The First and Second Wave of Dorothy L. Sayers

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Dorothy L. Sayers broke nearly every mould in her life. She was one of the first women to graduate from Oxford and pursued careers in editing, writing, and the theatre. She wrote untraditional women like Harriet Vane who were angry and indecisive about marriage, and she wrote men like Peter Wimsey, who had emotional interdialog that expanded on his vulnerabilities. This was progressive for Dorothy’s time and unfortunately remains an anomaly into the 21st century. While Sayers herself did not like to associate herself with feminism, critics and readers of her work in the decades since her death have done it for her. Dorothy Sayers has been critiqued for exhibiting a narrow view of feminism, but her writings and life reflect the first and second waves of feminism, even if the latter did not yet exist in her time.

First, Dorothy Sayers exhibited characteristics of first wave feminism. Maureen Anne Moynagh and Nancy M. Forestell, authors of the multivolume work, Documenting First Wave Feminisms, outlined what first wave feminism was. First wave feminism was about women’s suffrage and abolition of alcohol, and was deeply rooted in Protestantism. “The demand for a single moral standard was a key and for the most part unifying issue among women reformers, while others such as the legalization of birth control were fraught with tensions and divisions” (Moynagh 199). However, the critique with Sayers (and the first wave of feminism in general) is that women of higher social standing were the only ones to benefit from feminism at the time. “For Anglo-Celtic middle-class reformers in particular the activist project of moral regeneration was part of a broader program of nation and empire building, albeit one in which asymmetries or race and class were more often reinforced than subverted.” (Moynagh 199). This critique is well founded of Dorothy Sayers. In Are Women Human? Sayers makes no mention of the plights of women across race, social class, etc. Mary McDermott Shilder would disagree. As the author of
the Introduction to *Are Women Human?*, Shilder asserts that it is Sayers’ thesis of women and men as creatures that serve their functions is what make them human, that “we are all equal in our creaturehood, whatever our sex, color, age, background, or abilities” (*Are Women Human?* 8). If moral reform was the goal of first wave feminism, then Sayers largely asserted her stance in the essay “Christian Morality”, an essay that is part of a larger work entitled, *Letters to a Diminished Church*. Sayers’ main critique of the Church (which comes heavily into play during the next paragraph) is that the Church only focuses on abstinence from premarital sex as morality. “Now, I do not suggest that the Church does right to pay attention to the regulation of bodily appetites and the proper observance of holidays. What I do suggest is that by overemphasizing this side of morality, to the comparative neglect of others, she has not only betrayed her mission but, incidentally, also defeated her own aims even about morality” (*Letters* 103). Sayers’ definition of morality in a nutshell would be that good work done well should be focused on. Sayers disregards social conventions on work and gender in her essay, *Are Women Human?* And it can be inferred by her essay “Christian Morality” that she does not altogether disregard color, age, or class. “The chief danger is lest the churches, having for so long acquiesced in the exploiting of many by the few, should now think to adjust the balance by helping in the exploitation of the few by the many, instead of attacking the false standards by which everybody, rich and poor alike, has now come to assess the value of life and work” (*Letters* 107). Thus, Sayers condemns the Church (and therefore the people that make up its body) and classism. In doing so, Sayers exhibited first wave ideas and foreshadowed second wave feminism.

While the second wave of feminism did not really take off until the 1960’s, some of Dorothy L. Sayers’ work foreshadows its blossoming. The article, “What was the Second Wave
Feminist Movement?” via dailyhistory.org, outlines the beginnings of second wave feminism. Again, feminism was all about major social transition, most notably for Western countries starting from the 1960s and onward. This included women's participation in the labor force following WWII and increased prosperity that forced a major social awareness movement that questioned the roles of gender in society. Largely, literature began to question perceived traditional gender roles and exposed social problems created by such roles on women. After a period of time, the movement gained greater traction through more authors in the 1960s. Betty Friedan, author of *The Feminine Mystique*, being one of them. In this book, Friedan “questioned white, middle class ideals of family life and motherhood, particularly as domestic life had stifled women and their aspirations. Friedan includes interviews with women who were unhappy in their home life, debunking the ideals of the 1950’s that often showed a happy family with men at work and women focused on housework” (What was the Second Wave Feminist Movement?). This is an idea that Dorothy entertained through character in her detective novel, *Gaudy Night*. In it, a character named Harriet Vane states that she is a much better at writing than she is at sweeping floors. In real life, these same ideas of work and vocation regardless of gender are present in *Are Women Human?* and *Letters to a Diminished Church*. “Later, the merger of racial and other social inequality was seen as part of wider social struggles in society. Ultimately, the second wave feminist movement gave women the opportunity to start conversations about how their social inequality and begin to think about gender, identity, sexuality, race, and class as all equally important factors” (“What was the Second Wave?”). As asserted above, Dorothy hints at such social reform, but it never became fully realized in her work. What did become fully realized was a freer sexual dialogue. Millets, an author cited in “What was the Second Wave Feminist Movement?”}, argued that before any other type of oppression existed, elite men first
oppressed people based on sex and gender. “In Drummond’s commentary and numerous other feminist discussions dealing with moral reform, males were often depicted as the principal source of sexual disorder, with female activists being disparaging of the “excessiveness” of male desire” (Moynagh 201). Dorothy was again ahead of this assertion and the goal of fellow reformers by protecting women and girls from sexual immorality. Indeed, Sayers argues that “the other six deadly sins” other than sexual immorality must be addressed as well in a essay under the same name. While Sayers was not on the same plane as “female sex radicals” in the United States and Britain, like socialist Dora Forster Kerr, she did change her mind about premarital sex after her first love, John Cournos, left her because she would not have premarital sex with him to “prove her love”. Such an account is present in Barbara Reynolds’ work, Dorothy L. Sayers: Her Life and Soul.

In her pamphlet Sex Radicalism as Seen by an Emancipated Woman of the New Time (1905) she [Kerr] portrayed relations between men and women as a “sex war” that persisted to the detriment of the latter. As part of a broader critique of monogamous relationships and the institution of marriage, Kerr argued that sexual pleasure or “sex love” should not be depicted in negative terms or narrowly conned to marital relationships, but viewed as a “power for good and a principle to regulate the conduct of men and women as equal comrades.” (Moynagh 201)

Sayers, it has been established, was for this humanist view that “men and women were equal comrades”. This would have been against mainstream thoughts on sex and male/female relationships that were considered feminist. Consider Canadian activist Lady Julia Drummond.

“Taking British law as her point of reference, though, an ongoing common practice as it
was assumed legislation in Canada should replicate as much as possible the legal traditions of the mother country, Drummond objected to the additional requirement that girls in Canada had to prove they were “of previously chaste character.” In her view this clause largely abrogated the legal and moral protections that should be provided young girls at the expense of defending the interests of men.

This is not the part the Sayers would disagree with. “Drummond reinforced ‘the hierarchies of class as she attempted to deconstruct those of gender’ in her assertion that ‘in the class of life where such offences are most frequent, girls thus led are not likely to be able to substantiate a good character” (Moynagh 199-200)’. This assertion that sexually active women are not of moral uprightness would have exasperated Sayers. Again, that was not what she believed should be the focus of morality even though she did say that, “the mournful and medical aspect of twentieth-century pornography and promiscuity strongly suggests that we have reached one of these periods of spiritual depression where people go to bed because they have nothing better to do” (Letters 77). This idea is even contrary to third wave feminism, though that is not the focus of this essay.

In conclusion, Dorothy Sayers has been critiqued for only exhibiting a narrow view of feminism, but her writings and life reflect the first and second waves of feminism, even if the latter did not yet exist in her time. She pioneered fiction writing for women in Britain and asserted her beliefs on gender roles even when such opinions were unpopular. Despite this, Sayers’ was celebrated in her own lifetime as well as into the 21st century.
Works Cited


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