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## Dorothy L. Sayers and the Inklings

### Abstract

Notes known connections to Lewis and Williams on Sayers's part (through the evidence of letters). Speculates on ways they may have influenced each other. Includes an excerpt from a Sayers letter on the Narnia books.

### Additional Keywords

Inklings—Relations with women; Lewis, C.S.—Friends and associates—Dorothy L. Sayers; Sayers, Dorothy L.—Friends and associates—C.S. Lewis; Sayers, Dorothy L.—Friends and associates—Charles Williams; Sayers, Dorothy L.—Relation to Inklings; Williams, Charles—Friends and associates—Dorothy L. Sayers

lizard at his ear and his abrupt transformation into a kind of Sagittarian horseman.

"Vividly imagined...memorable pictures..."—the very words imply a different world from the one we best know. They draw us on, or back, into the world of myth. And what is the world of myth like? Whatever else it is, it is the opposite of atomic and the reverse of solid. No wonder Ovid chose "Metamorphoses" for the title of his general account of it. It is a world where, instead of cause-and-effect, we find a sequence of shapes and patterns gradually changing into each other. It is a world where everything *flows*. The very last word one would choose, if one were trying to convey a taste of its quality, is "solidity."

In that world, both during Lewis's life and since his death, there has been a steadily growing interest, a growing awareness of the fact that there was once a time when that kind of consciousness was collective; a time when it was, for mankind, the normal way of apprehending the world around him; when it was his "common sense"; when it was the ground beneath knowledge itself. And there has been a growing tendency to ask whether it may not have been a way of knowing things, including things about the spirit, which we no longer know—except in what we call "the unconscious." In this mythic, or symbolic type of consciousness, which was not finally extinguished until the time of the scientific revolution, Lewis, as he showed in *The Discarded Image* and elsewhere, was very much at home. With that kind of *question* about it he was not at home at all.

Lewis had practically no use for theories about myth and very definite ideas about its relations to anything that could be called belief or knowledge. He held, in short, that there was no relation at all, or certainly no discoverable one. He criticized the "demythologisers" in theology, but his own determination to keep the two separate was absolute. Knowledge, or belief about matters of fact, was one thing; myth and all it stands for another. He always went out of his way to insist that his own works of fiction were fiction, without relation to fact. And it is so, he tells us in the Preface, that we are to take the narrative and descriptive parts of *The Great Divorce*. Knowledge and belief were the province not of mythopoeic but of atomic Lewis, and their only sure basis (always excepting Divine Revelation) was the post-Cartesian reality principle, the great divorce between matter and spirit. However it might be in heaven, for man on earth to search for any link between myth and fact was for him a crucial error. Worse: it was a kind of rape, since it deflowered imagination herself of her supreme quality: the virginal purity of detachment—of being an end in herself and not a means to some other end. Worse still: it was the first downward step in a journey that could only end in another mishmash—not the sort that comes of crude materialism, but one which he was equally inclined, and equally equipped, to combat: namely,

that mis-taking of the symbol itself for the symbolised, of mere matter in some outlandish guise for "spirit," which was what the word "occultism" denoted in his vocabulary. And here too I am inclined to think his hostile vigilance was not unneeded. There are a good many signs today to bear it out. And if in the last analysis he was mistaken, and the way of flowing images *is* a way of knowledge as well as the atomic or rational way, then its proper pursuit calls for intellectual vertebrates, with a backbone enough stiffened by atomic thinking to enable them to discern the gentleness that is imagination from the softness that is ruin.

There was then something like a great divorce between the two Lewises themselves. And paradoxically it is in the book for which he chose that title that they came as near as they ever did come to remarriage. How then was the reconciliation brought about? In a very remarkable way, and one which is at the same time the most distinctive stroke in the book. Almost indeed by a kind of conjuring-trick. In all imagery and symbolism, and perhaps especially in myth, the movements and the changing shapes and patterns of the solid material world are made to reveal, or at all events to suggest, the immaterial world of spirit which that world normally veils from us. Lewis does just that with them, but he also strides a long step beyond it. In *The Great Divorce* mythopoeic Lewis, with a touch of violence that is itself perhaps more characteristic of atomic Lewis, employs not only material shapes but *materiality itself* to symbolise immateriality. All the description concentrates on heaven as a *solid* place. Heaven itself almost *is* solidity, and its inhabitants are regularly referred to as "the Solid People" by contrast with the wraith-like visitants from hell. In other words, mythopoeic Lewis, the builder, filches from atomic Lewis the concrete reality principle, which he had always kept so fastidiously at arm's length, and inserts it as the keystone of his supporting arch!

This to my mind is the outstandingly original touch in the book; and it is insisted on throughout. Some have no doubt seen it as a cunningly didactic invention—to take the reality principle itself of twentieth century men (including Lewis himself as knower) and use it as a means of pointing them to a greater reality. But I have reason to believe that was not the way it came about. It was begotten genuinely of his own inner life. It arose quite naturally out of an intercourse—call it struggle, if you prefer—between the two Lewises that had been going on in there for a long time. And thus it was that between them they were able to create a violent indeed, but also novel, and perhaps important symbol. If you want a *philosophy* of imagination, you must look into the universal law of polarity, of which Coleridge speaks, and then into all that follows from it. But if you are content with a *symbol* of imagination's relation to truth, a symbol of myth, a symbol of symbolism itself, you may find it in *The Great Divorce*.

# Dorothy L. Sayers & the Inklings

by Joe R. Christopher

LET ME BEGIN WITH the fact that Dorothy L. Sayers was *not* an Inkling. This needs saying because several authors, including Janet Hitchman, have said she was. Hitchman, in her *Such a Strange Lady: An Introduction to Dorothy L. Sayers (1893-1957)*, published in London by the New English Library, writes: "Charles Williams and C. S. Lewis were the most popular writers on religious questions in the thirties. [Surely a decade early.] Dorothy corresponded with both of them...and they formed themselves into a kind of loosely

knit club, referring to themselves as the 'Inklings' because they thought they each had a glimpse of the meaning of God" (p. 177). This is going to be typical of popular writing on Sayers and the Inklings, I'm afraid—because, after all, she does share a community of interest with Williams and Lewis.

Even to call Sayers an "Oxford Christian"—a name some have used for the Inklings—is misleading to a degree. She was born in Oxford (her father was then headmaster of Christchurch Cathedral Choir School, but four years later he

moved to a living in the fen country which Sayers depicted in *The Nine Tailors*), and she was educated there (she went up to Somerville College in 1912, and received a First Class Honours Degree in French in 1915, and an M.A. in 1920—Sayers depicted Somerville College in *Gaudy Night*). But despite these details and later visits, Sayers was equally at home in London (like Charles Williams), working for Benson's advertising agency for nine years (she depicted Benson's in *Murder Must Advertise*); it was in London she had a love affair with John Courous, a minor writer and translator of Russian, in 1921-1922, and with someone else the next year, which resulted in the birth of her illegitimate son on January 3, 1924. Indeed, she married in London in 1926 (in a civil ceremony) and lived there until World War II. After the war, in 1952, she became the Vicar's Warden at St. Thomas's Church (where Christopher Fry's *Sleep of Prisoners* was first produced), and later, after St. Thomas's was closed, became a Church Warden at St. Paul's—both churches in the same general area of London.

That's a long biographical paragraph, but it suggests the direction this note must take (if one leaves aside the thesis about Oxford and London): Sayers' career is an intriguing one of writing worldly mystery stories (parallel in a general way to her own life), deepening into more than puzzles in the last few—particularly *The Nine Tailors* and *Gaudy Night*—and then, after the play version of *Busman's Honeymoon* (1936), shifting abruptly into religious drama—*The Zeal of Thy House* (1937) produced at Canterbury Cathedral. Hitchman has no real suggestion of what changed Sayers' direction, nor of what caused Canterbury Cathedral to turn to a mystery novelist for a religious play in blank verse. All we have (as yet) is conjecture, but I don't mind offering my own: Charles Williams.

A. M. Hadfield, in her *Introduction to Charles Williams* (1959), writes of Williams' relationship to the number of young women who showed up at Amen House (the London home of the Oxford University Press) in the late '30s to see him: "C. W. might talk to you for an hour, he might take you out to tea, write letters to you, ring you up, make you read verse, learn collects, keep your temper once a week, write essays for him, but after a month your attention was more directed to the Holy Ghost and to Milton than to C. W." I hardly think that Sayers at age 45 was likely to be infatuated in the same way as these young ladies, but I conjecture (it's no more than that) a similar thing happened. At any rate, in 1936 Charles Williams' *Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury* was produced at the Canterbury Festival; then, in 1937, Sayers' *The Zeal of Thy House* and, in 1939, her version of the Faust legend, *The Devil to Pay*. (Sayers went on to a second career in religious drama: *He That Should Come* (a radio Nativity play, 1938), *The Man Born to be King* (a radio-play cycle on the life of Christ, 1941), *The Just Vengeance* (a drama for the Lichfield Cathedral's 750th anniversary, 1946), and *The Emperor Constantine* (for the Festival of Britain celebrations at Colchester, 1951)—as well as a non-religious comedy, *Love All*, produced in 1940 but never printed).

An even clearer but not so immediate influence of Williams was Sayers' late career as critic and translator of Dante. She read Williams' *Figure of Beatrice* when it appeared in 1943 (she says this in her essay, "'...And Telling You a Story'"), and then, because of Williams, she read Dante. Hitchman tells the story this way: "Mac [the nickname of Sayers' husband] was yelling from the top of the cellar steps, 'Come on Dorothy! Doodlebugs!' [his nickname for the German V-1 missiles] ... At the sound of Mac's warning, and the air raid siren, she rushed downstairs, grabbing the first book her hand encountered, for she always, wherever she went, had to have something to read. Only when she was seated in the cellar did she realize that the book she had picked up was an old volume of Dante in the original mediaeval Italian. She was slightly annoyed, as she did not know even modern Italian, but she found that with her Latin and French, she could make a good deal of sense of *The Divine Comedy*. By the time the 'All Clear' sound she was hooked" (p. 177). That's probably not literally true—I would guess she had the books out to read sometime already—but the reference to doodlebugs in her essay shows the time is correct. It is notable that Sayers dedicated her translations of Dante's *Hell* and *Purgatory* to Williams, and no doubt if she had lived to finish the third volume, she would have dedicated it the same way.

Obviously, there is much to be learned about the Sayers-Williams friendship; all I can add is that it extended to Williams' family on Sayers' part, for the Wheaton College collection has a few short notes she wrote to his wife and son after Williams' death.

The friendship with C. S. Lewis is also largely unknown in detail. Lewis wrote in a letter (*Encounter* 20, January 1963, p. 81) that he had had tea with Sayers a few times—but never anything stronger, although that was neither her fault nor his. (Sayers was a great wine drinker, by the way.) Where, when, and why they met, we do not know. We do have a few letters of their correspondence: Lewis's, of 10 November 1945 and 2 August 1946, in *Letters of C. S. Lewis*, ed. W. H. Lewis; Sayers', of 13 May 1943, 3 December 1945, and 21 December 1953, in *C. S. Lewis: A Biography*, by Green and Hooper. From the latter volume, as well as Lewis's first letter, we know that Sayers (as well as Williams, according to Green and Hooper) was involved in the Socratic Club at Oxford during the days of Lewis's presidency. So a few of their meetings were probably on times when Sayers journeyed to Oxford to read a paper on a religious topic before that group. (At least one of Sayers' addresses before the Socratic Club—if she gave more than one—has been published: "Poetry, Language and Ambiguity" [delivered on 3 June 1954], in *The Poetry of Search and the Poetry of Statement, and Other Posthumous Essays*... [1963].)

Since the earliest of these letters is in 1943, it is possible that Charles Williams, after his removal with the Oxford University Press to Oxford, brought Lewis and Sayers together. (Certainly Lewis and Sayers collaborated on a letter on the tenth anniversary of Williams' death, sent to the *London Times*.) On the other hand, Sayers gave a series of radio talks, *Christ of the Creeds* (never published, at least under that title), in 1939; Lewis gave his *Broadcast Talks (The Case for Christianity in the U.S.)* in 1941—perhaps their introduction was through someone at the B.B.C. Or, of course, perhaps one of them just wrote to the other—such things do happen. In other words, as with the Williams-Sayers friendship, this essay is being written perhaps five or ten years too soon: no doubt more materials on Sayers will be forthcoming. Perhaps (wouldn't it be delightful?) Walter Hooper will edit the Lewis-Sayers correspondence. Perhaps, perhaps...

There are a couple of indications in these published letters of how valuable such a volume might be. In Sayers' letter of 13 May 1943, she urged him to write a book on miracles; a few weeks later, according to Green and Hooper, Lewis began work on *Miracles: A Preliminary Study*. Were there other such cross influences? Besides, Lewis wrote to Sayers in his 10 December 1945 letter, "...you are one of the great English letter writers." That's reason enough for a collection!

Two items of Sayers and Lewis writing about each other can conclude this note. Sayers wrote a letter to the *Spectator* 195 (22 July 1955), p. 123, in which she corrected a reviewer who compared Aslan to an archangel; she continues,

In these tales of Absolutely Elsewhere, Aslan is shown as creating the worlds (*The Magician's Nephew*), slain and arisen again for the redemption of sin (*The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*), incarnate as a Talking Beast among Talking Beasts (*passim*), and obedient to the laws he has made for his own creation (*The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, p. 146). His august archetype—higher than the angels and 'made a little lower' than they—is thus readily identified as the 'Lion of the Tribe of Judah'. Apart from a certain disturbance of the natural hierarchies occasioned by the presence in the story of actual human beings, Professor Lewis's theology and pneumatology are as accurate and logical here as in his other writings.

If it is delightful to know that Sayers read Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*, it would be even more interesting to have the final work—for Lewis wrote a panegyric on Sayers which, according to Hitchman, was read at her funeral by the Bishop of Chichester. (Perhaps the Bishop still has a copy?) Lewis was not a reader of detective stories (except for the Sherlock Holmes saga) and he was not greatly interested in drama, but who could have written a better appreciation of Sayers' Christian apologetics and her Dantean studies?