematically and stylistically.

Much of Sayers's thinking on the mystery novel and literature generally can be gleaned from her influential reviews for the *Sunday Times*, published in the early 1930s. In them she responded to virtually every mystery writer of her day, including Agatha Christie and Margery Allingham, and in the process revealed much about her attitude to art. Her other important critical work includes the landmark introductions to the three-volume *Omnibus of Crime* series (1929, 1932, and 1935), as well as a comical and insightful romp entitled 'Aristotle on Detective Fiction' (1935), which was based on an Oxford lecture in which she playfully demonstrated the essential classicism of her genre. Later in life she would produce many essays of Dante criticism.

Other writings and later life

No one knows why Sayers stopped writing mystery fiction in the mid-1930s, but the success at that time of her first Wimsey play, *Busman's Honeymoon*, led quickly to a Canterbury Festival commission, for which she wrote *The Zeal of thy House* (1937). With this turn she began writing for the theatre, her culminating accomplishment being the cycle of twelve radio plays composed for the BBC on the life of Christ, *The Man Born to be King* (1941), which was broadcast to a huge audience of Britons during the darkest days of the Second World War. Indeed, in these plays and in works like *Begin Here* (1941) and the Wimsey Papers (1939–40), she offered her countrymen a stirring argument for fighting. The choice, as she saw it, was proposed in the bold title of one of her essays, 'Creed or chaos?' (1947). Her greatest essay, *The Mind of the Maker* (1941), which is both artistic autobiography and examination of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, was also inspired by these difficult days. It remains one of the best inquiries into the creative process ever written.

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Some time in the early 1940s, Sayers began work on the last great passion of her life, the poetry of Dante Alighieri, and she would spend most of the rest of her days working on a verse translation of his *Divine*

Comedy. When death overtook her suddenly on 18 December 1957, she had just viewed a new portrait of herself by Sir William Hutchison, a picture now in the National Portrait Gallery, London. She was cremated and her ashes were deposited at St Anne's House, Dean Street, London, on 23 December. She did not live to finish the third volume of the Dante translation, but her Penguin editions had succeeded in introducing *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* to a new generation. Sayers ended life as she began it, as a scholar and wordsmith. At the end of the twentieth century, she was held in higher esteem in Britain for her theological writings than for her fiction, with the opposite being true in the United States. This may change somewhat as a result of the 1998 publication of her last Wimsey novel, *Thrones, Dominations*, which she abandoned in the early 1940s and which was finished by another novelist, Jill Paton Walsh. The book was an immediate best-seller on the *Sunday Times* list in the winter of 1998.

A woman of deep enthusiasms, wide-ranging intellect, and a great zest for living, Dorothy L. Sayers was large of body and of heart. Her work has inspired many writers, most notably P. D. James, and a literary society is named for her. In 1997 a statue of her was unveiled in Witham, Essex, opposite 24 Newland Street, the house she had shared with Fleming and in which she died.

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Likenesses

H. Coster, photographs, 1938, NPG

W. O. Hutchison, oils, 1949–1950, NPG [see illus.]

J. Doubleday, statue, 1997, Newland Street, Witham, Essex

Mac Fleming, sketches, repro. in Brabazon, *Dorothy L. Sayers*

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Wealth at Death

£36,276 13s. 7d.: probate, 3 Aug 1958, *CGPLA Eng. & Wales*

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