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"A Bloomsbury Blue-Stocking": Dorothy L. Sayers' Bloomsbury Years in Their "Spatial and Temporal Content"

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"A Bloomsbury Blue-Stocking": Dorothy L. Sayers' Bloomsbury Years in Their "Spatial and Temporal Content"

Abstract
Contends that Sayers’s “Bloomsbury years formed a significant source for and influence upon her detective fiction.”

Additional Keywords
Sayers, Dorothy L.—Biography; Sayers, Dorothy L.—Detective novels—Sources
It's no affair of mine how you behave in Bloomsbury...

In the last to be published of Dorothy L. Sayers
detective novels, the Countess of Severn and
Thames writes to Lord Peter's mother, the
Dowager Duchess of Denver, that
to see your amorous sweet devil of a son wedded to an
Oxford-Bloomsbury blue-stocking should add consid­
erably to the gaiety of the seacnn *

The sobriquet "blue-stocking," which she applies to Harriet
Vane — defined as "a woman with intellectual or literary
interests" — could equally be applied to Miss Sayers
herself; both she and her creation had attended Oxford
and lived in Bloomsbury. These facts are by no means co­
incidental or without significance in the life and work of
Dorothy L. Sayers. It is my thesis that her Bloomsbury
years formed a significant source for and influence upon
her detective fiction. S. P. Rosenbaum, a specialist in
Bloomsbury studies, states that while modern literary
study dislikes the use of "spatial and temporal context" in
the interpretation of literature, he uses this mode in his
discussion of Bloomsbury, and so shall I.

The extreme cachet of Bloomsbury has been character­
ized variously by Miss Sayers' biographers; Alzina Stone
Dale calls it "a part of London where young intellectuals
lived and worked and talked about art and love and poli­
tics," while Nancy M. Tischler styles it "Vanity Fair,"
defining "Bloomsbury women" as "flamboyant, icono­
clastic, and independent career women who rejected the
Victorian rules of decorum and domesticity for a new
freedom." The reality behind these colorful impressions
will be discussed below. That Miss Sayers herself knew
what a reference to Bloomsbury meant is made clear in
*Gaudy Night* when Harriet Vane returns from the results of
a disastrous sojourn in Bloomsbury to the apparent sanctu­
yary of Oxford. She is confronted by Shrewsbury
College's Miss Hillyard, who demands to know what her
relations are with Lord Peter, a man she calls "notorious
all over Europe," and declares: "It's no affair of mine how
you behave in Bloomsbury. But if you bring your lovers
here — " (Ibid.). She is clearly implying Bloomsbury's
reputation for sexual liberty. What that liberty actually
meant for Dorothy and for her alter ego Harriet, as well as
for the women whose lives in part gave that reputation to
Bloomsbury, is attributed with terrible accuracy by Louise
de Salvo to "Bloomsbury's virulent if unconscious
misogyny, masquerading beneath the veneer of a sexually
liberated, enlightened humanism."8

What, then, is Bloomsbury? As a geographical location,
Bloomsbury remains, even today, a "partly residential"
district located between the West End and "the City." The
site of both the British Museum and the University of
London, it is distinguished by a series of beautiful, tree­
surrounded squares, the earliest of which — Bloomsbury
Square — was created in 1660, lined with seventeenth and
eighteenth century houses, many of them already broken
up into flats in Miss Sayers' day. Into this physical setting,
the Bloomsbury of "modern English fiction, biography,
economics, aesthetics, painting and decoration," and
"models of modern living" ("for good or ill") (Rosenbaum,
1975, p. 1), came into being in 1904, when, following the
death of the eminent Victorian biographer Leslie Stephen,
his four children moved to 46 Gordon Square,
Bloomsbury. Vanessa Bell, elder of his two daughters,
destined to become an artist, explained this move in a
memoir written in 1951:

We knew no one living in Bloomsbury then and that I think
was one of its attractions... It seemed as if in every way we
were making a new beginning in the tall clean rather frigid
rooms, heated only by coal fires in the old-fashioned fire­
paces. (Quoted in Rosenbaum, 1975, p. 75-76)

Her younger sister, Virginia Stephen (whom the world
knows by her married name Virginia Woolf), wrote of the
house as it looked in 1908:

The drawing room had greatly changed its character...
the age of Augustus John was dawning. His Pyramus
filled one entire wall. The Watts portraits of my father
and my mother were hung downstairs... Clive had
hidden all the match boxes because their blue and
yellow swore with the prevailing colour scheme. (Ibid.)

In this setting, the four young people held an impromptu
salon every Thursday evening; one of its number, Clive
Bell, who married Vanessa in 1907, recorded that the "set
of friends" thus formed was first given a name "by Lady
MacCarthy... in a letter: she calls them 'the Bloomsberies.'"

The Bloomsbury Group which developed from this
beginning consisted in part of Virginia and Leonard
Woolf, Vanessa and Clive Bell, Lytton Strachey, E.M.
Forster, John Maynard Keynes, Roger Fry, Duncan Grant,
and Desmond MacCarthy. Rosenbaum describes them as
"a collectivity of friends and relations who knew and loved
one another for a period of time extending over two gen-
The difference, in Miss Sayers' case, is significant. — "men," carries a lingering whiff of "unconscious misogyny of a unanalysable good," (Ibid. p. 26) Platonists, or bears, "sought a secular solution," (Rosenbaum, 1987, p. 23) Anglican Evangelicism, whose major moral focus was the century, including the "Clapham Sect," a major center of milieu that characterized Cambridge in the early nineteenth century, including the "Clapham Sect," a major center of Anglican Evangelicism, whose major moral focus was the abolition of slavery. The revolt of its Bloomsbury descendants was not against this moral mandate, but against evangelical restraints upon "the senses... the intellect... amusement, enjoyment, art... curiosity... criticism [and] science."13

Although the Bloomsbury Group, unlike their forebears, "sought a secular solution," (Rosenbaum, 1987, p. 23) Dorothy L. Sayers did not. The point is not that the Bloomsbury Group lacked a recognizable religious source and element. They were, in terms of their "intuitive awareness of a unanalysable good," (Ibid. p. 26) Platonists, or rather Neo-Platonist. Even Bloomsbury's aestheticism was Romantic, formalist, and Platonic, in its emphasis upon "significant form" (Ibid. p. 39). Virginia Woolf wrote (inaccurately, I suspect) that "human character changed" in December, 1910, when Roger Fry's first exhibition of post-impressionist art opened. (Ibid. p. 307) This remarkable statement can be better understood by noting that the second post-impressionist show, organized by Fry in 1912, included Van Gogh, Gauguin, Vlaminck, Derain, Rouault, Picasso, and Cezanne. (Naylor, p. 14)

The Bloomsbury Group survived a move to Fitzroy Square, which occurred after Thoby Stephen died (1906) and Vanessa Stephen married Clive Bell (1907). Virginia and her surviving brother Adrian moved to this address, also in Bloomsbury, and the Thursday evening gatherings continued. (Rosenbaum, 1979, p. 2) The year that Dorothy L. Sayers first went to live in Bloomsbury, 1920, a "Memoir Club" was founded by members of the Bloomsbury Group, to "commemorate Old Bloomsbury," (Rosenbaum, 1987, p. 4) and this Club met on "a continuing basis for the New Bloomsbury" (Ibid.) until 1956. Miss Sayers' Bloomsbury years thus took place in an environment already firmly identified with Bloomsbury arts and letters, displayed and published there and forming a vital part of the environment in which Lord Peter had his birth.
she taught at the Hull School for Girls in 1916. While living at Hull, she saw a selection of her poems published in Op I (1916) by Blackwell in Oxford. These poems strongly medievalizing and Anglo-Catholic in content and aesthetic, show vividly the difference between her Oxford mentality and that of the Cambridge-bred Bloomsberries. Interestingly, this first of her books foreshadows elements of her future writings: in "Lay" she writes, "I shall sing of thee in antique rime, / ... And intricate as bells rung down in time," introducing the theme of the bell-ringing central to The Nine Tailors (1934). And in "The Gates of Paradise" she describes how "Judas' soul went through the night," introducing a figure she was to explore deeply in The Man Born to Be King (1944).

She followed this triumph in the same year by securing a job at Blackwell's (with her father's help), returning to live in Oxford in 1917. This time her parents had moved yet again, to a small and even more remote parish, Christ Church, in the Cambridgeshire Fens. Along with her publishing job, Dorothy began to translate the Tristan of Thomas, a twelfth-century French poet. (Barbazon, p. 64) This indicates that she intended to be a scholar as well as a poet (an ambition realized later in her life as a major translator and interpreter of Dante). She put together the manuscript of a second book of poetry, Catholic Tales and Christian Songs (published in 1918). These poems contain precursors as well: "I make the wonderful carven beams,/ ... And the gilded, wide-winged cherubims," another motif to appear later in The Nine Tailors; and her first tiny play, "The Mocking of Christ," whose characters include 'Persona Dei,' Emperor, Pope, Chorus, King, Preacher, Bishop, Cathedral Organist, First Curate, Second Curate, Respectable Gentleman, Patriot, Patriot of Another Nationality, Sentimental Person, A Mummer, Dionysus, Osiris, Elijah, Joshua, Gautama, Mithra, Priest of the Grove of Nemi, Green Person, Bacchae, Balder, Prometheus, Adonis, Plato, Socrates, and a Captain, in the space of eleven pages. Knowing what her lifetime career would bring, one sees here that she was to go on, ultimately, as she had begun.

Miss Sayers left this still somewhat sheltered setting and went, with the man who won her totally unrequited love, Eric Whelpton, to France in 1919, to teach there for a year at L'Ecole des Roches in Veurne sur Awre, near Paris. Illness again intervened, in the form of mumps, and she returned to England in September, 1920, where she was able at least to take formally her long deferred degree at Oxford, a BA and MA, October 14, 1920. (Barbazon, p. 85) At this point she began her Bloomsbury years, still a virgin and twenty-seven years old. After a brief sojourn in St. George's Square, she moved into a tiny flat in No. 44 Mecklenburgh Square. This brief first stay and subsequent move are echoed in Strong Poison, where Harriet Vane stays at first with Sybil Marriott and Eiluned Price, until she "left Miss Marriott's house and took a small flat of her own in Doughty street." On this model, Miss Sayers' short stay in St. George's Square may have been spent in a place of the utmost austerity: "The door opened upon a small bed-sitting room, furnished with the severest simplicity," (Ibid. p. 105) so limited in space and facilities that the occupants resort to "a tap in the landing" in order to fill a kettle, (Ibid., p. 106) and share a telephone which is also "somewhere outside." (Ibid., p. 107)

Settled in No. 44 Mecklenburgh Square, and firmly ensconced in Bloomsbury sixteen years after the surviving Stephens settled there and began their weekly meetings in Gordon Square, Dorothy found herself forced to prepare her own meals for the first time in her life, buying her first frying pan and doing without curtains. (Barbazon, p. 85) She was being supported by her parents, both similarly and differently to Virginia Stephen, who with her siblings lived upon an inheritance. Interestingly, the Rev. Mr. Sayers chose November 20, 1920 (when his daughter was first living in Bloomsbury) to change his will in order to leave his estate exclusively to his wife. (Brunsdale, p. 78) This is unlikely to have been totally coincidental. It may be that her choice of Bloomsbury seemed to him an augury against her future stability. He was mistaken, in that case, but neither he nor Dorothy could have known that for sure in 1920, although in that year she was working on the manuscript for Whose Body?, the first of what were to become her twelve immensely successful detective novels.

In accordance with the conventional (and accurate) wisdom that the writer should write what she knows, the fledgling novelist placed several of the characters in this first novel in Bloomsbury:

Mr. Parker [the policeman who later becomes Lord Peter's brother-in-law] was a bachelor, and occupied a Georgian but inconvenient flat at No. 12A Great Ormond Street, for which he paid a pound a week. This flat contains a sitting-room, "where Munns, who did for him by the day, was laying the table," referring to a servant, a luxury Dorothy was not able at that time to enjoy for herself. Parker awakens "to the smell of burnt porridge," perhaps inspired by Dorothy's fledgling efforts as a cook, while "a raw fog was rolling slowly in through the hygienically open' window of his bedroom." Later in the novel, Sir Julian Freke asks to share a cab with Parker, who is on the point of "returning to Bloomsbury," later generously gives up his cab to Freke, who orders the driver to take him to 24 Russell Square... and look sharp." (Ibid., p. 133)

By the end of 1921 Miss Sayers had moved. "In November her landlady gave her notice to be out of her room by December 5." Happily, her friend Murial Jaeger had located a new flat for her, in Great James Street, not far away. Dorothy wrote to her parents on November 24, 1921, that her new flat was "quite small but very pretty." This is the flat which she continued to own, by most accounts, until the end of her life, though it had long since ceased by that time to form the center of her existence:

Beginning with her settlement in Great James Street, Miss Sayers engaged in intense relationships with three
men. The first, John Cournos, whom she had perhaps already met in Oxford, became "part of her quasi-bohemian lifestyle in London." (Brunsdales, p. 90) By May of 1922, she had found long-term and solid employment, going to work as a copywriter at S.H. Benson's advertising agency, where she remained until 1930. By October of 1922, Cournos had abruptly left England (and Dorothy) without a word. A Russian Jewish author some twelve years her senior, he had been raised as a stepson in a Hasidic family, (Barbazon, p. 89-90) whose community, even more enclosed than an Anglican country rectory, he had obviously abandoned before he met Miss Sayers. During the period of their relationship (1921-1922) they never lived together, though she did leave him "to keep the flat warm in my absence," (Ibid., p. 91) as she somewhat suggestively put it in a letter to her parents, February 14, 1922. Her biographers conclude that Miss Sayers ended her relationship with Cournos while still a virgin. She wanted to marry him and bear his children; from her church rectory-based view, the physical expression of her love for him could only take place inside a marriage, and (or at the very least) without the use of contraceptive devices. He, on the contrary, was willing to become her lover but determined to prevent the birth of children from such a relationship. Dorothy portrayed her dilemma fictionally in Strong Poison (1930): the judge in Harriet Vane's trial for the murder of her lover says that she was angry with [him]... because, after persuading her against her will to adapt her principles of conduct, he then renounced those principles and so, as she says, 'made a fool of her.'" (Sayers (1930/1977, p. 11)

In reality, Courrnois had married Sybil Norton in 1924, and Miss Sayers wrote to him in bitter terms:

I dare say I wanted too much — I could not be content with less than your love and your children and our happy acknowledgement of each other to the world. You now say you would have given me all those, but at the time you went out of your way to insist you would give me none of them.

Clearly, she saw the demeaning and humiliating side of this relationship, in which the male partner agrees to share sexual experiences with the female partner but insists upon denying her both marriage and childbirth, thus deciding for her how, in what circumstances, and to what issue her sexuality is to be expressed. He remains dominant, choosing to give and to withhold. She must submit, and in a way doubly, perhaps triply submissive, for her sexual activity, her social status, and her capacity for procreation are all placed in his control alone. The bitterness of her letters to Cournos is a bitterness compounded, for by this time her immediate response to his departure in 1922 had led to an even more disastrous result. By April of 1923 she had become pregnant, reportedly because of an affair with a racing motorcyclist, which, entered on the rebound, had presumably been consummated without the protection of any form of birth control. In this circumstance her pregnancy can hardly be described as an "accident," (Brunsdales, p. 91) unless she had — as may well be — trusted her partner to be more experienced in such matters than she. Clearly she had so far let down the bars of her conventions as to undergo her sexual initiation, but it seems quite likely that she had kept her second provision — that the prevention of children was wrong — in place, probably in the naive expectation that if she became pregnant, her man of the people would marry her. He did not; firmly in control of the situation, he had met her sexual needs but refused, when their son Anthony appeared, to become his legal father, thus exercising his power not only over the inexperienced Dorothy but over the infant issue of his sexual pleasure as well.

By the time the new mother did become married in 1926, to Oswald Atherton Fleming, she may have abandoned her refusal of birth control too. Certainly she never bore Fleming any children, or perhaps this divorced man, already a father, was sufficiently sophisticated to prevent any further children by means he controlled himself. He never accepted Anthony into their home, although when Dorothy's son became old enough to go away to school, Fleming gave the boy his surname, without formal adoption. "Mac" Fleming, like Cournos and "Bill," used or withheld his capacity to procreate or acknowledge children as he chose, though he did grant Miss Sayers the marriage and, in its context, the licit sexual expression she had sought (at least in accordance with secular law).

Their marriage coincided with the publication of Clouds of Witness, which had been three years in the making, and which contains an unflattering portrait of the Marxist motorcyclist Goyle whose shabby desertion of Lady Mary (Lord Peter's sister) leads her mother, the Dowager Duchess, to exclaim:

Mary was so crazy to get to London — I shall always say it was the fault of that ridiculous club — what could you expect of a place where you ate such horrible food, all packed into an underground cellar painted pink and talking away at the tops of their voices, and never any evening dress — only Soviet jumpers and side-whiskers.

This fictional depiction of a relationship across the lines of class had expressed itself in the reality of Miss Sayers' life by visits to West End dance halls. But she had indeed, like Lady Mary, developed a temporary sympathy with people who got their hands dirty for a living. She wrote of Howard roasting his posterior before the fire and looking all sleek and oily, saying in a haw-haw voice that it really was horrid out of doors — this to Bill, who had been testing motorcycles all day in fog and rain and inches deep in liquid mud.

And she had, indeed, been "crazy to get to London."

When the child of her liaison was born, she resorted to her cousin Ivy Shrimpton, who cared for children for a living in her little cottage, and took Anthony to Ivy to be reared, as she and Ivy had been, in a remote and rural setting, having borne him in secret. He remained un-
known, according to most of her biographers, even to her own parents, who would certainly have disapproved, though they might not have been surprised.

Unlike Dorothy L. Sayers, Virginia Stephen married her own "penniless Jew,"23 Leonard Woolf, on August 10, 1912; she was some thirty years old at the time, about the same age as Miss Sayers when Cournos left her in 1922. Virginia Woolf's marriage lasted until her suicide in 1941; Dorothy L. Sayers marriage to Oswald Atherton Fleming lasted until she died in 1950. In the particular of a longterm marriage terminated only by death, both these marriages followed the Victorian ideal. On the other hand, both marriages were childless. Rosenbaum says that the hand of Victoria lay heavily upon the Bloomsbury Group: they "were preoccupied with Victorianism throughout their careers." (Rosenbaum, p. 58) In this preoccupation they contrasted "reality" (their own life vision, presumably) with "the unreality of Victorian life." (Ibid., p. 68) This "unreality" refers to the role of denial in the lives of Victorian families, where what "really" happened — including psychological, physical, and sexual abuse, in the case of the Leslie Stephen household — was smothered by efforts at maintaining "appearances," a pattern identified in the late twentieth century as a major characteristic of dysfunctional families.

Virginia Woolf had lost her mother at the age of thirteen and her father at twenty-two. The result was that her mother became "unreal" to her. (Ibid., p. 78) "Unreality shadows life throughout Bloom's Victorian preoccupation, but no more so than in the death-ridden Stephens family." (Ibid.) Rosenbaum says. This unreal mother obsessed Virginia at least until she wrote To the Lighthouse, which contains a portrait of her. (Ibid., p. 81) As for Virginia's father, she felt towards him a profound ambivalence. (Ibid. p. 85) This father-dominated household was the same place where the two sisters' half-brother George had made them victims of his developing sexuality, and which they were so glad to exchange for their new, self-chosen house in Bloomsbury.

Was Dorothy's life in complete contrast to all this? If her fiction reflects her true life, just possibly. She always depicted clergy in a warm light, along with their spouses: the picture of the Rev. and Mrs. Venables in The Nine Tailors is often cited as an example. And certainly her parents supported her financially in her efforts at independence. But she, the daughter of Victorian parents, vigorously maintained a Victorian silence to bridge the gap between "reality" — her illegitimate child — and appearances; whether or not she ever told her parents (or they ever suspected) what had happened. Certainly her son was kept aside and only very late and slightly acknowledged, well after her parents had died. For his part, Anthony maintained his personal silence to the end of life as well. After Janet Hitchman revealed the secret of his existence and relationship to Miss Sayers in her biography Such a Strange Lady, he gave permission to James Barbazon to produce her "authorized" biography, upon which most subsequent biographers have depended. It describes touchingly how he made himself known to his mother's closest friends after she died. Interestingly, Miss Sayers never erected a tombstone to either parent, though she provided her mother with a house in Witham during her brief widowhood after the Rev. Mr. Sayers died in 1928. Perhaps Dorothy's silence about these deaths was a continuation of the silence she maintained about her child. Or perhaps it was, in some way, an unspoken retribution — say, rather, an unspoken equivalent — for the silence she had felt obliged, by what she understood to be their view, to maintain about her child.

Some hint of Miss Sayers' attitude toward her parents can be seen in the way she dealt with them in regard to her marriage to a divorced man (another major affront, certainly, to their values). Without any forewarning, she wrote to them on April 8, 1926:

I am getting married on Tuesday (weather permitting!) to a man named Fleming, who is at the moment motoring correspondent to the News of the World... I didn't mention this before, because it's our own business and I don't want an avalanche of interrogation from all sorts of people." (Quoted in Barbazon, p. 116)

Presumably these interrogators would have included her parents. Writing again to her now forewarned mother, April 14, 1926, in a jaunty, facetious, and perhaps defensive (not to say ironic) tone, she reported that "we were 'turned off' as the hangman says, in the salubrious purlieux of the registrar's office in the Clerkenwell Road," (Ibid., p. 117) a far cry from the cathedral wedding she well knew her parents hoped to see.

Miss Sayers and her husband, whose name she never used publicly, settled down in her flat in 24 Great James Street. It was "cramped for space, so Sayers accepted that they would have to move before John Anthony could join them," according to David Coomes.24 In this small space they began "to get on each other's nerves," (Barbazon, p. 140) and when in August of 1928 a second flat on the floor above became available, the two facilities were joined. Miss Sayers began to press for Anthony's inclusion, as she wrote to Ivy, but it was not to be. By September of the same year the death of her father presaged a still greater spatial expansion in the marriage. "Mac" Fleming himself located a house for his mother-in-law, "Sunnyside, Newland Street, Witham, Essex," which he told her was "a pleasant, old fashioned town on the main road between Chelmsford and Colchester." (Ibid., p. 141) In August of 1929, his wife became sufficiently stabilized in her writing career and its income to leave Benson's, and the Witham house, by that time vacated through the death of Dorothy's mother, became "their principal dwelling place, with the flat in town kept simply as a pied-a-terre." (Ibid., p. 142) Perhaps this address aided Mac in his campaign to keep his marriage childless; there is so likely to be gossip in a village, if mysteries set in English villages are to be believed. In any event, this new address effectively ended Dorothy L. Sayers' Bloomsbury years.
It did not, however, end her inclusion of Bloomsbury references in her fiction, or her habit of giving her characters residences there.25 Of her twelve novels, only The Five Red Herrings lacks a Bloomsbury reference; instead it imagines a death in the Scottish setting of the Sayers-Fleming holidays. Although Dorothy L. Sayers and Virginia Woolf alike drew upon their own lives in their art, it would be shallow to explain their genius in terms of their variant sufferings alone. But an extensive literature has in fact explored Virginia Woolf’s life and its relationship to her art. Miss Sayer’s life and art too have been much discussed, but little has been said about the relationship of her Bloomsbury experiences to her writings beyond the outlining of biographical events and the cataloguing of Bloomsbury references.

The character of Lord Peter (who does not live in Bloomsbury) may have emerged briefly before she settled there, but she wrote her first novel, Whose Body?, during her first full year of Bloomsbury residence, and this book shows him at his most jaunty and artificial. Here, even before she has taken up the anti-classical labors of an advertising copywriter, we hear an adopted sophistication and a commercial voice. Of course, Barbara Reynolds points out that Miss Sayers first mentioned Dante in Whose Body?, written between the summer and autumn of 1921 — a year which was significant for interest in Dante, both for a display of early editions of his works at University College in London, and for a sixteen-page Dante supplement to the Times of September 14, 1921.26 This interest, first evinced in the context of Miss Sayers’ residing in London, flowered two decades later in her well-known translation of the Commedia for Penguin. Clearly, living in Bloomsbury furthered Miss Sayers’ intellectual development as well as her affairs of the heart.

A review of the eleven novels that do mention Bloomsbury must begin with Whose Body?, where, as we have already seen, both the villainous Sir Julian Freke and the blameless Parker reside in very different addresses. Sir Julian Freke lives in Russell Square, “one of the largest squares in central London’s Bloomsbury district,” which is bordered on the west by the University of London and the British Museum. (Clarke, p. 414) Parker, as we have also seen, occupies his humble flat at No. 12A Great Ormond Street, where he lives as a bachelor. I have suggested above that Miss Sayers’ emphasis upon details of his modest existence there may have been humorously based upon her own experience.

Clouds of Witness (1926) contains only one specific reference to Bloomsbury: the object of desire for the Duke of Denver (on trial for his life before the House of Lords with only his brother, Lord Peter, between him and the noose) — the beautiful Mrs. Grimthorpe — stays there briefly after being rescued from her abusive husband: “Peter saw her home to a respectable little hotel in Bloomsbury.”27 The book treats illicit love in melodramatic terms — the time of its writing parallels without mimicking the very racy romantic career of its author, and was published in the year that she married.

Unnatural Death (1927), like Whose Body?, places a villainous character in Bloomsbury: “Miss Whittaker knew London, of course. She had trained at the Royal Free [Hospital]. That meant she would know Bloomsbury better than any other district.”28 Miss Sayers, stating the premise of my essay, says “nobody knew better than Parker [who also lives in Bloomsbury] how rarely Londoners move out of their own particular little orbit.” (Ibid.) Basing his police procedure upon this principle, Parker centers his search for a solicitor that Miss Whittaker may have visited, in Bloomsbury: he “crossed the road toward Bedford Row” and “started at the first solicitor’s he came to, which happened to be the office of one J.F. Trigg.” (Ibid., p. 198) Trigg has a very significant story to tell: he once interviewed Mary Whittaker under the name of “Miss Grant,” and “She said she was staying at the Peveril Hotel in Bloomsbury.” (Ibid. p. 204) These passages are more than coincidental, for though it was true that Bloomsbury, as Miss Sayers said, was “a quarter which swarms with solicitors,” (Ibid., p. 198) being located adjacent to London’s legal district, and equally true that the London Free Hospital did indeed train nurses like (or, one hopes, unlike) Mary Whittaker, the likely meaning of London in general, and almost certainly the meaning of Bloomsbury in particular, for Miss Sayers herself in her own life and choice to live there, is expressed explicitly and tellingly in this poignant observation about “London, whose rather untidy and grubby bosom is the repository of so many odd secrets. Discreet, incurious, and all-enfolding London.” (Ibid., p. 197) London is a mother in whose bosom secrets may safely be deposited; as Miss Sayers’ own mother evidently was not. In discreet, incurious, and all-enfolding London, where young Dorothy could explore (whether safely or not, certainly secretly) her own sexuality and her own penchant for popular art. One notes that when her widowed mother was provided with a domicile, it was not located conveniently near to the Bloomsbury flat of the Sayers-Fleming menage, but well out of London in a village cottage.

Three of the short stories published in Lord Peter Views the Body (1928) contain references to Bloomsbury. In "The Abominable History of the Man with Copper Fingers," a Dr. Pettifer tells how "a totally unknown man had led him to a house in Bloomsbury where there was a woman suffering from strychnine poisoning."29 This tale is told as an example of how "The more secluded London squares teemed with subjects for a writer," (Ibid., p. 6) a statement not only about Miss Sayers’ use of Bloomsbury as a writer’s source, but again, as a reference to the seclusion, with all that could mean for good or ill, of the "London squares" for which Bloomsbury was especially well known. This seclusion, like the maternal capacity of London to keep secrets, is a part of the Bloomsbury Miss Sayers may have sought as well as found.

The medical aspect of Bloomsbury appears again in “The Vindictive Story of the Footsteps that Ran,” where Dr. Hartman, a "young physician,"(Ibid., p. 161) says that "A struggling G.P. can’t afford to let his practice go, even in
Bloombsbury." (Ibid., p. 162) The phrase "even in Bloomsbury," emphasizes its reputation, perhaps, as a place where other things are indeed "let... go." Lord Peter recalls additional Bloomsbury residents in the same story: he says he "Frightened the postman into a fit the other day by askin' him how his young lady at Croydon was. He's a married man, livin' in Great Ormond Street." Indeed, "he lives just opposite to a friend of mine — Inspector Parker." (Ibid., p. 163) We assume that the postman has a young lady and a wife at the same time, an arrangement not appropriately engaged in while living opposite a policeman. Parker at this time is not yet married, although his inventor was. The changes he made to his flat after marriage will, as we shall see, parallel those she had made to her own flat.

The third story, "The Entertaining Episode of the Article in Question," again touches upon domicile, neither secluded and macabre, as in "The Abominable History," nor referring to marriage and the residential element in the "The Vindictive Story," but lurid and outre. Lord Peter, sitting "in his book-lined sitting-room at 110A Picadilly," (Ibid., p. 31) and hence very definitely not in Bloomsbury, receives a request from Bunter about a man "domiciled... in Guilford Street, Bloomsbury," (Ibid.) who turns out to be Jacques Lerouge, the female impersonator who is a thief, a safe-cracker, and a would-be diamond-snatcher, thus perpetuating the motif of the villain who resides in Bloomsbury already seen in Whose Body? and Unnatural Death. Sexual misbehavior and disorder were associated by Miss Sayers not only with Bloomsbury but with France, where her own desire for Eric Whelpston had been utterly disregarded. This motif appears strongly in Clouds of Witness, written early in her Bloomsbury period.

But Parker is not a villain, nor is Sir James Lubbock. In The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club (1928), published in the same year as Lord Peter Views the Body, we see Lord Peter hailing a cab and driving to the residence of Sir James Lubbock, the "well-known Analyst."30 We learn in The Documents in the Case (1930), Miss Sayers' only detective novel without Lord Peter, that Lubbock resides in Bloomsbury, that is to say, in Bloomsbury. Harriet is the heroine of this mystery, resides while the matter is investigated. He too is a character of the utmost respectability.

Miss Sayers continued her custom of locating villainous characters in Bloomsbury, however. In Strong Poison (1930), having learned of Harriet's taking a "small flat of her own," we learn that Philip Boyes, "finding his solitary life depressing, has accepted the invitation of his cousin, Mr. Norman Urquhart, to stay at the latter's house in Woburn Square." (Sayers (1930/1977), p. 12) Boyes is the victim, but certainly not the hero, in this detective tale; Urquhart is something worse. This novel gives a series of vivid portraits of Bohemian Bloomsbury. It is true that Marjorie Phelps, Lord Peter's artist friend, who plays Virgil to his Dante in their little excursions, has her own studio in Chelsea, but the motifs accord closely with Bloomsbury. Miss Sayers makes her narrator note that Harriet and her former lover Philip Boyes are still "living in the same quarter of London," (Ibid.) that is to say, in Bloomsbury. Harriet has left Sylvia Mariott's flat, which Philip L. Scowcroft says is "possibly in Bloomsbury," (Scowcroft, p. 12) and moved to a flat in Doughty Street, where the narrator-judge places her. Later, in Gaudy Night, she lives in Mecklenburgh Square, where her author lived. Harriet is the heroine of both Strong Poison and Gaudy Night, and, similar to Miss Sayers in many ways, is precisely like her in this.

The underworld journey of Strong Poison across Bloomsbury gives a sharply-observed series of vignettes of Bloomsbury life. Marjorie Phelps tells Lord Peter "You'll like Eliuned Price, I think. She scorns everything in trou­sers, but she's a good friend at a pinch." (Ibid.) Eliuned lives with Sylvia Mariott in a "small bed-sitting room." I have suggested it is a picture of Miss Sayers' first brief Bloomsbury residence; it is here "inhabited by a pale, spectacled young woman in a Morris chair." (Ibid., p. 105) The portrayal of the two women, which might read today like a depiction of a lesbian couple, is charming, amusing, and perfectly sympathetic to both of their deftly drawn personalities. Marjorie identifies these friends of Harriet's to Lord Peter as "the rival gang," (Ibid., p. 94) in opposition to Philip Boyes' friends, and offers to introduce him to these others.

Off they go "headed for a round of the studios." (Ibid.) This is the Bloomsbury based upon a milieu begun when
the Omega Workshop opened in 1913. Its pottery and furniture (made or designed by members and associates of the Bloomsbury Group) were displayed and made their appearance in popular magazines of the day as exemplars of contemporary interior decorating. The Workshop served as a precursor for the superb decoration by Duncan Grant of his own home, Charleston, and as an accomplishment to the home of Adrian and Virginia Stephen on "the north side of Brunswick Square," where the "ground-floor dining room" had its wall painted "with a continuous London street scene by Duncan Grant and a friend," as David Garnett recalled in *The Golden Echo* (1953). (Quoted in Naylor, p. 47) Such settings, of course, were created by and for people in social and financial circumstances far more elevated than those of Miss Sayers' Bloomsbury, but they formed the matrix of this setting.

In the first studio, inhabited by "the Kropotkys," who are "pro-Boyes, Bolshevik, and musical," (Sayers (1930-1977) p. 94) Lord Peter and his guide, stumbling "up a narrow and encumbered" stair, encountered "heat, sound, smoke, and the smell of frying" in a room "dimmly lit by a single electric bulb, smothered in a lantern of painted glass," there is "a vast and steaming kettle" on the stove and "a vast and steaming samovar" on the side-table, as well as a piano being played by a "young man with bushy red hair." (Ibid., p. 95) Members of the Russian expatriate community are suggested here: John Cournos might have taken Dorothy to such a gathering. Next the searchers "try Joey Trimble's" (Ibid., p. 102) "a studio over a mews," equally smoky, hot, and crowded, but adding "a strong smell of oil-paints," (Ibid.) which do have a distinctive odour, much increased by the turpentine, linseed oil, damar varnish, and other volatile substances generally used with them. Finally, they locate Sylvia, at home with her friend Eiluned.

Still other aspects of Bloomsbury are mentioned in *Have His Carcase* (1932), as Olga Kohn writes to Lord Peter from "159 Regent Square, Bloomsbury," in "very pretty hand." (p. 32) Despite her refined handwriting, the author wryly and frankly tells us that

Regent Square is anything but a high-class locality, being chiefly populated by grubby infants and ladies of doubtful calling, but its rents are comparatively cheap for so central a situation.

At the "top of a rather dark and dirty stair," Lord Peter is "surprised to discover a freshly painted green door... opened at once by a handsome young woman." (Ibid., p. 297) In keeping with this depiction of Bloomsbury's less affluent addresses, we also learn how the long suffering "Mr. Mervyn Bunter sat in the bedroom of a cheap hotel in Bloomsbury, keeping his eye on a rather dirty curtain, which he could just see across a very dingy courtyard." (Ibid., p. 390)

*Murder Must Advertise* (1933) contains interesting information not only about Miss Sayers' sojourn at Benson's, but intriguing details suggestive of the flat she occupied with her husband, in its enlarged form. These elements appear in connection with the arrival of Lord Peter, disguised as Death Bredon (a soubriquet composed of his own middle names), at Pym's advertising agency, where she has portrayed herself as one of the other employees —

"Miss Meteyard — of Somerville [Miss Sayers' own college]. One of the brighter ornaments of our department. She makes the vulgarest limericks ever recited within these chaste walls;" to Mr. Bredon's prompt response: "then we shall be friends." (Ibid., p. 39)

In his disguise, Lord Peter has apparently taken up residence in 12A, Great Ormond Street, a Bloomsbury address. (Ibid., p. 24) Another resident of that quarter, also at Pym's, is Mr. Ingleby, who "lived in Bloomsbury, was communistic in a literary way, and dressed almost exclusively in pull-overs and grey flannel. He was completely and precociously disillusioned," as, indeed, is Miss Meteyard, who had "a somewhat similar mental makeup." (Ibid., p. 39)

As it emerges, Parker's flat and Mr. Bredon's flat combine to resemble the two storey structure of Miss Sayers' own flat in its nuptial phase. First we read that

Lord Peter Wimsey had paid a call upon Chief-Inspector Parker of Scotland Yard, who was his brother-in-law.

He occupied a large and comfortable armchair in the Chief-Inspector's Bloomsbury flat...

The author comments that "the scene was almost ostentatiously peaceful and domestic," (Ibid.) with Lady Mary knitting "upon the chesterfield" and "Parker himself" on "the window-seat," a vision completed by "a couple of decanters and a soda siphon" on "a convenient table" and "a large tabby cat" on "the hearth rug." (Ibid.) In this cheerful vision we note the presence of alcohol (Fleming was an alcoholic) and the cat (Miss Sayers was a life-long cat-fancier); a middle-class ambience is clearly sketched in these passages.

Later on, Parker goes to Great Ormond Street as the observer rather than observed:

He opened the front door with his latch-key and stepped inside. It was the same house in which he had long occupied a modest bachelor flat, but on his marriage he had taken, in addition, a flat above his own, and this possessed what was, in effect, a seven-roomed maisonette. (Ibid., p. 112)

Here, we read, in "the front hall, common to all the tenants," are mailboxes which include "Flat 3 — Parker," along with "Flat 4," obviously the second and upper part of Parker's maisonette, now being used as a mailing address for "Bredon," who, since he is really Lord Peter Wimsey, actually lives in Piccadilly. Flat 3, the lower flat, contains Parker's "living-room, dining-room and kitchen," (Ibid., p. 113) and Flat 4 the bedrooms. As Parker goes up the shared stairs between the two flats, he is attacked, and is later discovered by his wife, who has emerged from the upper level, which contains "the nursery" and "the bedroom." (Ibid., p. 114) Poignantly, Miss Sayers has assigned one of the bedrooms to be a nursery, the usage she probably
imagined for herself, her husband, and her son, when she added a similarly expanded facility to her own flat.

Bloomsbury references also appear in The Nine Tailors (1934), as a wire from Superintendent Blundell to Lord Peter locates a missing couple: "Vicar St. Andrews Bloombsury says asked perform marriage by license William Thoday Mary Thoday both of that parish," and Frank Jenkins explains that "He had been hanging around a garriage in Bloombury... where he saw a bloke coming along on this here bike." (Ibid., p. 307) The bloke is James Thoday, the brother of Will Thoday, and the "garriage" ambience, a motif appearing in several other parts of Miss Sayers' imagined world, derived perhaps, from her relationship with "Bill," whom she may have met because she, too, possessed a motorcycle, "which she rode with dignity, sitting bolt upright as if driving a chariot."

In Gaudy Night (1935), Miss Sayers gives Harriet Vane her own Bloomsbury address, the one she occupied when she wrote Whose Body?:

Harriet Vane sat at her writing-table and stared out into Mecklenburgh Square. The late tulips made a brave show in the Square Garden, and a quartet of early tennis-players were energetically calling the score of a rather erratic and unpractised game. (Sayers (1930/1977) p. 7)

After her trial and acquittal in the murder of Philip Boyes, Harriet travelled on the continent with a woman friend, and "As soon as she got back to London, she moved to a new flat in Mecklenburgh Square, and settled down to work." (Ibid., p. 65) Here Lord Peter takes her, after their first contact in several years, and leaves her as she is "mounting the stone staircase." (Ibid., p. 68) During the cab ride "he was babbling pleasantly about the Georgian architecture of London. It was only as they were running along Guilford Street that" (Ibid., p. 67) he brought up the subject of marriage; he had never, Harriet mused, "violated the seclusion of Mecklenburgh Square."(Ibid., p. 68) Inside, "on the mantelpiece of her sitting-room stood a note, in Peter's small and rather difficult writing;" (Ibid., p. 69) he is going away to the North and she will not see him again for a time. These passages, besides offering a glimpse of the flat and its environment, drop a hint that Harriet may yet find a relationship with Peter, so delicate is he in his approach, so diffident and so careful of her feelings, not to say her reputation; and indeed at the end of this book, she has agreed to marry him. This address, where Miss Sayers lived before she moved to Great James Street and began her relationship with John Cournos, may have suggested itself as neutral ground for the moment of renewal in Lord Peter's relationship with Harriet Vane.

The final mention of Bloomsbury in the novels comes in Busman's Honeymoon (1937), published nine years after Miss Sayers' own marriage, as we are told about the wedding and honeymoon of Lord Peter and Harriet (Lady Peter). It contains the telling characterization from which I have taken my title: "an Oxford-Bloomsbury blue-stocking. (Sayers (1937/1976), p. 15) Here, most clearly, Dorothy L. Sayers not only identifies Harriet with herself, but identifies herself as a product of those distinctive contexts, Oxford and Bloomsbury. Her Oxford origins and her Oxford University and Somerville College education between them made her an orthodox, high church Anglican, one who found her religious identity in the Prayer Book's sonorous Creeds, her aesthetics in the majestic ceremonies and architectural settings of the established church, and her moral certainties in a rural Anglican rectory.

Life-long marriage between never-married virgins, and child-bearing within this context and without artificial intervention: these were the standards she had imbied and attempted to maintain. Certainly she kept her delight in the intellectual intricacies of the Creeds; certainly she drew upon a rich liturgical heritage in her plays, written in many cases for presentation in medieval cathedrals. As for her received mores in regard to sexuality, relationship, and procreation: she was to violate all except fidelity. She engaged in an active sexual liaison before marriage; she bore a child out of wedlock; she married a divorced man. How did all this come about? Like the Bloomsburies before her, she went to Bloomsbury to find freedom. Her choice of Bloomsbury, with its widely-known reputation, expressed vividly in the quotations we have examined from all but one of her twelve novels — as a place to live when she went, finally, to seek her fortune in London, where she began to write her novels, where she found long-term employment at Benson's, and where she undertook three affairs of the heart with such various and in many ways emotionally disastrous results — suggests that she had, in some way, looked for the anonymity, liberality, and freedom of the Bloomsbury ambience.

Did she actually know what this might mean and where it might lead? Almost certainly not. The innocence of a sexually inexperienced woman, even in her late twenties, and despite her apparent sophistication, can be, and was in this case, profound. In her relationship with Cournos her expectations of him were, to say the least, naive. But then, she was naive, as well as obdurate, more obdurate than he, who despite his amoral intentions toward her, could not break down her defenses and, perhaps in frustration at this affront, removed himself from London. Bloodied by this rejection, herself frustrated by his refusal to love her in her necessary context, she dropped her objections to premarital sex in her democratic relationship with Bill, with lifetime consequences to herself and to her resulting child. Even in her lifelong relationship with Fleming she was forced to marry outside the church.

Did she change her mind about the sinfulness of these activities? Perhaps; her treatment of sexual behaviors in her novels is focused far less upon the technical status of the lovers than upon the misuse of one person by another in these relationships, a region of human behavior of which she had gained genuine and bitter experience. And her categorization of "Lust" as one of the warm-hearted — as opposed to cold-hearted — sins, in her essay "The Other
Six Deadly Sins,\textsuperscript{36} suggests latitude and toleration of the means, though not the intentions, of what had been in her life unequal contests between woman and man.

The Bloomsbury references in Miss Sayers' novels and short stories contain two main categories, expressed in a variety of ways. Bloomsbury functions as a place of residence, whether long-term or transient, and at the same time, houses a host of offices, studios, and other facilities where professionals engage in their professions: doctors, lawyers, policemen, artists, and writers significantly among them. Bloomsbury is portrayed as a place of freedom, autonomy, independence, and self-determination. This is so in part because it is a place of privacy, secrecy, anonymity, and disguise. Bloomsbury, despite its elegant squares and historic houses, can be a place of humility, poverty, illegality, and other forms of liminality. Its position on the borderline between worlds makes it a place for bohemianism, political and sexual license and experimentation, and alternative literature and art, including popular forms.

The poles of personal freedom and professional empowerment are not, and in Miss Sayers' Bloomsbury, were not, very far apart. She went to live there to pursue her self-chosen profession, writing, and to explore the combination of freedom and privacy Bloomsbury promised, not only for her own sexuality, but for all the other aspects of a free person's selfhood, capability, and identity. That she found them all, not only pain and failure, but joy and success, is indicated by the rich range of good and evil nations of freedom and privacy Bloomsbury promised, not been relegated to esoterica. Her Bloomsbury years, with the same zest she used to pursue her art, her scholarship, and art, including popular forms.

Dorothy L. Sayers had a genius for the popular, for motorcycles as well as for bell-towers, for advertising as well as for medieval translations, for mystery novels as well as Mystery plays. That is why her art still lives, when many works of greater moment in their own time have been relegated to esoterica. Her Bloomsbury years, with their intense personal experiences, gave her the grasp upon human realities that make her writings not only witty and accessible, but wise, humane, and, despite their deliberate and self-reflexive artificiality, true.

\begin{itemize}
\item 3. Stephen P. Clarke, The Lord Peter Wimsey Companion (New York: The Mysterious Press, 1985), p. 49. This, along Philip L. Scowcroft's essay (see below) was an indispensable aid in the preparation of my paper.
\item 7. Sayers (1935/1976), loc. cit.
\item 25. See Philip L. Scowcroft, “Some Bloomsbury Residents,” Sidelines on Sayers, Vol. XXXVI, pp. 4-6, for a survey of the characters who shared Miss Sayers’ chosen neighborhood. This little essay, impeccably researched as always by its author, has been absolutely indispensable in the creation of my present study.
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