

6-2006

# 'A Very Odd Piece of Work': A Glimpse into Dorothy L. Sayers's Nurture and Development of the Detective Story Genre

Anne Marie Hardy  
*Taylor University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings\\_forever](https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings_forever)

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

---

### Recommended Citation

Hardy, Anne Marie (2006) "A Very Odd Piece of Work': A Glimpse into Dorothy L. Sayers's Nurture and Development of the Detective Story Genre," *Inklings Forever*: Vol. 5 , Article 24.  
Available at: [https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings\\_forever/vol5/iss1/24](https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings_forever/vol5/iss1/24)

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for the Study of C.S. Lewis & Friends at Pillars at Taylor University. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Inklings Forever* by an authorized editor of Pillars at Taylor University. For more information, please contact [pillars@taylor.edu](mailto:pillars@taylor.edu).

---

# 'A Very Odd Piece of Work': A Glimpse into Dorothy L. Sayers's Nurture and Development of the Detective Story Genre

## **Cover Page Footnote**

Undergraduate Student Essay

# **INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume V**

A Collection of Essays Presented at the Fifth  
FRANCES WHITE COLLOQUIUM on C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

Taylor University 2006

Upland, Indiana

---

## **‘A Very Odd Piece of Work’: A Glimpse into Dorothy L. Sayers’s Nurture and Development of the Detective Story Genre**

Anne Marie Hardy

## **‘A Very Odd Piece of Work’: A Glimpse into Dorothy L. Sayers’s Nurture and Development of the Detective Story Genre**

Anne Marie Hardy

“What a piece of work is man, that he should enjoy this kind of thing! A very odd piece of work—indeed, a mystery.” So concludes Dorothy L. Sayers’s masterful essay introducing the anthology, *The Omnibus of Crime: Great Short Stories of Detection*. Sayers’s love for detective fiction, combined with her skill in creating and critiquing it, allowed her career as a detective novelist to center on nurturing and re-defining the genre of the detective story, seeking to secure its place among the ranks of legitimate literature. Sayers endeavored to root the genre in the tradition of canonized literature even as she argued for changes in order to ensure its preservation. This effort and the ideas and challenges she espoused concerning the genre, specifically as described in her anthology’s introductory essay, came to fruition in the writing of her final Lord Peter Wimsey novel, *Busman’s Honeymoon*.

Though Sayers reportedly began studying the detective story because “that is where the money is,” it is clear that she cared deeply about her own work in the detective story genre as well as the genre in general (qtd. in Hitchman 37). Sayers demonstrated her love of the detective story as a genre in three ways. First, Sayers’s introductory essay and editing work for the 1928 anthology, *The Omnibus of Crime*, reveal her dedication to the genre. Critic Laura Krugman Ray assures that “[Sayers’] introductions to the three editions of the *Omnibus of Crime* are generally ranked among the best essays in the field” (172). The first introduction meticulously traces the antiquity of the form, its development from figures such as Poe, the ‘rules of the game’ and its relationship to other literary genres, from which it derives its lifeblood and momentum. Secondly, her involvement with the

Detection Club (which she joined in 1928) led her to create an oath in which she defines the laws that should govern good detective fiction. These laws, for example, demand that detectives to use their own wits, “not placing any reliance upon . . . Divine Revelation, Feminine Intuition, Mumbo Jumbo, Jiggery-Pokery, Coincidence or the Act of God” (Hitchman 104). Thirdly, her remarks on her own novels betray her deep passion for the genre. She claimed, for example, that *The Nine Tailors* was a “labour of love” and *Gaudy Night* was “the book I wanted to write” (Reynolds 271; Hitchman 86). Most poignantly, in the dedication letter for *Busman’s Honeymoon*, the novel under discussion here, she writes, “I humbly bring, I dedicate with tears, this sentimental comedy.”

As much as Sayers revered the detective genre, however, she was not ignorant of its limitations. She realized that serious changes would have to occur to ensure the genre’s preservation and the realization of its potential. In the introduction to the *Omnibus* anthology, Sayers candidly admits that the detective author’s “bag of tricks” is quite limited (17). She explains that after one has read “half a dozen” stories by any certain author, one may understand the author well enough to predict mystery solutions (44). This leads readers to become unsatisfied with that author’s later works. In 1928, the typical detective story was merely a mind game between the author and reader; the author tried to outwit the reader as the reader pieced together clues. Because this “pure puzzle is a formula which obviously has its limitations,” Sayers warns that, quite possibly, “the detective-story will some time come to an end, simply because the public will have learnt all the tricks” (20, 44). Because of the typical “reduction of character-

drawing to bold, flat outline,” there is little purpose for the reader’s attention other than that of solving of the mystery (12). Herein lays Sayers’s clue to the means of saving the detective story.

Sayers proposes the necessity of creating fuller, more meaningful characters in detective fiction, predicting that the genre will evolve, with a “new and less rigid formula” that would draw the detective novel closer “to the novel of manners” (Sayers, “Introduction” 44, 38). The detective who dominates the pages of a story must therefore “achieve a tenderer human feeling” (38). Sayers recognizes that, “As the detective ceases to be impenetrable and infallible and becomes a man touched with the feeling of our infirmities, so the rigid technique of the art necessarily expands a little” (37).

Because Sayers recognized and believed in the necessity of these shifts, she was able to take risks in her own work. “My voice,” Sayers writes, “was raised very loudly to proclaim this doctrine” of moving the detective novel to become “once more a novel of manners instead of a pure crossword puzzle” (“Gaudy Night” 209). Sayers proclaimed this precisely because “I still meant my books to develop along those lines at all costs” (209). When Sayers wrote the introduction, she had already authored five Peter Wimsey novels and was likely scared of becoming predictable and losing reader interest. After her “Introduction,” Sayers was possibly unsure where to begin her revisions, writing one more typical Wimsey novel before daringly beginning to create a more life-like Lord Peter in *Strong Poison*. Here, Sayers embraced the enormous risk of introducing a love story. According to biographer David Coomes, this is precisely the element that gives Wimsey his first “hint of the human about him” (111-112). Though Dorothy might have feared that readers would begin discovering her detective’s tricks soon enough, they certainly would not be able to predict just how the strong-willed Peter and Harriet would (if ever) believably fall into each other’s arms.

Sayers further embeds detective fiction within standard literature through showing its interaction with other, more critically acclaimed genres. Since the detective story has existed in one form or another for thousands of years, the first four stories in Sayers’s anthology come from ancient sources. In her introduction, as she traces the development of the genre, she focuses on the influence of the canonized literary genius, Edgar Allen Poe. Through demonstrating how so much of the modern genre in question stems from Poe’s paradigm, Sayers gives the genre a firm foundation of literary legitimacy.

Sayers then places the figure of the detective in the tradition of ancient literary heroes. Explaining that society now looks to new public heroes, Sayers writes, “But if one could no longer hunt the mantichora, one could still hunt the murderer” (13). Thus, “the detective steps into his right place as the protector of the weak—the latest of the popular heroes, the true successor of

Roland and Lancelot” (13). Lord Peter’s potentially snobbish upper-class mannerisms may be “all part of modernizing the King Arthur legend” (Hitchman 99).

The hero of *The Song of Roland*, which Dorothy translated in 1957, shows particular similarities to Wimsey. Translator Howard S. Robertson writes of how Roland bears “the burden of being a legend in his own time” and the *Song* “present[s] less a celebration of the hero than the examination of his role” (x). *The Song of Roland* causes the reader to question the “ambiguities of justice”; Sayers’s presentations of Wimsey, particularly in *The Nine Tailors* and the end of *Busman’s Honeymoon*, raise similar issues (Robertson x).

Perhaps the most obvious way in which Sayers roots her work within other genres of literature is through her use of a vast array of quotations. Many of the chapters in the Wimsey novels (including every chapter in the final three works) are prefaced by a literary quote ranging from the English Romantic poets, to Shakespeare, to Sheridan Lefanu. A particularly effective quote comes in chapter nineteen of *Busman’s Honeymoon*, with lines from T.S. Eliot’s *The Hollow Men*. Peter’s dream, which opens the body of the chapter, invokes Eliot’s imagery of confused and empty wandering in the desert (Sayers, *Busman’s* 308). A reference to the dream at the close of the chapter, though somewhat awkward, nonetheless achieves Sayers’s purpose of creating a world that interacts with other literature. Harriet Vane also interacts with other texts as she buys an original John Donne manuscript letter for Peter’s wedding present and elsewhere jokingly refers to herself as Jane Eyre (24, 25).

The rate and style of quoting borders on pedantic in *Busman’s Honeymoon*. Quotes are tossed back and forth “on the slightest pretext” between Harriet, Peter and the constable (Hitchman 97). The novel ends with a lengthy quotation from John Donne’s “Eclogue for the Marriage of the Earl of Somerset” (Sayers, *Busman’s* 380-381). Though Hitchman condescendingly attributes this incessant quoting to Sayers’s feeble attempts at filling out the original stage-play version of the story into a full length novel, Sayers’s purpose may have been not only to boast about how literate she was herself, but also to enforce the idea that her characters were players in the larger metanarrative of literature.

Even as Sayers fervently attempts to broaden the formulas for her beloved genre and root that genre within canonized and historical literature, she stresses the necessity of following certain established rules in the writing of detection fiction. She realizes that some rules are necessary. As emphasized in her Detection Club oath and elsewhere, Sayers strongly valued the rule of “fair play” (Sayers, “Introduction” 33). This rule, as stated in S.S. Van Dine’s 1928 article, “Twenty rules for writing detective stories,” asserts, “The reader must have equal opportunity with the detective for solving the mystery. All clues must be plainly stated

and described.” Sayers laments that authors such as Sir Arthur Canon Doyle disagree (Sayers, “Introduction” 32). Further respecting the rights and intelligence of the reader, Sayers also affirms that “the real criminal must be suspected at least once in the course of the story” and that the detective must use his or her wits without relying on “Divine Revelation,” “Mumbo Jumbo” or the like (Sayers, “Introduction” 42; Hitchman 104). Sayers also argues that the mystery should be the primary focus and warned in the 1928 article that “the love is better left out” (“Introduction” 40). As was obvious only two years later, Sayers sometimes found even the rules she once upheld to be too constricting.

Much of Sayers’s decision to push the boundaries stems from her desire to go back to those roots of detective fiction found in Wilkie Collins. Sayers admired Collins fervently, describing *The Moonstone* as “probably the very finest detective story ever written,” and crediting the author with paving the way for the English detective story to rise “to its present position of international supremacy” (Sayers, “Introduction,” 25; Reynolds 271). This immense reverence, revealing itself in an unfinished biography of Collins, focused on his ability to create characters (Reynolds 271). Sayers identifies Collins as one of the great Victorians (along with Dickens and Reade) who “firmly [bound] together the novel of plot and the novel of character” (271). Sayers recognized that Collins was atypical of most detective authors, exclaiming of him, “how admirably the characters are drawn!” (“Introduction” 25).

Sayers’s efforts in imitating Collin’s characterization and creating a new type of detective novel culminate in *Busman’s Honeymoon*. Here, she tackles the most difficult tasks she identifies in her “Introduction” in hopes of benefiting the entire genre. Sayers recognizes that *Gaudy Night* (1935) is less of a detective story than it is a psychological treatment of the theme of intellectual integrity; she removes detection from the primary focus (Reynolds 289). In *Busman’s Honeymoon*, the characters are at last the main focus of the novel, reminiscent of Wilkie Collins’s masterpiece, *The Woman in White*. Just as the reader of Collins’s work is chiefly interested in Walter, Laura and Marian’s ultimate happiness, Sayers’s readers are likely to be primarily eager to discover just how Harriet and Peter will find marital bliss and interdependence. The discovery of a murder in *Busman’s Honeymoon* is left until page 109, when the reader is already enthralled in Harriet and Peter’s honeymoon story. Sayers makes no pretences about her intentions regarding the focus of the novel; the subtitle reads, “A Love Story with Detective Interruptions.”

Sayers realizes that only the most careful and important love story could hold its place in a good detective novel. This is the goal for which she strives in introducing and continuing the Peter-Harriet love story through *Strong Poison* (1930), *The Nine Tailors* (1934), *Gaudy Night* (1935) and *Busman’s Honeymoon*

(1938). Sayers accomplishes her task through revising the hypothesis she made in 1928 that the mystery must come first in importance in the detective-story. In *Busman’s Honeymoon*, love reigns as Peter and Harriet at last enjoy marital bliss and moments of ecstatic emotion (particularly in the first half of chapter sixteen, “Crown Matrimonial”) even while characteristically joking about the distastefulness of their indulgence in sentimentality.

In all this, however, Sayers abides by some of the unwavering rules she upholds in her essay. Harriet and Peter’s emotions do not “make hay of the detective interest” (Sayers, “Introduction” 40). The clues are fairly displayed to the reader, the villain is a suspect during the investigation and Peter’s love for Harriet does not prevent him from solving the crime. Thus, Sayers effectively satisfies readers’ desire for a solvable crime, even while removing the crime from the focus. Her reasons for doing this, as moving toward a style of a novel of manners, are stated in her in the opening dedicatory letter. Sayers writes, “It has been said, by myself and others, that a love-interest is only an intrusion upon a detective story. But to the characters involved, the detective-interest might well seem an irritating intrusion upon their love-story.” And so it would have been. If Sayers was to be true to her characters in accordance with her views of authorship expressed in *The Mind of the Maker*, she had to give the characters a will of their own even while they remained her own creations. In such circumstances, it would have been untrue to the integrity of Sayers’s writing had she forced Peter and Harriet to place supreme importance on the murder mystery in the midst of their honeymoon.

Yet another challenge which Sayers uniquely accepts in *Busman’s Honeymoon* is that of taking a humanist outlook regarding the fate of the villain. Sayers writes in her essay, “To make the transition from the detached to the human point of view is one of the writer’s hardest tasks” (38). She accepts this task through making Crutchley and Peter both real people. “When the murderer has been made human and sympathetic” she warns, “. . . a real person has then to be brought to the gallows, and this must not be done too lightheartedly” (38). She then gives examples of detective writers who have avoided this difficulty. Chesterton allows Father Brown to drop his involvement in affairs before the accused is arrested and executed (38). Some authors allow their villain a dignified suicide in order to avoid complications of emotion (38). If the villain is ‘monstrous’ enough, no one is bothered by his execution (38). Sayers carefully avoids all of these approaches in her final novel.

Though Peter seems to often leave the scene before the execution, Sayers finally confronts the horror directly. Through Harriet, Sayers writes that a detective commonly “unmask[s] his murderer with a flourish of *panache* in the last chapter . . . leaving somebody else to cope with the trivial details of putting the case

together” (Sayers, *Busman’s* 345). In contrast, Peter suffers through the hearings, giving testimony, bearing the burden of town gossip and attempting to attain Crutchley’s forgiveness. Most dramatically, Sayers heeds no warnings of attaching too much emotion to characters and shows Peter in all his agony as he copes with the fact that Crutchley will be hanged as a direct result of his sleuthing. This is exactly the difficulty Sayers warns of in her essay. “The farther [the detective story] escapes from pure analysis” she writes, “the more difficulty it has in achieving artistic unity” (Sayers, “Introduction” 37). Because of this difficulty, Sayers writes that her genre “rarely touches the heights and depths of human passion” and instead “looks upon death and mutilation with a dispassionate eye” (37). At the end of the novel, however, as Peter and Harriet wait for the moment of Crutchley’s execution, Sayers looks upon these things:

“Quite suddenly, he said, ‘Oh, damn!’ and began to cry—in an awkward, unpractised way at first, and then more easily. So she held him, crouched at her knees, against her breast, huddling his head in her arms that he might not hear eight o’clock strike” (Sayers, *Busman’s* 380).

Sayers had avoided falsifying her characters in other works; she abandoned plans, for example, to marry Peter and Harriet at the end of *Strong Poison* because it would have been untrue to the characterization (Coomes 111). Therefore, when she produced *Busman’s Honeymoon* so lovingly, she must have considered herself to have achieved artistic unity. From the lack of critical reviews to the contrary, it appears her audience believes her to have accomplished just that.

Having met her self-proclaimed greatest challenges in detective fiction writing, Sayers merely dabbled in the genre after completing *Busman’s Honeymoon*. She published a small collection of detective short stories, including a few about Wimsey in 1939. She wrote the first 170 pages of another Harriet and Peter novel entitled *Thrones, Dominations* yet never finished the work, instead hiding the manuscript in her attic (Coomes 119). The unfinished portion of *Thrones, Dominations* reportedly gives not “so much as a hint of a crime” (119). She realized that her desire to write straight fiction had overtaken her; rather than squeeze Lord Peter into a new mold, she abandoned his character and headed in new directions altogether. Sayers devoted the rest of her career to the writing of theological plays and essays and medieval research and translation projects.

Dorothy L. Sayers clearly held the detective story in high regard and devoted an abundance of time and effort to nurturing, defining and contributing to the genre. Her writings show deep concern and love for the

genre as she seeks to establish its place as rooted firmly in historical and canonized literature. As part of her concern for the betterment of detection fiction, Sayers outlines and upholds certain conventions and rules even as she argues for the necessary expansion of the formulas. In predicting the direction in which the genre must move, she shows that the detective novel must embrace the tradition of Wilkie Collins and move toward the standards of the novel of manners. Sayers then accepts her own challenge and gradually makes her own detective novels evolve toward a more character-based approach. Her hopes for the genre, as well as the greatest challenges she predicted, culminate in her masterpiece, *Busman’s Honeymoon*. Here, even while Sayers lays out a murder, inspection and solution, Lord Peter Wimsey and Harriet Vane finally have the spotlight in the novel as real human beings of more importance than the detection process itself. Sayers’s contributions to the thought and substance of the detective genre were not in vain; she remains widely read, her person is deeply admired, and the detection genre remains very much alive today.

#### Works Cited

- Collins, Wilkie. *The Woman in White*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982.
- Coomes, David. “*Dorothy L. Sayers: A Careless Rage for Life*.” Oxford: Lion Publishing, 1992.
- Hitchman, Janet. *Such a Strange Lady: a Biography of Dorothy L. Sayers*. London: Harper & Row, 1975.
- Ray, Laura Kugman. Rev. of *A Literary Biography*, by Ralphe Hone, and *As Her Whimsey Took Her*, by Margaret Hanney. *Studies in the Novel*. 12.2 (1980): 170-173.
- Reynolds, Barbara. *Dorothy L. Sayers: Her Life and Soul*. Rev. ed. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2002.
- Robertson, Howard S, trans. *The Song of Roland*. London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1972.
- Sayers, Dorothy L. *Busman’s Honeymoon*. New York: HarperCollins, 1993.
- . “Gaudy Night.” *The Art of the Mystery Story*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1946. 208-221.
- . “Introduction.” *The Omnibus of Crime: Great Short Stories of Detection*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1929.
- . *Strong Poison*. New York: HarperCollins, 1995
- . *The Mind of the Maker*. London: Mowbray, 1994.
- . *The Nine Tailors*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1962.
- Van Dine, S.S. “Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories.” *American Magazine*. (Sept. 1928).
- Zunshine, Lisa. Reading of “Why We Read Fiction,” by Lisa Zunshine. Idea Festival. Radisson Plaza Hotel, Lexington, KY. 23 Sept. 2004.

