

Taylor University

## Pillars at Taylor University

---

Celebration of Scholarship - All

Celebration of Scholarship

---

Summer 2019

### Even the Parrot and World War II: How Wartime Britain Influenced Dorothy L. Sayers's 1944 Book for "Enlightened Children"

Rachel L. Knight

Taylor University, [rachel\\_knight@taylor.edu](mailto:rachel_knight@taylor.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://pillars.taylor.edu/celebration-of-scholarship>



Part of the [Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Knight, Rachel L., "Even the Parrot and World War II: How Wartime Britain Influenced Dorothy L. Sayers's 1944 Book for "Enlightened Children"" (2019). *Celebration of Scholarship - All*. 3.

<https://pillars.taylor.edu/celebration-of-scholarship/3>

This Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Celebration of Scholarship at Pillars at Taylor University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Celebration of Scholarship - All by an authorized administrator of Pillars at Taylor University. For more information, please contact [pillars@taylor.edu](mailto:pillars@taylor.edu).

*Even the Parrot* and World War II:

How Wartime Britain Influenced Dorothy L. Sayers's 1944 Book for "Enlightened Children"

Rachel Knight

April 29, 2020

Three months after D-Day, after penning a variety of editorials, papers, books, essays, and poems about World War II and wartime Britain, Dorothy L. Sayers published *Even the Parrot: Exemplary Conversations for Enlightened Children* on September 21, 1944. It would later be reprinted in December 1944 and again in 1945,<sup>1</sup> though it was not reprinted again after the war and does not enjoy the same renown as many of her other works. Unlike most of her previous World War II literature, this book does not directly address wartime or religion. However, the influence of wartime Britain is visible on almost every page. Additionally, though this work's title claims that it is for "enlightened children," Sayers's writing is more of a parody of children's literature than a contribution to the genre. Through *Even the Parrot*, Dorothy L. Sayers satirically inspects British life during the early 1940s and World War II's impact on Britain.

In the introduction at the start of the book, Dorothy L. Sayers uses a quote to provide context for the title: "'Even the Parrot,' said my Nurse, severely, 'knows better than to eat the peel.'" <sup>2</sup> Sayers, with her sharp wit shining through even in this short paragraph, retorts with a comment about how she still eats her apples with the skin "except, naturally, at dinner-parties," but she lately began to wonder if her Nurse was actually right, so in this book she will "venture to present a few Exemplary Conversations in the traditional manner, based on my Nurse's hypothesis that God has given wisdom to the animal creation."<sup>3</sup> *Even the Parrot* is divided into five chapters/conversations: "The Canary: Or, Healthful Slumbers," "The Cat: Or, Family Affection," "The Bee-Hive: Or, The Perfect Society," "The Boa-Constrictor: Or, The Rules of

---

1. Dorothy L. Sayers, *Even the Parrot: Exemplary Conversations for Enlightened Children*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1945), iv.

2. Sayers, *Even the Parrot*, vii.

3. Sayers, *Even the Parrot*, vii.

Diet,” and “The Rabbit: Or, Town Planning.” In each of these conversations, Nurse Nature and her two charges, Archibald and Matilda Lively (alongside a variety of other characters), discuss various questions and concerns that come up in their daily lives.

While this book is Sayers’s first foray into children’s literature, it is not a run-of-the-mill piece of edifying literature for children. She weaves satire into all 55 pages of this little book, to the point that it is officially listed as satire in a bibliography of her works.<sup>4</sup> When discussing children and kittens, she refers to human children as “the slowest of all animals to attain maturity,” and continues that “indeed, when in a state of advanced civilization, their youth is so artificially prolonged that in some ways they never become properly mature.”<sup>5</sup> This quote is but one of many examples of satire within this slim volume.. As stated by Lisa Sainsbury in a 2017 article in *Children’s Literature in Education*, “the satiric tone [in *Even the Parrot*] signals the literary status of a thought experiment in which narrative tempers paradigm.”<sup>6</sup> Sayers takes a well-known and well-used formula in children’s literature, the thought experiment, and turns it on its head. She uses satire within a seemingly innocuous piece of children’s literature as a unique way of discussing the war and its impact on Britain.

In the first chapter of *Even the Parrot*, titled “The Canary: Or, Healthful Slumbers,” Sayers repeatedly references then-current British life and wartime. The premise of the chapter, blackout curtains and their influence on sleep, comes from one of the most well-known home front impacts of World War II: blackouts. Countries did not want their enemies to be able to find

---

4. Colleen B. Gilbert, *A Bibliography of the Works of Dorothy L. Sayers* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1978), 231.

5. Sayers, *Even the Parrot*, 9.

6. Lisa Sainsbury, “‘But the Soldier’s Remains were Gone’: Thought Experiments in Children’s Literature,” *Children’s Literature in Education* 48, no. 2 (June 2017): 161, doi: 10.1007/s10583-016-9274-6.

and bomb them at night due to light from houses and streetlights. In fact, in *Even the Parrot*, Archibald and Matilda's father is an air warden. Additionally, Sayers mentions British Double Summer Time "which differs by two hours from Greenwich Mean Time and by sixty minutes from the old Summer Time we had before the War from April to September,"<sup>7</sup> a time zone which was used during World War II to save daylight. This short chapter contains other mentions of World War II which are not directly connected to blackouts. Dr. Quickstep is described as only having obtained his position due to the war giving Dr. Draught the choice between Dr. Quickstep and a woman. Additionally, Hitler is mentioned by name on page 6 and 7, with Matilda praising him for "imposing this excellent rule [the blackouts] upon us, and thus improving our health and comfort" and Nurse Nature reminding Matilda that "the title *Herr* should be reserved for gentlemen."<sup>8</sup> In "The Canary," Sayers uses the war as a conversation starter, with Nurse Nature, Matilda, and Archibald's discussion centered on an aspect of the war's impact on their lives.

Throughout the second chapter, titled "The Cat: Or, Family Affection," various wartime topics are mentioned in passing. Unlike in "The Canary," the chapter's premise (a mother cat having a spat with her kitten) is not based in a wartime issue, but the war's influence is present in this chapter nonetheless. Pat-a-Cake's kitten Spitfire shares a name with a Royal Air Force plane from World War II. The discussion on childhood and maturity in human children included an aside about then-current life when Nurse Nature stated: "But as matters are to-day, the only item in this programme that a young gentleman would be likely to carry out... would be the going to the Wars."<sup>9</sup> For boys on the home front during the war, the main thing they could expect as they

---

7. Sayers, *Even the Parrot*, 2.

8. Sayers, *Even the Parrot*, 6-7.

9. Sayers, *Even the Parrot*, 11.

reached adulthood was military service, while during peacetime they could expect university, marriage, and their own estate to be in their futures. Additionally, when discussing upbringing of children, Nurse Nature brings up that yesterday's journal mentioned a declining birthrate, which was due in part to families being busier in wartime. Finally, when discussing their role as Pat-a-Cake's nursemaids, Matilda remarks that Pat-a-Cake is lucky to "keep so great a staff of domestics, even in war-time,"<sup>10</sup> referring to how the Lively family helps Pat-a-Cake care for her kittens. In "The Cat," the war serves as a backdrop to Sayers's commentary on childhood.

"The Bee-Hive: Or, The Perfect Society," the third chapter, starts with a direct reference to the impact of the war. The reason for the scenery change is that the Lively parents wanted their kids away from the aerial bombardment in the city. In fact, it is stated at the start of the chapter that they stayed at the farm for more than a year. Also, in this chapter, the life lesson from Nurse Nature has to do with war. When Archibald latches onto her passing mention that men are necessary for war, she tells him "if there were no men to make the war, I think the women and children would manage very well, since they would only need to be protected from one another."<sup>11</sup> As she concludes her argument, she and Matilda determine that the breeding of men is comparable to when the Germans secretly manufactured war machinery. In "The Bee-Hive," the war sparks the events of the chapter, since the Lively children would not be at the Thatchett farm if Britain was not being bombed. Also, Sayers uses the bees as a way to discuss men and war.

In the fourth chapter of *Even the Parrot*, titled "The Boa-Constrictor: Or, The Rules of Diet," the war is more of a backdrop than a plot point. Uncle Peregrine left South America as

---

10. Sayers, *Even the Parrot*, 13.

11. Sayers, *Even the Parrot*, 24.

soon as he heard war had broken out and headed for England, though it took him two years, two encounters with torpedoes, and a ride in a Coastal Command (maritime arm of the Royal Air Force) airplane to reach the country. He is staying with the Livelys because he wishes to join the war, but the government is hesitant due to his age. Besides the arrival of Uncle Peregrine, there are a couple of war references. When discussing diet, Matilda says “Although, now that I come to think of it, that first rule, *Eat what you like*, is not very easy to practise in time of war,”<sup>12</sup> referring to wartime practices such as rationing. Later in the chapter, Uncle Peregrine mentions points and food tins, again referring to rationing and food restrictions during wartime. In “The Boa Constrictor,” the war takes Uncle Peregrine from the wilderness of South America to England, and serves as inspiration for Sayers to discuss eating habits.

Unlike the previous chapter, “The Rabbit: Or, Town Planning” (the fifth and final chapter) is steeped in references to World War II. In the moors, there are “...Home Guards at exercise, Canadian troops rehearsing military manoeuvres, and persons descending by parachute from flying-machines in preparation for raids upon the continent of Europe,”<sup>13</sup> along with bomb damage within the town visible from the moors. Home Guards were a citizen militia during World War II, and the most likely reason for so many troops up in the moors is the current fighting in western Europe, since this book was published shortly after D-Day. Papa Lively’s binoculars had been offered to the Royal Air Force, since the military desperately needed more supplies at the time, but were rejected due to not being powerful enough. Angelina gets frustrated at the others for finding pleasure from seeing war’s devastation through the binoculars, but Matilda corrects her by saying her pleasure comes from observation and recollection, not the

---

12. Sayers, *Even the Parrot*, 36.

13. Sayers, *Even the Parrot*, 42.

ravages of war. When the conversation shifts to the idea of trying to rebuild City Hall and much of the town after the war, there is a debate on whether they should build for peace or for war. Archibald points out that, no matter how well they build, the enemy will invent something to overcome any defenses. Mr. Ramrod, the caretaker of the moors, has many good quotes about war, culminating with the following: “in time of war men built for war; and in time of peace they built for peace; it is only in these latter days that, perceiving war to be imminent, men have obstinately built for peace, as though by burning their umbrellas they could hope to avert the rain.”<sup>14</sup> This quote summarizes the focus of the chapter: should we build for war or for peace? In “The Rabbit,” the war is front and center, with the entire discussion focused on the war.

Sayers’s other wartime writings share some similarities with *Even the Parrot*, but there are also significant differences. Her first wartime publication was an editorial titled “What Do We Believe?” published one week after England declared war on Germany.<sup>15</sup> This editorial focuses on a Christian response to this war, using a creed for structure, and emphasizes the importance of belief and the creative will in the face of defeat, war, and suffering.<sup>16</sup> Later in 1939, Sayers penned a longer response to wartime concerns titled *Begin Here: A War-Time Essay*. In *Begin Here*, she refers to war as an “ugly disaster,” “the breaking up of security and habit,” and “the letting-in of energy upon the things that have become static and corrupt.”<sup>17</sup> Later, in 1943, she penned a satirical essay about Britain and its failings during and between the

---

14. Sayers, *Even the Parrot*, 54.

15. Ralph E. Hone, *Dorothy L. Sayers: A Literary Biography* (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 1979), 95-6

16. Dorothy L. Sayers, *Christian Letters to a Post-Christian World: A Selection of Essays* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1969), 27-30.

17. Dorothy L. Sayers, *Begin Here: A War-Time Essay*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, December 1940), 11, 14.

wars titled “They Tried to Be Good,” which was later included in *Unpopular Opinions*.<sup>18</sup> Sayers uses “They Tried to Be Good” to discuss the same issues as “What Do We Believe?” and *Begin Here*, but in a different way, using phrases like “stripped naked in the arena to await the pounce of the beast”<sup>19</sup> to describe Britain instead of maintaining a more serious tone. Additionally, “They Tried to Be Good” foreshadows *Even the Parrot*’s structure while criticizing the British, stating the following:

Our worst betrayals, our most flagrant stupidities resulted from our efforts to obey the contradictory orders of the silliest nursery governess ever foisted on a well-meaning bunch of children. I have no use whatever for Enlightened Opinion, whose science is obsolete, its psychology superficial, its theology beneath contempt and its history nowhere; besides, it is a craven thing.<sup>20</sup>

In all three of these wartime writings, along with many others, Sayers discusses British response to war, and what the British should do about this war. While some of her writings, like “They Tried to Be Good,” are satirical, none of them are quite the same as *Even the Parrot*.

*Even the Parrot*, despite its relevancy to then-current events and Sayers’s earlier writings, did not cause much of a splash in literary circles when its first edition was published on September 21, 1944. Even though Sayers was a well-known author at the time, there is only one review of *Even the Parrot* which is referenced in any contemporary sources, and it often serves as the only reference used for information on this slim volume. This review, from the Times Literary Supplement, was not released until November 25, more than two months after its publication date. *Even the Parrot* and six other books, according to the reviewer, “defy

---

18. Hone, *Literary Biography*, 137.

19. Dorothy L. Sayers, *Unpopular Opinions*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, March 1951), 103-4.

20. Sayers, *Unpopular Opinions*, 105.

classification,” though they were instructive “by the insidious route of entertainment.”<sup>21</sup> The review is positive overall, saying that “she [Sayers] must have had good fun writing it, and most of its readers will have equally good fun doing their share.”<sup>22</sup> This review is often the only source other than *Even the Parrot* itself cited in secondary sources. On November 13, 1945, Sayers referred to *Even the Parrot* as “my world-shaking book... to which nobody pays attention” in a letter to Maurice Reckitt.<sup>23</sup> This shows that Sayers had a very high opinion of this little book, and hints that she expected it to have a larger impact on its readers. Additionally, on December 8, Sayers wrote to C.S. Lewis and spent an entire paragraph describing the hopelessness of reviewers when faced with irony in books like *Even the Parrot*:

“Reviewers are hopeless. Most of them are either too old or far too young for the job. Another thing that defeats them is irony. I expected them to be annoyed by my *Even the Parrot* – but it was much worse; they found it wholly unintelligible. I suppose irony and satire can only be written and reviewed from a stable position of some kind, and they have none.”<sup>24</sup>

Sayers intentionally wrote *Even the Parrot* as satire, though it seems that some, if not many, who read it did not pick up on her satiric tone. She expected readers to be annoyed at her use of satire, not hopelessly confused by its presence. Alas, even the best writing can fall prey to readers that fail to grasp its intended meaning.

Sayers, in *Even the Parrot*, weaves satire into Nurse Nature’s lessons about canaries, cats, beehives, boa constrictors, and rabbits as a way of discussing World War II. Each chapter is

---

21. Marjorie Hessel Tiltman, “Children’s Books, III: A Touch of Instruction,” *Times Literary Supplement* (London), November 25, 1944, 574, The Times Literary Supplement Historical Archive, <http://tinyurl.com/tinyurl/A6EQp3>

22. Tiltman, “Children’s Books, III,” 574.

23. Barbara Reynolds, ed, *1944-1950: A Noble Daring*, Vol. 3 of *The Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers* (Cambridge: Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 1998), 175.

24. Reynolds, *1944-1950*, 180-1.

packed to the brim with references to wartime, and the lessons learned by Archibald and Matilda Lively more closely resemble satirical commentary of wartime conditions than lessons a sane person would share with children. This little book showcases Dorothy L. Sayers's humor and wit by using a familiar structure, instructional literature for children, and using it to provide commentary on World War II.

## Bibliography

- Gilbert, Colleen B. *A Bibliography of the Works of Dorothy L. Sayers*. Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1978.
- Hone, Ralph E. *Dorothy L. Sayers: A Literary Biography*. Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 1979.
- Reynolds, Barbara, editor. *1944-1950: A Noble Daring*. Vol. 3 of *The Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers*. Cambridge: Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 1998.
- Sainsbury, Lisa. “‘But the Soldier’s Remains were Gone’: Thought Experiments in Children’s Literature.” *Children’s Literature in Education* 48, no. 2 (June 2017): 152-68. doi: 10.1007/s10583-016-9274-6.
- Sayers, Dorothy L. *Begin Here: A War-Time Essay*. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, December 1940.
- . *Christian Letters to a Post-Christian World: A Selection of Essays*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1969.
- . *Even the Parrot: Exemplary Conversations for Enlightened Children*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1945.
- . *Unpopular Opinions*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, March 1951.
- Tiltman, Marjorie Hessel. “Children’s Books, III: A Touch of Instruction.” *Times Literary Supplement* (London), November 25, 1944. The Times Literary Supplement Historical Archive. <http://tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/A6EQp3>