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Why We Honor the Centenary of Dorothy L. Sayers (1893-1957)

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Abstract

Describes Sayers's relationships with Lewis and Williams in particular, and their mutual influences on each other.

Additional Keywords

Sayers, Dorothy L.—Relation to Inklings

Why We Honor the Centenary of Dorothy L. Sayers (1893-1957)

When Dorothy L. Sayers died in 1957, C.S. Lewis wrote a vivid and affectionate panegyric to be delivered at a memorial service held at the Athenaeum Club. The Very Reverend George Bell, Bishop of Chichester, read it aloud to her mourners, and Lewis gave a copy to her son, Anthony Fleming. He in turn eventually gave it to Walter Hooper, who published it (and deserves much thanks for doing so) in C. S. Lewis' *Of This and Other Worlds* (London: Collins, 1982). People who wonder why Miss Sayers' centenary is being honored by *Mythlore* are urged to read Lewis' pungent and entrancing tribute, which makes clear her relationship to the sphere of literature occupied by Lewis himself, as well as Charles Williams and J.R.R. Tolkien. Those coming late to this triumvirate, or lacking access to a good library, can read on, as I endeavor to explain the matter. Those who can think of still more reasons are invited to send letters to *Mythlore*, thus keeping Glen GoodKnight happy because its Letters column will be well filled for years to come.

Mythlore is devoted, not to all Inklings, but to three of them in particular, and in general to other writers who influenced the three or were influenced by them. In his pioneering work on Lewis, C.S. Lewis: *Apostle to the Skeptics* (New York: the Macmillan Co., 1949), Chad Walsh spoke of "a few of the writers who have left the greatest imprint on Lewis," (P. 134) and puts George MacDonald at the head of the list, followed immediately by Charles Williams, who was, he says, "avidly read and ardently admired by a small circle of Christian intellectuals, including T.S. Eliot and Dorothy Sayers." (p. 136) He adds a few other names, but of all these, only Charles Williams was an Inking. Again, stating that Lewis' literary appeal may "simply be variety," he calls Lewis "wellnigh unique among modern religious writers," and adds, "I can think of only three rivals: G.K. Chesterton, Charles Williams, and Dorothy Sayers." (p. 156)

Miss Sayers' works closely parallel those of Lewis without in the least degree imitating them: she and he both wrote works in a popular genre: his were science fiction and hers were detective novels. She and he both wrote poetry, each of them first appearing in print with slim volumes of poetry not long after each had graduated from Oxford. Both were pressed into writing apologetics, and produced vigorous defences and explications of Christianity, expressing themselves as members of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, who happened to be Anglicans. Both wrote significant works of scholarship regarding major works of medieval literature. Readers of *Mythlore* will note that so far the same could be said for J.R.R. Tolkien (with the exception of apologetics), though I think his essay "On Fairy Stories" (to which I shall return)

contains the single most perfect defense of Christian thought in the 20th century: see below.

In adding the name of Charles Williams we can increase this list of parallels. Williams and Miss Sayers (along with T.S. Eliot) wrote significant Christian plays. These, in particular, qualify Miss Sayers most obviously, as a mythopoetic writer. The characters in her plays, as in Lewis' novels, include angels; and as in Williams' novels, they include both the living and the dead. And, since the definition of the category in Colin Manlove's indispensable study, *Christian Fantasy*, Miss Sayers would qualify by the fact of her bravura translation of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Her translation, in the Penguin edition, which for about thirty years was surely the most widely read version of the *Commedia* in history, Lewis found to be full of "audacities in both language and rhythm." (*Worlds*, p. 124) As for her radio play cycle, *The Man Born to Be King*, Lewis wrote, "I have re-read it in every Holy Week since it first appeared, and never re-read it without being deeply moved." (*Ibid.*, p. 125) The two of them exchanged letters regularly. Some of these appear in C.S. Lewis' *Letters* (Collins: Fount Paperbacks, 1966). In 1945 he told her "you are one of the great English letter writers." (p. 380) It was to her (probably because she was a fellow apologist and would understand), in 1946, that he wrote his famous admission that "a doctrine never seems dimmer to me than when I have just successfully defended it." (p. 382) And, in 1956, he wrote her about his marriage to Joy Davidman, at a time when he expected her to die immediately. In fact, Joy Lewis lived long enough to ask Miss Sayers in person if it were true that she hated to hear her detective works mentioned, and "was relieved to hear her deny it." (*Worlds*, p. 122) Indeed, in his panegyric, Lewis explains very accurately and perceptively the process of development in the character of Lord Peter Wimsey, through his relationship with Harriet Vane. He quotes "a better critic" (than those who thought Miss Sayers was "falling in love with her hero") on the matter. This critic, who may have been his wife, says "It would be truer to say she was falling out of love with him; and ceased fondling a girl's dream — if she has ever done so — and begun inventing a man." (*Worlds*, pp. 122-123). Lewis had a circle of intellectual friends outside of the Inklings; this included most especially his wife, but it obviously included Dorothy L. Sayers.

As for Charles Williams, Miss Sayers addressed her translations of *The Divine Comedy* "To the Dead Master of the Affirmations, Charles Williams." (*Cantica I, Hell*, 1949, and *Cantica II, Purgatory*, 1955). Lewis says that in her essay in the volume he edited, *Essays Presented to Charles Williams* (1947), (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), "And Telling You a Story: A Note on *The Divine Comedy*," you get

the first impact of Dante on a mature, a scholarly, and an extremely independent mind." (*Worlds*, p. 125). In this breath-taking essay, which as Lewis says, gives her whole method in approaching Dante, she says, "While I still knew Dante chiefly by his repute, *The Figure of Beatrice* [by Charles Williams] was published [in 1943], and I read it—not because it was about Dante, but because it was by Charles Williams. It became immediately apparent that here was an Image, and here an Image-maker, with whom one had to reckon." (*Essays*, p. 1) Here Miss Sayers is writing precisely in terms of Williams' own theological language—the "Affirmations" of which she deemed him the "Master" were those of which he speaks in his often used phrase, "The Affirmation of Images," and he follows this affirmation in his own spirituality, keeping it in balance with the more widely documented *Via Negativa* (Way of Negation) of the best-known Christian mystics. This affirmative way, Miss Sayers saw and celebrated in Williams and Dante alike. It is the Way she followed in her own spirituality, which has been, I think, much misunderstood.

She and Williams engaged in a lively exchange of letters; since neither hers nor Williams' letter have been published in collections (more's the pity), one turns to James Barbazon's fine biography, *Dorothy L. Sayers, The Life of a Courageous Woman* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1981) for a few snippets of the letters she wrote to Williams about Dante. These "range over every kind of topic, whether the historical background of the poem, its theory, its style, its humanity, or the character and personality of Dante himself." (Barbazon, pp. 231) Most potently, in regard to the last, is the letter she wrote on Dante's "bedworthiness." This means exactly what you think. Dante, "she adjudged, from the evidence of his poetry, to have been a passionate and satisfying lover." (Barbazon, p. 112). Look it up in the source I have recited, (recently republished in paperback), if you think that Christian writers cannot celebrate human sexuality.

It is impossible in this brief format to explore further the deep debt of mutual exchange among Miss Sayers and the two Inklings who enjoyed her friendship. One must remember that while she was never part of that entirely male group, the Inklings, she had herself a close circle of female friends (they called themselves the Mutual Admiration Society) with whom she enjoyed a rewarding intellectual relationship over the whole of her adult life. But *Mythlore*, a journal that focuses upon C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and J.R.R. Tolkien, must take account of this major contemporary of theirs.

The mention of Tolkien leads me to my final point in considering the mythopoeic *bona fides* of Miss Sayers as a writer of mystery novels. The mystery is quintessentially a comedy, as defined by Northrop Frye. In discussing "Comic Fictional Modes" (which include *The Divine Comedy*), Frye says "in some religious poetry, for example at the end of the *Paradiso*, we can see that literature has an upper limit, a

point at which an imaginative vision of an eternal world becomes an experience of it." (Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, New York: Atheneum, 1967, p. 45) For Frye, "the theme of the comic is the integration of society." (p. 43) He explains that the detective story is a form of comedy, in a sequence that passes through melodrama to myth, and finally to science fiction, "a mode of romance with a strong inherent tendency to myth." (p. 49) All the genres along this continuum are in their degree forms of mythopoeic fantasy whose realistic and ironic garb conceal a romantic core. And what, most especially in detective fiction, is that core? In the detective novel, a wrongful death or other extreme crime disrupts Frye's "integration of society," and at the moment when the killer (disrupter) is identified, that integration begins to be restored. There is always, in a true detective novel, a happy ending, as Tolkien says there must be in "the true... fairy tale."

In "On Fairy-Stories" (J.R.R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1964), he speaks of "the consolation of the Happy Ending." (p. 60) Of this, he says, "I will call it *Eucatastrophe*." He continues, "It does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure... it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat, and in so far is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the wall of the world, poignant as grief." (p. 60) The structuring of her art in terms of the "pre-eminently... high and joyous" (p. 63) Christian story of the Birth of Christ ("the *Eucatastrophe* of Man's history") and the Resurrection ("the *eucatastrophe* of the story of the Incarnation,") which is present in every one of Miss Sayers' detective novels, surely entitles her to be placed upon the shelf reserved for masterpieces (after their kind) of Mythopoeic fiction.

As C.S. Lewis said, "For all she did and was, for delight and instruction, for her militant loyalty as a friend, for courage and honesty... — let us thank the Author who invented her." This present issue of *Mythlore* is dedicated to Dorothy L. Sayers' Centenary in order to do just that.

— Nancy-Lou Patteson

