

Taylor University

Pillars at Taylor University

Papers Presented at Previous Colloquia


Center for the Study of C.S. Lewis & Friends

6-3-2018

"Let Us Thank the Author Who Invented Her": Lewis on Reading Dorothy Sayers

K. Alan Snyder

Follow this and additional works at: <https://pillars.taylor.edu/colloquium-papers>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [History Commons](#), [Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

“Let Us Thank the Author Who Invented Her”: Lewis on Reading Dorothy Sayers

Dr. K. Alan Snyder

Dorothy Sayers was never present at an Inklings meeting. She was never considered as a member of that weekly sharing of readings and thoughts. Yet she is often seen in conjunction with the Inklings because she graduated from Oxford herself and was friends with two of its leading members: Charles Williams and C. S. Lewis. Sayers knew Williams first, then initiated a correspondence with Lewis that grew over time and resulted in, first, a collegial relationship, and then a more personal friendship. Lewis, responding during the last year of his life about his connections with Sayers, gave this summary:

Dorothy Sayers, so far as I know, was not even acquainted with any of us except Charles Williams and me. We two had got to know her at different times and in different ways. In my case, the initiative came from her. She was the first person of importance who ever wrote me a fan-letter. I liked her, originally, because she liked me; later, for the extraordinary zest and edge of her conversation—as I like a high wind. She was a friend, not an ally. Needless to say, she never met our own club, and probably never knew of its existence.¹

What was it about Sayers’s writing that appealed to Lewis? Why did he find himself drawn to a number of her works? Through an examination of Sayers’s *The Mind of the Maker* and her radio play *The Man Born to Be King*, and insights from Lewis’s correspondence with and about her, particularly concerning her new translation of Dante’s *The Divine Comedy*, certain conclusions may be drawn.

Dorothy Sayers and Me

Although I have been an avid reader of Lewis my entire life, my only interaction for a long time with anything Sayers wrote was her essay, “The Lost Tools of Learning,” which I read

¹ Lewis to the editor of *Encounter*, [1?] January 1963, in Walter Hooper, ed., *Collected Letters, Vol. III* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2007).

sometime in the early 1990s as I was delving into the movement among homeschoolers to establish a more classical education model. Her explication of the medieval emphasis on the grammar, logic, and rhetoric connected with all subject matter was enlightening. But there my reading of Sayers stopped until my interest in Lewis led to writing a book on him and awakened a desire to seek out more writers of his ilk. Tolkien I had already ingested, so I first turned to the novels of Charles Williams. Then when the Wade Center's blog, *Off the Shelf*, began a short series on one of Sayers's novels, *The Nine Tailors*, I was intrigued enough to order the book in an electronic version (my bookcases are already on the verge of succumbing to the inevitable overflow quite common for an academic) to see why it was considered so significant.

I found the novel, which centered on her favorite aristocratic and amateur detective, Lord Peter Wimsey, to be intelligent, suffused with an understated humor, and somewhat different from what I had always considered to be the classic detective story. At the end of the book, there was a teaser for the next one in the series, *Gaudy Night*, and the teaser worked—I purchased that one as well. This novel introduced me to the woman who would eventually become Wimsey's wife, Harriet Vane. Again, I was impressed not only with the writing but with the atmosphere she created in her fictional Oxford College for women. Once introduced to the Vane character, I had to find out where she first appeared in the series and why she had been charged with murder, so that led to *Strong Poison* for the backstory. In all, I read five of the Wimsey novels and came away impressed with Sayers's storytelling with a solid emphasis on character development.

As the idea of a paper on Lewis and Sayers began to percolate, I bought *The Man Born to Be King* and saw immediately in the introduction concepts that I had also seen in Lewis. I then turned to *The Mind of the Maker*, thinking I only had to skim it to get the overall feeling for why Lewis might like it, but instead found myself engrossed in each chapter, and using each chapter

as a portion of my morning devotions. Finally, I read every letter Lewis wrote to Sayers.

Although I wasn't able on short notice to spend any time in the Sayers collection, much of what she said to Lewis in letters was incorporated into Walter Hooper's notes in the Lewis collection. Those letters also included Lewis's commentary on Sayers's contribution on Dante in the volume, *Essays Presented to Charles Williams*, and Lewis's praise for her new translation of Dante's *A Divine Comedy*. With that research completed, I felt it was time to put it all together and try to explain exactly why Lewis liked Sayers.

The Mind of the Maker

Lewis read *The Mind of the Maker* shortly after it went public in 1941 and provided a short review of it in the journal *Theology*. He introduces the theme immediately: "The purpose of this book is to throw light both on the doctrine of the Blessed Trinity and on the process whereby a work of art (specially of literature) is produced, by drawing an analogy between the two." Of this he wholly approves. Then he proceeds to caution the reader about the one feature of the book that gives him concern:

I think that in an age when idolatry of human genius is one of our most insidious dangers Miss Sayers would have been prudent to stress more continuously than she does the fact that the analogy *is* merely an analogy. I am afraid that some vainglorious writers may be encouraged to forget that they are called "creative" only by a metaphor—that an unbridgeable gulf yawns between the human activity of re-combining elements from a pre-existing world and the Divine activity of first inventing, and then endowing with substantial existence, the elements themselves.²

This concern for Lewis was centered on the arrogance that sometimes infuses the mind of the artist. He merely wished Sayers had stressed more the very distinct difference between the actual Creator and humans who sub-create at a lower level.

² Lewis, "Review of *The Mind of the Maker*," *Theology* (1 October 1941): 248, <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0040571X4104325618>.

Yet that is his only negative remark on the substance of the book. “In general,” he continues, “I find Miss Sayers’ development of her analogy full of illumination both on the theological and on the literary side.” He singles out for praise chapters on “Free Will and Miracle,” “The Incarnation,” and “Scalene Trinities.” That last one, he confesses, “cannot be explained to those who have not read the book, but I believe it to be a really illuminating contribution to literary classification.” He concludes with appreciation for what she has offered, yet also with a warning to those who think too highly of their own literary talents:

This is the first "little book on religion" I have read for a long time in which every sentence is intelligible and every page advances the argument. I recommend it heartily to theologians and critics. To novelists and poets, if they are already inclined in any degree to idolatry of their own vocation, I recommend it with much more caution. They had better read it fasting.³

Writing to lifelong friend Arthur Greeves later that year, he noted, “Dorothy Sayers *The Mind of the Maker* I thought good on the whole: good enough to induce me to try one of her novels—*Gaudy Night*.” He admitted, though, that the latter didn’t really suit him: “But then, as you know, detective stories aren’t my taste, so that proves nothing.”⁴ His dislike of detective stories aside, at least the impetus for trying one came from his reading of *The Mind of the Maker*.

Sayers made the initial contact between the two because of her admiration for Lewis’s writings. She asked him to write a book for her “Bridgeheads” series intended to prepare readers for post-WWII reconstruction. Her *The Mind of the Maker* was to be the first in the series. She was particularly impressed with Letter 18 in *The Screwtape Letters* dealing with love and marriage and wanted Lewis to write on this for her series. He ultimately declined the offer, preferring that she write the book herself, perhaps as a novel or a treatise.⁵ “Every word you

³ *Ibid.*, 249.

⁴ Lewis to Arthur Greeves, 23 December 1941, in Walter Hooper, ed., *Collected Letters, Vol. II*.

⁵ Lewis to Sayers, April 1942, *ibid.*

wrote [in her previous letter] showed that you had the book in your own head and just straining at the leash,” he encouraged. “All you’re doing is to try to get someone else to do the ‘ghosting’ (or ‘son-ing?’) But it’s no good: you’re obviously going to write this yourself.”⁶

In their early correspondence, Lewis doesn’t really expound further on his views of *The Mind of the Maker*, but an analysis of some of the concepts within it may offer some clues as to what else he would have admired in the work.

The very first chapter, “The ‘Laws’ of Nature and Opinion,” serves as a complement to the way Lewis later expounded on the subject in *Mere Christianity*. There is a reality built into the universe, Sayers asserts, that no one in his right mind would ever attempt to deny.

If the M.C.C. [Marylebone Cricket Club] were to agree, in a thoughtless moment, that the ball must be so hit by the batsman that it should never come down to earth again, cricket would become an impossibility. A vivid sense of reality usually restrains sports committees from promulgating laws of this kind; other legislators occasionally lack this salutary realism.⁷

Even the subtle sarcasm toward the government that she adds at the end would probably find a receptive audience in Lewis.

Sayers goes on to say that there is a universal moral law that is behind even the moral code by which a society may function. Christianity, she maintains, has called this the natural law, and “the more closely the moral code agrees with the natural law, the more it makes for freedom in human behavior; the more widely it departs from the natural law, the more it tends to enslave mankind and to produce the catastrophes called ‘judgments of God.’” A society may have a moral code that wants people to behave like St. Francis, she posits, but what if that society prefers a code more in line with the Emperor Caligula? One must then refer to the natural law upon which the moral code ought to be based. By doing so, one should be able to prove “at the

⁶ Lewis to Sayers, 6 April 1942, *ibid.*

⁷ Dorothy Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (NY: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1941), 8.

bar of experience, that St. Francis does in fact enjoy a freer truth to essential human nature than Caligula, and that a society of Caligulas is more likely to end in catastrophe than a society of Franciscans.”⁸ Her conclusion is very Lewis-like:

Defy the commandments of the natural law, and the race will perish in a few generations; co-operate with them, and the race will flourish for ages to come. That is the fact; whether we like it or not, the universe is made that way. This commandment is interesting because it specifically puts forward the moral *law* as the basis of the moral *code*: *because* God has made the world like this and will not alter it, *therefore* you must not worship your own fantasies, but pay allegiance to the truth.⁹

Chapter three, “Idea, Energy, and Power,” develops Sayers’s thesis by showing how any completed work in life starts with an idea in the mind. This correlates nicely with what Lewis said to his brother, Warnie, when the idea of a senior devil instructing a junior devil popped into his mind while sitting in church.¹⁰ He later explained that the genesis of Narnia was “a picture” in his mind “of a faun carrying an umbrella and parcels in a snowy wood.” He also noted that when he decided to write the tales, “Aslan came bounding into it.” How? “I think I had been having a good many dreams of lions about that time.”¹¹ Sayers is making the same point in this chapter. As she notes,

The ordinary man is apt to say: “I thought you began by collecting material and working out the plot.” The confusion here is not merely over the words “first” and “begin.” In fact the “Idea”—or rather the writer’s realization of his own idea—does precede any mental or physical work upon the materials or on the course of the story within a time-series.¹²

In chapter four, “The Energy Revealed in Creation,” she stresses that a truly imaginative work demands some diversity within it to properly emphasize the unity. The other side of an argument, so to speak, must be given voice in order to give the work its “vital power.” Literature

⁸ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁰ Lewis to Warnie Lewis, 20 July 1940, in Hooper, ed., *Collected Letters, Vol. II*.

¹¹ Lewis, “It All Began with a Picture,” in *On Stories and Other Essays on Literature* (Harcourt, 1982), 53.

¹² Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker*, 38.

that is merely “edifying” or “propaganda” will lose that vital power. “The Energy is active only in one part of the whole, and in consequence the wholeness is destroyed and the Power diminished. You cannot, in fact, give God His due without giving the devil his due also.”¹³ This is essentially what Lewis does in *Perelandra* when he allows the ongoing dialogue/argument between Ransom and Weston (the Un-man). If there were no counterpoint to the truths Ransom is offering the Green Lady of that planet, the drama would be sapped from the narrative. It’s the dynamic of the diversity of views that ultimately reveals the soundness of what Ransom is saying. The story would be lifeless—except for the descriptions of the beauty of the unfallen environment—and there would be little reason to invest time in it because it would only be a work of propaganda.

Lewis also guided his readers into an appreciation for a written work itself, and downplayed the desire to delve more into the author than the work the author has given us. Sayers says virtually the same thing when she asserts, “To put it crudely, we may, and do, know the *Iliad* without knowing Homer.” She bemoans the many foolish speculations about Shakespeare and admonishes,

The itch for personally knowing authors torments most of us; we feel that if we could somehow get at the man himself, we should obtain more help and satisfaction from him than from his chosen self-revelation. . . . And it is desirable to bear in mind—when dealing with the human maker at any rate—that his chosen way of revelation *is* through his works. To persist in asking, as so many of us do, “What did you mean by this book?” is to invite bafflement: the book itself is what the writer means.¹⁴

Chapter eight is appropriately entitled “Pentecost,” as it focuses on the power of words to move men. Lewis was a dedicated wordsmith who knew that the right words used at the right time in just the right way, could spark the imagination and jumpstart the mind. Sayers shares that

¹³ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 56-57.

same mindset and worries that people don't really grasp the power of words for both good and evil. She warns, "The habit, very prevalent today, of dismissing words as 'just words' takes no account of their power." Sadly, men are often moved by the wrong kinds of words. Words—mere words—can often lead to unforeseen and devastating actions. Reflecting on the reality of 1941, in the midst of WWII, Sayers remarks, "At the time when these words are being written, we are witnessing a fearful judgment of blood, resulting from the incarnation in deeds of an Idea to which, when it was content with a verbal revelation, we paid singularly little heed." She then offers a critique of modern education—something Lewis undoubtedly affirmed when he read her words—noting that it seems to short-circuit the power of words too often. However, she cautions, "Pentecost will happen, whether from within or without official education. From some quarter of other, the Power will descend, to flame or to smolder until it is ready to issue in a new revelation. We need not suppose that, because the mind of the reader is inert to Plato, it will therefore be inert to Nietzsche or Karl Marx. Failing those, it may respond to Wilhelmina Stitch or to Hollywood."¹⁵

Lewis often touched on what he considered the wrong emphasis on the concept of originality in writing. "Of all literary virtues 'originality,' in the vulgar sense, has . . . the shortest

¹⁵ Ibid., 111-113.

Wilhemina Stitch is the pseudonym of Ruth Jacobs who was born in November 1888 in Cambridge. Ruth married a Canadian Elisha Arakie Cohen in 1908 while he was visiting England and she returned with him to Winnipeg where he was a lecturer at the University of Manitoba. Her husband died in 1919 following a violent influenza epidemic and she was obliged to seek employment to support herself and her son. She, therefore, began work writing advertisements for the T. Eaton Company before writing book reviews, editing the women's page and writing short verses as "Wilhelmina Stitch" for the *Winnipeg Telegram*. Her "daily 'stitch,' short verse about the human and homely incidents and feelings of life" became most popular. She remarried in 1923 and, with her Scottish physician husband Frank Lang Collie, she moved to England, where, as Ruth Collie, she settled in London and worked for the *Daily Graphic* and then the *Daily Herald* with her "daily stitch" reaching over two million readers every day. Indeed she became such a cultural institution that her daily *Fragrant Minute* poetry piece was syndicated in various British papers and journals and the Cambridge theatrical productions parodied her.

life,” he opined.¹⁶ Lewis’s essay, “Membership,” includes this comment: “No man who values originality will ever be original. But try to tell the truth as you see it, try to do any bit of work as well as it can be done for the work’s sake, and what men call originality will come unsought.”¹⁷ In the same spirit, Sayers instructs her readers, “The demand for ‘originality’—with the implication that the reminiscence of other writers is a sin against originality and a defect in the work—is a recent one and would have seemed quite ludicrous to poets of the Augustan Age, or of Shakespeare’s time. The traditional view is that each new work should be a fresh focus of power through which former streams of beauty, emotion, and reflection are directed.”¹⁸

Thrice in *The Mind of the Maker* Sayers quotes Lewis—this was before she made first contact with him, thereby showing her familiarity with his works. One quote is from *The Allegory of Love* emphasizing the importance of purity of intention in writing.¹⁹ The other two are from *The Problem of Pain*, one quoting Lewis on the nature of God’s love, “the consuming fire Himself, the Love that made the worlds, persistent as the artist’s love for his work.”²⁰ The second quote uses Lewis to affirm Sayers’s belief in the difference between kindness and love and the artist’s love for his/her work.²¹ Although Lewis, in his correspondence, didn’t elaborate on precisely why he liked *The Mind of the Maker*, it’s not difficult to see the congruence of thought with Sayers on a multitude of subjects.

¹⁶ Lewis, “Donne and Love Poetry in the Seventeenth Century,” in *Selected Literary Essays* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 122.

¹⁷ Lewis, “Membership,” in *The Weight of Glory* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1980), 175.

¹⁸ Sayers, *Mind of the Maker*, 121.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 150.

²⁰ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (Orig. 1940; NY: HarperCollins, 2001), 39, in *ibid.*, 125.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 32-33, in *ibid.*, 224-225.

The Man Born to Be King

Sayers became a center of controversy when she scripted and had produced a series of radio plays on the life of Christ that she called *The Man Born to Be King*. The BBC Home Service aired the plays from December 1941 through October 1942. Sayers then had the scripts published in a book that came out in 1943. The controversy revolved around her approach to the sacred: she made Jesus, His disciples, and everyone else in the stories speak in the language of the common man in Britain at that time. For some, this was sacrilegious. It was denigrating the person and work of Christ. Sayers, though, held her ground, and the BBC stood with her.

In the introduction to the book, she lays out her apologetic for writing the scripts as she did, tackling first the law that had forbidden any representation of the Trinity on the stage (radio plays apparently were thought to be part of “the stage”). That law, she complained, “had helped to foster the notion that all such representations were intrinsically wicked” and led to a “totally heretical Christology which denies the full Humanity of Our Lord.” She realized she had shattered that tradition “in the face of a good deal of prejudice,” but she had good reasons to do so. “The knowledge which the British public has of the New Testament is extensive,” she admitted, “but in many respects peculiar. The books are, on the whole, far better known as a collection of disjointed texts and moral aphorisms wrenched from their contexts than as a coherent history made up of coherent episodes.”²² Her plays were an attempt to correct that perception.

She then took aim at the misunderstanding of the nature of the Biblical text itself:

Moreover, the words of the books . . . are by great numbers of British Christians held to be sacrosanct in such a sense that they must not be expanded, interpreted, or added to, even in order to set the scene, supply obvious gaps in the narrative, or elucidate the sense. And this sacrosanctity is attributed, not to the Greek of the original and only authentic documents, but to every syllable of a translation made three hundred years ago (and that

²² Dorothy Sayers, *The Man Born to Be King* (1943; reprint ed., Camp Hill, PA: Classical Academic Press, 2014), 9-10.

not always with perfect accuracy) in an idiom so old-fashioned that, even as English, it is often obscure to us or positively misleading.²³

One newspaper editor had commented that when one quotes the Bible, the Authorized Version should be used, “and not the interpretations of scholars, however wise.” Sayers could barely hold back from retorting, “That is to say, we are to pay attention, not to the ascertainable meaning of what the Evangelist wrote, but only to the words (however inexact or unintelligible) used by King James’s translators—who, incidentally, were themselves mere ‘scholars, however wise.’”²⁴ She had a knack for scalpel-like sarcasm.

Dramatist Sayers also defended her work as an art form. Any dramatist, she opined, had to first get rid of “all edificatory and theological intentions. He must set out, not to instruct but to show forth; not to point a moral but to tell a story; not to produce a Divinity Lesson with illustrations in dialogue but to write a good piece of theatre.” She urged that her plays be judged as any work of art should be judged:

My object was to *tell that story* to the best of my ability, within the medium at my disposal—in short to make as good a work of art as I could. For a work of art that is not good and true *in art* is not good or true in any other respect, and is useless for any purpose whatsoever—even for edification—because it is a lie, and the devil is that father of all such. As drama, these plays stand or fall.²⁵

Lewis was of the same mind. In his essay, “Good Work and Good Works,” he draws this distinction: when Jesus changed the water into wine at the wedding, He was doing good “works,” but it was also good “work” because “it was a wine really worth drinking.” We are not only to work but “work to produce what is ‘good.’” He then offers a critique: “The idea of Good Work is not quite extinct among us, though it is not, I fear, especially characteristic of religious

²³ Ibid., 10.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 11-12.

people.”²⁶ In the final paragraph of that essay, he declares that great works and good works “had better also be Good Work. Let choirs sing well or not at all.”²⁷

But it’s in his “Christianity and Literature” essay that he makes the application directly to writing, thereby tying him to Sayers’s apologetic:

The rules for writing a good passion play or a good devotional lyric are simply the rules for writing tragedy or lyric in general: success in sacred literature depends on the same qualities of structure, suspense, variety, diction, and the like which secure success in secular literature. . . .

Boiling an egg is the same process whether you are a Christian or a Pagan. In the same way, literature written by Christians for Christians would have to avoid mendacity, cruelty, blasphemy, pornography, and the like, and it would aim at edification in so far as edification was proper to the kind of work in hand. But whatever it chose to do would have to be done by the means common to all literature; it could succeed or fail only by the same excellences and the same faults as all literature; and its literary success or failure would never be the same thing as its obedience or disobedience to Christian principles.²⁸

Sayers sent Lewis an advance copy of *The Man Born to Be King* in May 1943, to which he responded, “Thanks awfully! I loved the one I heard on the air . . . and look forward to reading the whole series.”²⁹ Three days later, he gave her an update: “Have started your book (in bed) but am still in the Preface—very vigorous!”³⁰ Ten days after that, he had this to report: “I’ve finished *The Man Born to be King* and think it a complete success. (Christie the H.M. of Westminster told me that the actual performances over the air left his 2 small daughters with ‘open and silent mouths’ for several minutes).” Although he questioned her interpretation of Judas, he conceded her conception of him was a valid possibility. Overall, though, he was

²⁶ Lewis, “Good Work and Good Works,” in *The World’s Last Night and Other Essays* (Boston & NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt; First Mariner Books Ed., 2012), 71.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 80.

²⁸ Lewis, “Christianity and Literature,” in *The Seeing Eye and Other Selected Essays from Christian Reflections* (NY: Ballantine Books, 1967), 1-2.

²⁹ Lewis to Sayers, 17 May 1943, in Hooper, ed., *Collected Letters, Vol. II*.

³⁰ Lewis to Sayers, 20 May 1943, *ibid.*

nothing less than enthusiastic, writing, “I shed real tears (hot ones) in places: since Mauriac’s *Vie de Jesus* nothing has moved me so much. . . . I expect to read it times without number again.”³¹

Lewis was true to that pledge, letting her know in letters in 1947 and again in 1955 that he was in the process of re-reading it, something that became a sacred ritual for him during Lent. He also informed an American correspondent in 1949, “I think D. Sayers’ *Man Born to be King* has edified us in this country more than anything for a long time.”³² And what of the critics of Sayers’s approach to the retelling of the gospel story? “I seem to get v. little reading done these days,” he confided to Arthur Greeves in June 1943. But he added, “One thing I *have* read recently is D. Sayers’ *The Man Born to be King* wh. I thought excellent, indeed most moving. The objections to it seem to me . . . silly.”³³

Sayers and Dante

Due to his great respect for Sayers’s works—*The Mind of the Maker* and *The Man Born to Be King*—Lewis asked Sayers to be one of the contributors to a volume of essays dedicated to Charles Williams, who had died unexpectedly in 1945. “Like me you will be mourning the death of Charles Williams. Professor Tolkien and I had already been proposing a *Festschrift* for him in the form of a volume of essays by his friends. Tolkien and Mr. Barfield and I had in fact written our contributions. We now want it to go forward as a memorial volume, to be sold for the benefit of his widow. Would you contribute?—any subject you like.”³⁴ She readily agreed and chose Dante for her topic, to which Lewis gave this rather buoyant response: “Yes—you’ll be having grand fun with the Dante! ‘Oh my lights and liver!’”³⁵ When she completed it and gave it to

³¹ Lewis to Sayers, 30 May 1943, *ibid.*

³² Lewis to Edward T. Dell, 25 October 1949, *ibid.*

³³ Lewis to Arthur Greeves, 1 June 1943, *ibid.*

³⁴ Lewis to Sayers, 17 May 1945, *ibid.*

³⁵ Lewis to Sayers, 23 May 1945, *ibid.*

Lewis for a read-through, he praised her, saying, “I’ve romped through your essay for a first reading with v. great delight. There’s not a dull moment and some things are superlatively good. . . . It’s a grand essay.”³⁶ Another insight into how Lewis viewed Sayers as a writer is revealed in a letter in which he informs her that T. S. Eliot, who was supposed to be one of the contributors, had backed out of the project. “I thought as much,” Lewis declared. “He’s not a *writer* in your sense at all.”³⁷

Sayers’s foray into Dante led to a great desire to come up with her own translation of *The Divine Comedy*, a task that occupied the remaining years of her life. Lewis was right beside her, via correspondence and occasional face-to-face visits, encouraging her efforts and letting her know he eagerly anticipated the release of each of the three sections of the work: *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*.

Lewis’s enthusiasm for Sayers’s translation comes through abundantly in other letters. When he learned that *Inferno* was finally published, he wrote in expectation, “Hurrah! I look forward to your *Inferno* very much, all the more because I was re-reading your C.W. essay on Dante last night with great enjoyment. I expect I *shall* find you loud pedaling the comic element more than I approve, but it is much better to have *your* Dante as *your* Dante than to have a compromise between it and some one else’s. That’s the only way a translation can be really alive.”³⁸ After he read it, he offered a particular type of praise that probably only a translator could appreciate fully: “I’ve finished it now. There’s no doubt, taking it for all in all, it is a stunning work. The real test is this, that however I set out with the idea of attending to your translation, before I’ve read a page I’ve forgotten all about you and am thinking only of Dante,

³⁶ Lewis to Sayers, 18 December 1945, *ibid.*

³⁷ Lewis to Sayers, 28 February 1946, *ibid.*

³⁸ Lewis to Sayers, 9 November 1949, *ibid.*

and two pages later I've forgotten about Dante and am thinking only about Hell. *Brava, bravissima.*"³⁹ Sayers's response to Lewis's praise shows how much she appreciated his honest appraisal: "I've had a lot of nice letters about the *Inferno*, but I think yours is the very nicest, because you understood so well what the thing's all about, and what a translation aims at, and why it is bound to be one thing or the other and can't very well be two incompatible things at once."⁴⁰

Six more years passed before the *Purgatorio* was released. Lewis eagerly anticipated it, and let Sayers know how eagerly. In late 1953, he wrote, "It is perhaps my favourite part of the Comedy and I look forward very much to going up and round the terraces with your guidance."⁴¹ A year later, he complimented her on her approach to the entire Dante work, noting, "I have no doubt at all that your resolute stand against the 'awful' Miltonic, Caryish, high-brow D., and your defence of all the comic, novelistic, and science-fiction elements (I, of course wd. have made more of the last) is right, and will turn out hereafter to give you your chief permanent place in the history of Dantology. That is the great debt we all owe you."⁴² When the work finally appeared in mid-1955, Lewis expressed his full approval in these words:

I am really *delighted* with it. Your *Inferno* was good, but this is even better. One wd. say the same to Dante about the originals, no doubt; but then he set the pace, and who would have dared to hope that you could rise with him? I had wondered how the muscular, often rough & colloquial, manner which you need for Hell would serve you on the Mountain! Innocent and faithless that I was—and of course all the time you knew that it wouldn't do and had new modulations in store. By gum, it makes one hungry for your *Paradiso*.⁴³

³⁹ Lewis to Sayers, 15 November 1949, *ibid.*

⁴⁰ Sayers to Lewis, 18 November 1949, *ibid.*

⁴¹ Lewis to Sayers, 16 December 1953, in Hooper, ed., *Collected Letters, Vol. III.*

⁴² Lewis to Sayers, 14 November 1954, *ibid.*

⁴³ Lewis to Sayers, 31 July 1955, *ibid.*

Sayers did set to work on the third section of the *Comedy*, but death overtook her before she could complete it. A close associate finished the work later with the lion's share of the credit going to Sayers.

Lewis's Eulogy for Sayers

Dorothy Sayers's sudden, unexpected death of a heart attack in her home on 17 December 1957, at age sixty-four, both shocked and saddened her admirers, C. S. Lewis among them. Lewis, incidentally, would also die at age sixty-four, just six years later and one week from his sixty-fifth birthday. Lewis was unable to attend the memorial service for Sayers due to "bone trouble,"⁴⁴ but his "A Panegyric for Dorothy L. Sayers" was read by the Lord Bishop of Chichester, George Bell.⁴⁵

He was embarrassed, he wrote in that tribute, that he was no lover of detective stories, the genre that first established Sayers as a writer of note. He respected those who could write them well, though, because of the knowledge of criminal investigation that was required to make such stories work. Sayers was not ashamed of having written her Lord Peter Wimsey books; some had suggested that was why she stopped writing them. But Lewis related that his wife, Joy, had actually asked Sayers if that accusation were true; Sayers denied it. "She had stopped working in that genre," Lewis revealed, "because she felt she had done all she could with it."⁴⁶ It was time to move on to other endeavors. Her later works did not represent a cleavage from her earlier ones. In everything she wrote, Lewis emphasized, she was "first and foremost the craftsman, the professional. She always saw herself as one who has learned a trade, and respects it, and demands respect for it from others." Lewis put her in rather exalted company when he said,

⁴⁴ Lewis to Anthony Fleming, 21 January 1958, *ibid.*

⁴⁵ Walter Hooper, ed., "Preface," in *On Stories and Other Essays on Literature*, xx.

⁴⁶ All quotations in this section are from Lewis, "A Panegyric for Dorothy L. Sayers," *ibid.*, 91-95.

She aspired to be, and was, at once a popular entertainer and a conscientious craftsman: like (in her degree) Chaucer, Cervantes, Shakespeare, or Molière. I have an idea that, with a very few exceptions, it is only such writers who matter much in the long run. . . . Much of her most valuable thought about writing was embodied in *The Mind of the Maker*: a book which is still too little read. It has faults. But books about writing by those who have themselves written viable books are too rare and too useful to be neglected.

When it came to her religious works, Lewis asserted, “She never sank the artist and entertainer in the evangelist. The very astringent (and admirable) preface to *The Man Born to Be King*, written when she had lately been assailed with a great deal of ignorant and spiteful obloquy, makes the point of view defiantly clear.” He adds, though, that “her disclaimer of an intention to ‘do good’ was ironically rewarded by the immense amount of good she evidently did.” At this point in the remembrance, Lewis informed everyone present of his practice of re-reading that work “in every Holy Week since it first appeared, and never re-read it without being deeply moved.”

All of her excellent work in translating Dante, Lewis argued, should first be prefaced by reading the essay she contributed to the volume commemorating Charles Williams. “There you get the first impact of Dante on a mature, a scholarly, and an extremely independent mind. That impact determined the whole character of her translation.” In concluding his testimonial to his friend, Lewis gave us one of his classic and memorable endings:

No version can give the whole of Dante. So at least I said when I read her *Inferno*. But, then, when I came to the *Purgatorio*, a little miracle seemed to be happening. She had risen, just as Dante himself rose in his second part: growing richer, more liquid, more elevated. Then first I began to have great hopes of her *Paradiso*. Would she go on rising? Was it possible? Dared we hope?

Well. She died instead; went, as one may in all humility hope, to learn more of Heaven than even the *Paradiso* could tell her. For all she did and was, for delight and instruction, for her militant loyalty as a friend, for courage and honesty, for the richly feminine qualities which showed through a port and manner superficially masculine and even gleefully ogreish—let us thank the Author who invented her.