

**The Apologetic Value of Theological Truth Through Story and Pattern in the Works of
Dorothy L. Sayers.**

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Abstract

This thesis sets out to understand the theological method of Dorothy L. Sayers, a complex woman of letters. The preeminent argument is that a new and helpful paradigm for understanding Sayers' work and evaluating her contribution to Christian apologetics is her emphasis on accessing and expressing theological 'truth', through 'story' and 'pattern'. Sayers consistently explored theological truths in the context of dramatic narratives and orderly systems.

The primary research methodology is to find, read and use Sayers' own letters as the principal sources to shed light on her published work. The thesis seeks to show that recognising Sayers' passion for truth, through story and pattern makes a significant contribution towards understanding her canon as a unity. The thesis differs in perspective in this regard from other Sayers scholarship, which has placed emphasis on other particular theological motifs or literary points in her career as an author. Furthermore, this thesis will differ from other theological analyses of Sayers' work in that it engages with the full diversity of genres in Sayers' canon and does so from a rigorous theological perspective rather than by taking a biographical approach.

This thesis contributes to current theological understanding by bringing the work of a significant lay female Christian thinker of the twentieth century to the attention of scholarship. Sayers' work has continuing resonance for contemporary theologians who are interested in the role of narrative, drama and analogy in theology, and in the creative communication of theological ideas.

Chapter One

Introduction and Literature Review

Well-known as an author of detective fiction and religious plays, and as translator of Dante, Dorothy L. Sayers was also an insightful lay theologian and Christian apologist. She was an eloquent religious voice in her generation, articulating the Christian faith in an accessible and persuasive way. Speaking of Dorothy L. Sayers and C. S. Lewis, Regius Professor of Divinity at the University of Oxford, Canon Oliver Quick, wrote to Archbishop William Temple in 1943 describing them as: “The two people who seem really able to put across to ordinary people a reasonably orthodox form of Christianity.”¹ Karl Barth recommended Sayers to a student, calling her one of the most “outstanding British theologians”² whose books he had read in order to help him learn English. Barth went on to translate three of Sayers’ theological essays into German.³

However, Sayers’ work has received relatively little scholarly attention. Crystal Downing commented on the paucity of scholarship devoted to her work: “while her friend and fellow Anglican C. S. Lewis has generated over 150 biographical and critical books, full-length studies of Sayers could be counted on one’s fingers.”⁴ Despite this reality, a review of scholarship associated with Sayers’ work is necessary in order to gauge the impact of her theological and apologetic contributions and to assess where important questions about her work remain unanswered. The following literature review indicates that although some

¹ Private letter from Oliver Quick to William Temple, 24 July 1943; Lambeth Palace Library, William Temple Papers, vol. 39, fol. 269.

² Unpublished letter from Arnold Ehrhardt to Sayers, September 1945: Wade DLS Letters Folder 9/9-10. Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois.

³ Karl Barth, *Das grösste Drama aller Zeiten aus dem Englischen übersetzt und mit einem Geleitwort* (Evangelischer Verlag: Zollikon, 1959).

⁴ Crystal Downing, *Writing Performances: The Stages of Dorothy L. Sayers* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p.9.

research has elucidated the literary coherence of Sayers' writings, the importance of Sayers' contribution to a theology of work, and her formulation of ideas about the Trinity and creativity, far less inquiry has been attempted with regard to the critical factors shaping her overall theological worldview or the nature of her apologetic contribution.

No full length, academic, theological study of Sayers' oeuvre has yet been published. Any such analysis of Sayers' work would be a contribution to the theological landscape. Writers have tended to come at the various genres of Sayers' work with a particular question or literary genre in mind, or to focus their interest solely upon her personal life and development. In fact, the majority of the existing studies of Dorothy L. Sayers have taken the form of biography. This is ironic since Sayers' own approach to literature emphasised the importance of assessing any given work in its own terms over and above the personality or predilections of the author. In a letter to Dr. E. V. Rieu on 21 April 1944, Sayers wrote regarding this familiar concern that the work be taken seriously on its own terms without a focus on the personal life of the author:

“as the man is so the work.” If the work is sincere it will reflect both the maker's opinions and his character with a ruthless fidelity... It does not matter to any soul alive what my personal aims or satisfactions are.⁵

Amongst the biographical works dedicated to Sayers' life and oeuvre there are two works that command particular attention. The first is by James Brabazon, entitled *Dorothy L. Sayers: The Life of a Courageous Woman*.⁶ This biography was authorised by Sayers' son and was published in 1981. The author was given unparalleled access to Sayers' private papers and his work is of particular importance with regard to Sayers' personal life as it officially disclosed the story of the birth of her illegitimate son. This personal and private emphasis overshadows

⁵ Barbara Reynolds (ed.), *The Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers Volume Three 1944-1950: A Noble Daring* (Cambridge: Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 1999), p.7.

⁶ James Brabazon, *Dorothy L Sayers: The Life of a Courageous Woman* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1981).

other aspects of Sayers' experience and in particular her work as a writer, which was the focus of her life. Unfortunately, Brabazon sheds very little light on her work.

The second biography to stand out is Barbara Reynolds' *Dorothy L. Sayers: Her Life and Soul* published in 1993. Barbara Reynolds has been the leading figure in Sayers scholarship since she edited and compiled Sayers' private letters for publication in a series running to five volumes. These thousands of letters, meticulously chosen and transcribed, give researchers the context for Sayers' literary creations from her own pen, as well as shedding light on her private thoughts as she processed with trusted correspondents many of the intellectual themes she was grappling with and challenges she faced. Reynolds' work is the most scholarly of the Sayers biographies to date. Reynolds deftly drew upon the vast canon of Sayers' personal papers and letters with which she was so familiar, having already begun the process of compiling and editing her letters for publication. Reynolds was able to elucidate more than a chronology of Sayers' life, decisions, publications and relationships because she intentionally traced the development of Sayers' ideas and, in particular, her theological maturation. Her work is an intellectual biography of Sayers, as much as it details the chronology of her life and achievements.

It was Reynolds who first argued that Sayers' work was "all of a piece."⁷ This intuition about the essential unity of Sayers' thinking is a critical milestone in the development of Sayers scholarship, since Sayers' work has largely been studied in a piecemeal fashion. Those interested in fiction have discussed the detective novels, whilst theologians have read her plays and *The Mind of the Maker*, largely focusing on her Trinitarian analogy for the creative process.

⁷ Barbara Reynolds oral history interview (on sound and video recording). Interviewed by Lyle W. Dorsett, 4 April 1989. Call Numbers: OH / SR-29 & OH / VR-15, The Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, IL.

Scholars with an interest in gender studies may have examined her characterisation of Harriet Vane or her essays such as “Are Women Human?” Unfortunately, however, Reynolds’ perception of the unity of Sayers’ work has not yet been seriously explored in Sayers scholarship, and it could be approached from many different angles. This thesis will present one attempt at a serious engagement with Sayers’ unifying, theological underpinning.

Barbara Reynolds was a close friend of Sayers and upon her death completed Sayers’ magnum opus – her translation of Dante, making the final volume, *Paradise*, ready for publication. Reynolds also wrote *The Passionate Intellect: Dorothy L. Sayers’ Encounter with Dante*, which specifically examines Sayers’ discovery of Dante and her growing cognisance that his writing encapsulated so much of her own theological thinking. Sayers’ prodigious efforts at translation and publication of *Hell* in 1949, *Purgatory* in 1955 and *Paradise*, which was published posthumously in 1962, marked a significant national and cultural milestone as millions of copies were sold and read. In the preface to Reynolds’ *The Passionate Intellect*, Ralph Hone commented that as a result of Sayers’ translation “Dante has had more English-speaking readers in the last forty years than he had in the preceding six-and-a-quarter-centuries.”⁸

Other biographical studies of Dorothy L. Sayers include David Coombes’ *Dorothy L. Sayers: A Careless Rage for Life*,⁹ a readable, journalistic biography of Sayers, drawing on her letters and introducing the reader to Sayers the witty, energetic, public intellectual. Mitzi Brunsdale’s biography *Dorothy L. Sayers: Solving the Mystery of Wickedness*¹⁰ was focused upon Sayers as an autobiographical female writer. Brunsdale draws out the distinctively Christian moral

⁸ Ralph Hone, “Preface,” in Barbara Reynolds, *The Passionate Intellect: Dorothy L. Sayers’ Encounter with Dante* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1989), p.xii.

⁹ David Coomes, *Dorothy L. Sayers: A Careless Rage for Life* (Oxford: Lion Publishing, 1992).

¹⁰ Mitzi Brunsdale, *Dorothy L. Sayers: Solving the Mystery of Wickedness* (Providence, RI: Berg Publishers, Inc., 1990).

framework Sayers brought to bear upon her writing across the various genres of her work. She took a chronological approach to Sayers' life, examining it in eight-year intervals but failed to add any detail not already mentioned by Brabazon or Reynolds. Alzina Stone Dale *Maker and Craftsman: The Story of Dorothy L. Sayers* was first published in 1978 and later updated and rereleased in 1992.¹¹ It gives a straightforward chronological overview of Sayers' life and publications, introducing her to unfamiliar readers. Janet Hitchman wrote her biography, *Such a Strange Lady: An Introduction to Dorothy L. Sayers, 1893-1957*, in 1975 and it is evident that she was not exposed to the vast corpus of Sayers' private papers.¹² Ralph Hone's *Dorothy L. Sayers: A Literary Biography*, published in 1979 is similar although perhaps more important, because it was a biography with a specific focus on Sayers as a creative writer, friend and literary figure.¹³ Whilst biographers have examined her relationships and the context of her work in some detail there has not yet been a biography specifically focused on Sayers' spiritual development, despite the enormous influence of her religious convictions upon her work. Thus, questions remain about how Sayers came to settle upon her own spiritual beliefs in her early years.

Published material written directly about Sayers' theological contribution is also relatively scarce. John Thurmer committed significant time to studying Sayers' theology of the Trinity, publishing *Reluctant Evangelist: Papers on the Christian Thought of Dorothy L. Sayers* in 1996.¹⁴ Thurmer focused his scholarly attention upon Sayers' seminal work *The Mind of the Maker* and he ably explored the outworking of her Trinitarian analogies in her theories about creativity and her own work itself. Thurmer wrote an interesting chapter on the motif of "story",

¹¹ Alzina Stone Dale, *Maker and Craftsman: The Story of Dorothy L. Sayers* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978).

¹² Janet Hitchman, *Such a Strange Lady* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975).

¹³ Ralph E. Hone, *Dorothy L. Sayers: A Literary Biography* (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 1979).

¹⁴ John Thurmer, *Reluctant Evangelist: Papers on the Christian Thought of Dorothy L. Sayers* (Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 1996).

in which he applied Sayers' tripartite theory of creativity as Idea, Activity and Power to her religious plays. He did not draw wider conclusions about the importance of story in Sayers' oeuvre although he did point out that she anticipated subsequent theological interest amongst scholars in story and narrative.¹⁵ Thurmer's work raises important questions and begins to open some of the vistas I will explore in Sayers' work. However, each of his chapters is short and while he successfully raises some important questions, particularly with regard to story, from my perspective there remains more to be done.

Laura Simmons' *Creed without Chaos: Exploring Theology in the Writings of Dorothy L. Sayers* is a descriptive, popular, theological exploration of the overview of the Sayers' canon. Simmons set out to "inspire people to read more of Dorothy L. Sayers' writings"¹⁶ and her style is appropriately approachable. Simmons' enthusiasm for Sayers is infectious and she draws on a wide variety of source material from across Sayers' canon. Thurmer called Simmons' book "the first full-length, comprehensive survey of the theology of Dorothy L. Sayers"¹⁷, and *Creed without Chaos* is indeed a solid and worthwhile overview of Sayers' theology. However, Simmons did not look at Sayers' writings chronologically nor did she examine each genre systematically. This meant that she barely touched upon Sayers' plays. Simmons organised her material thematically under headings including "The Incarnation and the Nature of Christ", "The Trinity" and "Women's Issues." Although she has drawn widely on Sayers' letters and theological writing, including some interesting references, she did not set out to analyse Sayers' thought or theological contribution in substantial depth. In fact, while readers are introduced to the breadth of Sayers' ideas, they are not really left with a clear sense of the specific integrity of any one of Sayers' individual works. Nonetheless, Simmons does

¹⁵ *ibid.* p.13.

¹⁶ Laura Simmons, *Creed without Chaos Exploring Theology in the Writings of Dorothy L. Sayers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), p.12.

¹⁷ *ibid.* p.223.

succeed in producing an engaging overview designed to intrigue modern readers to discover Sayers, which was her stated intention in writing.

Ann Loades plays a similar role of introducing Sayers' theology to new readers in her collection *Dorothy L. Sayers' Spiritual Writings*¹⁸. She has also written a number of articles on Sayers focused upon questions of gender and spirituality. Loades' work helps to shape a landscape and background for the themes this thesis will explore without directly touching on Sayers' apologetic contribution or her internal theological coherence as a thinker.

Perhaps the most important recent theological contribution to the field of Sayers' studies is Christine Fletcher's book, *The Artist and the Trinity*.¹⁹ This is a substantive piece of theological research on Sayers' thought. Fletcher set out to write a book exploring Sayers' theology of work within the broader landscape of her Trinitarian theology. In so doing, Fletcher also managed to successfully draw out Sayers' interest in gender dynamics with regard to human identity and the nature of work. These broad themes are of central importance in Sayers' canon and have been picked up by wider Sayers scholarship over the last two decades. Fletcher's own perspective as a Roman Catholic female scholar sheds fresh light on Sayers' ideas, particularly with regard to how Sayers' writings make a contribution to the wider landscape of ethical reasoning about work.

Fletcher develops a simple but clear outline of chapters beginning with a short biographical chapter. Here anecdotes from Sayers' life are interspersed with episodes and incidents that may have influenced her as a writer and especially her view of creative work. Fletcher's next chapter

¹⁸ Ann Loades, *Dorothy L. Sayers Spiritual Writings: Selected and Introduced by Ann Loades* (London: SPCK, 1993).

¹⁹ Christine M. Fletcher, *The Artist and the Trinity Dorothy L. Sayers' Theology of Work* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013).

sets out to look at Sayers' fiction and drama together, with a particular focus on questions of gender. Next she focuses on Sayers' wartime writing, with a helpful discussion of the Malvern conference.

The strongest two chapters, perhaps unsurprisingly given the book's title, focus on Sayers' ideas about the doctrine of the Trinity and the nature of work. Whilst Fletcher's conclusions on the Trinity are close to John Thurmer's work on Sayers in this area, she does provide us with fresh insights around the themes of gender and creativity, which were of critical personal importance to Sayers. Fletcher's work is complementary to the themes I will be exploring in the course of this thesis. However, her focus on the specific outworking of Sayers' ideas about creativity, gender and the Trinity leaves an important question unanswered: are there any unifying concerns or concepts undergirding Sayers' oeuvre or is Sayers' work merely of piecemeal interest when addressing a particular area of theological significance such as human creativity or gender or of literary import when examining religious plays or detective fiction?

Frances Clemson's research, "The Theology of Dorothy L. Sayers' Dramatic Works: Dramatic Performance and the 'continual showing forth of God's act in history'", is soon to be published as a book and will be a major contribution to the field. Clemson examines Sayers as a leading proponent of theology and drama. Clemson introduces the theological contribution of Sayers' oeuvre but the focus of her research is the sacramental nature of Sayers' plays. Drama as theology enacted is "an enfleshed representation of reality".²⁰ Clemson recognises the importance of structure, texture and pattern in Sayers' dramatic creations and analyses her plays *He That Should Come*, *The Just Vengeance* and *The Man Born to be King* with particular reference to Sayers' theological emphasis on incarnation. Clemson argues that Sayers believed

²⁰ Frances Clemson, "The Theology of Dorothy L. Sayers' Dramatic Works: Dramatic Performance and the 'continual showing forth of God's act in history'" University of Exeter PhD, 2012. p.66.

that “God is known truly not by abstracting from but by plunging into, the specificities of historical existence – by repeated re-engagement with life in all its dense texture,”²¹ and drama provided the ideal vehicle for demonstrating this. Clemson’s research confirms the contention of this thesis that both story and pattern are seminal theological concepts for Dorothy L. Sayers. The scope of Clemson’s work is specifically set upon the interplay of theology and drama so Sayers’ plays are the focal point of her attention, whilst this thesis will seek to examine Sayers’ wider work from a more comprehensive perspective.

Alongside the theological and biographical works, there are a number of literary studies. Margaret Hannay’s book, *As Her Whimsy Took Her – Critical Essays on Dorothy L. Sayers’ Work* was published in 1979.²² Hannay explores Sayers’ ideas about creativity and aesthetics and in particular her essay, “Creative Mind.” Trevor Hall analyses Sayers’ career as a writer and reviewer of detective fiction in *Dorothy L. Sayers: Nine Literary Studies*. Catherine Kenney’s *The Remarkable Case of Dorothy L. Sayers* concentrates on what she perceives as three distinct phases of Sayers’ work. Firstly, her development of the modern detective genre into “a serious novel of social criticism and moral depth.”²³ Kenney’s analysis of Sayers’ detective fiction is insightful and well referenced. The second area she denotes is Sayers’ writings about women. Here Kenney is less successful, since she does not touch on the unpublished material and fails to draw out the theological nuance and importance of Sayers’ writing about gender. Thirdly, Kenney assesses Sayers’ theological writings. Since these writings are numerous, there are inevitable generalisations. Nonetheless, significant attention

²¹ *ibid.* p.83.

²² Margaret P. Hannay (ed.), *As Her Whimsy Took Her: Critical Essays on the Work of Dorothy L. Sayers* (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 1979).

²³ Catherine Kenney, *The Remarkable Case of Dorothy L. Sayers* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1990), p.xi.

is given to *The Man Born to Be King*, and valuable insights are explored regarding the play's literary and theological contribution.

The Seven Deadly Sins in the Work of Dorothy L Sayers by Janice Brown is a short literary study that attempts to draw out a point of theological continuity that undergirded Sayers' writing. Brown argues for the concept of sin as the unifying interest of Sayers' work across the genres of her writing and she examines Sayers' particular depictions of the seven deadly sins - pride, anger, envy, gluttony, sloth, greed and lust - alongside her understanding of redemption. *The Seven Deadly Sins* contains a useful survey of Sayers' oeuvre but it is neither theologically analytical nor literarily critical.

A further literary study of Sayers is one focused on Sayers' detective novels in particular: *The Victorian Approach to Modernism in the Fiction of Dorothy L. Sayers* by Aoife Leahy. Alongside the detective fiction, Leahy occasionally draws upon Sayers' wider theological and intellectual canon. Leahy's book highlights the Victorian literary references within Sayers' work and suggests that Sayers was intending to educate the readers of her detective fiction by connecting her characters with memorable sayings from the novels of the great Victorian authors. Leahy comments:

In *The Mind of the Maker* (1941), Sayers discusses the "power of unconscious persuasion" in literature... She understands how the unconscious can be put to work in interpreting and decoding a complex web of literary references.²⁴

Leahy also detects a moral didacticism in Sayers' fiction which she connects to Sayers' theological interests: "Sayers' novels were intended at the time of writing to bring the key moral issues of the early twentieth century to the attention of a wide readership."²⁵ Leahy

²⁴ Aoife Leahy, *The Victorian Approach to Modernism in the Fiction of Dorothy L. Sayers* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), p.2.

²⁵ *ibid.* p.5.

makes a significant contribution to the literary analysis of Sayers' fiction by making connections with her theological interests, however her work is relatively limited in its impact since it focuses on a small number of Sayers' detective novels.

In *Dorothy L. Sayers: More than a Crime Fiction Writer*, Sandra Percy has published a detailed overview of Sayers' "prodigious literary life" focusing on her achievements as a "literary interpreter who followed medieval and hermeneutic modes of thinking" and a creative writer. Percy regarded Sayers as "a serious literary interpreter and a hermeneutic scholar."²⁶ Percy begins by exploring Sayers as a literary critic and interpreter before examining the influence of medieval scholarship upon her work. She then goes on to explore Sayers' essays and letters before writing about her detective fiction, plays and translation of Dante. Thus Percy explores Sayers' various genres from a literary and personal perspective but this is neither done chronologically nor with a theological focus. Hence for example, *The Mind of the Maker* is given a rather short section in the chapter on essays and letters. However, Percy does clearly identify Sayers' penchant for pattern, form and structure, which she notes were "prized by medieval artists and scholars... these characteristics were very much part of Sayers' writing style."²⁷ But having identified pattern as a crucial characteristic of Sayers' writing style and having explored the literary implications of this, Percy does not take the further step of exploring the theological and ideological iterations of Sayers' interest in pattern. Percy's book is a well written, coherent contribution to Sayers' scholarship; its literary focus opens the way for deeper theological study of the questions it raises.

In her book, *Writing Performances: The Stages of Dorothy L. Sayers*, Crystal Downing

²⁶ Sandra Percy, *Dorothy L. Sayers: More than a Crime Fiction Writer* (Charleston, SC: Createspace, 2011), p.349.

²⁷ *ibid.*

studies Sayers' writing through the lens of "performance." In this insightful book, Downing examines the different literary genres Sayers deploys and focuses in particular on the interplay of Sayers' work and its performance or outworking. Downing begins by investigating the connection between Sayers' life and her writing, assessing the relative contributions of the various biographies. Downing draws attention to Sayers' inherent suspicion of language – what she called the "staging of the self"²⁸ and her repeated habit of seeking to "disparage biography in her correspondence and eschew personal questions during interviews."²⁹ Downing reminds the reader that Sayers wanted her work to speak for itself and then explores the relationship between the private life or "personal performance" and the literary "performance" of Sayers' work both written and lived. Downing then devotes a chapter of her book to the question of gender in Sayers' writing. She explores Sayers' personal experiences as well as her characterisation of female characters in her work and her essays pertaining to feminism. Downing describes how "multiple positions explain why Sayers wrote explicitly feminist essays while simultaneously feeling uncomfortable with the totalizing discourses of feminist ideology."³⁰ Sayers' plays are the most natural context within which to explore the various dimensions of performance in her work, since the plays were literally enacted in Sayers' own lifetime.

For Downing, it is Sayers' own writing that provides readers with the performance that is of most interest. She applies Sayers' tri-part theory of creativity – idea, activity and power - itself an analogy of the Trinity, to the theory of performance concluding that Sayers directly "defied modernism"³¹ and drawing interesting observations from postmodern literary theory:

²⁸ Crystal Downing, *Writing Performances: The Stages of Dorothy L. Sayers* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p.10.

²⁹ *ibid.* p.32.

³⁰ *ibid.* p.11.

³¹ *ibid.* p.11.

Like postmodern theorists, Sayers acknowledges the many tongues humanity has been given to image forth the Image of the Unimaginable. She therefore develops new glosses for old beliefs...[and] ignites the dross of language with a fiery tongue.³²

Downing explores the connection between Sayers' literary theory and her theology, tracing Sayers' awareness of the outworking of her theology in her writing. Downing saw that Sayers' beliefs about God as Creator shaped how she understood the nature of human creativity: "Because God, through Creation, performs the other, creative writing at its best performs otherness."³³ Downing argues that Sayers' reflections sound and feel postmodern as she uses terminology such as: "realization of the other in the self." Downing comments: "Though the words sound straight out of postmodern theory, they are from Sayers, who believed that an author's creation parallels that of God."³⁴

Downing's contribution to the field is important primarily because she is not focused on a particular work or idea from Sayers' canon; rather she sets out to examine Sayers' literary and intellectual coherence as a writer and to assess the impact of her writing performances. This is useful for any broader assessment of Sayers' work and influence. Downing is a scholar in the field of English Literature and brings a primarily literary rather than theological perspective to bear on Sayers' work. This is particularly useful within the field of Sayers scholarship as she was first and foremost a creative writer. It is also indicative of the reality that Sayers' work is more frequently referenced in literary journals or women's studies than in wider theological research. Downing makes an important contribution, but her book also highlights the need for a more serious engagement with Sayers' work from a scholarly, theological perspective. Downing introduces us to Sayers' passion for truth and explores this from the technical perspective of communication and performance but she does not set out to elucidate Sayers'

³² *ibid.* p.138.

³³ *ibid.* p.110.

³⁴ *ibid.* p.110.

performance as a theologian or Christian apologist. As a consequence, she does not draw out the unifying theological themes of Sayers' oeuvre.

Reynolds, Downing, Percy, Kenney and Clemson have each made significant contributions towards Sayers scholarship. Their work provides a foundation for further scholarly analysis of Sayers but further questions for research remain. Why has Sayers attracted such scant attention from scholarship in contrast with comparable figures such as C. S. Lewis or G. K. Chesterton? In contrast with the paucity of research pertaining to the work of Dorothy L. Sayers, both G. K. Chesterton and C. S. Lewis have been the subject of a great deal of academic study.

G. K. Chesterton (1874-1936)

Gilbert Keith Chesterton was an English writer whose prolific and varied works included philosophy, poetry, plays, journalism, public lectures and debates, literary and art criticism, biographies, Christian apologetics and fiction. In a career spanning four decades, he wrote over 80 books, 200 short stories, 4,000 essays and countless newspaper columns. Unlike Sayers or C.S. Lewis, he did not write many letters and those that survive are frequently without a date. Chesterton's career as a writer was underpinned by his professional life as a journalist. For 30 years he wrote a weekly column for the *Illustrated London News* and for 13 years a weekly column for the *Daily News*. He also edited his own newspaper, *G.K.'s Weekly*.

Chesterton's classic work on the basics of Christian belief, *Orthodoxy*³⁵ is a masterful example of Christian apologetics as well as a kind of spiritual autobiography. Sayers greatly admired the book and in particular Chesterton's articulation of the uniqueness of Christ:

³⁵ G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (London: Bodley Head, 1908).

That a good man may have his back to the wall is no more than we knew already, but that God could have His back to the wall is a boast for all insurgents forever. Christianity is the only religion on earth that has felt that omnipotence made God incomplete. Christianity alone felt that God, to be wholly God, must have been a rebel as well as a king. Alone of all creeds, Christianity has added courage to the virtues of the Creator.³⁶

Chesterton refused to recognise a dichotomy between reason and faith: “Reason is itself a matter of faith. It is an act of faith to assert that our thoughts have any relation to reality at all.”³⁷ His apologetic appeal has reached out beyond the community of his adopted Roman Catholicism (Chesterton converted to Roman Catholicism in 1922, fourteen years before his death). In 1910 Chesterton wrote *What’s Wrong with the World?*³⁸ in which he famously concluded: “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried.”³⁹ *The Everlasting Man*⁴⁰ is a history of humanity, Christ, and Christianity and attempted to provide a rebuttal of H.G. Wells’ *Outline of History*⁴¹. This book of apologetics greatly influenced the faith of C.S. Lewis.

Chesterton continues to be read widely by lay Christians and has also attracted serious scholarly attention. In their book *G.K. Chesterton, London and Modernity*, Matthew Beaumont and Matthew Ingleby explore Chesterton’s analysis of the city of London, introducing him as a distinctive urban commentator of insightful sophistication. G. K. Chesterton’s work on the life and thought of Aquinas, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*,⁴² is regarded as a theological masterpiece. Etienne Gilson, one of the foremost twentieth century scholars of Aquinas wrote:

I consider it as being without possible comparison the best book ever written on St. Thomas. Nothing short of genius can account for such an achievement.... Chesterton

³⁶ *ibid.* p.144.

³⁷ *ibid.* p. 29.

³⁸ G. K. Chesterton, *What’s Wrong with the World?* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1910).

³⁹ *ibid.* Part I Chapter 5.

⁴⁰ G. K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1925).

⁴¹ H.G. Wells *Outline of History* (London: George Newnes, 1919).

⁴² G.K. Chesterton, *Saint Thomas Aquinas* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1933).

was one of the deepest thinkers who ever existed; he was deep because he was right; and he could not help being right; but he could not either help being modest and charitable, so he left it to those who could understand him to know that he was right, and deep.⁴³

Dominican priest, Aidan Nichols in his analytical work on Chesterton, *G. K. Chesterton Theologian*,⁴⁴ wrote of how Christians can rediscover faith through his writings. Nichols gathered together compelling, theological passages from the breadth of Chesterton's works and analysed each passage with concise explanations. In *Chesterton and Tolkien as Theologians*,⁴⁵ Alison Milbank examines the theology of G.K. Chesterton's fantastical poetry looking at the concept of Chesterton's 'theology of gift' as the means by which magic can become 'real' and enable characters to connect with the divine. Milbank sees a flourishing theology of creation and incarnation in both Tolkien and Chesterton's work. Furthermore, *The Chesterton Review*, founded in 1974, to promote an interest in all aspects of Chesterton's life, work, art and ideas, including his Christian apologetics, continues to be produced twice annually and flourishes with scholarly writing about Chesterton.

A number of biographies have been produced, drawing on Chesterton's autobiography, *The Autobiography of G. K. Chesterton*,⁴⁶ including Maisie Ward's *Gilbert Keith Chesterton*,⁴⁷ which was written at the request of Frances Chesterton. In her review of Ward's biography Aodh de Blacam wrote: "G. K. C. is studied, quoted and discussed, condemned, defended and praised more today than in his lifetime; and his work has come to be expounded with admiration by scholars of the highest intellectual rank."⁴⁸ Further biographies include

⁴³ Etienne Gilson "Letter to Chesterton's editor", in Josef Pieper, *Guide to Thomas Aquinas*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press), pp.6–7.

⁴⁴ Aidan Nichols, *G. K. Chesterton Theologian* (Bedford, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 2009).

⁴⁵ Alison Milbank, *Chesterton and Tolkien as Theologians* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark Theology, 2009).

⁴⁶ *The Autobiography of G.K. Chesterton* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2006).

⁴⁷ Maisie Ward, *Gilbert Keith Chesterton* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

⁴⁸ Review by: Aodh de Blacam *The Irish Monthly* Vol. 73, No. 859 (Jan., 1945), pp. 25-36.

Chesterton and Romance of Orthodoxy: The Making of GKC 1875-1908 by William Oddie,⁴⁹ Ian Ker's *G. K. Chesterton A Biography* and Joseph Pearce's *Wisdom and Innocence: A Life of G.K. Chesterton*.⁵⁰ The theological impact of Chesterton's writing continues to be felt, particularly within the Catholic Church where his popularity persists.

C. S. Lewis (1898-1963)

C. S. Lewis taught at the University of Oxford from 1925-1954 where he was a Fellow of Magdalen College and for the last nine years of his life he was Professor of Medieval and Renaissance English at the University of Cambridge. His scholarly work in English Literature was focused upon the later Middle Ages and in particular upon Allegory.⁵¹ Lewis' conversion to Christianity in 1931 and his subsequent publications as a lay theologian,⁵² Christian apologist,⁵³ advocate for Christian ecumenism,⁵⁴ and writer of fantasy and children's stories,⁵⁵ have remained steadfastly popular such that his works still sell in the millions, fifty years after his death. C. S. Lewis has been the subject of much scholarly attention. In his landmark biography of Lewis, Alister McGrath refers to a "vast amount of biographical and scholarly

⁴⁹ William Oddie, *Chesterton and Romance of Orthodoxy: The Making of GKC 1875-1908* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁵⁰ Joseph Pearce *Wisdom and Innocence: A Life of G.K. Chesterton* (San Francisco, CA: St. Ignatius Press, 1996).

⁵¹ See C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1942), *An Experiment in Criticism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961) and *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964).

⁵² For example, *The Screwtape Letters* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1942), *The Four Loves* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1960), *A Grief Observed* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1961), *Surprised by Joy* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1955).

⁵³ For example, *The Abolition of Man* (London: Oxford University Press, 1943), *Beyond Personality* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1944), *The Problem of Pain* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1942), *Miracles* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1947).

⁵⁴ For example, *Mere Christianity* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1952).

⁵⁵ Trilogy: *Out of the Silent Planet* (London: The Bodley Head, 1938), *Perelandra* (London: The Bodley Head, 1943) and *That Hideous Strength* (London: The Bodley Head, 1946). The Chronicles of Narnia: *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1950), *Prince Caspian* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1951), *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1952), *The Silver Chair* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1953), *The Horse and His Boy* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1954), *The Magicians Nephew* (London: The Bodley Head, 1955) and *The Last Battle* (London: The Bodley Head, 1956).

material now available concerning Lewis and his circle"⁵⁶ that threatens to overwhelm a reader. Indeed, despite the plethora of material written about Lewis, McGrath regarded him as a figure worthy of further scholarly attention and analysis whose theological influence should not be underestimated: "His *Mere Christianity* is now often cited as the most influential religious work of the twentieth century."⁵⁷ McGrath noted that: "Although Lewis became a highly influential voice within British Christianity, he operated from its margins rather than its centre,"⁵⁸ and that as a Christian apologist Lewis' ideas and approaches still today retain "at least something of their sparkle and power."⁵⁹

Furthermore, Rowan Williams notes that whilst scholarly interest in Lewis had been largely driven by American Evangelicalism, interest in Lewis from a theological perspective now finds a broader theological base. Williams comments that this scholarship consists in "serious academic attention – and attention from people who are not just in the evangelical camp."⁶⁰

The Cambridge Companion to C. S. Lewis supports this contention noting:

in evangelical circles Lewis's reputation is astonishingly high... For example, in 2000 the influential American evangelical magazine "Christianity Today" put Lewis's *Mere Christianity* on the very top of their list as the 'best' religious book of the twentieth century.⁶¹

Studies of C. S. Lewis' works have continued to advance both in terms of deepening an understanding of why his works are popular and with regard to how they should be best understood by scholars. For example, in his ground breaking monograph, published in 2008,

⁵⁶ Alister McGrath, *C. S. Lewis: A Life: Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2013), preface p.5.

⁵⁷ *ibid.* p.2.

⁵⁸ *ibid.* p.5.

⁵⁹ *ibid.* p.9.

⁶⁰ Rowan Williams *The Lion's World: A Journey into the Heart of Narnia* (London: SPCK, 2012), p.56.

⁶¹ Robert MacSwain and Michael Ward (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to C. S. Lewis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp.1-2.

Planet Narnia: The Seven Heavens in the Imagination of C. S. Lewis,⁶² Michael Ward discovered the connection between Lewis' Narnia Chronicles and his medieval literary interest in astronomy and pre-Copernican symbolism.

Production of research degrees and academic publications persist with regard to C. S. Lewis, and his work continues to be cited as an authority more broadly within the Christian community. There is no sign of scholarly interest in his work or that of G. K. Chesterton diminishing. However, no full-length, scholarly, theological study of Sayers' oeuvre has yet been published. Why is this so? Sayers' decision to decline the Lambeth doctorate, her lack of access to scholarly resources and her status as an author of popular detective fiction may have all contributed to her relatively low profile amongst theologians. Sayers downplayed her own theological content, preferring to be known as a literary figure, rather than a representative of Christianity – perhaps theologians have taken her at face value. Indeed, it seems likely that the plethora of genres she deployed has meant that readers may come at her work through one avenue and not see any of the others, thus diminishing the overall impact of her writing. Furthermore, Sayers was a vociferously direct person; if she had been more ambiguous it is possible that she may have enticed more theological interest. Her certainty and clarity may have deterred scholars from perceiving her as deep or profound. A further explanation for the paucity of scholarship pertaining to Sayers work may be found in a Protestant distaste for Dante's *Comedy* and so her association with the great poet may have deterred some from taking her seriously. Moreover, whilst Lewis made a virtue of his ecumenism and is read and studied avidly by evangelicals alongside Catholics and the broad spectrum of Christendom, Sayers' Anglo-Catholicism, her implacable character and her gender have perhaps inhibited a more

⁶² Michael Ward, *Planet Narnia: The Seven Heavens in the Imagination of C. S. Lewis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

widespread popularity amongst lay Christians after her death or for that matter much serious study of her work.

Whatever the reasons for Sayers being so sparsely read and studied in comparison with equivalent contemporaneous Christian apologist figures, it is clear that there is now a need for more research pertaining to Dorothy L. Sayers, her work and, in particular, her contribution to Christian theology and apologetics. What is more, the existing biographical studies of Sayers have not focused upon her spiritual development, despite the significant influence of her religious convictions upon her work. Questions remain as to how Sayers acquired her spiritual beliefs in the early years of her life.

Dorothy L. Sayers Research

Further questions arising pertaining to Dorothy L. Sayers include the query as to whether there is a unity to Sayers' work as Reynolds suggests, or whether Kenney is correct in her perception of clearly delineated separate sections of a writing career. If there is a perceptible unity within the Sayers canon what does it consist of? This question of what exactly holds together the seemingly disparate interests and output of Sayers will be examined in this thesis with reference to potential theological themes that emerge throughout her work and, in particular, truth through story and pattern. The question of when and how Sayers came to develop her ideas about truth, story and pattern is also significant – were traces of these ideas always there or did they develop and solidify over time? Furthermore, notably in her Trinitarian analogy, Sayers invokes the concept of “image.” In *The Mind of the Maker* image is clearly an important concept but the question arises as to what the relationship is between “image” and “pattern” in Sayers' thought.

Sayers scholarship has focused on her as a woman and upon her personal life but the questions of how Sayers came to be a popular theologian, what held her thought together and why she was effective as a Christian communicator in her own time, still remain relatively unstudied. In examining these questions this thesis explores Sayers' writings about women and asks whether her own theories about perceptions of gender have anything to contribute to this question.

Moreover, the question of the nature of her apologetic contribution remains. This thesis explores the interplay of her conceptions of drama, incarnation and story, as well as her instinct to seek coherence. Sayers' search for pattern or a big structural foundation rather than disparate pieces of separate reasoning still resonates decades after her death – could this help to explain her apologetic contribution to the public communication of Christianity?

The contention of this thesis arising from these questions is that a significant paradigm for understanding Sayers' work and her effectiveness as a Christian communicator is her emphasis on truth through story and pattern. These themes continually arise throughout the various genres of her corpus. Sayers consistently explored theological truths in the context of dramatic narratives and orderly systems. Recognising this tendency in her work gives the reader an insight into how a female author of best-selling detective novels came to be regarded as one of the leading Christian apologists and lay theologians of her generation.

Sayers' own letters provide a contemporaneous and personal perspective upon the process of creating and publishing her work. There are five published volumes of letters, which go alongside her unpublished letters held at The Wade Center, Illinois and the Dorothy L. Sayers Society in Witham. Sayers' thousands of letters, both published and unpublished, have been

examined and her letters are cited within each section where they illuminate the development of her thinking. The thesis engages with Sayers specialists, as well as wider scholarship in the interplay between theology and each of her genres. It seeks to show that recognising Sayers' passion for truth through story and pattern makes a significant contribution towards understanding her canon as a unity. The thesis differs in perspective in this regard from other Sayers scholarship, which has placed emphasis on other particular theological motifs or literary points in her career as an author. Additionally, this thesis will differ from other theological analyses of Sayers' work in that it engages with the full diversity of genres in her canon from a rigorous theological perspective rather than by taking a primarily biographical approach.

The thesis is made up of three contextual chapters followed by the main substance of the work, comprising five sections. A chapter is devoted to each significant genre of Sayers' work. These are: detective fiction, religious plays, theological prose in *The Mind of the Maker*, theological essays, and the translation and interpretation of Dante.

Overview

This first chapter is comprised of a literature review analysing the existing landscape of Sayers scholarship. The current field of Sayers literature primarily consists of biographical works. Theological scholarship, where it exists, tends to focus on her understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity and human creativity. This chapter has set the scene so as to demonstrate the need for a greater theological engagement with Sayers' entire canon.

The second chapter offers a theological biography of Dorothy L. Sayers. A number of biographies have been written about Sayers but this chapter is a new contribution to the field since it focuses primarily on her spiritual and religious development in the formative years

before she became a published author. Drawing on both published and unpublished material, the thesis will trace Sayers' development from child of the vicarage to thoughtful teenager considering apologetic questions of the Christian faith, through a period of doubt at the University of Oxford to the beginnings of her successful career as a writer of detective fiction. Sayers' poetry is considered as distinct from the verse she wrote for her plays in the course of this chapter, as her first brief foray into publishing took the form of poetry in her early twenties. The chapter analyses how Sayers came to the religious convictions that went on to influence and define her later work.

The third chapter introduces the key argument of the thesis scoping out the meaning of the terms "truth", "story" and "pattern" as Sayers understood them. The central paradigm of the thesis is introduced with Sayers' concepts of truth, story and pattern being clearly explored and defined. The main body of the thesis scrutinises the theme of truth, through story and pattern in the diverse genres of Dorothy L. Sayers, seeking to make an argument that these concepts are key to grasping what Sayers was trying to do.

The fourth chapter of the thesis explores Sayers' detective fiction in depth, asking the question: how do truth, story and pattern emerge? I argue that the quest for truth, understood within the explanatory frameworks of story and pattern, is a compelling, unifying paradigm running through the diversity of Sayers' writing and this begins to emerge perceptibly in her detective fiction. The detective novels are stories about discovering truth in which Sayers hints at the explanatory power of her concept of pattern. Sayers' correspondence during the period of the writing and publication of these novels and her later essays about her theories pertaining to detective fiction, provide the opportunity for a deeper analysis of this genre of her work and its

theological contribution. In the detective fiction Sayers is just beginning to delve into the possibility of considering truth through story and in relationship to pattern.

A fifth chapter examines Sayers' religious plays. It was through her plays written for Cathedral Festivals or broadcast on the radio that Sayers' religious ideas first came to be widely communicated. In her plays Sayers' insights are conveyed in enacted stories as her theology was brought to life by drama on the stage or radio. Truth and story coalesce in drama. Furthermore, it was whilst writing her plays that Sayers first explored and articulated her theories of creativity flowing out of the doctrine of the Trinity and her theological concept of pattern. Her first religious play, *Zeal of Thy House*, written for performance in a Cathedral Festival, and her sequence of religious plays, *The Man Born to be King*, composed for broadcast on the BBC, are analysed in this chapter, with continuing regard to Sayers' understanding of truth through story and pattern.

Chapter six analyses Sayers' landmark book *The Mind of the Maker*, investigating Sayers' interest in the Christian doctrine of the Trinity and her tri-part analogy for human creativity as Idea, Energy and Power. The chapter elucidates how Sayers understood this seminal pattern as a demonstration of divine truth revealing itself in the natural world and examines the importance of this Trinitarian pattern in her apologetic approach. In *The Mind of the Maker*, Sayers comes to a settled conclusion that a God-given structure for eternal truth exists and that this is mirrored and even evidenced in human creativity. This concept of pattern is truly central to her theological outlook with regard to the divine nature but it also pervades her understanding of the peculiarity of human stories and experiences.

Subsequently, the seventh chapter examines Sayers as an essayist. Selected essays and articles are analysed with regard to demonstrating her prevalent interest in truth through story and pattern. Sayers' writing on human vocation and on gender are today some of her most popular works. This chapter examines how the arguments of these essays are shaped by Sayers' concept of pattern and how her essays contribute to the cumulative case for regarding truth through story and pattern as a unifying paradigm for understanding Sayers' oeuvre.

In the eighth chapter Sayers' work on translating Dante into English and her essays introducing his work to a wider audience are explored. Sayers regarded her Dante work as her most important theological and literary contribution. She resonated with the theological instincts of Dante and the intellectual pattern of Christian doctrine in his work. Although she died shortly before completing her translation of the *Divine Comedy* she found through this endeavour greater clarity and equanimity in her own theological bearings with regard to truth, story and pattern.

Overall, the thesis sets out a case for regarding a quest for truth, understood within the explanatory frameworks of story and pattern, as a compelling, unifying paradigm running through the diversity of Sayers' writing. Grasping this gives the reader new insight into how Sayers came to emerge as a Christian apologist, broadcaster and lay theologian of such prominence. This thesis contributes to current theological understanding by bringing the work of a significant lay female Christian thinker of the twentieth century to the attention of scholarship. Sayers' work has continuing resonance for theologians who are interested in the role of narrative and drama in theology, and deserves greater attention in the academy. Furthermore, Sayers is of interest for her contribution to the role of analogy in exploring the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Sayers was a successful Christian apologist, using the new

media of her time to creatively express and explore Christian truth for a wide audience and so her communication of theological insights is of interest in the field of Christian apologetics. Sayers is not merely retrospectively significant, however: her literary and theological contemporaries such as C. S. Lewis, Charles Williams, William Temple and Karl Barth thought her work interesting and important. It is my contention that her work deserves to be considered afresh by contemporary theologians.

Chapter Two

Theological Biography: Early Years

In examining Dorothy L. Sayers, biographers have explored the life of a woman of letters (Reynolds), a creative writer (Stone Dale), a literary intellectual (Hone), and a mother (Brabazon)⁶³. First and foremost, Sayers hoped to be known for the quality of her work. C. S. Lewis regarded Sayers as an outstanding writer:

She aspired to be, and was, at once a popular entertainer and a conscientious craftsman: like (in her degree) Chaucer, Cervantes, Shakespeare, or Moliere. I have an idea that, with a very few exceptions, it is only such writers who matter much in the long run.⁶⁴

But despite the religious underpinning to all of her work and the directly Christian engagement of much of it, Sayers' writing has not been widely studied from a theological perspective. Where Sayers has been studied, the focus has been largely biographical. Yet the biographies that do exist have not set out to analyse her religious development. This chapter will endeavour to do what other biographies of Sayers have not set out to achieve, namely to examine the early spiritual development and formative Christian principles that provided a theological foundation for Sayers' creative output.

Dorothy Leigh Sayers was born on the 13 June 1893. She was the only child of the Reverend Henry Sayers and Helen Mary, and she was baptised on the 15 July in Oxford, at Christ Church Cathedral. Her name Dorothy means 'gift of God' and Leigh was her mother's maiden name. Her father came from a long line of Church of England clergy and, following his own

⁶³ James Brabazon, *Dorothy L. Sayers* (New York, NY: Scribner, 1981); Alzina Stone Dale, *Maker and Craftsman: The Story of Dorothy L. Sayers* (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw, 1992); Ralph E. Hone, *Dorothy L. Sayers: A Literary Biography* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1979); Barbara Reynolds, *Dorothy L. Sayers: Her Life and Soul* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1993).

⁶⁴ C. S. Lewis, *On Stories and other Essays on Literature* (Orlando: FL: Harcourt Books, 1982), p.92.

ordination, he became the headmaster of the Christ Church Cathedral Choir School, Oxford. Sayers was brought up as an Anglican surrounded by the rituals and duties of the church.

In 1897, when Dorothy was four, the family moved to East Anglia so that her father could take up the post of incumbent of the parish of Bluntisham-cum-Earith in Huntingdonshire. Bluntisham was a remote, though beautiful place to live and the rectory accommodated a grandmother and various aunts as well as the family and their staff. Dorothy was constantly in the company of adults and from a young age she read widely, appearing to pick up both her literary and theological interests in this period.

The young Dorothy took an interest in her father's sermons. Her early theological knowledge is revealed in the letters she exchanged with her cousin Ivy Shrimpton.⁶⁵ Expressing her interest in the interaction between theology and science, the thirteen-year-old Dorothy wrote to Ivy:

Do you remember the talk we once had in the garden? I said people – poor people – ought to be enlightened about the creation, and not think the earth was made in a week, etc, etc. Well, to-day (Septuagesima Sunday) Daddy preached a very nice sermon, on that very point, showing them how to reconcile science with the Bible. Most of them listened with great attention, but one or two looked as if they'd got a new idea, and it had staggered them a wee bit.⁶⁶

It seems that her father had been preaching on theistic evolution and the young Dorothy had already expressed concerns to her friend that ordinary church people ought to have been made aware of the theory and its compatibility with a Christian perspective.

⁶⁵ Ivy was a first cousin on Sayers' mother's Leigh side of the family. Although she was eight years older than Dorothy and attended a school run by Anglican nuns in Oxford, Ivy spent her vacations at the Bluntisham rectory and formed a close bond of friendship with Dorothy that was to prove a vital support to Sayers in her adult life.

⁶⁶ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to Ivy Shrimpton, 27 January 1907, in Barbara Reynolds (ed.), *The Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers 1899-1936: The Making of a Detective Novelist* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1995 and Sceptre Paperback 1996), p.5.

Other theological issues are raised in letters of this period by the young Dorothy, showing that her Christian faith was grounded from an early age in discussions of a philosophical nature. Even at the age of thirteen Sayers was concerned with questions related to the rationality of Christianity. This is further demonstrated in an unpublished letter of 17 February 1907, in which Sayers expressed her concern about future divine judgement for people who had never heard about God and how she found some resolution to this dilemma through reading the way Paul addressed the question in his letter to the Romans:

Do you remember that we once talked in the garden about savages, and people who had never heard of God, and how I said I wondered whether they were given another chance, or what, because of course, God wouldn't punish them for disobeying laws they had never heard of? Well, don't you think that the 2nd Chapter of St Paul to the Romans, which we had to-night [sic], throws a little light upon the subject – especially the 14th, 15th, 16th, 26th and 27th verses? Do tell me what you think when you next write. Just read the whole chapter carefully. I never used to understand it, but I like it better now. I love St Paul. He was such a fine little chap – I have read that he was a small insignificant little man – and he was so bold in his cause. Besides, everything he says is so practical. St Paul was a man of the world, and he has left us some fine practical hints for daily life.⁶⁷

Sayers returned to the question of the potential of theological salvation of people who have never heard the Christian gospel in a subsequent letter. By now she was fourteen and wrote again to her cousin Ivy about the nature and scope of salvation within Christian thought:

Do you remember our discussions about the heathen and how I once wrote to you about Rom: II? May I draw your attention (I feel that I am like Miss Clack) to St Luke xii, 47 and 48. 'And that servant which knew his lord's will and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he that knew not and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes. For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more.' Do you think that has some bearing on the questions, especially where I have underlined it?⁶⁸

This issue of salvation was clearly a question that the young Sayers thought deeply about. It is also apparent that Sayers was reading the Bible on her own terms with a desire to resolve this

⁶⁷ Unpublished letter to Ivy Shrimpton 17 February 1907, Wade DLS Letters, Folder 53/42-43, Wade Center, Illinois.

⁶⁸ Unpublished letter ca. September 1907 Wade DLS Letters, Folder 50/3-5, Wade Center, Illinois.

question for herself. The epistle to the Romans and the four Gospels held particular interest and she seems to have studied them independently and diligently.

As a young teenager, Sayers was not only concerned about the salvation of people who may not have heard about God, she was also considering the implications of Christian faith more personally. In a letter to Ivy, the teenage Sayers took her cousin to task for a perceived tendency towards spiritual legalism. Written with her characteristic directness, and yet with genuine warmth and concern for her friend this letter gives us a profound insight into the young Sayers' own spiritual outlook:

... it seems to be an opportunity for me to say something that has been in my mind for some time, and which I have never liked to say for fear of offending you. It is dreadfully difficult for me to say these things, because I am so much younger than you are, and yet I notice things, I feel that I ought to tell you of them, especially of this particular thing, because, I think, if you aren't careful, it will spoil your life for you very much... I think, old girl, that you are just a bit inclined to form harsh judgment – or perhaps I ought rather to say, a hard judgment of other people. You are just a little inclined not to consider that some people may have quite peculiar temptations to put up with, which do not particularly assail you, and that some things which are easy for you are an awful fight for some others. I think this arises from the fact that you have rather a high moral standard and if people don't keep up to it, you are a bit apt to condemn them... Dear old girl, get out of the way of thinking that. It is terribly closely allied to Pharisaism, which you know, is the one thing Our Lord was always so down upon. And I think that this attitude towards other people will make you have fewer friends, because they will be afraid of you. I shouldn't like to feel, Ivy, that supposing some time I sinned a great sin, that I should be afraid to come to you for help, only, unless you would try to make allowances for me, I'm afraid I should... charity is making allowances for other people's mistakes.⁶⁹

In the light of what was to unfold in her own private life this letter is strangely prescient, since Ivy was to be the one person Sayers could turn to in her hour of desperation. This letter provides a window into Sayers' understanding of Christ's character and her sympathy for the theological priorities of grace and charity. The tone of Sayers' letter, "written in fear and trembling,"⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to Ivy Shrimpton, 23 February 1908, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume One*, p.10.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*

challenging an older relative to examine her prejudices, demonstrates the seriousness of her own spiritual convictions and the practical relevance of her faith in her daily life.

Whilst living at home and taking lessons from a governess, Sayers began to make points of application between what she was learning and the material world. In her loosely biographical, unfinished novel, “Cat O’ Mary,” she described one such incident from her own childhood through her character Katherine’s words. Sayers and her governess had been searching in the old vicarage garden for the tennis court which was completely overgrown. Sayers was able to use the geometric principles she had learned in the schoolroom to locate the hidden tennis court in the unkempt garden. She reflected through her character Katherine:

If the court had not been precisely laid out in the first instance, she might have had more difficulty, but the corner being accurately placed, the laws of geometry held good. In her heart of hearts Katherine was awe-stricken. To see a prophecy made on paper fulfilled on the back lawn is a very enlarging experience.⁷¹

This was an early experience of a pre-existing pattern being revealed in the specifics of life. The mundane lines of a tennis court took on a tremendous symbolic importance, since the experience of applying geometry to everyday life showed that there was in fact an intrinsic coherence to reality. An observation of ultimate truth being revealed in the specifics of day-to-day life was a religious experience, a glimpse of divine beauty in the overall pattern itself as well as in the particulars of the given instance:

She had been brought face to face with beauty. It had risen up before her again – the lovely, satisfying unity of things: the wedding of the thing learnt with the thing done: the great intellectual fulfillment... nothing would ever quite wipe out the memory of that magnificent moment when the intersecting circles marched out of the page of the Euclid book and met on the green grass in the sun-flecked shadow of the mulberry tree.⁷²

⁷¹ Dorothy L. Sayers, “Cat O’ Mary” in Barbara Reynolds (ed.), *Dorothy L. Sayers Child and Woman of Her Time Volume Five: A Supplement to the Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers* (Cambridge: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society Carole Green Publishing, 2002), p.67.

⁷² *ibid.*

Sayers was a deeply intellectual young person and this interest in the pattern and coherence of reality was already emerging from the root of her adolescent Christian faith.

The young Sayers explored Christian faith through a serious engagement with the sacred texts. In 1909 Sayers wrote to thank her father for sending her a Greek New Testament that she was studying with others at school.⁷³ Her parents had chosen to send her to the Godolphin School, a boarding school in Salisbury. Whilst at school, Sayers discovered the theological writings of G. K. Chesterton for herself. She wrote home to her parents in February 1909 mentioning his recently published *Orthodoxy*: “I am so glad you’ve got *Orthodoxy*. I am not surprised to hear that Chesterton is a Christian. I expect though, that he is a very cheerful one, and rather original in his views, eh?”⁷⁴ Sayers was already clear in her own mind that Christian faith was to be primarily pursued intellectually and that it was not a matter of emotion or feeling. She finished a letter to her parents describing her confirmation with the line: “I never can write about my feelings – that’s why I haven’t.”⁷⁵

There are some issues arising from the confirmation of Dorothy L. Sayers and these are raised by her own reflections in later life on what had gone on. Her letters home from school all describe her confirmation with warmth and wit. For example, on the evening after the service itself she wrote to her parents:

My dearest people

The service is just over; we have a whole half-holiday, which is convenient, as it enables me to have decent time for writing – it was an awfully nice service, and everything was most beautifully arranged, so that there was no fuss or muddle...

The Bishop’s address was quite nice, but not awfully exciting – I wish our Dean were a Bishop! – only then we shouldn’t see him so often. I had a small talk with Canon Myers last night – he is ripping. We are all to make our communion together on Easter

⁷³ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to her mother, 3 October 1909, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume One*, p.29.

⁷⁴ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to her parents, February 1909, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume One*, p. 18.

⁷⁵ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to her parents 23 March 1910, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume One*, p.41.

Sunday – the whole (confirmed) School with us – I think don't you, it would be nicest to have it then, with the School...⁷⁶

But in a letter to her cousin Ivy, written twenty years later around the vexed question of whether Sayers wanted her son, John Anthony, to be baptised, Sayers implies that her memory of things is that she was pushed into confirmation against her will:

Being baptised against one's will is certainly not so harmful as being confirmed against one's will, which is what happened to me, and gave me a resentment against religion in general which lasted a long time. My people (weakly) thought it would 'be better' to have it 'done' at school – and it was the worst possible school for the purpose, being Low Church and sentimental – and I (still more weakly) gave in because I didn't want to be conspicuous and fight it out. Afterwards, when I became High Church, I wished I hadn't done it, because then I could have undertaken it properly, without fury and resentment, and without having the dreariest associations connected with the Communion Service.⁷⁷

This later-life reflection on her religious involvement during her school days presents Sayers scholars with a challenge. Biographer James Brabazon asserts that Sayers' schoolgirl letters home to her parents were fakery. He alleges that Sayers was hiding her real feelings of resentment and cynicism about religion:

in her letters home she found it quite impossible to speak of her mental and physical distress... to cover her lack of candour she filled them (her letters) with factual information.⁷⁸

Brabazon argues that Sayers' fictional character Katherine Lammas in "Cat O' Mary" who does share many of Sayers' traits and experiences, is a mouthpiece for Sayers' negative experience of her own schoolgirl confirmation. Katherine feels embarrassment and a sense of utter hypocrisy at her confirmation but is unable to tell her parents:

She wrote in duty bound to her parents giving a detailed account of the ceremony. But that would not do by itself. She chewed her pen. 'I won't say anything about feelings' she wrote. I can't express those very well!⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to her parents, 21 March 1910, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume One*, p.40.

⁷⁷ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to Ivy Shrimpton, 15 April 1930, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume One*, p. 306.

⁷⁸ James Brabazon, *Dorothy L. Sayers* (New York, NY: Scribner, 1981), p.32.

⁷⁹ Sayers, "Cat O' Mary", p. 117.

This does appear to strike a chord as her letter home about the confirmation service ends with the sentiment that Sayers was unable to talk about her feelings. However, Barbara Reynolds disagreed with Brabazon's thesis:

Dorothy's letters home give no indication that she felt uncomfortable about the religious atmosphere of the school. It is not that she remains silent on the subject; on the contrary, she goes out of her way to volunteer that she likes what she finds there in that respect.⁸⁰

Reynolds was a close friend and confidante of Sayers in her later life; their shared religious conversations led to Reynolds' baptism as an adult, at which Sayers played the role of godmother shortly before her death. Reynolds is more likely to have drawn the correct conclusion about such an important matter with regard to the early development of Sayers' Christian faith. Furthermore, Sayers did feel able to express doubts, challenges and dilemmas to her cousin Ivy but in a letter to Ivy just before her confirmation Sayers wrote quite happily about the upcoming occasion: "I was just forgetting to tell you – I am to be confirmed on the Wednesday in Easter week – in the Cathedral – isn't it nice? I was christened in a Cathedral too."⁸¹ The letters home themselves do not lend themselves to Brabazon's interpretation, neither does Sayers' correspondence with Ivy at the time of her confirmation.⁸² However, a possible new explanation for this may be offered by examining the timing of a potential period of doubt and resentment towards religion that Sayers does seem to have gone through. Sayers'

⁸⁰ Barbara Reynolds, *Dorothy L. Sayers Her Life and Soul* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1993), p.38.

⁸¹ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to Ivy Shrimpton, March 1910, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume One*, p.35.

⁸² Brabazon seems to be heavily depending on the perspective of the schoolgirl Katherine Lammas in the fictional "Cat O'Mary", who bears many resemblances to Dorothy L. Sayers and is seen as a semi-autobiographical character, rather than her actual letters home at the time. "She was unhappy at this time about religion. There seemed to be two different Christian religions, which had nothing in common except that both were connected with the same set of historical facts. The Christianity which surrounded her at school gave her that curious sense of physical repulsion which affects healthy people at the sight of the village idiot: it was ugly; it shambled in its walk; it fawned upon one with an odious leering familiarity; when it uttered the lovely speech of the Scriptures, the words came out distorted – thick and unlike themselves. She could not believe that it was the same Christianity that had built the great churches and surrounded the name of god with scarlet and blue and gold... In the book called *Orthodoxy* there were glimpses of this other Christianity, which was beautiful and adventurous and queerly full of humour;" Sayers, "Cat O' Mary", p.133. Even here, Katherine were she to represent Dorothy, is not rejecting religious faith per se, she is merely repelled by a shallow version of it, wanting to pursue something closer to G. K. Chesterton's *Orthodoxy*.

letters lend themselves to the possibility that she did go through some kind of testing of her faith at Oxford, rather than at school but that twenty years later she conflated this with her school girl confirmation.

Whilst at university in Oxford, Sayers regularly attended St Barnabas Church. A letter home to her parents in March 1914 suggests that it was whilst studying at Oxford that she did spend some time reevaluating and even questioning her faith:

Dearest People

Gloom has come upon me. I went to tea with the aunts at Leckford Road... and Aunt Annie walked back with me and thought it her duty to enquire after my soul's welfare. She will probably send you an account of my spiritual state, so I may as well prepare you. I do not at all mind discussing my soul – I do it every day – but I do not like doing it with very earnest people of narrow experience. They are so apt to be hurt, or shocked or surprised or worried. I let her down as gently as possible, but it's difficult to make people see that what you have been taught counts for nothing, and that the only things worth having are the things you find out for yourself. Also, that when so many brands of what Chesterton calls 'fancy souls' and theories of life are offered you, there is no sense in not looking pretty carefully to see what you are going in for. There are more different brands offered to us than probably there ever were to Aunt Annie.... We have to begin, as it were further back than she realises. It isn't a case of 'Here is the Christian religion, the one authoritative and respectable rule of life. Take it or leave it.' It's 'Here's a muddling kind of affair called Life, and here are nineteen or twenty different explanations of it, all supported by people whose opinions are not to be sneezed at. Among them is the Christian religion in which you happen to have been brought up. Your friend so-and-so has been brought up in quite a different way of thinking; is a perfectly splendid person and thoroughly happy. What are you going to do about it?' – I'm worrying it out quietly, and whatever I get hold of will be valuable, because I've got it for myself; but really you know, the whole question is not as simple as it looks. All this in case Aunt Annie should think fit to make any alarming statements about 'contentedly living without the means of Grace', which sounds so horrid and mediaeval somehow... With best love D. Don't worry about my soul but above all don't let anyone else worry you about it'⁸³

Sayers was clearly irritated by her overtly religious aunt but the letter reveals some deeper questions in her mind. She had now come across multiple ways of looking at the world amongst her friends at Oxford, many of which conflicted with the Christian outlook she had been

⁸³ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to her parents, March 1914, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume One*, p.85.

brought up with. She liked the people with whom she was discussing these things and they seemed sincere. This had caused her to reflect upon and question her own religious beliefs handed down to her by her parents. She did not want them to worry and tried to encourage them with the thought that when she resolved things in her own mind her convictions would be truly her own.

This is a deeply significant letter. Written by a loving daughter to a clergyman father and religious mother, this is a nuanced and thoughtful account of her spiritual search. Sayers was giving her parents due warning that she was thinking everything through for herself with regard to Christianity, whilst at the same time she did not want them to be disturbed by reports from her aunt that she had completely turned away from Christian faith.

It is possible that, looking back on her life when considering the question of baptism for her son in her letter to Ivy Shrimpton, Sayers conflated the period of struggle and doubt at Oxford with her confirmation at school. Perhaps Sayers forgot the exact sequence of these developments; since confirmation is intended to be the time for an adult profession of faith following infant baptism, Sayers remembered her doubts as having occurred then. She continued with this re-reading of history in her semi- autobiographical “Cat O’ Mary” which was written in 1934 and infused with her adult faith. Sayers’ adult theological emphases are definitively attributed to the teenage character Katherine:

A strict course of exact and dogmatic theology might well provide the intellect with a good, strong bone to cut its teeth on; but theology is a science which has fallen upon difficult days... it is impossible to teach a coherent theology without offending some parent or other. All circumstances combine to foster the delusion that right living is easier without clear thinking.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Sayers, “Cat O’ Mary”, p. 108.

There is some precedent for this kind of confusion of timing around the various steps of faith and doubt in the life of C. S. Lewis. Alister McGrath, in his biography of Lewis, *C. S. Lewis: A Life: Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet*, reveals that in the process of writing this biography he discovered that Lewis had misreported the date of his own conversion to Theism. Writing in later life about his Theistic conversion in *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis urged his readers to:

picture me alone in that room at Magdalen night after night feeling whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in and admitted that God was God and knelt and prayed perhaps that night the most dejected convert in all of England.⁸⁵

But as McGrath points out:

Lewis's subjective location of the event in his inner world is accepted, but his chronological location of the event is seen to have been misplaced... Lewis's location of this event in the external world of space and time appears to be inaccurate. Lewis's conversion is best understood as having taken place in the Trinity Term of 1930, not 1929. In 1930, Trinity Term fell between 27 April and 21 June.⁸⁶

Is it possible that Sayers was doing something similar in her letter to Ivy Shrimpton? Perhaps the adult Sayers had forgotten the exact order of events and read back into her schoolgirl confirmation doubts and questions about the Christian faith. She then remembered feeling “forced into” this adult confession of faith at confirmation, when she actually experienced these doubts and questions much later whilst an undergraduate in Oxford.

Whichever way we read the spiritual significance of her confirmation at Godolphin School, Sayers was not particularly sorry to finally leave school when a serious illness caused her to return home in December 1911. Following a significant few months of recuperation, during

⁸⁵ C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (London: Fount, 1998), p.82.

⁸⁶ Alister McGrath, *C.S. Lewis: A Life: Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2013), p.14.

which time she pursued private study with a tutor, Sayers won the highly prized Gilchrist Scholarship and went up to read Modern Languages at Somerville College at Oxford in October 1912. Sayers flourished both academically and socially at Oxford, earning a First Class degree and attending a steady stream of parties and outings. Ann McClellan emphasises the privileged position in which Sayers found herself, relative to other women in the same era:

Sayers' attendance at college was still a luxury in 1920, especially for women. Even with the increase in literacy resulting from the Fisher Education Act of 1918 providing free compulsory education to all students until the age of fourteen, the number of students enrolling in and attending university was still devastatingly low. In 1938 less than two percent of the relevant age group were entering universities.⁸⁷

Nonetheless, Sayers was at Oxford during an era of flowering philosophical and literary skepticism:

The 1920s and 1930s were notoriously an age of failed gods and shattered conventions, to which many thoughtful people responded in obvious ways, retreating into nihilism, hedonism, and experimentalism. Literature became subjective, art became abstract, poetry abandoned its traditional forms. In the 'low, dishonest decade' that then followed, much of this negativism curdled into power-worship and escapism of various kinds.⁸⁸

Sayers interacted with friends of differing religious and philosophical viewpoints. She continued to attend church and, having resolved her internal struggle about Christian faith, wrote home in her final year as an undergraduate, to describe the sermon she had heard at church one morning:

We had a sermon this morning about the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, which has depressed me. However, I was pleased, because the preacher said we were to pray that God would do away with the shortcomings of missionaries. He added that our own attempts at converting other people were generally blundering, and that when our friends tried to convert us, we usually dismissed their attempts as well-meaning but painful. He...encouraged us by a story to the effect that some cultured Indians on hearing the Athanasian creed fully explained (I suppose by a High Churchman)

⁸⁷ Ann McClellan "Alma Mater: Women, the Academy, and Mothering in Dorothy L. Sayers's Gaudy Night," *Literature Interpretation Theory* 15:4 (2004): 324.

⁸⁸ John Derbyshire, "What Happened to Aldous Huxley," *The New Criterion* 21:6 (2003):15.

exclaimed ‘Well! If that is the philosophy of your creed we cannot stand against it!’⁸⁹

Her interest in the creeds had evidently been piqued at Oxford, although generally her letters home from university were rather fuller of music, theatricals, parties and friends than of theological musings. Sayers may have questioned her faith whilst at university but she appears to have come through this process with her own theological priorities and emphases established and in particular her admiration for the creeds of the church.

In June 1915 Sayers sat for her final examinations at Oxford in French honours, specialising in the mediaeval period and was awarded a ‘first.’ At the time, women at Oxford were only granted a ‘title to a degree’ rather than the honour of the degree itself but this detail was settled in 1920 when Dorothy L. Sayers was among the first group of women upon whom an Oxford degree was officially conferred.

Sayers found it difficult to leave Oxford – describing the sense of loss upon returning home in a letter to her friend Muriel Jaeger:

Just at present I’m simply struggling with Oxford fever... But oh dear! My dear! I do want Oxford. If I’ve not got a job which keeps me stuck elsewhere this autumn I shan’t be able to keep away from the place.⁹⁰

Sayers continued to miss Oxford during a short stint of teaching in Hull and she returned to the city in 1917 with the promising prospect of work as a publisher’s apprentice for Basil Blackwell, given her literary interest and talent. During her time in Hull she was successful in getting some of her own poetry published. This came out as ‘Number 9’ in Basil Blackwell’s *Adventurers All* series as *Op. I.* and it was published in December 1916 in a limited edition of

⁸⁹ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to her parents, November 1914, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume One*, p.106.

⁹⁰ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to Muriel Jaeger, 27 July 1915, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume One*, p.110.

350.

In a letter to C. S. Lewis, dated 8 August 1955, two years before she died, Sayers bemoaned the fact that her success as a writer of detective fiction appeared to have detracted from any critical appreciation of her poetic creativity:

Only a few people take my verse-making seriously. I am pigeon-holed as a mystery-monger who in old age has taken to tinkering in an amateur way with religion and rhyme.⁹¹

However, Sayers' perception of herself was that she was and always had been a poet. In "Cat O' Mary," Katherine assesses her own abilities as a poet:

She didn't write sentimental little verses, either, about moonlight, and roses, but good, stalwart stuff; cavalier songs, ballads which might have come straight out of Percy's *Reliques*, spelling and all. And she knew that it was good verse, with metre that required no apology.⁹²

Furthermore, there seems to be a connection between Sayers' poetry and her early spiritual journey, since her poems resound with theological imagery. Sayers' first publications were volumes of poetry: *Op.I* (1916) and *Catholic Tales and Christian Songs* (1918)⁹³ and a good number of these poems touch on the religious themes that were to shape Sayers' later writings. Barbara Reynolds pointed out that by the time her poetry was published her faith was both privately and publicly established: "Her resentment against Christianity, a phase of which she

⁹¹ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to C. S. Lewis, 8 August 1955, in Barbara Reynolds (ed.), *The Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers Volume Four 1951-1957: In the Midst of Life* (Cambridge: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society: Carole Green Publishing, 2000), p.253.

⁹² Sayers, "Cat O' Mary", p.75.

⁹³ Dorothy, L. Sayers, *Op.I*, (Oxford: Blackwells, 1916) and Dorothy, L. Sayers, *Catholic Tales and Christian Songs*, (Oxford: McBride, 1918). Sayers poetry was also published in *The Fritillary*, *The London Mercury*, *The New Witness*, *The Oxford Chronicle*, *Oxford Journal Illustrated*, *Oxford Magazine* and *The Saturday Westminster Gazette*.

spoke in later life, was certainly not in evidence in this period.”⁹⁴ In *Catholic Tales* Sayers explored theological themes such as the Incarnation in her poem “The Triumph of Christ”:

Said man: "If You think it well to be
Such a thing as I, make trial and see."
God answered him: "And if I do,
I'll prove Me a better Man than you."⁹⁵

In her narrative poem “The Mocking of Christ” she places the story of the soldiers crucifying Christ in the context of ecclesiastical, biblical and classical figures of history reacting to his crucifixion. There are resonances of *The Man Born to be King* as Sayers used verse to magnify the meaning of the crucifixion of Christ and to probe into the consciences of readers and listeners as to their own response to this event in history. Sayers juxtaposed her ironic epigraph: “So man made God in his own image” referencing the popular, contemporary Freudian rejection of God’s existence as wish-fulfillment, with the conclusion of the poem that Christ’s objective existence in history inevitably continues to impact all of humanity:

Yet when I am lifted high
I will cause all men draw nigh
Unto My royal throne.
As I go to Golgotha
My tread shakes the earth afar.⁹⁶

Sayers wrote to her parents on 14 June 1918, about the upcoming publication of *Catholic Tales*, warning them that it had the potential to be controversial:

... all the poems are about Christ. Some people think it ‘wonderful’ and some think it ‘blasphemous’... I can assure you that it is intended at any rate to be the expression of reverent belief – but some people find it hard to allow that faith if lively, can be reverent.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Reynolds, *Life and Soul*, p.80.

⁹⁵ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Catholic Tales*, <http://www.ccel.org/s/sayers/cathtales/dls-cathtales.html#carp>, visited 20 March 2016.

⁹⁶ *ibid.*

⁹⁷ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to her parents, 14 June 1918, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume One*, p.138.

This anticipation of a negative reaction amongst some is somewhat resonant of the controversy that did accompany *The Man Born to Be King* years later. Hints of the same vibrancy and wit applied to serious theological dogma that were to characterize her plays and essays are already present in her poetry. The themes selected by Sayers to be explored in these early poems appear to circle around the central dogmas of the Christian creeds, such as the nature of Christ and his Incarnation and crucifixion. These are theological dogmas that continued to hold her interest and attention throughout her life. Furthermore, this letter seems to close the circle that Sayers had opened in discussing her own questions about faith with her parents whilst she was at Oxford. By June 1918 she was speaking of her own “reverent belief” and was in a position to publish serious poems pertaining to Christian theology.

After the publication of the poems Sayers received a letter from her parish priest in Hull. Clearly she had been a regular worshipper at St Mary’s, Hull and had become known personally to him:

I had a most charming letter from Canon A. C. England (formerly St Mary’s, Hull) about it, which particularly cheers me because he is so good and simple a man, and not in the least an ‘intellectual’. ‘... Your very charming book. I like it very much indeed and congratulate you on your Magnum Opus. It is very like you – and I can see you in it all. What I like about it is the freshness and naturalness of it all.’⁹⁸

Just as Sayers had herself predicted, convictions she had come to on her own were all the more potent for that fact. Perhaps the period of struggle at Oxford had strengthened her Christian convictions. Although Sayers continued on occasion to write poetry throughout her life and in particular during the war years, her most focused output of verse occurred in the era when she

⁹⁸ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to her father, 20 November 1918, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume One*, p.142.

wrote her plays and when she translated Dante into English using *terza rima*.⁹⁹

By 1919 Sayers was dissatisfied with her job at Blackwells, since it was primarily focused on the technical and administrative, rather than the literary, side of publishing. She became lonely in Oxford, partly due to her unrequited love for one Eric Whelpton. She longed for “a thorough change... an absolute change of everything”¹⁰⁰ but instead followed Whelpton to France for a year where she taught and assisted at a school.

In 1920 Sayers returned to Britain alone, to two frustrating years of occasional work teaching, tutoring and translating, while starting to write two detective novels. This was a difficult period for her and she despaired of ever getting a novel published or of finding permanent work:

Lord Peter is nearly ready to be typed, but I'm feeling rather disgusted with him now he is done. However, that's nothing unusual. I'm going to try him on one or two publishers I have slight influence with, but don't suppose anything will come of it. No job as yet.¹⁰¹

In May 1922, having applied for various jobs, Sayers secured a full-time position at S. H. Benson's advertising agency as a copy-writer. She was grateful for the steady work and she worked at Benson's for the following nine years whilst continuing to write her detective novels. Sayers had a gift for communicating with the general public and she came up with such slogans as “My Goodness My Guinness!” She is also credited with coining the slogan "It pays to advertise!" Sayers worked with the artist John Gilroy at Bensons and together they developed the commercially successful idea of ‘The Mustard Club’ for Colman's mustard and the Guinness ‘zoo’ advertisements. One famous example was a picture of a toucan whose bill was arching under a glass of Guinness and underneath was Sayers' jingle: “If he can say as you can,

⁹⁹ Hence this thesis will not examine Sayers' poetry as a separate genre of her work, but will consider it as part of her dramatic writing and her Dante translations and occasionally, as in this chapter, *en passim* where relevant.

¹⁰⁰ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to her mother, 6 June 1919, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume One*, p.153.

¹⁰¹ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to her mother, 27 July 1921, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume One*, p.179.

Guinness is good for you. How grand to be a Toucan. Just think what Toucan do!" The experience of working in a professional advertising agency focused upon communicating with the general public in a persuasive and memorable way laid foundations of skills and insights in Sayers that she was to draw upon in her later popular Christian writing, which enjoyed mass appeal.

In 1923 her first Wimsey novel, *Whose Body* was finally published and she already had *Clouds of Witnesses* ready and waiting in the pipeline. However, despite her success, this era proved to be both personally and spiritually challenging for Sayers. She hints at this in her use of the advertising industry as the setting for her novel, *Murder Must Advertise*, in which she described perceptions of 'truth' in advertising:

... the firm of Pym's Publicity, Ltd., Advertising Agents ...

"Now, Mr. Pym is a man of rigid morality—except, of course, as regards his profession, whose essence is to tell plausible lies for money—"

"How about truth in advertising?"

"Of course, there is some truth in advertising. There's yeast in bread, but you can't make bread with yeast alone. Truth in advertising ... is like leaven, which a woman hid in three measures of meal. It provides a suitable quantity of gas, with which to blow out a mass of crude misrepresentation into a form that the public can swallow.¹⁰²

During this time working in London, Sayers fell in love with the writer John Cournos. The progress of the love affair is documented in her letters both about him and to him. Barbara Reynolds devotes a chapter of her biography to this episode in Sayers' life. However, the spiritual dimension of Sayers' relationship with Cournos is of particular interest and importance in her spiritual development and her formation as a writer. On 18 January 1922, Sayers wrote to her mother:

¹⁰² Dorothy L. Sayers, *Murder Must Advertise* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1933), p.74.

John turned up the other day and was all right, though deeply buried in *Babel* (his third novel.) He and I have had a difference, though, on a point of practical Christianity (to which he strongly objects!) and I may hear no more of him.¹⁰³

Cournos wanted to have a sexual relationship with Sayers outside of marriage using contraception so as to be sure that there would be no children. Sayers hoped not only to marry the man she loved but also to bear his children and, as a committed Anglican,¹⁰⁴ her conscience would not allow her to use contraception. Cournos was adamant that he would never marry anybody nor have any children. They separated over the issue.

Sayers began a short-lived relationship with a motorbike mechanic and because she neither loved him nor had any desire to bear his children, in her despair she did use contraception. However, she became pregnant and had a son. Her misery was compounded upon discovering months later that Cournos had gone to America, got married and now had children with his wife. Apparently Cournos had wanted Sayers to surrender her spiritual principles to him and then he would have married her after all. Sayers' letters to him reveal a level of emotion and spiritual passion that challenge any perception of her as a cold, unfeeling, intellectual figure:

I'm afraid my hero-worship was perhaps not quite so abject as that of the lady to whom you refer. I mean that, though doubtless you feel that your company would be sufficient 'reward' to compensate for any amount of spiritual filth, I'm afraid that if it excluded frankness and friendship and children and so on, it would be a maimed thing. You broke your own image in my heart, you see. You stood to me for beauty and truth – and you demanded ugliness, barrenness – and it seems now that even in doing so, you were just lying.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to her mother, 18 January 1922, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume One*, p.186.

¹⁰⁴ Lambeth Conference, 1920 Resolution 68 - Problems of Marriage and Sexual Morality, states: "The Conference, while declining to lay down rules which will meet the needs of every abnormal case, regards with grave concern the spread in modern society of theories and practices hostile to the family. We utter an emphatic warning against the use of unnatural means for the avoidance of conception, together with the grave dangers - physical, moral and religious - thereby incurred, and against the evils with which the extension of such use threatens the race. In opposition to the teaching which, under the name of science and religion, encourages married people in the deliberate cultivation of sexual union as an end in itself, we steadfastly uphold what must always be regarded as the governing considerations of Christian marriage."

<http://www.anglicancommunion.org/resources/document-library/lambeth-conference/1920/resolution-68-problems-of-marriage-and-sexual-morality?author=Lambeth+Conference&year=1920>, visited 25 August 2016.

¹⁰⁵ Dorothy L. Sayers Letter to John Cournos, January 1925, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume One*, p.225.

In Sayers' mind Cournos had been an image bearer of truth and beauty. His behaviour had hurt her but had more fundamentally shattered his spiritual image for her. In a later letter of January 1925 to Cournos, she wrote:

You are right in supposing that it is a husband I really want, because I become impatient of the beastly restrictions which 'free love' imposes. I have a careless rage for life, and secrecy tends to make me bad-tempered.¹⁰⁶

On 3 January 1923 Sayers gave birth, in secrecy, to a son whom she named John Anthony. She had arranged for her cousin Ivy, who was a professional foster carer, to take the child on and, only after he was born did she confide in a letter to Ivy, on 27th January 1923, the true nature of things:

My dear – Everything I told you about the boy is absolutely true – only I didn't tell you he was my own! – I won't go into the whole story – think the best you can of me – I know it won't make you love the boy any less... I wouldn't like to send him to anybody but you, because I know I can trust you absolutely to give him everything which I can't give him these first years.¹⁰⁷

The trust and confidence Sayers placed in Ivy closed a circle emotionally and spiritually within their correspondence, since sixteen years had passed since Sayers had challenged her cousin about a tendency towards religious Pharisaism. In the midst of this Sayers continued to work at Benson's hiding the pregnancy with loose clothing. She sought to protect her parents from any scandal or disappointment: "They know nothing about it at home, and they must know nothing. It would grieve them quite unnecessarily,"¹⁰⁸ and her son: "whoever suffers over this business I'm quite clear it mustn't be John Anthony."¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to John Cournos, late January 1925, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume One*, p.227.

¹⁰⁷ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to Ivy Shrimpton, 27 January 1924, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume One*, p.208.

¹⁰⁸ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to Ivy Shrimpton, 6 February 1924, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume One*, p.210.

¹⁰⁹ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to Ivy Shrimpton, late February 1924, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume One*, p.211.

Sayers herself suffered a good deal, not only emotionally, because of the strain of secrecy, but also professionally, because of her fear of exposure. Her reputation as a theological thinker might well have risen considerably during the 1940s and 50s had it not been for the residual problem of having to keep her son's existence secret. Indeed, in 1943, upon the success of her religious play, *The Man Born to be King*, Dr. Welch wrote to the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, asking whether a Lambeth Doctorate of Divinity might be conferred upon Sayers given the religious impact of her work:

I have been astonished at the religious effect of these plays on regular churchgoers; but very much more striking than that is the way in which the Gospel has been made to mean something to people totally divorced from the churches to whom the Christian Gospel has little relevance or meaning. My serious judgement is that these plays have done more for the preaching of the Gospel to the unconverted than any other single effort of the churches or religious broadcasting since the last war – that is a big statement but my experience forces me to make it. And so I wonder, not knowing the rules of this particular game, whether it would be possible and right to offer Dorothy L. Sayers a Lambeth D. D. for this fine piece of Christian evangelism.¹¹⁰

William Temple consulted the Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford Oliver Quick who replied with a letter in which he admitted that he would like to be able to get the University of Oxford to confer a Doctorate of Divinity upon Sayers but that the process with the relevant committee would be prohibitive:

I'm all for Dorothy Sayers being given a D. D., and should like C. S. Lewis to have one too. They are the two people who seem really able to put across to ordinary people a reasonably orthodox form of Christianity. But I don't think it would be the best use my trying to suggest D. S. or C. S. L. either for an Oxford D. D. Hon D. D.'s are entirely in the hands of the Council – I am not a member of it and I am never consulted by it... But as I say I am all for D. L. S. having her D. D and should be delighted if she were to receive one from Lambeth.¹¹¹

When Sayers received the offer she was reluctant to accept:

¹¹⁰ Private letter from Dr. Welch to William Temple 18 June 1943; Lambeth Palace Library, William Temple Papers, vol. 39, fol. 269.

¹¹¹ Private letter from Oliver Quick to William Temple 24 July 1943; Lambeth Palace Library, William Temple Papers, vol. 39, fol. 269.

Your Grace, Thank you very much indeed for the great honour you do me. I find it very difficult to reply as I ought, because I am extremely conscious that I don't deserve it... A degree in Divinity is not, I suppose, intended as a certificate of sanctity, exactly; but I should feel better about it if I were a more convincing kind of Christian... I shouldn't like your first woman D. D. to create scandal, or give reviewers cause to blaspheme.¹¹²

Having asked for some time to think the matter over, Sayers decided not to accept the D. D.:

I have come to the conclusion that it would be better for me not to accept the D. D... there are certain practical considerations. The first, and perhaps the most cogent from the Church's point of view is this: that any good I can do in the way of presenting the Christian Faith to the common people is bound to be hampered and impeded the moment I carry any sort of ecclesiastical label. In the present peculiar state of public opinion, it is the "outside" with neither dog-collar nor professional standing in the church who can sometimes carry the exterior defensive positions by the mere shock of a surprise assault.¹¹³

Sayers was arguing that any perception that she held an ecclesiastical position could undermine her effectiveness as a popular Christian apologist, since her identification as a public intellectual or as a writer predisposed the public to make no assumption about her religion, meaning that her opinion might hold more sway with them. In reality it seems likely that the underlying reason for rejecting the honour was a fear of the scandal of her illegitimate son being made known and bringing the Church and the Archbishop into disrepute.

In the intervening years Sayers completed her twelve Lord Peter Wimsey novels, through which she attained personal financial independence. In April 1926 she married a divorced journalist called Atherton Fleming known as "Mac", who agreed to the adoption of John Anthony. However, the child never came to live with them. Mac was at first a congenial,

¹¹² Dorothy L. Sayers letter to the Archbishop of Canterbury, 7 September 1943, in Barbara Reynolds (ed.), *The Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers Volume Two 1937-1943: From Novelist to Playwright* (Cambridge: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society: Carole Green Publishing, 1997), p.429.

¹¹³ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to the Archbishop of Canterbury, 24 September 1943, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Two*, p.431.

supportive husband but his physical and mental health gradually deteriorated to the point that living with him placed Sayers under enormous strain.

In the subsequent thirty years of her life Sayers' prolific letter-writing furnishes her readers with insights into the development of her novels, plays, books and essays alongside her deepening personal theological convictions. Critically, it seems that Sayers' early spiritual and theological journey provided the foundation for the ideas and emphases that were to characterise her entire body of work. Her interest in theological truth, stories and pattern evidently began to emerge in her childhood and young adulthood and this points forward towards that which was going to substantially shape her work across the decades of her life and the various genres she deployed. But how did Sayers come to understand truth, story and pattern? The next chapter will examine these concepts and set out what Sayers understood by the terms she used.

Chapter Three

Introduction to the Themes of Truth, Through Story and Pattern

During her writing career 1923-1957, Dorothy L. Sayers became well-known at a popular level as an author of detective fiction and religious plays. In this same period Sayers also emerged as an insightful lay theologian and Christian apologist. She came to be a significant religious voice in her generation, articulating the Christian faith in an accessible and persuasive way. This thesis sets out to explore the range of Sayers' work with a particular focus on her contribution to theology, Christian communication and apologetics. This current chapter sets out the themes that will be examined over the course of the thesis.

Different subjects and priorities run through the prose, plays and poetry Sayers wrote but throughout her work we encounter a unifying quality that consistently stands out. Sayers is caught up in a relentless quest for 'truth.' Despite the disparity in style between her various genres, there appears to be an intrinsic unity to Sayers' work. Barbara Reynolds describes her writing as "all of a piece."¹¹⁴ Chris Willerton observes: "Like T. S. Eliot and C. S. Lewis (and Arnold, Ruskin and Morris before them), Sayers insisted on a holistic view of civilization. Art, economics, and education flowed together."¹¹⁵ It is a similar intuition about the essential harmony of Sayers' diverse writings that has led me to want to discover the cardinal components of this unity. The process of exploring Sayers' theological instincts and her convictions about truth grounded in her Christian faith has exposed key converging themes. I argue that story and pattern provide useful lenses through which the concept of truth in Sayers' work can be understood, enabling her theological and apologetic contribution to be assessed

¹¹⁴ Barbara Reynolds oral history interview (on sound and video recording). Interviewed by Lyle W. Dorsett, 4 April 1989. Call Numbers: OH / SR-29 & OH / VR-15, The Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, IL.

¹¹⁵ Chris Willerton, "Dorothy L. Sayers and the creative Reader", *SEVEN an Anglo American Literary Review* 28 (2011): 47-60, p.47.

and appreciated.¹¹⁶

Although Sayers changes the genre she writes in, the underlying paradigm remains the same for her – her convictions about ‘truth’ are revealed in the Christian ‘story’ that is the foundation for a ‘pattern’ or framework within which everything makes sense. Janice Brown disagrees:

Sayers wrote herself out of the genre [detective fiction] because her themes and preoccupations became more serious than the form could allow, as her focus shifted away from shallow mysteries of crime to the profound mysteries of the human spirit. From this point in her writing career, her chief concern was not in developing the intricacies of plot, but in exploring the intricacies of the soul.¹¹⁷

By contrast, one of the contentions of this thesis is that Sayers was attempting in her detective fiction to create art that reflected the same undergirding truths that she was intending to explore in her plays and her later theological writing.¹¹⁸ Part of Sayers’ apologetic importance is this holistic approach, so that enduring truth could be explored and expressed in different ways. This thesis will make the argument that Sayers’ overall theological worldview and the public apologetic impact of her work are rooted in her pursuit of truth and her dependence upon the power of both story and pattern in discovering and communicating truth. The interconnectedness of truth, story and pattern in Sayers’ apologetic approach raises the question as to how these three concepts relate to each other. Whilst acknowledging that these concepts

¹¹⁶ A case might be made to include ‘image’ as an equally important motif here. However, although image is an interesting idea to Sayers, most especially in *The Mind of the Maker*, it is a concept primarily significant in her understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity and the creative process of making art. Image is not a focus across the span of her work in the same way that truth is. In fact, in this thesis the concept of image will be discussed in some detail but it will be examined as an important part of Sayers’ wider interest in the concept of pattern.

¹¹⁷ Janice Brown, *The Seven Deadly Sins in the Work of Dorothy L. Sayers* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press 1998), p.213.

¹¹⁸ Sayers herself saw no dramatic shift in focus in her work. In a footnote to her essay “Gaudy Night” she commented: “even the kindest critics feel it incongruous that a writer of detective stories should write a play about Christian dogma, and one of them goes as far as to say, ‘not by one line or phrase can we recognise the creator of . . . Lord Peter Wimsey.’ Yet the theme of the play – the “integrity of the work” over-riding and redeeming personal weaknesses – is the theme of *Gaudy Night* viewed from a divine standpoint. . . . But, *mutatis mutandis*, novel and play deal with the same problem and offer the same solution, and it is only the “detective” label on the one and the “religious” label on the other that has put them into different critical pigeon-holes.” Dorothy L. Sayers, “Gaudy Night” in Denys Kilham Roberts (ed.), *Titles to Fame*. (London: Nelson and Sons Ltd, 1937), p.88.

and their relationship to one another in Sayers' work are not consistently stable, I will show how truth, story and pattern work together in a number of different ways. The clarity and coherence of Sayers' work is rooted in her commitment to pattern whilst her ability to excite and make connections with readers and audiences by evoking resonance and even *wonder* come through story. Structure and wonder together lead to truth. The coherence of Sayers' intellectual framework and her interest in the big picture provide her writing with a logical and persuasive edge, whilst her gift for exploring the detailed, historical or dramatic specifics of life in dialogues, relationships and plots mean that her work is appealing, creative and energetic. Story and pattern are together operative in drawing the reader into truth. It is this dynamic combination that sets Sayers' work apart and lends it such apologetic purchase.

Sayers' service to Christian thought and in particular to Christian apologetics has not yet received much attention from scholarship. This may partly be because of her gender and perhaps her naivety about the influence of her own Anglo-Catholic presuppositions upon her work.¹¹⁹ Furthermore, Sayers was a best-selling popular author and not a tenured academic. But it is precisely the fact of her broad appeal and popular theological influence in her own era that lends contemporary study of her work significance even though these very factors seem to have contributed to her receiving scant attention from scholars.

Yet, perhaps a more important contributory factor to Sayers' fairly narrow reach within scholarship has been the lack of precision and clarity in her use of language and her failure to systematise her ideas clearly within her literary output. Sayers' relatively imprecise use of

¹¹⁹ Sayers' attempt at encouraging non-churchgoers to consider the creeds of the church was itself an Anglo-Catholic preoccupation, placing her firmly within that particular wing of the church and potentially limiting her broader theological reach within scholarship and indeed the broader Christian church.

language presents a real challenge to the discernment of her intended theological meaning.

Sayers acknowledged this in her lecture, “Creative Mind”, and set out:

simply to warn you that my use of words will not always be your use of words, and that the word of the common poet - the creator in words - must never be interpreted absolutely, but only in relation to their context. They must be considered as fields of force, which disturb and are disturbed by their environment.¹²⁰

Sayers was not an analytic philosopher but she was a ‘woman of letters,’ a literary, creative writer and thinker. Although her work is entertaining, prescient and, at times profoundly insightful, she did not use language forensically. She was not given to defining her terms concisely. This is important to bear in mind as we come to examine her various understandings of truth and the role that story and pattern played in her work.

Accordingly, it is necessary to begin a study of Sayers’ work by scoping out the terms to be used, as we examine what I will argue in this thesis are key defining and unifying concepts for her. This chapter sets out to do precisely that work of explaining these terms from Sayers’ own writing, before the thesis goes on to examine each of Sayers’ major literary genres in turn with the pursuit of truth and the themes of story and pattern in mind.

Truth

Although truth was central to Sayers’ thought, when she used the word there were many layers of meaning to it for her. In her work as a creative writer, Sayers envisaged truth as that which the artist imagines and communicates when producing work that explored the unity of apparently disparate concepts:

¹²⁰ Dorothy L. Sayers, address given to the Humanities Club at Reading, February 1942 “Creative Mind.” Wade Center, Illinois. MS-50, 2.

The associative values of words, which make them such bad tools for the scientist, make them the right tools for the poet, for they facilitate the establishment of similarities between many widely differing concepts, and so make easy the task of the creative imagination building up its poetic truths.¹²¹

According to Sayers, truth was that which all genuine artistic endeavours reached for and revealed:

When we read the poem, or see the play or picture or hear the music it is as though a light were turned on inside us. We say: “ah! I recognise that! That is something which I obscurely felt to be going on in and about me, but I didn’t know what it was and couldn’t express it” ... This recognition of the truth that we get in the artist’s work comes to us as a revelation of a new truth.¹²²

Sayers viewed truth as critically important in the life of the writer¹²³ because it was a concept which encapsulated the goal of all artistic creation.

However, Sayers the theological thinker, on the other hand, realised that truth could mean something slightly different. Her ideas of truth were not merely literary and creative; she had a theologically informed set of ideas about God and Christ that undergirded her understanding of the nature of truth. Ideas about Christ as ‘the truth’ were not a narrow observation in Sayers’ work - she believed they had universal purchase: “If Christ is the eternal truth, His coming should fulfil, not merely the Jewish prophecies but all prophecies – all the religious intuitions of man.”¹²⁴ This did not mean she understood religious truth as being ‘plural’. In fact, Sayers contended that the truth about Christ made contradictory religious beliefs ‘incompatible’:

¹²¹ *ibid.* p.19.

¹²² Dorothy L. Sayers, “Towards a Christian Aesthetic.” in V. A. Demant (ed.) *Our Culture Its Christian Roots and Present Crisis: Edward Alleyn Lectures 1944* (London: SPCK, 1944), pp.60-61.

¹²³ She wrote: “the only thing that matters about a writer is whether he is qualified to deal with the subject or not, and whether what he says is false or true” Dorothy L. Sayers, *Begin Here* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1940), p.117.

¹²⁴ Dorothy L. Sayers, “Worship in the Anglican Church”, a lecture to the North London Presbyterian Fellowship of Youth at Regent Square Church on January 10 1942, in *SEVEN: An Anglo-American Literary Review*. 12 (1995): 31-48.

That Christ is, in His own Person, wholly and uniquely God is fundamental to the Christian faith; and any religious system which is otherwise founded is alien from Christianity and incompatible with it.¹²⁵

Truth for Sayers was ultimately grounded in the person of Christ and, in her mind, truth was not contingent on individuals or communities affirming it; rather, it stood regardless of who recognised it.¹²⁶ Furthermore, Sayers believed that faith and ‘truth’ sometimes ran counter to an individual’s personal preferences:

faith is not primarily ‘a comfort,’ but a truth about ourselves. What we in fact believe is not necessarily the theory we most desire or admire. It is the thing which, consciously or unconsciously, we take for granted and act on.¹²⁷

Sayers’ convictions about Christ were founded, in part, in her belief that truth has historical dimensions:

The message of Christianity is that our vague feelings about right and wrong are quite true. That our vague dreams of a God in human form, dying and resurrected are true too – the thing did happen – it has an actual date in history.¹²⁸

In her essay “A Vote of Thanks to Cyrus,” Sayers described her surprise at realising as a child that there was a continuity between the religious sphere and history: “It is just as well that from time to time Cyrus should march out of Herodotus into the Bible for the synthesis of history and the confutation of history.”¹²⁹ She came to the conclusion that: “history was all of a piece and the Bible was part of it.”¹³⁰ It mattered to Sayers that Christ came at a particular point in history:

¹²⁵ Dorothy L. Sayers, “Problems of Religious Broadcasting” *BBC Quarterly* (1947): 29-31.

¹²⁶ Sayers’ Christological understanding of truth had a significant impact on her apologetic as we shall see in a later chapter on her religious plays and in particular *The Man Born to be King*.

¹²⁷ Dorothy L. Sayers, “What Do We Believe?” in *Unpopular Opinions* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1946), pp. 17-18.

¹²⁸ Dorothy L. Sayers, “Viewpoints of Various Worldviews” (Date unknown) Wade Center, Illinois. MS-471, 4.

¹²⁹ Dorothy L. Sayers, “A Vote of Thanks to Cyrus” in *Unpopular Opinions*, (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1946), pp.23-24.

¹³⁰ *ibid.* p.24.

in most theologies, the god is supposed to have suffered and died in some remote and mythical period of pre-history. The Christian story, on the other hand, starts briskly in St Matthew's account with a place and a date.¹³¹

As far as Sayers was concerned, truth was evidenced in history since God himself entered history in the person of Jesus Christ at a particular time and place.¹³² This was in stark contrast with the theological legacy of the historical-critical movement which called into question the connection between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. The movement to demythologize the historical Jesus is exemplified in the writings of David Friedrich Strauss' *Life of Jesus Critically Examined* or Ernest Renan's *Vie de Jésus*.¹³³ N. T. Wright comments that such theology offered "the world the pale and timeless Galilean"¹³⁴ which was precisely the portrait of Jesus in the popular imagination that Sayers rejected with her insistence on the coalescence of the New Testament and what she regarded as historical truth.

Yet Sayers also sought to ground her ideas of the 'truth' more broadly by attempting to interact with the world of science. She wrote:

To the Scientist... Reason is valid and your methods are valid so far as they go. God is Truth, and any truth is God's truth; there is nothing irrational about God. But you must not try to make scientific tools do something they aren't fitted to do. It won't tell you about origin or purpose.¹³⁵

¹³¹ Dorothy L. Sayers, "The Greatest Drama Ever Staged" in *Creed or Chaos?* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1947), p.2.

¹³² Sayers anticipated what scholars like Newbiggin argued about the conceptual footing for historiographical study. Christ is the clue to history, the finality of Christ provides the interpretive key of history since Christ is the Archimedean point and the revealed *telos*. Newbiggin wrote: "To claim finality for Christ is to claim that this is the true clue to history, the standpoint from which one truly interprets history and therefore has the possibility of being relevantly committed to the service of God in history now." Newbiggin, L. "Finality of Christ" in (ed.) Weston, P., *Leslie Newbiggin: Missionary Theologian: A Reader* (London: SCM Press, 1969), p.57.

¹³³ David Friedrich Strauss, *Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (New York, NY: C. Blanchard, 1860), Ernest Renan, *Vie de Jésus* (New York, NY: Modern Library, 1927) originally published, 1863.

¹³⁴ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996), p.18.

¹³⁵ Sayers, "Viewpoints of Various Worldviews" MS-471, 5.

Sayers saw no conflict between ‘God’s truth’ and science.¹³⁶ In fact, she saw scientific discovery as a part of the broad landscape of truth:

One must not try to bolster up theological truth by denying or falsifying scientific truth and conversely: one must not try to bolster up scientific truth by denying or falsifying theological truth. There is only one truth in which all truths are unified.¹³⁷

But Sayers went further than this, claiming that science could provide evidence for the truth of her own particular religious beliefs:

the truth of Christianity ought to be ascertainable, by scientific method, from the observation of the phenomena. So it ought – so indeed it must be, which is why argument about Christian evidence is possible.¹³⁸

She believed in objective truth and the possibility of human minds accessing such truth by means of reason and logic. Sayers’ understanding of theological truth can be set into a wider context of varying emphases on the roles of reason, revelation and experience as sources of truth about God within the broad landscape of Christian theology, alongside questions about the relative priority placed upon Scripture and Tradition. Sayers, it should be remembered was not a professional theologian and does not fit neatly into any one particular school of thought.

When Sayers’ work is examined it quickly becomes clear that she had a high view of the potential of human reason to lead human beings to discover the truth about God. However, Sayers’ understanding of reason echoed neither the enlightenment rationalism of Kant,¹³⁹ with

¹³⁶ It is interesting to compare Sayers with Dooyeweerd here in his *Prolegomena* in H. Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought. The Necessary Presuppositions of Philosophy* William S. Young and David H. Freeman (eds.), (Phillipsburg, NJ: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1969). His grounding of the *archos* in history and communicated through revelation is unpacked in different ‘spheres’ of knowledge such as science. See H. Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought. The General Theory of the Modal Spheres* H. de Jongste and David H. Freeman (eds.), (Phillipsburg, NJ: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1969).

¹³⁷ Dorothy L. Sayers notes for a letter in reply to Kathleen Nott’s *The Emperor’s Clothes* Wade Center, Illinois. 1954, MS-345, 8.

¹³⁸ *ibid.* MS-345, 9.

¹³⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793).

its assertion of the primacy of human reason and conscience over religious or spiritual claims, nor the rationalism of English Deism,¹⁴⁰ which envisaged God as a static encapsulation of human ideals of justice, logic and wisdom, rather than a divine mover with a continuing involvement in his creation. Sayers resonated more closely with Aquinas' understanding of Christian faith as fundamentally rational but not limited by or dependent upon human reason. With regard to the role of reason in theology, Sayers' work echoes the emphases of her friend Canon Professor Oliver Quick. In *Doctrines of the Creed*, Quick wrote that the task of theology was to interpret Christian doctrine within the specifics of life: "How can we best understand and interpret as a coherent whole the doctrinal tradition of our church in relation to that particular world in which we are now called upon to uphold the Christian faith?"¹⁴¹ Quick was committed to the Anglican 'threefold cord' of Scripture, Tradition and Reason and his grounding in philosophy undergirded his determination to ally philosophy and theology. Quick argued that Christian theology faced two possible dangers in his day pertaining to reason and revelation. Alexander L. Hughes notes, these extremes are:

on one side, a liberal or modernist view that Christianity consists 'primarily and almost exclusively in a revelation of God', made known in Jesus, who is recognized as such by the way his life and teaching commends itself to human reason and conscience; on the other side, a view associated with a rising generation of continental Protestants that Christianity concerns a 'scandalous' divine act, which makes no appeal to human faculties...¹⁴²

Quick wanted to take a middle path between these two extremes, holding reason and faith together. He characterised this endeavour as the reconciliation of Hellenism and Hebraism calling Christianity "the stammering witness to a truth which lies above and beyond them

¹⁴⁰ See Albert L. Kuhn, "English Deism and the Development of Romantic Mythological Syncretism" in *PMLA*, 71:5 (1956): 1094-1116; Peter Annet, *Deism Fairly Stated* (London, 1746); Matthew Tindal, *Christianity as Old as Creation* (London, 1730).

¹⁴¹ Oliver Quick, *Doctrines of the Creed* (London: James Nisbet & Co Ltd, 1938), p.ix.

¹⁴² Alexander J. Hughes, "Oliver Quick and the Quest for a Christian Metaphysic" in *Theology*, 119:3 (2016): 221-222.

both.”¹⁴³ Treading the same theological path, Sayers regarded human reason as a legitimate participant in theological enquiry and a necessary conduit of theological truth. Furthermore, she appealed to the rationality of Christian faith without undermining the divine intervention of God in his revelation of himself primarily in the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

Sayers understood truth to mean correspondence with reality and, in her mind, this was grounded in the existence of an objective, supernatural reality, namely the Creator.¹⁴⁴ She proclaimed: “The one necessary act of faith: The thing is reasonable – I can trust my reason, so far as it goes, and my moral sense, so far as it goes. They correspond to a real truth and a real goodness, outside me and the world.”¹⁴⁵ She argued that such truth was accessible to humanity despite the finite nature of subjective human experience because of the Christian concept of divine revelation: “Revelation (is) the only rational grounds for believing that our ideas about what is “good” correspond to any reality and are not just somebody’s fancy. The Christian revelation is a record of experience.”¹⁴⁶ For Sayers, theological truth about the being of God related directly to the ‘real nature of things’. She speculated that since:

God... is the reality of the universe... “faith” in God is the recognition of a universal reality” and conversely “‘judgments’ or ‘lack of faith’ are not arbitrary, but the necessary consequence of a delusion running counter to the real nature of things.”¹⁴⁷

Truth and reality were closely intertwined in Sayers’ mind.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴³ Oliver Quick, “The Present Situation in Christian Theology” in *International Review of Missions*, 27 (1938), p. 570.

¹⁴⁴ ‘Correspondence theory’ states that truth conditions are objective features of reality so that a proposition should correspond with a fact or event in order to be acknowledged as truth. In contrast, ‘coherence theory’ measures the coherence and consistency among statements within a system and truth conditions are found in propositions. Although Sayers occasionally uses the word “coheres” in her writings, she seems to have subscribed to a correspondence view of truth. See *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/truth-coherence/>.

¹⁴⁵ Sayers, “Viewpoints of Various Worldviews” MS-471, 4.

¹⁴⁶ Sayers, “Nature of God” MS-143, 6.

¹⁴⁷ *ibid.* MS-143,1.

¹⁴⁸ This approach to truth was challenged by the philosopher Kathleen Nott and Sayers’ correspondence with her gives us an insight into the apologetic arguments Sayers made. See Sayers’ notes for a letter in reply to Kathleen Nott. MS-345, 25.

Yet despite her insistence on the objective nature of truth, Sayers also explored the importance of human presuppositions in relation to *perceptions* about truth, even appearing to appreciate contemporary challenges to Christian *a priori* assumptions: “Bernard Shaw’s great contribution was that he took things on we took for granted and asked whether there was any truth left in them.”¹⁴⁹ However, she did at times express her intuition that Christians faced the interrogation of their premises rather more frequently than others: “I do not think it should always be the Christians who are thrown to the critical lions. I think the others should take their turn in the arena.”¹⁵⁰ Sayers referred to such presuppositions amongst Christians as ‘dogma’, which she defined as:

not the thing we argue about, but the thing we take for granted. Certain things we don’t question – we conduct all argument and base all our behaviour on the assumption that these things are so.¹⁵¹

Sayers observed that explorations of truth required an examination of the worldview perspective assumed by the individual, but she went further than raising questions about this. She argued that although people “have tended to think that no dogma was founded in reality”,¹⁵² the Christian bases his or her dogma on something objective. She claimed: “the Logos... the Divine Word is the guarantee of rationality in the universe.”¹⁵³ Responding to the critiques of her theological writing by the philosopher Kathleen Nott, she concluded: “She speaks of the Dogma in the manger – and she is right. For that which lay in the manger was indeed incarnate Dogma – *verbum infans* – the definition to which all Christendom gives its

¹⁴⁹ Dorothy L. Sayers unpublished notes, “Religion and our Reading, Listening and Playgoing” (date unknown), Wade Center, Illinois. MS-173, 3.

¹⁵⁰ Dorothy L. Sayers, “Problems of Religious Broadcasting”, *BBC Quarterly* (1947): 29-31.

¹⁵¹ Sayers, “Nature of God.” MS-143, 3.

¹⁵² *ibid.* MS-143, 4.

¹⁵³ *ibid.* MS-143, 7.

assent.”¹⁵⁴ For Sayers, the objective foundation for rational thought was the divine logos who is ‘Dogma incarnate’, indeed, in Sayers’ writings truth was accessible rationally because of the Christian revelation.

Sayers’ concept of truth sits within a wider theological discussion of the nature of Christian revelation. Alister McGrath outlines four models of revelation within Christian theology that are not mutually exclusive but may be emphasised to a greater or lesser degree by different theologians.¹⁵⁵ These four are revelation as doctrine, revelation as presence, revelation as experience and revelation as history.

Revelation as doctrine has been a particular emphasis of Catholic and conservative or traditionalist Christians for whom the teaching office of the church and the historic creeds of the church are especially important.¹⁵⁶ Newman described the Christian creeds as a kind of theoretical overview of theology that could be likened to a map of the City of London, which enabled one to see the city as a whole.¹⁵⁷ The human imagination and affections are moved to experience by the concrete language of the creeds which encapsulate the truth of divine revelation. Doctrine as revelation does not to deny the mediation of the transformative presence of God in the experience of the believer, but rather sees the propositional truths captured in the Christian creeds as foundational and primary to that experience. Sayers’ understanding of revelation reflects this Catholic emphasis on doctrine, as is evidenced in her commitment to

¹⁵⁴ Sayers to Kathleen Nott. 1954, MS-345, 25.

¹⁵⁵ Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction Sixth Edition* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), p.? See also Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983). Dulles delineates revelation as doctrine, as history, as inner experience, as dialectical presence, and as new awareness.

¹⁵⁶ See Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange and, in particular, *The One God: A Commentary on the First Part of St. Thomas' Theological Summa* (St Louis, MO: B. Herder Book Company, 1943), *The Trinity and God the Creator and Grace: A Commentary on St. Thomas' Theological Summa* (London: B. Herder Book Company, 1952), or Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* (London: Burns and Oates, 1969).

¹⁵⁷ See Henry Newman, *The Grammar of Assent* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), Chapter Four.

the centrality of dogma, the influence of the creeds and her commitment to Christian dogma or “the Church’s teaching” in her publications.

Revelation as presence is the second model of revelation drawn out by McGrath. The Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, who was an admirer of Sayers’ work, wrote that: “Knowledge of God can be fully given to man only in a Person, never in a doctrine. Faith is not the holding of correct doctrine, but personal fellowship with the living God.”¹⁵⁸ The personal nature of God and his revelation of himself in the person of Christ is primary. Understandings of revelation as presence were prioritised by theologians such as Newman, Bonhoeffer and Brunner. Revelation as presence caused Newman to write:

If I am asked why I believe in God, I answer that it is because I believe in myself, for I feel it impossible to believe in my own existence (and of that fact I am quite sure) without believing also in the existence of Him, who lives as a Personal, all-seeing, all-judging Being in my conscience...¹⁵⁹

Brunner had been influenced by the Jewish thinker Martin Buber and set out a clear vision of revelation as presence in his 1937 book, *Truth as Encounter*. Alongside a firmly historical understanding of God’s revelation of himself in the person of Christ, Brunner unequivocally imagined revelation as the impartation of the personal presence of God in the heart of an individual believer: “Revelation and faith now mean a personal encounter, personal communion.”¹⁶⁰ Bonhoeffer spoke of “the Christ himself walking through his congregation as the Word.”¹⁶¹ Bonhoeffer further articulated this commitment to revelation of the divine presence, imagining God’s revelation of his presence in a public way – at the centre of everyday life and not hidden away:

¹⁵⁸ William Temple, *Nature, Man and God* (London: Macmillan, 1934) pp.321-322.

¹⁵⁹ Newman, *Apologetics*, p.180.

¹⁶⁰ Emil Brunner, *Dogmatics I: The Christian Doctrine of God* (London: Lutterworth, 1949), p. 26.

¹⁶¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Worldly Preaching* (New York: Crossroad, 1991) p. 126.

I should not like to speak of God on the boundaries but at the center, not in weakness but in strength; not at the boundaries or beyond in the midst of life, but in the middle of the village¹⁶²

To the extent that Sayers understood revelation as presence to any degree, it was this sense of God being revealed in the specifics of life – “in the middle of the village” – that Bonhoeffer drew out rather than the more personal, ecstatic or experiential vision of presence articulated by Brunner or Newman.

Closely connected to revelation as presence is the third model of revelation as experience. This model centres upon individual human experience of the divine presence and has been espoused by Tyrell¹⁶³, Schleiermacher¹⁶⁴ and Ritschl.¹⁶⁵ The challenge of Feuerbach (1804-73), taken up by Sigmund Freud, was that religious experience was actually subjective human experience and was in no sense revelation from outside of the self. Sayers’ tendency to eschew human emotion or spiritual feeling will be noted in the course of this thesis and she was not predisposed to explore revelation as experience.

Revelation as history has been primarily associated with Wolfhart Pannenberg (1928-2014). For Pannenberg, Christian truth is rooted in publicly accessible history and not the subjectivity

¹⁶² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: SCM Press, 1999), pp. 325-6. First published 1953.

¹⁶³ George Tyrell *Christianity at the Crossroads* (London: Longmans, Green and Company, 1913) and George Tyrell, arranged by D. M. Petre Tyrell, *Essays on Faith and Immortality* (New York, NY: Edward Arnold, 1914).

¹⁶⁴ Friedrich Schleiermacher, (eds.) H.R. Mackintosh and J.S. Stewart, *The Christian Faith* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1963), originally published 1821.

¹⁶⁵ Albrecht Ritschl, *Die christliche Lehre von der Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung* (1870-), 3rd ed., 3 vols. (Bonn: Adolph Marcus, 1889.) Only vols. 1 and 3 have appeared in English translation: vol. 1 as *A Critical History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation* trans. J. S. Black (Edinburgh: Edmonston & Douglas, 1872) and vol. 3 as *The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation: The Positive Development of the Doctrine* trans. H. R. Mackintosh and A. B. Macaulay (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1900).

of personal experience. McGrath writes that in this model “history is itself revelation”.¹⁶⁶ In this context Pannenberg positions the resurrection of Christ as the central point of history – a divine act of revelation to the world. Sayers’ understanding of the importance of the incarnation and resurrection of Christ as the focal point of history “and the ultimate divine revelation”, finds deep resonance with this mode of revelation as history.

With regard to revelation, reason and experience, Sayers is firmly located as an orthodox Anglican, respecting the place of human reason in theology and emphasising revelation as doctrine and history. Sayers did not emphasise experience as a primary source of theology.

Sayers was writing at a time when theological debates about the relative roles of scripture and tradition as sources of Christian revelation were raging in Europe. In twentieth-century German Protestant theology the concept of revelation was influenced by the dialectical theology of Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultman and Friedrich Gogarten. Protestant orthodoxy’s direct identification of revelation with scripture had been challenged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as rational critique and higher critical literary theory had been applied to the biblical texts. However, as Morgan argues:

this decline in the fortunes of the concept (of revelation with regard to scripture) was dramatically reversed after the war, when revelation in ‘the Word’ (written and/or preached) replace the idea of God in history. Barth and Gogarten persuaded even the liberal Bultmann that the Reformers’ kerygmatic idea of revelation had been rehabilitated.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology*, p.140.

¹⁶⁷ Robert Morgan “Does the Gospel Story Demand and Discourage Talk of Revelation?” in (eds.) Gerhard Sauter and John Barton, *Revelation and Story: Narrative Theology and the Centrality of Story* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 145-73.

Barth understood revelation to be a communication from God that human beings had no power to discover for themselves. The Bible bore witness to this revelation and it was made known in Christian proclamation. *Sola scriptum*, the ‘Bible principle’, was the measure of any theological insight.

In 1934, a debate erupted between two influential continental theologians, Karl Barth and Emil Brunner. Barth had become increasingly convinced that in the context of the rise of Nazism and the ensuing susceptibility of the Christian church to syncretism, Christian theologians needed to clearly articulate that there can be only one absolute authority for faith: the revelation of God to humans in Jesus Christ and him crucified. Christian theology could never look to two distinct sources: revelation on the one hand, and nature, reason or human tradition on the other.

Barth was concerned that in any age, but particularly in Nazi Germany, any acknowledgement of a role in Christian theology for human reason, tradition or for nature would open the floodgates to relativism, secularism and paganism. Barth understood nature as standing in absolute discontinuity with grace and he argued that over this question the very life and integrity of the Christian church was at stake. Trevor Hart comments:

This was a matter of fidelity to the church's task of witness to Christ in a situation where his sole Lordship and sovereignty was being called into question, and the truth of the gospel sold down the river for the sake of compromise with an intrinsically evil regime. To give way at this point, to concede some other authority for faith than that of God's self-revealing act, to lay claim to some innate receptivity for knowledge of God on the part of humanity—albeit only the slightest concession—was, he believed, to have placed one foot on the slippery slope which led inevitably to a natural religion, a natural law and a Promethean challenge to the sole authority of God's Word.¹⁶⁸

Brunner did not see a chasm between himself and Barth:

¹⁶⁸ Trevor Hart, “The Barth - Brunner Debate Revisited”, *Tyndale Bulletin*, 44.2 (1993), p. 292.

We are concerned with the fact that the proclamation of the Church has not two sources and norms, such as, e.g. revelation *and* reason or the Word of God *and* history, and that ecclesiastical or Christian action has not two norms, such as e.g. commandments *and* "Ordinances" ... In all this there is between me and Barth no difference of opinion, except the one on the side of Barth that there is a difference of opinion.¹⁶⁹

Brunner argued that the Bible itself is clear that God's world speaks of his workmanship. Brunner saw that God "leaves the imprint of his nature upon what he does. Therefore, the creation of the world is at the same time a revelation, a self-communication of God."¹⁷⁰ The reality of human sin does not undermine the fact that God has given humanity points of contact with himself. God has revealed himself in the natural world but, according to Brunner, sin blinds human beings, leaving humanity unable to fully recognise God's revelation.

For Barth, the key danger in Brunner's theology was this question of a "point of contact" between God and humanity outside of scripture – any human capacity for a knowledge of God that was not squarely rooted in scripture alone was perceived by Barth as being inherently dangerous. The ensuing disagreement between the two over natural theology and grace, scripture and revelation should be read in the context of the rise of Nazism. Although Barth was an admirer of Sayers, it is clear that Sayers' sympathy for reason and tradition alongside scripture as sources for theology would not position her as Barthian in her approach to scripture.

Within twentieth-century Catholic theology attempts have been made to de-emphasise such stark distinction between scripture and tradition. Möhler rejected the idea that scripture and tradition are two sources of God's revelation which stand side by side and never meet. Rather, he argued that the two penetrate each other, each giving to and receiving from the other. Thus,

¹⁶⁹ Emil Brunner, "Nature and Grace" in *Natural Theology: Comprising "Nature and Grace" by Professor Dr. Emil Brunner and the reply "No!" by Dr. Karl Barth* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), p. 18.

¹⁷⁰ *ibid.* p. 25.

scripture cannot be understood without understanding the development of doctrine in the Church, and vice versa. Indeed, Rahner, in his article “Scripture and Tradition”, argued that scripture itself is a mode of tradition since it represents a ‘handing-on’ of the witness of those early believers who first received the *traditio Jesu Christi* (self-tradition of Jesus Christ). Without being a Roman Catholic herself, Sayers, by affirming the truth of scripture, the necessity of reason and the possibilities of natural theology, can be found within the Catholic tradition on the spectrum of Christian belief about scripture and tradition.

However, from Sayers’ point of view, communication of Christian truth with the wider general public was far more important than detailed theological debates pertaining to the precise modes of human apprehension of truth. In a letter to the Rev. Dom Ralph Russell on 28 October 1941, Sayers spoke of her frustration with so-called experts in theology who were not able to communicate truth in any meaningful way to ordinary people and somehow gave the impression that it might be inappropriate for them to speak about God:

they *will* treat God as an elderly invalid who might collapse from shock if suddenly intruded on by a common person... One of the lay apologist’s great difficulties is the difference between the technical and every-day meaning of the words in the theological vocabulary... over and over one hears preachers preaching merrily away, and one wants to call out “Stop! Stop! The words you are using don’t mean to the people what they mean to you”... after a time, the people get to imagine that theological statements mean nothing, never did mean anything, and were never intended to mean anything... That’s why it does seem to me that it may be useful for some common or garden person like myself to come along and say “Look here! This isn’t just verbiage and mumbo-jumbo. It means something quite concrete and relevant. It applies in the most matter-of-fact way to my everyday experience.”¹⁷¹

Sayers regarded truth as vibrant and exciting but also personally consequential. What is more, she hoped to connect transcendental truth with the day-to-day experience of real people. Although, in contrast with reason, Sayers had a tentative approach to the role of human experience as a source of truth about God, she sought in her work to elucidate truth in such a

¹⁷¹ Dorothy L. Sayers unpublished letter to Rev. Dom Ralph Russell, 28 October 1941 Wade DLS Letters, 406/78, Wade Center, Illinois.

way as to connect with ordinary people. Sayers' suspicion of experience as a trustworthy guide to truth and her dislike of religious sentimentality appear to place her firmly outside of the theological territory regarding human experience as a primary source of truth about God. Sayers did not view human experience of spiritual intuitions or feelings, however ecstatic, as an adequate basis for Christian theology or even as a significant starting point for discovering truth about God. This was in direct contrast with the work of influential theologians such as Schleiermacher,¹⁷² who argued that Christian piety entailed a feeling of absolute dependence, a 'higher self-consciousness' that, when melded with modes of sentient or 'lower self-consciousness', would produce a religious 'emotion' and that this religious experience was the starting place for knowledge of the divine. However, aspects of Sayers' approach resonate strongly with Paul Tillich's understanding of theology connecting God with human experience.¹⁷³ Sayers' theological reflection on work, economics and gender demonstrate this impulse to analyse and interpret every day human experiences in the light of divine truth. Sayers' work on the doctrine of the Trinity and human creativity in particular took insights from the realm of human experience, such as artistic creativity, and showed how such experience might point humanity to the triune creator revealed in the Christian creeds. Within the landscape of contemporary theological possibility Sayers was far more reliant on reason than experience as sources of knowledge about God, yet she sought in her work to make real connections between divine truth and practical human experience.

But why does this thesis specifically examine Sayers' pursuit of truth and not the role of the other transcendentals – goodness or beauty, – in her work? Why is truth so important to her? Goodness and beauty, the related transcendentals, are certainly present in Sayers' writing but

¹⁷² Sayers thoughts were in direct contrast with the experientially-focused theology typified by F. D. E. Schleiermacher. See Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1928).

¹⁷³ See Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1973) and *The Courage to Be* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1962).

are less prominent than truth.¹⁷⁴ It seems that, for Sayers, truth envisaged through “the passionate intellect” largely encompassed both goodness and beauty. The truth is the beauty¹⁷⁵ – particularly where the pattern or structure of reality is properly mirrored in human creativity or experience, and moral goodness is also truth. This is not dissimilar from Aquinas’ interpretation of truth as the end and beginning of the universe, the truth of all created entities being grounded in the divine nature. According to Aquinas the order among the diversity of beings in the universe is “the chief beauty of things.”¹⁷⁶ Furthermore, with regard to goodness, Sayers was not inclined to underscore goodness as religious or moral scrupulosity. She wrote to John Cournos in 1925, “Love sits more happily at meat with publicans and sinners than with eligible Pharisees with water-tight minds.”¹⁷⁷ Goodness was not moral conformity; in fact, in Sayers’ writings goodness was primarily framed in such a way as to connect it to truth. A good example of this can be observed in *Begin Here* in which she addresses the political totalitarianism of both Communism and Fascism in her generation. Sayers argued that Christianity is the “ultimate source of opposition to the establishment of any absolute temporal value or of any absolute temporal authority”¹⁷⁸ and thus the foundation for opposing the great moral evil of the 1940s, since the ultimate Absolute challenging the absolutising of totalitarian power structures is God himself, the source of Christian principles and human freedom.

¹⁷⁴ The Catholic intellectual tradition following scholastic theology emphasises the sequence truth, goodness, and beauty as the transcendentals – the three core elements of being. Although Sayers was not herself Roman Catholic, she was heavily influenced by Aquinas and it is perhaps surprising that she does not accentuate the three transcendentals together in her work.

¹⁷⁵ This is resonant of John Keats’ poem “Ode on a Grecian Urn” which ends with the statement: “Beauty is truth, truth beauty, - that is all Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.” Norman Howlings (ed.), *A Keats Selection* (London: Macmillan, 1966), p.166.

¹⁷⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* III. C.71.

¹⁷⁷ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to John Cournos, January 1925, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume One*, p.227.

¹⁷⁸ Sayers, *Begin Here*, p.78.

This thesis will focus on Sayers' pursuit of truth assuming that she understood truth to envelop the other transcendentals – goodness and beauty. In fact, the coalescence of goodness and beauty in Sayers' understanding of truth is not dissimilar from C. S. Lewis' approach.¹⁷⁹

Sayers' pursuit of truth as transcendental, encapsulated beauty and goodness.¹⁸⁰

With regard to understanding the seminal concept of truth in Sayers' work it is evident that she relied upon at least seven complementary approaches to understanding truth, including; literary and poetic, Christological, historical, scientific, revelatory, correspondence to reality, and rationality. Truth was also transcendent for Sayers and in some way representative of the other transcendentals beauty and goodness. Furthermore, when invoking the foundational truth of Christian revelation, Sayers frequently envisaged the theological concept of truth in terms of a 'story'.

Story

In Sayers' diverse canon of work, story and truth are closely related. The connection between

¹⁷⁹ Peter Kreeft writes that for C. S. Lewis "Truth is good and beautiful; goodness is true and beautiful; beauty is true and good. But there is an ontological (not temporal) order: it flows from Being to truth, truth to goodness, and goodness to beauty. Truth is judged by Being, goodness by truth, and beauty by goodness... The order of these three transcendentals of truth, goodness and beauty is ontologically founded. Truth is defined by Being, for truth is the effulgence of Being, the revelation of Being, the word of Being. Truth is not defined by consciousness, which conforms to Being in knowing it. Goodness is defined by truth, not by will, which is good only when it conforms to the truth of Being. And beauty is defined by goodness, objectively real goodness, not by subjective desire or pleasure or feeling or imagination, all of which should conform to it. However, the psychological order is the reverse of the ontological order. As we know Being through first sensing appearances, so we are attracted to goodness first by its beauty, we are attracted to truth by its goodness, and we are attracted to Being by its truth. But ontologically, truth depends on Being, goodness on truth, and beauty on goodness. Truth is knowing Being. Goodness is true goodness. And the most beautiful thing in the world is perfect goodness." Peter Kreeft, "Lewis's Philosophy of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty" in David Baggett, Gary R. Habermas, Jerry L. Walls (eds.) *C. S. Lewis as Philosopher: Truth, Goodness, and Beauty* (Downers Grove, IL.: Intervarsity Press, 2008), p.25.

¹⁸⁰ For further study of the relationship between truth, goodness and beauty in Catholic theology see Jeffrey Wattles, *Living in Truth, Beauty, and Goodness: Values and Virtues* (Eugene, OR.: Wipf and Stock, 2016); Alice M. Ramos, *Dynamic Transcendentals Truth Goodness and Beauty from a Thomistic Perspective* (Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2012); Jan Artesen, *The Transcendentals and Medieval Philosophy: The Case of Thomas Aquinas* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996); J. Augustine DinNoia, O.P., "Imago Dei – Imago Christi: The Theological Foundations of Christian Humanism" *Nova et Vetera 2* (2004): 267-78.

story and truth was significant for Sayers, yet her observations about story have not been widely picked up. Indeed, C. S. Lewis noted: “It is astonishing how little attention critics have paid to Story considered in itself.”¹⁸¹ Lewis himself drew out the potential power of stories in conveying meaning: “To be stories at all they must be a series of events: but it must be understood that this series – the plot, as we call it – is only really a net whereby to catch something else.”¹⁸²

The ongoing theological conversation, variously described as narrative, post-liberal or Yale School theology, provides a relevant backdrop for a discussion of the theological importance of story in Sayers’ work. Richard Niebuhr was highly influential in the rediscovery of narrative’s significance to theology and ethics in the twentieth-century. Niebuhr’s 1941 essay, “The Story of Our Lives”, highlighted the process of storytelling in the early church as integral to truth and revelation.¹⁸³ Niebuhr began a dialogue which influenced Hans Frei, who went on to become Professor of Theology at Yale Divinity School, as well as George Lindbeck, who coined the phrase “post-liberal theology”, and many other theologians to begin to engage with story.¹⁸⁴ Hans Frei emphasised the significance of narrative in biblical studies and in particular biblical hermeneutics.¹⁸⁵ For Frei, the starting place for Christian communication was the world

¹⁸¹ C. S. Lewis, *On Stories and Other Essays on Literature* (London: Harcourt, Inc., 1982) (First published 1966.), p.3.

¹⁸² C. S. Lewis, “Literary History, Theory and Criticism” in Lyle W. Dorsett (ed.), *Essential C. S. Lewis* (London: Simon and Schuster, 1996), p.510.

¹⁸³ H. Richard Niebuhr, “The Story of Our Lives” in *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: MacMillan, 1941).

¹⁸⁴ See for example, George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1984); Hans W. Frei, “Eberhard Busch’s Biography of Karl Barth” in *Types of Christian Theology* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992); Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981); Michael Goldberg, *Theology and Narrative: A Critical Introduction* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1982); Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981); (ed.) Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones, *Why Narrative?: Readings in Narrative Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989); Nicholas Lash, *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* (London: SCM Press, 1986), *Easter in Ordinary* (London, SCM Press, 1988); (ed.) K. Yandell, *Faith and Narrative* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001) and F. Watson, “Narrative and Reality” in *Text, Church and World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994).

¹⁸⁵ See Hans Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Bases of Dogmatic Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1967) and *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1974).

of the biblical narratives – and he sought to demonstrate that this is in fact the same world in which we all live and interact. Frei regarded narrative as autonomous, a unique genre with particular power in expressing Christian truth. In this context apologetics operates having assumed the Christian revelation to be true whilst also seeking to demonstrate to onlookers that such an assumption is reasonable. It will become clear that this is very close to Sayers’ approach, although her focus was the story of the creeds, and to some extent the gospels, rather than directly biblical narrative from the Old Testament onwards. Nevertheless, her passion for truth as story and her emphasis on telling the Christian story resonates with the central concern of narrative theologians. Robert Jenson, in *Theology as Revisionary Metaphysics: Essays on God and Creation* warns that:

Protestantism has regularly substituted slogans for narrative, both in teaching and in liturgy. It has supposed that hearers already knew they had a story and even already knew its basic plot, so that all that needed to be done was to point up certain features of the story.¹⁸⁶

However, Paul Fiddes’ critique of narrative theology – that it can fall short by limiting the scope of its vision to biblical narratives alone, rather than fully appreciating beauty in the world – is something that Sayers’ work speaks into.¹⁸⁷ Rather than coming to story from a study of the biblical narratives per se, Sayers’ interest in story and theology was contingent upon her own vocation as a writer creating fiction, and detective fiction in particular. To Sayers it became apparent that theology flows to and from story; this discovery occurred organically to a theologically astute author of fiction within the course of her writing career. Sayers’ appreciation for the theological potency of story, including non-biblical narratives, overlaps

¹⁸⁶ Robert W. Jenson, *Theology as Revisionary Metaphysics: Essays on God and Creation* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), pp.57-8, see also “How the World Lost Its Story” <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2010/03/how-the-world-lost-its-story>

¹⁸⁷ Fiddes urges theologians to “consider how systematic theology might indeed remain close to ‘everyday theology’, resisting any *reduction* of metaphor and narrative to metaphysical concept, while at the same time bringing metaphor into genuine interaction with concepts that make ontological statements.” Paul S. Fiddes, “Concept, Image and Story in Systematic Theology,” *Theology International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 11:1 (2009), pp. 3–23.

with the emphasis of other writers, such as Paul Ricoeur, who approached narrative more broadly with regard to meaning, by drawing on the potential of literary, poetic, phenomenological and psychological understandings in his theology.¹⁸⁸ Ricoeur linked the idea of revelation with ‘poetics’.¹⁸⁹ The truth with which the poetic text is concerned is not verification but manifestation. The text embodies the reality with which it is concerned and can be seen as a ‘testimony’. Poetry then exercises a revelatory function.¹⁹⁰ However Ricoeur diverged from Sayers’ outlook substantially in his expectations of the relationship between story and actuality; Ricoeur believed that texts could express possibilities but not actualities. He argued that: “the world to which the text refers is ‘mimesis’ of life... the text refers, not to what is but to what might be.”¹⁹¹ Furthermore, stories could describe not how things are but how they might be. Narrative “configures the different moments of past, present and future into a new temporality”¹⁹²

In *God is Not a Story: Realism Revisited*, Francesca Murphy argues that narrative theology fails to deliver what it promises. Since without a metaphysic, narrative theology dissolves God himself into the story and neutralises drama and relation, rather than establishing it. Again Sayers’ work is relevant to this critique given her focus on the specificity inherent in story or drama theologically undergirded by pattern, and the vibrancy and coherence her work brings to bear on theological engagement with story. Furthermore, Sayers’ engagement with Drama as a medium anticipates the move within narrative theology to embrace performance. In *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology*, David Kelsey builds on Frei’s emphasis

¹⁸⁸ See Paul Ricoeur *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, (trans.) Robert Czerny, Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977) and also *Time and Narrative*, Volumes 1-3, (Chicago, MI: University of Chicago Press, 1984, 1985, 1988).

¹⁸⁹ Paul Ricoeur, “Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation” in (ed.) L. S. Mudge, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1980), pp.73-118.

¹⁹⁰ *ibid* p. 102.

¹⁹¹ *ibid*. pp. 99-100.

¹⁹² Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative: Vol. 1*, trans. K. McLaughlin and D. Pellauer (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p.54.

upon the role of Christian community in interpreting biblical narrative by exploring the dramatic nature of theology and the sacraments.¹⁹³ Kelsey's work exemplifies the tendency amongst contemporary ethicists and theologians influenced by the Yale School to embrace dramatic embodiment and performance theology. Whilst he notes the necessary specificity of theology located within particular Christian communities he argues that this need not limit the scope of theological conversation, so long as the community's starting point is recognised. Indeed, it is this embodied community that enables the drama of theological narrative to be truly enacted. Shannon Craigo-Snell notes that within post-liberal or Yale School theology there is:

ample space to investigate how the norm of biblical narrative shapes personal identity in whole-bodied ways – shaping not just conceptual and linguistic patterns but also patterns of behaviour and aesthetics. Furthermore, narrative theology values external, enacted, or public religious cultural forms as both indicative and formative of identity.¹⁹⁴

Graham Ward argues for a theological understanding of story as revelation:

In an examination of the relationship between story and revelation... though there may be a distinction drawn between them, there cannot be a polarity... It is in our experience of the world, in our wording and our reading, in our storytelling that we are redeemed. The triune God, by His revelation in Christ and through His Spirit, moves within the processes of time and human desire itself. Because we are made in *the image of* then we are destined to be *homo symbolicus*... As such our creative storytelling takes place within the operation of God's triune loving; we exist in God's endless impartation of Himself.¹⁹⁵

Sayers' invoking of story and her theological understanding of this concept sit within a wider ongoing theological conversation about the role of story in conveying and revealing truth within Christian thought.

¹⁹³ David Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009).

¹⁹⁴ Shanon Craigo-Snell, "From Narrative to Performance?" in (ed.) Gene Outka, *The Theological Anthropology of David Kelsey Response to Eccentric Existence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), p. 153.

¹⁹⁵ Graham Ward, "Allegoria: Reading as a Spiritual Exercise" in (ed.) Gerhard Sauter and John Barton, *Revelation and Story*, pp. 163-81.

Sayers is not alone in postulating the potential power of a story in exploring and communicating truth, but she was perhaps ahead of her time. In scoping out Sayers' understanding of this term story it becomes apparent that there are multi-layered meanings for it in her work. She speculated that a well-written story: "produces a true and measurable effect... precisely as though it had, in fact, "taken place" within the work of art itself."¹⁹⁶ A story produces effects as if it were actually true. Rolland Hein in *Christian Mythmakers* echoes this as he explores poetic truth within the concept of myth, arguing that whereas:

the basic requirement of systematizing is abstracting; myth is concerned not so much with parts as with wholes. Myth is necessary because reality is so much larger than rationality.¹⁹⁷

Sayers realised that a story enabled the expression of truth imaginatively in such a way that the syntheses of words and images created by the artist had tremendous power to communicate essential reality.¹⁹⁸

Sayers' observations about the power of story were theologically grounded in her belief that truth and story were perpetually connected since God, the eternal truth, entered into human history in the incarnation of Jesus and that this was the ultimate story. Sayers wrote:

... the official story – the tale of the time when God was the under-dog and got beaten, when he submitted to the conditions He laid down and became a man like the men He had made, and the men He had made broke Him and killed Him. This is the dogma we find so dull – this terrifying drama of which God is the victim and hero.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁶ Dorothy L. Sayers "Creative Mind." MS-50, 16.

¹⁹⁷ Rolland Hein, *Christian Mythmakers* (Chicago, IL: Cornerstone Press Chicago, 1998), p.xi.

¹⁹⁸ Sayers was an admirer of both Lewis and Tolkien's work. In his study *J. R. R. Tolkien: Man and Myth, a Literary Life* (San Francisco CA: Ignatius, 1999), Joseph Pearce paraphrases a conversation between Tolkien and C. S. Lewis: "Myths', Lewis told Tolkien, were 'lies and therefore worthless, even though breathed through silver'. 'No' Tolkien replied. 'They are not lies. Far from being lies they were the best way - sometimes the only way - of conveying truths that would otherwise remain inexpressible. We have come from God, Tolkien argued, and inevitably the myths woven by us, though they contain error, reflect a splintered fragment of the true light, the eternal truth that is with God.'" p.87.

¹⁹⁹ Sayers, *Creed*, p.3.

Sayers believed that the life and death of Jesus Christ were not like any other story. From her perspective, the historicity of the Christian story is crucial, a factor underlined for her by the inclusion of the reference to ‘Pontius Pilate’ in the Church’s creeds.²⁰⁰ She wrote:

About thirty-three years later... God was executed, for being a political nuisance, ‘under Pontius Pilate’ – much as we might say, ‘when Mr. Johnson-Hicks was Home Secretary’. It is as definite and concrete as all that.²⁰¹

The story of Jesus Christ is set in a real historical era and it was important to Sayers’ apologetic that it actually happened.

Sayers enriched the story concept with what she calls ‘drama’. In fact, she appears to have used the words ‘story’ and ‘drama’ almost interchangeably. This perhaps reflected her new professional focus as she moved from writing fiction to writing plays in the 1940s. Nonetheless the same ideas about the interplay of truth with story come through as she explored drama. In Sayers’ work, theological truth and drama went hand in hand, and this shaped her Christian apologetic. She wrote that Christian dogma is “the greatest drama ever staged”, and reflecting on Christ she claimed:

It is the dogma that is the drama – not beautiful phrases, nor comforting sentiments, nor vague aspirations to loving-kindness and uplift, nor the promise of something nice after death – but the terrifying assertion that the same God who made the world lived in the world and passed through the grave and gate of death.²⁰²

Sayers argued that it is in the Incarnation in particular that humanity can see that ultimate truth about reality and humanity is inextricably grounded in story:

the dogma of the Incarnation is its name in theology; but for my purpose tonight I would rather call it the story of the Gospel... The Incarnation of God, or the gospel of Jesus Christ, is not a system of ethics, though it contains a code of ethics. It is not primarily

²⁰⁰ She commented: “Historical reality... is above all a concrete and not an abstract reality; and no concrete reality other than the historical does or can exist...” To underline this point, she then recited: “Very God of very God... incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary... He suffered under Pontius Pilate.” Sayers, *The Man Born To Be King* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1943), p.21.

²⁰¹ Sayers, *Creed*, p.3.

²⁰² Dorothy L. Sayers “The Dogma is the Drama” in *Creed or Chaos?* p.24.

an explanation of the universe, though it provides a rational explanation of the universe. It is a STORY. What kind of story? Well it is not a story about a nice young man called Jesus who was very religious and had ideas in advance of his age about brotherhood or internationalism and the working man and being ever so kind to children, who taught a good way of life and unfortunately got into trouble with the police and was killed. That would be just another human story of a kind with which we are only too familiar. No it is a story about GOD. It is also a story about MAN. It is a story about the relations between God and Man from the beginning of time forever. It is a story about our father and about you and me, and of our sons and daughters to the end of the world. It is THE STORY; the key that unlocks all history.²⁰³

The truth about God is ultimately a story. The story has at its heart the incarnation of God in the historical person Jesus of Nazareth. This is not a moralistic fable intended to help people behave better, it is theological truth unfolding in human history. As such, it is not just true in itself, it is also an interpretive key unlocking the meaning of history. Sayers' view of the explanatory power of the Christian story is resonant of C. S. Lewis' statement: "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen, not only because I see it but because by it I see everything else."²⁰⁴

Sayers' understanding of Christian theology was completely dependent on story. The genres she deployed may have changed over the years but the commitment to a dynamic relationship between truth and story or drama remained. Writing about the positive reaction to her play *The Zeal of Thy House*, amongst those who could not believe "that anything so interesting, so exciting and so dramatic can be the orthodox Creed of the church", Sayers insisted that if her play was dramatic, "it was so, not in spite of the dogma but because of it – that, in short, the dogma was the drama." She went on to explain that this analysis was not well received and that

²⁰³ Dorothy L. Sayers, "The Christian Faith and the Theatre" Wade Center, Illinois. MS-43, 14-15. This rather lengthy quotation is her clearest articulation of the interplay of story and the Incarnation and needs to be seen as a whole. (Emphasis hers.)

²⁰⁴ C. S. Lewis from a paper given to The Oxford Socratic Club November 6 1944, "Is Theology Poetry?" in *They Asked for a Paper: Papers and Addresses* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1962).

her interlocutors were certain that, “if there was anything attractive in Christianity I must have put it there myself.”²⁰⁵

Sayers expressly understood the experience of Christian redemption in terms of story:

The story of Passion-tide and Easter is the story of the winning of that freedom and of that victory over the evils of Time. The burden of guilt is accepted... the last agony of alienation from God is passed through... the temporal Body is broken and remade; and Time and Eternity are reconciled in a Single Person... the new Kingdom of God is built upon the foundations of spiritual experience.²⁰⁶

This connection between truth and story was integral to Sayers’ Christian apologetics. Sayers’ interest in truth led her to attempt to clear away common, popular misconceptions about Christian belief all the while still referring to it as story: “It is not a story about “believe in God and He will keep you safe from bombs and bankruptcy!” It is the story of how God himself endured the worst of misfortunes...”²⁰⁷ She also attempted to directly persuade others of her Christian beliefs and in so doing, appealed to the truth and relevance of the Christian story in her own era: “... the people who call it irrelevant have never heard the story, that is they do not know that it is a story.”²⁰⁸

Sayers argued that this story is not only relevant to human beings in the course of their experience of life, it also contains further layers of truth in that it happened in history. She continued using the story motif to consider what it might mean for the transcendent to become immanent. She wrote that all stories have authors but God the Author “put himself as a character into His own story”. She continued: “if this is true, it is obviously an event of

²⁰⁵ Sayers, *Creed*, p.21.

²⁰⁶ Sayers, *Creed*, p.19.

²⁰⁷ Sayers, “Christian Faith and the Theatre”, MS-43,17-18.

²⁰⁸ *ibid.*

paramount importance because it alone is authoritative. It is, as we say [,] a Gospel – ‘news’ from outside the story. But it is also an event within the story.”²⁰⁹

Sayers was not only a creator of stories, specializing in detective fiction, she also grasped the paradigmatic importance of story in both the exploration and communication of theology. Her unique combination of critical and creative abilities enabled her to perceive the potential power of story throughout the different seasons of her writing career and in her lifelong pursuit of truth.

Pattern

Alongside story, Sayers’ thinking and writing were underpinned by a concept she frequently referred to as ‘Pattern’. Pattern represents the unifying picture within which the pieces fit - a picture or structure for truth that Sayers was committed to finding, revealing and exploring in her work. Sayers became committed to the sense that the Christian revelation was the ultimate pattern undergirding all meaning. She remarked, “The important thing to say is that that [the Gospel] is the story and that if anybody calls himself a Christian, he is accepting that story as the pattern for all history including his own.”²¹⁰ While story and pattern overlapped in Sayers’ mind the pattern concept was an overarching framework within which stories and facts could make sense. The pattern could be an archetypal story (as with the Christian faith) but not all stories were patterns.

It seems that Sayers shared her commitment to the concept of pattern with G. K. Chesterton; indeed, it seems likely that he was a significant source of inspiration for her in this. In his book,

²⁰⁹ Dorothy L. Sayers “The Theologian and the Scientist”, *The Listener* 44:1132 (1950): 496-497, p.500.

²¹⁰ Sayers, “Christian Faith and the Theatre”, MS-43, 16-17.

Robert Louis Stevenson, Chesterton expressed his understanding of the concept of pattern within the context of exploring human creativity:

When Stevenson was known as Stennis, by Parisian art students struggling with his name, it was the hour of Art for Art's Sake. Painting was to be impersonal, though painters (like Whistler) were sometimes perhaps a little personal. But they all insisted that every picture is as impersonal as a pattern. They ought to have insisted that every pattern is as personal as a picture. Whether or not we see faces in the carpet, we ought to see a mind in the carpet; and in fact there is a mind in every scheme of ornament. There is as emphatically a morality expressed in Babylonian architecture or Baroque architecture as if it were plastered all over with Biblical texts. Now in the same manner there is at the back of every artist's mind something like a pattern or a type of architecture. The original quality in any man of imagination is imagery. It is a thing like the landscapes of his dreams; the sort of world he would wish to make or in which he would wish to wander; the strange flora and fauna of his own secret planet; the sort of thing that he likes to think about. This general atmosphere, and pattern or structure of growth, governs all his creations however varied; and because he can in this sense create a world, he is in this sense a creator; the image of God.²¹¹

Chesterton had been a source of inspiration for Sayers since she read him as a schoolgirl. Although she does not cite his work as the origin of her interest in the explanatory power of pattern, it is probable that Chesterton influenced her here either consciously or subconsciously.

Throughout Sayers' work she explored the possibility of recognising truth within overarching structures or 'patterns': "To build poetic systems of truth, the similarities must be, not quantitative, but qualitative, and the new unity that will emerge will be a world of new values."²¹² Pattern is theologically and historically important since Sayers saw the true story about Christ entering the world he created as the defining pattern for humanity. Sayers' desire to perceive the pattern and then to be shaped personally and creatively by it was a critical aspect of her religious outlook. Sayers asserted that a "religious person is a person who tries to shape his life in every aspect so as to fit with the purpose for which the world was made."²¹³ She

²¹¹ G. K. Chesterton, *Robert Louis Stevenson*, (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1928).
http://www.cse.dmu.ac.uk/~mward/gkc/books/Robert_Louis_Stevenson.txt, visited 9 September 2015.

²¹² Sayers, "Creative Mind", MS-50, 19.

²¹³ Sayers, "Nature of God", MS-143, 2.

envisaged Christian dogma itself as being a kind of pattern and concluded: “Christian doctrine is not a set of rules, but one vast interlocking rational structure.”²¹⁴

In Sayers’ mind the individual pieces of a given question should fit together within a whole.²¹⁵

The evidence leads to a conclusion within a particular framework where apparently disparate aspects when ‘arranged’ make sense:

Here metaphor and analogy are both appropriate and necessary – for both these processes involve the arranging of things according to some quality that the dissimilars have in common....²¹⁶

The particular framework for truth may well take the form of a story, but it could also be a dogma, creed or picture. Pattern meant a synthesis of truth. Pattern was intentional and not random from Sayers’ perspective. This stemmed from her intuition that the Creator has designed things to conform to a pattern. Pattern is worked out in the life and experience of human beings in the creative processes undertaken in life, so that human creativity and patterns reflect the divine reality:

...the same pattern inheres in my work as in myself; and I also find that theologians attribute to God Himself precisely that pattern of being which I find in my work and in me.²¹⁷

In her essay, “Oedipus Simplex”, Sayers explained how her concept of pattern provided an undergirding structure for creativity and meaning. The pattern was an iteration of an artist’s

²¹⁴ Dorothy L. Sayers, “Creed or Chaos?” in *Creed or Chaos?* p. 37.

²¹⁵ In the next chapter, I demonstrate that in her early writing career Sayers’ evolving interest in exploring truth through story and pattern is clearly discernible. In her detective novels characters find themselves persuaded to believe in something as evidence is pieced together within a framework; the pattern emerges as the story unfolds. The reader of her detective fiction conversely experiences the frustration of piecemeal evidence leading us down blind alleys. In her lecture, “Aristotle on Detective Fiction” delivered at Oxford, 5 March 1935, Sayers explores the detective fiction writer’s need to deploy imposter narratives before the ‘truth’ becomes clear at the denouement. Sayers appeals to Aristotelian *Paralogismos* as “the art of the false syllogism... The art of framing lies... in the right way.” in Sayers, *Unpopular Opinions* pp. 230-231. Sayers’ theories about detective fiction will be examined in more detail in the next chapter of this thesis.

²¹⁶ Sayers, “Creative Mind”, MS-50, 19.

²¹⁷ Dorothy L. Sayers, “Problem Picture” in *Mind*, p.172.

vision and will, providing a frame of reference and coherence within which logical consequences would follow of necessity:

We shall observe it in certain fixed points; these are the nodes of necessity, through which the lines *must* pass in order to make the pattern. The nodes are determined by the artist, but the lines are self-determined, and may take any direction they choose, subject to two limitations...The will of the maker readily submits to all these modifications, since the necessity laid upon the lines to come to the nodes means that all the possible modifications can only in the end produce a conditioned necessity of their own – just as, in a game of croquet, the path of every ball, however wildly it may diverge under the impact or a bad shot... is governed by the absolute external necessity imposed on both sides alike of going through the right hoops in the right order.²¹⁸

Sayers was clear that her understanding of pattern and the ensuing coherence of reality did not necessarily imply a deterministic outlook. Even from the perspective of a human author creating works of art, Sayers assumed that logic required an author to work within the constraints of what was believable – reasonable potentialities of possibilities with regard to the plot. She envisaged a wheel with a rim and various spokes representing the characters. As the story developed and the spokes converged on the hub, the realms of possibility for multitudinous outcomes narrowed. Nonetheless the freedom of the author was ultimately unimpaired, the plot was not pre-determined in any genuine sense. Pattern was not a straitjacket imposed upon the arts. Rather for Sayers, acknowledging pattern was to embrace intrinsic coherence whilst still allowing author and characters choice:

At the rim of the pattern, then, the lines of potentiality lie wide apart, and may take almost any course towards the node. But as they close in, the area of available choice becomes narrower and narrower.... But the element of personal choice remains to the last moment.²¹⁹

A good author would acknowledge pattern but refrain from constantly referring to it:

²¹⁸ Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Poetry of Search and The Poetry of Statement and other Posthumous Essays on Literature, Religion and Language* (London: Victor Gollancz, Ltd, 1963), p.258.

²¹⁹ *ibid.* p.259.

I would add that, in order to make a good story it is advisable to *keep* the lines veiled; otherwise one will not achieve the desired effect of inevitability combined with surprise.²²⁰

Pattern was an undergirding concept for Sayers, with implications reaching beyond the creative process of making art. Pattern had important theological meaning. In her article “The Triumph of Easter”, Sayers introduced a section under the heading ‘Working the Pattern Out’ in which she argued: “The Church asserts that there is a Mind which made the Universe, that he made it because he is the sort of Mind that takes pleasure in creation, and that if we want to know what the Mind of the Creator is, we must look at Christ.” Having described what Christ is like, Sayers concluded the section with the comment, “That is the bold postulate that the Church asks us to accept, adding that if we do accept it... the answers to all our other problems will be found to make sense.”²²¹ Sayers believed that accepting the Christian view of God the Creator and Christ the incarnate son, as described in the creeds, gave one a framework, a pattern, that had exhaustive elucidatory power.

In the wartime talk, “The Religions Behind the Nation”, broadcast to the nation by the BBC, Sayers explored this explanatory power in the context of the socio-political context of her era. She provided listeners with a clear articulation of her concept of pattern and its implication for how she understood Christian doctrine and its explanatory potential. Taking contemporary discussions of the state of the nation as her starting point, Sayers noted that it was commonly agreed in Britain that people wanted to defend “our culture” but she wanted to ask the question: “what *is* our culture?”²²² She argued that the critical point at stake in defining the culture of a nation was not the ideologies preached or the religious outlook but “the assumptions we hold

²²⁰ *ibid.* p.259.

²²¹ Dorothy L. Sayers, “The Triumph of Easter” in *The Sunday Times* (April 17 1938), p.10.

²²² Dorothy L. Sayers, “The Religions Behind the Nation” in *The Church Looks Ahead: Broadcast Talks* (London: Faber and Faber, 1941), p.67.

in common about what is GOOD... the things we take so much for granted that we never argue about them at all.”²²³ This speech was written and broadcast in 1941 in the midst of the Second World War and Sayers reflected upon the things that British culture presupposed: “all men and all races possess certain rights in common, just because they are men. We take it for granted that such things as freedom, mercy, charity, truth, tolerance, justice, and peace are Good Things.”²²⁴ By contrast Sayers pointed out that the Nazis absolutely deny such assumptions: “they base their new order of civilisation on the contrary assumptions that inferior races have no rights, that mercy and charity are effeminate vices, and that war is more desirable than peace.”²²⁵ She concluded that this may seem to be “sheer barbarism”,²²⁶ but that at the basis of such a reaction lay two basic but widely-held assumptions “which reason cannot prove and for which science can offer no evidence.”²²⁷ These assumptions were: “that both our conception of the good and our human reason are really valid.”²²⁸ Sayers examined Roman, Greek and Enlightenment thinking and concluded that “the enlightened human reason can establish almost anything except those two basic suppositions on which a human culture depends: it cannot *prove* that goodness is not an illusion, and it cannot *prove* that reason itself is not an illusion.”²²⁹ By contrast Sayers believed that Christian dogma could provide a coherent foundation for goodness and reason:

It [Christian dogma] asserted that the things which man had believed about right and reason from the beginning of time, were neither idle dreams nor wishful thinking, but actually and earthly true... It claimed in fact... that man’s persistent belief in goodness and reason were justified; that such was the nature of God and the true nature of man – and that Christ was there to prove it... Christianity offered the actual physical fact of the Incarnation... Christianity took theology out of the realm of myth and allegory, and pegged it firmly down to history. It picked up, so to speak, all the scattered ideas about God and man and the universe which had been lying about like loose beads – beautiful

²²³ *ibid.*

²²⁴ *ibid.* p.68.

²²⁵ *ibid.* p.69.

²²⁶ *ibid.*

²²⁷ *ibid.* p.70.

²²⁸ *ibid.*

²²⁹ *ibid.* p.72.

but disconnected – and ran through them, like a string, the historical personality of the God who was made flesh.²³⁰

This necklace envisaged by Sayers with the string of the incarnate Christ in history pulling the beads into a coherent shape was in fact a pattern. The specificity of Christ in history enacted a true pattern upon which western civilisation was built and was able to flourish. However, intellectuals had sought to do away with Christ – the very historical string holding the beads together:

It is the pattern of those beads on that string that is the pattern of our own civilisation and culture. We have grown accustomed to the look of it. We have spent nineteen and half centuries polishing the beads. And during that time, we have been tempted to feel that the only thing that spoils the look of them is the ugly string of Christian dogma running through them. For the last three centuries, we have been snipping the string away, strand by strand – forgetting that it was the string that made the pattern in the first place. Let us be quite clear about that. The assumptions we take for granted about right and reason, which seem to us self-evident, are not self-evident at all... but the evidence for them is the evidence for Christianity, and if we reject the one we automatically reject the other. What we have been trying to do for some time is to keep the Christian ethic without the connecting thread of the Christian theology – the beads without the string. We can of course, hope or imagine that the pattern will hold together of its own accord, but we have no rational warrant for supposing that it will; indeed, the witness of history contradicts that supposition.²³¹

In her presentation of the potency of her concept of pattern as a means of Christianity providing a coherent intellectual foundation for goodness and reason in culture, Sayers neglected to address the sins of the church throughout the course of history. Sayers avoided addressing the fact that the working out of the pattern by Christendom within society and culture has not always been conducive to human flourishing as evidenced in Crusades, Inquisitions, Imperialistic expansions of “Christian” powers, and, critically, by sections of the church within Germany, and more widely in Britain and Europe in Sayers’ own time, who appeased or even supported Fascism and the Nazi regime. She could have argued that these examples represented

²³⁰ *ibid.* p.74.

²³¹ *ibid.* pp.74-75.

divergences from the true pattern of Christianity but she is perhaps complacent in neglecting to do so.

In the course of this thesis it will become evident that Sayers deployed a number of different metaphors when invoking the concept of pattern. The threading together of beads into a necklace is also hinted at in Sayers' detective novel, *Whose Body?*, in which Wimsey comments that a particular incident, "threads together no beads in my mind."²³² Pattern can be conceptually architectural and structural or pattern can involve fabric being pushed and pulled or a tapestry being woven. The joy of recognition is common to seeing these different kinds of patterns. In Sayers' semi-autobiographical work, "Cat O' Mary", her main character Katherine, describes the experience of apprehending pattern:

When Katherine sat down to prepare a passage of Moliere she experienced the actual physical satisfaction of plaiting and weaving together innumerable threads to make a pattern, a tapestry, a created beauty...²³³

Later on in this thesis, when Sayers' theological writings are explored, it will be shown that her most acclaimed theological ideas about the Trinity are an outworking of her interest in pattern. The analogies she developed and her theological explorations of the doctrine of the Trinity in *The Mind of the Maker* are themselves developments of this deeper, longer, indeed life-long search for 'pattern'. She wrote:

If you ask me what is this pattern which I recognise as the true law of my nature, I can only suggest that it is the pattern of the creative mind... And this is the pattern... of the being of God. If all this is true, then the mind of the maker and the Mind of the Maker are formed on the same pattern, and all their works are made in their own image.²³⁴

John Thurmer writes that Sayers' most important contribution to Christian theology is her

²³² Dorothy L. Sayers, *Whose Body?* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1923), p.125.

²³³ Sayers, "Cat O' Mary", p.97.

²³⁴ Sayers, "Problem Picture" in *Mind*, p.173.

Trinitarian analogy, which was articulated most cogently in *The Mind of the Maker*.²³⁵ This is Sayers' tripartite analysis of human work as Idea, Activity and Power, reflecting the Trinitarian God of Christian tradition. Thurmer argues that this is the controlling idea that undergirds all of Sayers' writing, and he believes that she developed it in her theories about detective fiction, which emerged for her primarily in response to reading Aristotle. Thurmer suggests:

the threefold structure of the detective story expands into a universal creative pattern, which, in the case of the Gospel, and on Sayers' premise of Christian orthodoxy, can be no less than that most august of mysteries, the Holy and Undivided Trinity.²³⁶

Whilst Thurmer's analysis of how Sayers came to develop her Trinitarian theology is convincing, it nevertheless falls short of revealing a unifying paradigm in all of Sayers' work. The development of Sayers' Trinitarian analogy of the process of producing work is important, but it is itself part of her lifelong search for a pattern which explains the way things are. In her Trinitarian writing, Sayers focused primarily on the analogy of the creative task, as she considered how this reflected the being and nature of God. She believed that the process of an artist making their work communicated something of the nature of the God who is the ultimate creator. But it was the pattern of Christian revelation itself as the overarching story of the Trinitarian God's interaction with humanity that appears to have captivated Sayers. Her work on the Trinity was an outworking of her profound passion for truth and consequent interest in pattern.

When I set out to argue that Sayers' oeuvre could be understood as a unity with her pursuit of truth in story and pattern in mind, I did not initially understand that this was itself a Trinitarian

²³⁵ John Thurmer, "Eureka – The Genesis of an Analogy," *Theology*, 103:813 (2000):198-203, p.201.

<http://tjx.sagepub.com/content/103/813/198.citation>, accessed 15 November 2014.

²³⁶ *ibid* p.201.

pattern – a tripartite structural perspective with explanatory power. However, with this in mind, it becomes apparent in the analogy of this thesis that if pattern serves as “Pater” – the heavenly father of the Holy Trinity (indeed “Pater” and pattern are etymologically connected) – and the story is the Son incarnate in the drama of history, then the truth would be that which proceeds from both pattern and story, as the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. A transcendent connection with divine, absolute reality in human history, reason and felt experience is truth mediated by the Spirit. In such a scheme the pattern (Pater) is revealed in the story (Son) and truth (Spirit) is personally apprehended as the mind plays between the two. This way of understanding Sayers’ work makes sense given her perception that reality appears to be comprehensible in terms of multiple trinities in unities. In *The Mind of the Maker* Sayers reflected upon St Augustine’s writing on the Trinity and in particular the pervasive presence of trinities in the observable world:

He says in effect: “a Trinitarian structure of being is not a thing incomprehensible or unfamiliar to you; you know of many such within the created universe. There is a trinity of sight, for example: the form seen, the act of vision, and the mental attention which correlates the two. These three, though separable in theory, are inseparably present whenever you use your sight. Again, every thought is an inseparable trinity of memory understanding and will. This is a fact of which you are quite aware; it is not the concept of trinity in unity that in itself presents any insuperable difficulty to the human imagination.” We may perhaps go so far as to assert that the Trinitarian structure of activity is mysterious to us just because it is universal...²³⁷

Sayers anticipated that the Trinitarian nature of God would be reflected in his creation in multifarious ways. She wrote that her analogy of Idea, Energy and Power for the artist’s creative process was one “of an earthly three-in-oneness which I know by experience to exist and which may therefore serve as an inadequate analogy for the Divine Three-in-Oneness.” But in this letter to Father Kelly she went on to say, “There may be several illustrations for the same thing mayn’t there?”²³⁸ Pattern and tripartite patterns in particular were operative in

²³⁷ Sayers, *Mind*, pp. 26-7.

²³⁸ Dorothy L. Sayers’ letter to Father Herbert Kelly, 4 October 1937, in (ed.) Reynolds, *Letters: Volume Two*, p. 46.

Sayers' attempts at understanding and communicating deep theological meaning. In light of this it seems that pattern is so inescapable for Sayers that any comprehensive attempt to understand her work might be naturally inclined to incarnate as an argument in the form of a tripartite pattern and that the very structure of this thesis bears this out. Truth, story and pattern relate to one another as a Trinitarian pattern holding Sayers' diverse oeuvre together as an intellectually coherent whole.

Although this thesis will demonstrate the relative fluidity of Sayers' meanings in her use of the concepts of truth, story and pattern and the consequential flexibility in the interrelationship between the concepts themselves in her work, it is clear that tracing the main ways in which these three concepts relate in Sayers' thought should begin with grasping the importance Sayers placed upon tripartite patterns. Just as in the Christian doctrine of the Trinity there are distinct persons who do not operate hierarchically, so Sayers' understanding of truth revealed in story, with its drama and specificity, also requires the substantial grounding of the logical framework of an overarching bigger picture - pattern. By analysing Sayers' genres in turn, this thesis will consider the evolving relationship between truth, story and pattern in her work. Sayers' interest in the nature of truth itself as well as the process by which truth is discovered or revealed in stories is first expressed in her detective fiction. In the detective fiction an early and unfledged concept of pattern is observable in the form of a plot structure which enables the story to progress and even introduces the possibility of imposter narratives, untrue stories. In her plays Sayers was to explore how truth, story and pattern, relate together inextricably, and that dogma (pattern) *is* drama when the play is seen enfolded on the stage. Rather than story or pattern proceeding from another, truth is revealed with powerful effect from both story and pattern as they operate together. In *The Mind of the Maker* Sayers focused on her trinitarian analogy for human creativity. Sayers primarily explored this analogy as a pattern that had the capacity to

reveal truth; Sayers' perspective was that the very processes of human creativity including storytelling were themselves indicators of a divine creative pattern imprinted upon human life and experience. Stories were an inevitable emanation from this divine pattern for human creativity and thus had tremendous potential to unveil divine truth. In Dante, Sayers was to discover a writer who not only enthralled her with the poetic effect of his storytelling, but a genius who understood the power of pattern and took its theological potential to unexplored levels. Her sense of wonder at the experience of a deep realisation of spiritual truth through her work on Dante brought to the fore for her the very epiphany of truth being revealed and recognised. Truth, story and pattern evolve in Sayers' oeuvre both in terms of their meanings and their relationship to each other, all the while holding her work together in a coherent whole.

In summary, Sayers' pursuit of truth in story and pattern resonates throughout her work. Sayers discussed and defined these ideas in multi-faceted ways throughout her writing career. Her desire to discover the explanatory structure or pattern within which transcendent truth should be revealed shaped her writing in important ways, giving theological foundation to all her work. Her lifelong interest in story led her to the compelling discovery that layers of truth can be discerned and understood as stories are told and their 'poetic effect' is felt. Sayers' engagement with story and pattern in her pursuit of truth shaped her written work and contributed to her success as a Christian apologist and popular communicator of theological ideas. Considering these themes will help Sayers' readers grasp what she was trying to achieve from a theological perspective in her work, as well as contributing towards an assessment of her part in the efforts of Christian theological communication and apologetics in her generation.

In the next chapter, this thesis will examine Sayers' growing interest in the themes of truth through story and pattern in her formative years as a writer when she produced her best-selling

detective fiction and began to develop her theories about this genre in various lectures and essays.

Chapter Four

Detective Fiction

It was as the author of detective fiction that Dorothy L. Sayers first made her name. P. D. James commented:

it is, of course, as a writer of detective stories and the creator of Lord Peter Wimsey that she is chiefly known... she is the writer who has done more than any other to make the detective story intellectually respectable and to lift it from an ingenious but lifeless sub-literary puzzle into a specialized branch of fiction with serious claims to be judged by the same criteria as we apply to the so-called straight novel.²³⁹

But questions arise as to what, if anything, this has to do with her later theological writing. C. S. Lewis wrote: “there is in reality no cleavage between the detective stories and her other works. In them... she is first and foremost the craftsman, the professional.”²⁴⁰ This chapter will examine Dorothy L. Sayers’ detective fiction writings, with the question of whether her pursuit of truth, through story and pattern was yet evident or indeed significant in this genre of her work.

Sayers’ detective fiction forms a noteworthy part of her canon, alongside her religious plays, her directly theological writing and her translation and interpretation of Dante, which will be explored in later chapters. Sayers’ detective fiction was largely written in the 1920s and early 1930s, well before she started writing theology in earnest. One of the wider themes at hand in this research is Sayers’ interest in persuasion to a conclusion about truth by the coming together of evidence within a clear pattern or framework. This concern was ostensibly beginning to become significant to her at this early point in her career as an author of detective fiction. Moreover, her initial choice of the novel, a story, as the form for her art turned out to be remarkably prescient. After all, through writing fiction Sayers developed a foundation from

²³⁹ P. D. James, “Dorothy L. Sayers: Her Novels Today,” *SEVEN An Anglo American Literary Review Sayers Centenary Issue* 10 (1993): 19.

²⁴⁰ C. S. Lewis, “A Panegyric for Dorothy L. Sayers” in *On Stories and Other Essays on Literature*, p.92.

which to apply her literary creativity and theory and, in particular, her interest in ‘the story’ to her theological engagement. For Sayers, it became apparent that theology flows to and from story; this discovery occurred naturally to a theologically astute author of fiction. Sayers later wrote in her introduction to *The Man Born to Be King* play cycle that: “This story of the life and murder and resurrection of God-in-Man is... the symbol and epitome of the relations of God and man throughout time.”²⁴¹

It will not be possible in this thesis to study every one of Sayers’ novels, as she wrote fifteen, along with various short stories, but we can explore the field and examine one of her novels in greater detail to see the early foundations of the literary narrative apologist at work before she had turned her hand to explicitly theological themes. This chapter will consider the idea that Dorothy L. Sayers’ writing is, as Barbara Reynolds put it, “all of a piece”²⁴² and that there are unifying themes and priorities running through her work that are undergirded throughout by a philosophy that already begins to be discernable in her detective fiction. At first glance it may seem unlikely that the author of works of inspired theology, *The Mind of the Maker* and *Creed or Chaos?*, made her name writing witty, entertaining, detective story bestsellers in the 1920s and 30s. Clearly the genres are entirely different as is the subject matter, yet throughout Sayers’ work the palpable quest for truth is perceptible.

In her detective novels, readers are drawn into a story and persuaded to discover the truth of a particular matter by means of evidence being pieced together within an idiosyncratic pattern that makes sense, amongst competing explanations. Recognition of the pattern is the paradigm for discovering truth. Bruce Merry argues that Sayers’ methodology in her detective fiction was to assemble “an intense intellectual structure, tapering at its apex and based on a single

²⁴¹ Sayers, Introduction to *The Man Born to Be King*, p.21.

²⁴² Barbara Reynolds oral history interview (on sound and video recording). Interviewed by Lyle W. Dorsett, 4 April 1989. Call Numbers: OH / SR-29 & OH / VR-15, The Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, IL.

revealing idea, which explains the whole plot.”²⁴³ The reader experiences the frustration of piecemeal evidence leading us down blind alleys; imposter stories that do not fit the pattern and cannot lead us to the truth. In Sayers’ presentation of plot, evidence needed to be pieced together into a big picture. Things would not make sense outside of the true story, but there was a singular pattern within which the pieces would fit and everything could be explained.

Sayers’ detective fiction was sneered at by J. R. R. Tolkien²⁴⁴ and other well-read friends (including her own lovers Whelpton and Cournos who both moved in literary circles).²⁴⁵ C. S. Lewis eschewed the negativity of some intellectuals around the popularity of this genre, later writing to Sayers:

These prigs, starting from the true proposition that great art is more than entertainment, reach the glaring non-sequitur “entertainment has no place in great art” – like people who think music can’t be “classical” if there is a catchy tune in it.²⁴⁶

Nonetheless, this body of her work forms a highly significant part of the way she communicated with the general public. Although Sayers began writing detective fiction in a fairly casual way - “When in a light-hearted manner I set out, fifteen years ago to write the first “Lord Peter...””- her books became increasingly thoughtful and reflected what she

²⁴³ Bruce Merry “Dorothy L. Sayers: Mystery and Demystification” in Bernhard Benstock (ed.), *Essays on Detective Fiction* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1983), p.19.

²⁴⁴ See J. R. R. Tolkien letter to Christopher Tolkien, 25 May 1944, “I could not stand Gaudy Night. I followed P. Wimsey from his attractive beginnings so far, by which time I conceived a loathing for him (and his creatrix) not surpassed by any other character in literature known to me, unless by his Harriet. The honeymoon one (Busman’s H.?) was worse. I was sick.” Letter 71 in Christopher Tolkien and Humphrey Carpenter (eds.), *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien* (New York NY: Mariner Books, 2000), p.82.

²⁴⁵ Barbara Reynolds, *Dorothy L. Sayers: Her Life and Soul* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1993), p.93 “Whelpton... admitted later in life that he had never been able to finish any of her detective books.” On John Cournos, Sayers writes in a letter to her mother on the 8 November 1921 “John was ‘nice’ enough Friday week in a general way but I fear he has no sympathy with Lord Peter, being the kind of man who takes his writing seriously and spells Art with a capital A” in Barbara Reynolds (ed.), *The Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers 1899-1936: The Making of a Detective Novelist* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1995 and Sceptre Paperback, 1996), p.180.

²⁴⁶ C. S. Lewis letter to Dorothy L. Sayers, 25 May 1945. Folder 96 f.61, Wade Center, Illinois.

referred to as “bits and pieces of some kind of philosophy of life.”²⁴⁷ Although there were many factors in play, it seems that this one important idea that truth is discovered within a pattern has been overlooked by those who have studied Sayers from a theological perspective. It is nonetheless a key interpretive lens through which to understand her work as a unity.

Notably, it was in her early career as a writer that Sayers was to first deploy and explore these themes of ‘truth’, ‘story’ and ‘pattern’ in her detective fiction. This was not always adroitly done. Raymond Chandler regarded Sayers’ detective fiction as “second-grade literature,” precisely because of her experimentation with pattern:

If it started out to be about real people (and she could write about them – her minor characters show that), they must very soon do unreal things in order to form the artificial pattern required by the plot.²⁴⁸

Sayers’ initial engagement with pattern was not particularly sophisticated and she later reflected in her essay, “Problem Picture”, upon the danger of viewing the questions of life as a set of problems to be ‘solved’, particularly given the tendency of detective fiction writers to focus on plots as puzzles to be ‘solved’. She points out that an artist or writer does not “set out from a set of data, and proceed, like a crossword solver or a student of elementary algebra, to deduce from them a result which shall be final, predictable, complete and the only one possible.”²⁴⁹ This suggests that a decade after writing her novels Sayers saw a need to

²⁴⁷ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to John Wren-Lewis, Good Friday, March 1954, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Four* (Cambridge: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society: Carole Green Publishing, 2000), p.139.

²⁴⁸ Raymond Chandler “The Simple Art of Murder” in Raymond Chandler, *Pearls are a Nuisance* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), p.192.

²⁴⁹ Sayers “Problem Picture” in *Mind* pp.150-1.

distance herself from a simplistic approach to pattern within detective literature, perhaps even her own.

Sayers on Detective Fiction

Detective fiction in general tends to follow a relatively set trajectory beginning with a dramatic crime being committed – be that murder, robbery, fraud or some other disturbance. This takes place in a geographical setting that is recognisable to readers such as a college, a particular place of business, a village or a natural setting such as a beach. Then there are characters – the victim, the murderer, witnesses, suspects and incidental individuals. Motives, means and opportunities arise within these givens. Into this setting comes a detective whose role is to logically deduce from the available evidence and various factors what happened. The pieces come together as the story unfolds and the overall pattern emerges; in this way the mystery is ‘solved’ or at least ‘explained.’ Sayers wrote about this in some notes for a lecture she was to give called “The Craft of Detective Fiction”:

there is a certain kind of pattern that all detective stories have to follow more or less... this general pattern is 1) a crime (usually murder); 2) the main body of the story during which by argument and action proceeding alternately, the clues are before the detective and the reader; 3) the solution of the mystery in a manner both logical and surprising.²⁵⁰

Writing in 1928, in her introduction to *Great Short Stories of Detection, Mystery and Horror, First Series*, Sayers argued that detective stories had “an Aristotelian perfection of beginning middle and end.”²⁵¹ In the introduction to the subsequent 1931 volume, *Great Short Stories of Detection, Mystery and Horror, Second Series*, she analysed detective stories into a structure

²⁵⁰ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Craft of Detective Fiction* The Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton IL, MS-48,1.

²⁵¹ (ed.) Dorothy L. Sayers, *Great Short Stories of Detection, Mystery and Horror* (London: Victor Gollancz first published 1928, reprinted 1947), p.37.

of idea, plot and responsive reader. In a lecture given in 1935, “Aristotle on Detective Fiction” Sayers wrote that the triad of beginning, middle and end are the essential elements of the plot. For the construction of the plot, Sayers continued to draw on Aristotle, who she was certain would have believed that a detective story should have a number of essential elements, namely:

a beginning, a middle and an end... Herein the detective story is sharply distinguished from the kind of modern novel which, beginning at the end, rambles backwards and forwards without particular direction and ends on an indeterminate note and for no ascertainable reason...²⁵²

The detective plot had three necessary parts that Sayers named as ‘reversal of fortune’, ‘discovery’ and ‘suffering’. She wrote: “Concerning the three necessary parts of a detective plot – peripety, or reversal of fortune, discovery, and suffering – Aristotle has many very just observations.”²⁵³ By rooting her analysis of the pattern of detective fiction in the ideas of Aristotle, Sayers clearly indicated that in the process of looking back to this early stage of her writing career from later life, she still did not regard the genre as an inferior form of literature:

From the start Aristotle accepts the Detective Story as a worthy subject for serious treatment. “Tragedy,” he observes (tragedy being the literary form which the detective story took in his day) “also acquired magnitude” – that is, it became important both in form and substance.²⁵⁴

In drawing upon Aristotle and his *Poetics* in her discussion of detective fiction as a genre, Sayers revealed that in her mind there was no dichotomy between her detective novels and her moral philosophy, since her detective fiction was substantively undergirded by her philosophical theology. Her acknowledgement in her essay, “Problem Picture”, of the dangers of a “problem and solution” approach to creative or artistic endeavour perhaps calls

²⁵² Dorothy L. Sayers, *Unpopular Opinions* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1946), p.181.

²⁵³ *ibid.* p.183.

²⁵⁴ *ibid.* p.179.

this assertion into question. After all, a simplistic understanding of pattern as a grid by which problems are solved and mysteries straightened out so that truth can be known would fly in the face of a view of detective fiction as potentially valuable, artistic literature revealing poetic truth through story undergirded by a coherent philosophical pattern.

Furthermore, Sayers opined that the detective novel had serious artistic value since it engaged with cultural, social and moral ideals:

Let us note that this genre was born and has blossomed in democratic countries, that is, in countries where the law is not only respected but also where the population approves of it. The hero... devotes all his courage, all his energy and all his intelligence to defending the cause of civilization against the powers of chaos. This is why we must distinguish the so-called thriller from the genuine detective novel. The former, even when it doesn't actively require us to admire the criminal, is at the very least totally amoral; the latter, by its very nature, intends its readers to sympathise with the law and those who uphold it.²⁵⁵

Sayers made a case for detective fiction having the potential to make a genuine moral contribution to a society by exploring legality and illegality and stimulating a desire in the reader to see morality upheld. Indeed, in this sense her detective fiction resonated with the theological and moral vision of her theological writing. Robin Winks noted that she was “giving us her private vision of hell, as the Dorothy L. Sayers who translated Dante” just as surely as “the Dorothy L. Sayers who rang the Nine Tailors also did.”²⁵⁶ But Sayers also acknowledged that detective fiction provided people with something of an escape from the intractable challenges of real life:

The detective story is part of the literature of escape, and not of expression - we fly to mystery and adventure because they do not, as a rule, happen to us... it is remarkable how strong is the fascination of the higher type of detective-story for the intellectually

²⁵⁵ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Les Origines du Roman Policier: a wartime wireless talk to the French* (Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 2003), p.15.

²⁵⁶ Robin W. Winks, *Modus Operandi: An Excursion into Detective Fiction* (Boston, MA: David R. Godine, Publisher, Inc., 1982), p.37.

minded.²⁵⁷

In fact, she noted that it tended to be people of intellectual caliber and a literary bent who turned to detective fiction rather than the popular perception of the genre as stereotypically low-brow, attracting an uneducated audience:

It's quite surprising, how many who are distinguished in some kind of literary work turn to mystery-stories for recreation. I suppose they get fed up with problems about marriage & adolescence & perversion & find that detective problems irritate them less than the other kind.²⁵⁸

Sayers believed that far from being too populist and a low form of literature, the detective fiction of her generation was in danger of losing touch with the general public. She wrote:

The mystery story is indeed becoming more and more high-brow in its appeal, more subtle, literary and desiccated in manner. It is in great danger of losing touch with the common man, and becoming a caviar banquet for the cultured.²⁵⁹

However, her concern was that such readers were not being sufficiently challenged at a deeper level, as the cardboard characters of many detective novels contributed to the priority of the intellectual puzzle and the disconnection of the reader from the profound moral questions at hand: "A few conventional words of horror are uttered, but no feeling comes over us that something genuinely dreadful has happened, while the detective often seems to take the whole thing as a mere piece of intellectual fun."²⁶⁰ Sayers' interest in the "feeling" produced in the reader of her work is an interesting point given the emphasis laid upon her principally intellectual approach to her work, life and faith, and her perception of herself as an

²⁵⁷ Dorothy L. Sayers (ed.), *Great Short Stories of Detection, Mystery and Horror* (London: Victor Gollancz first published 1928, reprinted 1947), p.44.

²⁵⁸ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to E. H. Blakeney, 1 January 1929. Blakeney Collection Add Mss 63087/128. British Library, London.

²⁵⁹ Dorothy L. Sayers, "The Present Status of the Mystery Story" *London Mercury*, 23 November 1930.

²⁶⁰ Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Craft of Detection* MS 48,13. Wade Center, Illinois.

unemotional, and predominantly logical person.²⁶¹ This lack of emotionalism is evidenced in her private thoughts once written in a personal notebook:

I have made a muck of all my emotional relationships and I hate being beaten so I pretend not to care... It isn't that I've failed and pretend not to care. I don't care; and that is why I have failed.²⁶²

On her own religious sensibility Sayers wrote in a letter to John Wren-Lewis: "But since I cannot come at God through intuition, or my emotions, or through my "inner light"... there is only the intellect left."²⁶³ It seems that here in this context of the essay, "The Craft of Detective Fiction", Sayers was using the word "feeling" to mean a deep comprehension of the significance of life grounded in her Christian philosophy which transcends a person's material value or the thrill of solving a logical puzzle. Accordingly, Sayers' intention was clear, the detective novels were not empty entertainment, they were a considered element of her canon - she was trying to produce work of genuine significance.

However, Sayers expressed some disquietude that the wider genre of detective fiction amongst her contemporaries was tending towards writers producing formulaic puzzles rather than genuinely literary novels. In "The Craft of Detection" she referred to wanting to "pass over from the 'jigsaw' or 'puppet-play' type of story to the story which is a story of character of manner with detective interest."²⁶⁴ In an essay written in 1937 entitled "Gaudy Night" Sayers wrote of her own desire to write detective fiction that could be described as "novels of manners." By this she meant literature of vision, creativity and depth. She worried that

²⁶¹ Later in life Dorothy L. Sayers reflected on her own temperament in a letter to John Wren-Lewis, Good Friday, March 1954: "the lack of religious emotion in me makes me impatient of it in other people, and makes me appear cold an unsympathetic and impersonal. This is true. I am." Barbara Reynolds (ed.) *The Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers Volume Four 1951-1957: In the Midst of Life* (Cambridge: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society: Carole Green Publishing, 2000), p.137.

²⁶² Cited in James Brabazon, *Dorothy L. Sayers: A Biography* (New York, NY: Avon Books 1981), p.106.

²⁶³ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to John Wren-Lewis, Good Friday, March 1954, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Four*, p.137.

²⁶⁴ Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Craft of Detection* MS 48,12.

the detective genre needed to “get back to where it began in the hands of Collins and Le Fanu, and become once more a novel of manners instead of a pure crossword puzzle.”²⁶⁵ Sayers went on to write in her essay, “Problem Picture”, published in *Mind of the Maker* in 1943, of her concern that detective fiction was becoming “a way of escape from the problems of existence”, saying of her readers it “takes their minds off their troubles.”²⁶⁶ She wanted to resist the sense in which reading a detective novel would lull a reader into the false sense of security offered by the solving of the puzzle in the novel – as if the actual moral problem had been solved. In this sense, a crude pattern of problem and solution was to be avoided. She cautioned:

no part of the “problem” has been solved except the part which was presented in problematic terms... The murderer’s motive has been detected, but nothing at all has been said about the healing of his murderous soul.²⁶⁷

This provides an intriguing insight into the moral purpose of the author in writing her fiction. There is no sense in which Sayers’ detective writing was solely fun and frippery that enabled the bills to be paid. The detective fiction is a serious part of the body of her work, reflecting her life-long interest in the quest for truth as well as the values and themes she was committed to communicating throughout her career: “When in a light-hearted manner I set out fifteen years ago, to write the first “Lord Peter” book, it was with the avowed intention of producing something “less like a conventional detective story and more like a novel.””²⁶⁸ Even at the outset of her writing career as a young inexperienced writer, Sayers was trying to produce a piece of art – something meaningful, creative and substantial – ‘a novel’ as she described it.

²⁶⁵ Dorothy L. Sayers, “Gaudy Night” in Denys Kilham Roberts, (ed.), *Titles to Fame* (London: Nelson and Sons Ltd, 1937), p. xvii and p.76.

²⁶⁶ Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (London: Continuum, 2005), p.154.

²⁶⁷ *ibid* p. 153.

²⁶⁸ Sayers, “Gaudy Night”, p.75.

Truth, Story, Pattern

Reflecting back, later in life, Sayers began her essay, “Problem Picture,” with a broader observation:

We have begun to suspect that the purely analytical approach to phenomena is only leading us further and further in the abyss of disintegration and randomness, and that it is becoming urgently necessary to construct a synthesis of life.²⁶⁹

Sayers wrote this in 1943, long after she had finished writing detective fiction, but this discerning reflection – the desire to construct a ‘synthesis of life’, or a pattern within which the mysteries of life can be understood – was an emerging intuition underlying her detective fiction. She became cognisant that truth requires synthesis and, whilst seeking to avoid a crude problem/solution approach, nevertheless, the pieces of evidence needed to come together coherently in the story with a clear pattern. This was something Sayers went on to work out with greater sophistication in her directly theological writings and in her plays. Nonetheless, Sayers’ theories about detective fiction worked out in her novels lend themselves to the broader theme discussed here in this thesis; that the immediacy and specificity of story, character and plot require that there be a coherent framework or pattern so that the reader can encounter truth.

The quest for ‘truth’ which took disparate, detached ideas and concepts and saw them making sense as they came together in a ‘pattern’ (which for Sayers was most significantly comprised of the Christian revelation) underpinned all of her writing and is expressed in her article, “Making Sense of the Universe”:

²⁶⁹ Sayers, *Mind*, p.146.

I do not think we can afford to live any longer in a universe which makes no sense. It is hardly an over-statement to say that to ninety-nine people out of a hundred to-day, the world, and man's life, and man's place in the world have come to appear completely irrational. Detached bits of it they understand – they know how an internal combustion engine works, they have learnt how food is transformed into energy, or how the Solar System developed out of a nebular gas – they understand the mechanics of the material world; but they do not understand what it is all for, or where it is going or what they are doing in it... We cannot go on like this... Somehow we have got to rescue the human mind from the chaos of stark bewilderment. Now the Christian revelation does do that. It does make sense of the universe.²⁷⁰

It is the 'Christian revelation' that is the ultimate story within which the pieces of things human beings experience and observe come together in a meaningful whole, a coherent pattern. Sayers believed that reason required an intelligible, rational foundation and for her this was located in God and promulgated in the Christian revelation. Sayers presupposed that the Christian story was a divine revelation, which provided a solid foundation for knowledge and logic, and that without such a foundation reason would collapse. Sayers' detective fiction infers this philosophy by employing an overarching framework, a pattern, within which the detective reasons, using deductive logic, through fragments of evidence and discovers the truth – which in the case of detective novels, is the story of what actually happened.

However, in her essay, "Problem Picture", Sayers warns of the limitations of detective fiction in particular as a means of apprehending truth in art, since detective fiction has a tendency to present the discovery of truth within a pattern as akin to the solution of a mathematical problem. Referring to the words "problem" and "solution", Sayers cautions that applied "indiscriminately, they are fast becoming a deadly danger."²⁷¹ She goes on to argue that there are four ways in which a detective problem is different from a "life problem" and thus four ways in which readers should take care not to project the simplistic plot pattern or a novel

²⁷⁰ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Making Sense of the Universe* (London: St Anne's Church House, no date). MS 1.43. Wade Center, Illinois.

²⁷¹ "Problem Picture" p. 157.

upon real life. Firstly, she argues that “the detective problem is always soluble,”²⁷² pointing out that it has been constructed for the immediate purpose of being solved. This is in direct juxtaposition with the deeper questions of human existence, experience and life. The second point Sayers makes is that the detective problem is “completely soluble,”²⁷³ whereas in real life there are many examples of inconclusive problems to which there is no single solution. Thirdly, Sayers asserts that “the detective problem is solved in the same terms in which it is set,”²⁷⁴ as opposed to the work of the creative imagination which may well alter the terms of a particular discussion if the problem is to be solved at all. Finally, Sayers points out that “the detective problem is finite; when it is solved, there is an end of it... Now the artist does not behave like this.” What the artist creates is “a picture in itself, but it only leads from the picture behind it to the picture in front of it as part of a connected process...”²⁷⁵ In “Problem Picture” Sayers is challenging any sense in which pattern in detective fiction is a plodding, lifeless, finite, predetermined structure, since that would surely inhibit apprehension of poetic truth. There is a tension between this corrective of “Problem Picture” and the early iterations of pattern in Sayers’ early fiction, and so it is possible to see that whilst a concept of pattern together with story underpins Sayers’ early writing, her thinking evolved and deepened throughout the course of her writing career.

Inspired in part by Aristotle, Sayers’ early insight into pattern foreshadowed the clearer theological insights regarding pattern that were to come in Sayers’ later work and in particular her writing on the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. As noted in the previous chapters (but it bears repeating) John Thurmer commented, that in Sayers’ thinking:

the threefold structure of the detective story expands into a universal creative pattern, which, in the case of the Gospel, and on Sayers’ premise of Christian orthodoxy, can

²⁷² *ibid.* p.157

²⁷³ *ibid.* p.159.

²⁷⁴ *ibid.* p.163.

²⁷⁵ *ibid.* p.166.

be no less than that most august of mysteries, the Holy and Undivided Trinity.²⁷⁶

Whilst Thurmer's assessment that Sayers came to develop her Trinitarian theology in part as a response to reflecting on Aristotle and her own theories about detective fiction, is most probably right, this falls short of providing any explanation as to a unifying or overarching paradigm for Sayers' work.²⁷⁷ Sayers' Trinitarian analogy of the process of producing work is important but it is itself part of her wider interest in the potential of a pattern to explain the way things are. In her Trinitarian writing Sayers focused primarily on the analogy of the creative task as she considered how this reflected the being and nature of God. The process of making the work undergirds this truth paradigm, reflecting the nature of the God who is the ultimate creator, but it is the pattern of Christian revelation itself and the story of God's interactions with humanity within that which appear to have been Sayers' unifying interest. Her work on the Trinity was an outworking of this profound lifelong interest in truth, story and pattern.

A Broader Context of Contemporaneous Detective Fiction

Dorothy L. Sayers wrote her Wimsey novels within a wider context of the proliferation of the mystery novel. Wilkie Collins 1824-1889 is widely regarded as the grandfather of the detective story in Britain – indeed Dorothy L. Sayers admired *The Moonstone*²⁷⁸ in particular and had begun work on a biography of Collins that she never finished. The arrival of Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes on the scene in *A Study in Scarlet* in 1887 began a national obsession with detective fiction in Britain. However, it was the interwar period that became known as the

²⁷⁶ John Thurmer, *Eureka – The Genesis of an Analogy* (London: Sage Publications on behalf of SPCK, 2000), p.198.

²⁷⁷ Enabling Barbara Reynolds to describe it as 'all of a piece.'

²⁷⁸ Sayers wrote in a letter to Professor Tovey, 22 November 1935: "I do absolutely agree with you about the magnificent achievement of *The Moonstone*. I have often thought that Rachel Verinder was one of the most remarkable characters in fiction – a virtuous young Victorian gentlewoman, who is yet high-spirited and interesting. The thing is so well done that people simply don't notice what a remarkable *tour de force* it is. Except really remarkable people, like you and me!" In Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume One* p.361-2.

‘Golden Age’ of the detective novel with Howard Haycroft noting in 1942 that “one out of every four new works of fiction published in the English language belongs to this category.”²⁷⁹

Whilst Dorothy L. Sayers was an author writing detective fiction herself, she was concurrently a reviewer for *The Sunday Times* for two years between 1933-1935 and thus a critic as well as a writer of this extraordinarily popular form of literature:

Dearest Ivy, I have been tremendously hard at work this last week, or I'd have written sooner. I've taken on some reviewing work in addition to my other jobs, which has meant reading two novels a day or thereabouts – rather strenuous.²⁸⁰

The reviewing job turned out to be quite an undertaking, demanding a good deal of time and energy, but it increased her public profile and didn't prevent her from continuing to write and publish her own novels:

Beginning in June 1933 and finishing abruptly in August 1935, Dorothy Sayers reviewed 364 crime fiction books by 233 authors²⁸¹ for *The Sunday Times* - an average of three a week, and approximately 25% of the total output of crime fiction in those years of 'The Golden Age' of crime writing. In order to review three or four titles for a weekly deadline, it is said she actually read two novels a day, an impressive, almost incomprehensible feat. Given that this period also saw her lecturing, promoting *Murder Must Advertise*, acclaimed by *The Daily Express* as "having eclipsed Edgar Wallace and Conan Doyle as the master writer of detective fiction", editing short story collections, publishing *The Nine Tailors* and writing *Gaudy Night*, one wonders just how many hours there were in a DLS day.²⁸²

Accordingly, Sayers was part of a wider phenomenon - the scale of mystery story publication in general during this period was overwhelming in Britain. As she herself commented:

²⁷⁹ Howard Haycroft, *Murder for Pleasure: The Life and Times of the Detective Story* (London: Peter Davies Ltd., 1942), p.vi.

²⁸⁰ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to Ivy Shrimpton, 21 June 1933, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume One* p.334.

²⁸¹ See Ralph E. Hone “Dorothy L. Sayers: Critic of Detective Fiction” SEVEN: An Anglo-American Literary Review Volume 6 1985 (Marion E. Wade Center of Wheaton College), p.45.

²⁸² Mike Ripley, *Dorothy L Sayers as Crime Critic 1933-1935* Lecture July 1999 at the Dorothy L. Sayers Convention at Newnham College, Cambridge cited in Crime Time Magazine <http://www.crimetime.co.uk/features/dorothysayers.php>, visited 18 February 2015.

... it is impossible to keep track of all the detective-stories produced to-day. Book upon book, magazine upon magazine pour out from the Press, crammed with murders, thefts, arsons, frauds, conspiracies, problems, puzzles, mysteries, thrills, maniacs, crooks, poisoners, forgers, garroters, police, spies, secret-service men, detectives, until it seems that half the world must be engaged in setting riddles for the other half to solve.²⁸³

In both roles of critic and author Sayers was highly regarded as being extremely knowledgeable about the subject. Colin Watson writes: “Dorothy L. Sayers was, in the opinion of many earnest examiners of the detective story, the most accomplished practitioner in the field.”²⁸⁴

The 1930s was a time when detective novels were extremely popular but not highly regarded as a medium for exploring serious ideas:

The detective story of that period enjoyed a pretty poor reputation, and was not expected to contain anything that could be mistaken for “serious reading.” G. K. Chesterton had, indeed, succeeded in making it the vehicle of a reasoned philosophy; but then, he was an acknowledged genius, renowned for fantastical paradox, and a philosophical detective story was just one paradox more to his credit.²⁸⁵

In writing detective fiction with the intention of creating art or a “novel of manners”, Sayers was not completely alone; Chesterton had forged a pathway but she was unusual and it is perhaps noteworthy that from the so-called ‘Golden Age of Detective Fiction’ it is only Sayers’, Chesterton’s and Agatha Christie’s novels that remain in print in the twenty-first century.

²⁸³ Dorothy L. Sayers, (ed.), *Great Short Stories of Detection, Mystery and Horror: Part I – Detection and Mystery* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1954), p.31.

²⁸⁴ Colin Watson, *Snobbery with Violence: Crime Stories and their Audiences* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p.48.

²⁸⁵ Dorothy L. Sayers “Gaudy Night” in Denys Kilham Roberts (ed.), *Titles to Fame* (London: Nelson and Sons Ltd, 1937), p.76. By contrast, Chesterton is described from an opposing perspective by one commentator who observed that between 1890-1914 “radical political and other ideas forced their way into literature” and writers such as G. K. Chesterton “came to detective fiction with ideas to explore and axes to grind...” in Martin Priestman, *Detective Fiction and Literature: The Figure on the Carpet* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1990), p.105.

Even though Sayers' detective fiction was largely written in the 1920s and early 1930s, well before she started writing theology in earnest, the theme at hand in this research of the interplay of story and the search for pattern in the quest for truth, were already emerging for her. In exploring the field of Sayers' detective fiction, two of her novels will be examined in greater detail than the others so as to observe the early foundations of the literary Christian apologist at work and her interest in truth through story and pattern before she turned her hand to explicitly theological themes.

Sayers' Detective Fiction

Dorothy L. Sayers' first detective novel *Whose Body?* was published in 1923.²⁸⁶ She later wrote that although she had set out: "with the avowed intention of producing something 'less like a conventional detective story and more like a novel'", what had actually been produced was "conventional to the last degree, and no more like a novel than I to Hercules."²⁸⁷ *Whose Body?* revolved around the detective Peter Wimsey's deductive logical reasoning. Even at this first foray into writing Sayers formulated a mystery, which was only concluded when seemingly disparate threads of information were brought together by the detective into a meaningful narrative pattern. The data could only make sense when somebody pieced the story together. Sayers' next novels *Clouds of Witnesses*²⁸⁸ and *Unnatural Death*²⁸⁹ both follow this general pattern, depending heavily on the pursuit of truth located in the deductive reasoning power of Wimsey and coming to a clear finale with the detective putting the disparate pieces of evidence together as a 'pattern' and into a 'story' that makes sense of it all.

²⁸⁶ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Whose Body?* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1923).

²⁸⁷ Sayers, "Gaudy Night", p.75.

²⁸⁸ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Clouds of Witnesses* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1926).

²⁸⁹ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Unnatural Death* (London: Benn, 1927).

*The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*²⁹⁰ was to contain a deeper intellectual and spiritual challenge to her readers. It was the story of the murder of General Fentiman who is discovered dead at his club. But the novel does not only seek to unravel what happened on the basis of evidence, it also raises questions about belief in God. The beliefs of the committed Christians, Parker and Father Wittington, are laid out in juxtaposition to those of the humanist, Wimsey:

“You’re Lord Peter Wimsey, I know. We’ve got an interest in crime in common, haven’t we?...”

“Glad to see there’s no antagonism between religion and science,” said Wimsey

“Of course not. Why should there be? We are all searching for Truth.”²⁹¹

Strong Poison,²⁹² in which the falsely accused Harriet Vane is rescued from the hangman’s gallows by the detective genius of Peter Wimsey, is followed by *Five Red Herrings*,²⁹³ a complicated puzzle of a mystery reliant on train timetables and maps of the Scottish countryside. When writing *Five Red Herrings*, Sayers continued to explore the interplay of truth and the creative process. On 22 January 1931, she wrote to her publisher, Victor Gollancz:

I am glad you like the book. I quite appreciate the point you make about the decline of the ‘pure puzzle’ story... I wanted to try my hand at just one of that kind. I am always afraid of getting into a rut, and like each book to have a slightly different idea behind it.²⁹⁴

Five Red Herrings was by far the most formulaic novel Sayers wrote – in it the reader is led around in circles of frustration whilst following where the evidence leads. The mystery is resolved only when the true pattern emerges, and all begins to make sense. We are given an insight into how dissatisfying an incomplete story can be. As the reader follows trails of evidence that ultimately lead nowhere, it becomes increasingly disconcerting to process clues

²⁹⁰ Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1928).

²⁹¹ *ibid.* p.73.

²⁹² Dorothy L. Sayers, *Strong Poison* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1930).

²⁹³ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Five Red Herrings* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1931).

²⁹⁴ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to Victor Gollancz, 22 January 1931, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume One*, p.312.

without an explanatory revelation. Sayers later reflected on this phenomenon in her essay, “Aristotle on Detective Fiction”:

Aristotle... puts the whole craft of the detective writer into one master-word: *Paralogismos*... paralogism – the art of the false syllogism – for which Aristotle himself has a blunter and more candid phrase... *the art of framing lies in the right way*...²⁹⁵

Multiple potential explanations for the events unfolding in the plot must be subtly offered to the reader. In fact, the task of a successful writer of detective fiction was to achieve precisely this end of “framing lies” well, thereby producing a certain effect upon the readers. Sayers concluded:

There you are, then; there is your recipe for detective fiction: the art of framing lies. From beginning to end of your book, it is your whole aim and object to lead the reader up the garden; to induce him to believe a lie... to believe, in short, anything and everything but the truth.²⁹⁶

Next came *Have his Carcase*,²⁹⁷ which was noteworthy because Sayers systematically described the evidence from the different perspectives of the different characters involved. The final two chapters are entitled “Evidence of What Should Have Happened” and “Evidence of What Did Happen.” The detective is required to unravel the implausible story and to make an attempt at connecting the evidence together to get to the truth. Something quite profound happened in this novel. Sayers was letting her readers know that within a story itself evidence requires interpretation – it needs a pattern that makes sense of all the pieces so that the characters and the readers can discover the truth. Again in this context we are reminded of Aristotelian *paralogismos* as all stories are not equal. There are imposter narratives, stories that attempt to explain the evidence but are ultimately unable to persuade or convince the detective

²⁹⁵ Sayers, *Unpopular Opinions*, pp.230-1.

²⁹⁶ *ibid.* p.231.

²⁹⁷ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Have his Carcase* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1932).

or the reader since they are not true and cannot lead us to the truth.

According to Sayers, her next novel, *Murder must Advertise*,²⁹⁸ was her first real attempt at writing a “novel of manners.” She set the novel in a world that she knew well – that of the advertising agency, drawing on her experience working at Bensons in the 1920s. She thus created believable characters and an evocative context: “for the first time, the criticism of life was not relegated to incidental observations and character sketches, but was actually part of the plot.”²⁹⁹ In this novel Sayers began to achieve a healthy balance between the overarching pattern and the details of the story. Sandra Percy writes: “What was important to Sayers was the alignment of plot, theme, character, and setting – the search for *wholeness* that pervades the entire canon of her works.”³⁰⁰ When reflecting back on this phase of her writing career, Sayers detected a maturing process in her detective novels: “Taking it all in all, I think it is true that each successive book of mine worked gradually nearer to the sort of thing I had in view.”³⁰¹ Ultimately the pursuit of truth ran throughout all of Sayers’ writing and not least the detective fiction. Bruce Merry points out that there was an:

extraordinary search for truth in both Wimsey’s detection and Dorothy Sayers’ writing. He believes in truth as absolute. She struggles to create right balances and to show vanity, weakness and cleverness just as they are, coexisting in the same person or within a tradition. Truth is everywhere in Sayers’ books, an ideal and a target, far removed from the public prosecutor’s indisputable facts before a jury.³⁰²

In examining her next two novels in greater depth, we see that Sayers detective fiction was a crucial context for the development of those themes that were of lifelong importance to her:

²⁹⁸ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Murder Must Advertise* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1933).

²⁹⁹ Sayers, “Gaudy Night,” p.77.

³⁰⁰ Sandra Percy, *Dorothy L. Sayers: More than a Crime Fiction Writer* (North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace Books, 2010), p.185.

³⁰¹ Sayers, “Gaudy Night,” p.77.

³⁰² Bruce Merry, ‘Dorothy L. Sayers: Mystery and Demystification,’ in Bernard Benstock (ed.), *Essays on Detective Fiction* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1983), p.26.

the quest for truth, and the importance of story and pattern in discovering it.

The Nine Tailors

The Nine Tailors is set in the Fens where Dorothy L. Sayers had spent most of her childhood. As with *Gaudy Night* and *Murder Must Advertise* her evocative skills as a writer are put to greatest use when she set her stories in places she knew intimately. In *The Nine Tailors* the landscape and churches of the Fens are brought to life. As P. D. James puts it; “this was countryside she knew and described with loving fidelity... and dominating the desolate landscape of the fens as it does the novel, there is the great church.”³⁰³ Sayers also indulged her interest in campanology as the church bells played a crucial role in the story, signifying layers of meaning in the book and indicating important moments in the drama. At first the plot appears to be rather slow-moving: the first real indication that this is to be a detective mystery comes sixty-eight pages into the story.

Peter Wimsey and his manservant Bunter have had car difficulties in a tiny village in the Fens and arrive at the Rector’s house on New Year’s Eve. Wimsey is persuaded to help the parish bell-ringers ring in the New Year from midnight until the next morning. The bells are almost characters in and of themselves; in the story they are known as Gaude, Sabaoth, John, Jericho, Jubilee, Dimity, Batty Thomas and Tailor Paul. Tailor Paul was the bell always rung whenever somebody had died, notifying the village of the occurrence. The local squire, Sir Henry, had been brought close to ruin when an aged relative had visited and had her uninsured emerald necklace stolen from his house. Sir Henry had undertaken to pay her back for the rest of his life. His wife had subsequently died and when he died a few months later the grave was opened

³⁰³ P. D. James, ‘Dorothy L. Sayers: Her Novels Today’ SEVEN An Anglo American Literary Review Sayers Centenary Issue Volume 10, 1993, p.22.

for his burial and another body was found above his wife's coffin. Peter Wimsey sets about solving the mystery both of the stolen emeralds and the identity and cause of death of the stranger in the grave. The setting and elements of the story are wild and ominous. Merryn Williams commented:

The idea that certain elemental forces will punish the evil-doer is developed further in *The Nine Tailors*... Sayers was too intelligent to claim that human beings in a fallen world could expect more than rough justice.³⁰⁴

In the novel Sayers explores the idea of God's sovereignty. She was seeking to undo the myth that detective fiction frequently fosters, namely, the illusion that "all human experience may be presented in terms of a problem having a predictable final, complete and sole possible solution."³⁰⁵

In *The Nine Tailors*, Sayers was trying to explore the concept of truth by bringing together plot, setting, characters and theme more fully than she had previously managed to. Sayers herself noted that:

The Nine Tailors was a shot at combining detection with poetic romance, and was, I think, pretty nearly right, except that Peter himself remained, as it were, extraneous to the story and untouched by its spiritual conflicts. This was correct practice for a detective hero, but not for the hero of a novel of manners.³⁰⁶

The idea of 'poetic romance' was for Sayers, a medieval literary allusion. Evoking the quests of heroic knights, she sought to parallel the detective story with the medieval romance. In this paradigm the detective mirrors the knight: "In place of the adventurer and the knight errant... the detective steps into his right place as the protector of the weak – the latest of the popular

³⁰⁴ Merryn Williams, *Six Women Novelists* (London: Macmillan, 1987), p.90.

³⁰⁵ Sayers, *Mind*, p.293.

³⁰⁶ Sayers, "Gaudy Night," p.77.

heroes the true successor of Roland and Lancelot.”³⁰⁷ Sayers reimagines the literary icon that is the chivalrous knight of the poetic romance as the logically deductive detective of her novel. “The allusions undergird the style, at crucial points giving us to know that the story goes deeper than its surface bustle.”³⁰⁸ Peter is a knight on a quest to discover the true identity of the victim in the grave and to find the stolen emeralds and restore them to their rightful owner. In order to achieve the author’s ends, Wimsey needed to become a more rounded character, a process Sayers described as “delicate and dangerous.” She realised whilst writing *The Nine Tailors* that she would need to “perform a major operation on him.” She elaborated:

If the story was to go on, Peter had got to become a complete human being, with a past and a future, with a consistent family and social history, with a complicated psychology and even the rudiments of a religious outlook... The prognosis seemed fairly favourable; so I laid him out firmly on the operating-table and chipped away at his internal mechanism through three longish books. At the end of the process he was five years older than he was in *Strong Poison*, and twelve years older than he was when he started.³⁰⁹

In *The Nine Tailors* Sayers continued to explore the ideas of evidence leading us to the truth and the ensuing moral consequences. At one point, Peter Wimsey discusses the dilemma of a moral conflict with the Rector of the parish:

“My sympathies are all in the wrong place and I don’t like it. I know all about not doing evil that good may come. It’s doin’ good that evil may come that is so embarrassin’.” ‘My dear boy’ said the Rector, ‘it does not do for us to take too much thought for the morrow. It is better to follow the truth and leave the result in the hand of God. He can foresee where we cannot, because He knows all the facts.’ “To which Wimsey responds ““And never has to argue ahead of His data, as Sherlock Holmes would say?”³¹⁰

³⁰⁷Dorothy L. Sayers (ed.), *Great Short Stories of Detection, Mystery and Horror: Part I – Detection and Mystery* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1954), p.76.

³⁰⁸ Lionel Basney, “*The Nine Tailors* and the Complexity of Innocence.” In Margaret Hannay (ed.), *As Her Whimsey Took Her: Critical Essays on the Work of Dorothy L. Sayers* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1979), p.30.

³⁰⁹ Sayers, “Gaudy Night,” pp.79-80.

³¹⁰ Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Nine Tailors* (London: The Folio Society, 1998), p.233.

Evidence coming together within the context of a pattern that is ultimately “in the hand of God” emerged as a notable concern for Sayers in the book. Towards the end of the novel the truth is still unclear. Clues and leads have been uncovered but the true end of the story is yet to come together. The wider narrative context had not reached its final resolution, as the Superintendent comments: “we don’t seem very much forrarder – there’s something behind it yet that we don’t understand.”³¹¹ The pieces need to cohere as a whole in the right pattern.

The religious implications of this conviction about truth in Sayers’ own mind occasionally come through in the novel. It does not appear to be an accident that Peter is “inspired” to an important discovery twice in the Rector’s sermons. At the end of the novel there is a flood. The village men have worked to buttress the sluice gates and the Rector is rather like a biblical Noah preparing for the flood, ordering the supplies and making provision for his parishioners and their livestock. The flood lasts for 14 days (rather than the 40 of the biblical flood) and it is after the funeral for those who perish that Peter puts all the pieces together for the Rector and the Superintendent saying “we needn’t look for a murderer now...because the murderers... are hanged already, and a good deal higher than Haman.”³¹² He means the bells. From the Rector there is a theological understanding of what has happened; the bells have caused the death of the man but he sees a deeper spiritual dimension to the outcome and comments:

the bells are said to be jealous of the presence of evil. Perhaps God speaks through those mouths of inarticulate metal. He is a righteous judge, strong, and patient, and is provoked every day.³¹³

However, it is the Superintendent who sums up Sayers’ approach of bringing the disparate pieces of evidence together into the right pattern - the story is only complete when things

³¹¹ Sayers, *The Nine Tailors*, p.276.

³¹² *ibid.* p.302. The reference to Haman invokes the biblical story of Queen Esther when Haman the opponent to the Jews is hung on the gallows he had built to kill his Jewish adversaries on.

³¹³ *ibid.* p.303.

become clear and the reader grasps the truth of what has happened. Referring to the denouement when Wimsey has brought together the wide range of events and factors and explained what had happened, he says to him: “yours seems the best solution, and I’ll put it up to the Chief Constable.”³¹⁴ The detective provides a solution with explanatory power, taking into consideration the evidence and clues along the way.

The Nine Tailors was important to Sayers and it signaled her deepening interest in theological communication and the creative exploration of literary form and ideas of ‘truth’. The bell-ringing itself has a patterning effect in the novel as Sayers includes insights into the complex tapestry of the ‘changes’ of different Methods of campanology at the start of each part of the novel. The permutations (repetitions, variations, extensions, contractions) of each Method finally resolve into ‘rounds’ providing a creative correlative of the criminal plot that Wimsey is exploring and solving. Sayers deploys form to emphasise pattern in this novel. Some contemporaries appreciated what she was trying to do, as we see from her correspondence. Charles Williams had written to Gollancz upon being sent a copy of *The Nine Tailors* in January 1934:

Your Dorothy Sayers...! Present her some time with my profoundest compliments. It’s a marvelous book; it is high imagination – and the incomprehensible splendours of the preludes to each part make a pattern round and through it like the visible laws and the silver waters themselves... the end is unsurpassable...³¹⁵

With *The Nine Tailors*, Sayers was on the road to creating the kind of art she aspired to make. Her breathless reaction to Williams’ praise reveals a certain self-doubt: “Dear Mr. Gollancz, Thankyou so much for your letter with Mr. Williams’ lyrical appreciation of *The Nine Tailors*.”

³¹⁴ *ibid.* p.303.

³¹⁵ Cited by Barbara Reynolds, *Letters Volume One*, p.340. (Emphasis mine.)

I only hope he isn't pulling my leg – it sounds too good to be true!"³¹⁶

Gaudy Night

Gaudy Night is an unusual detective novel as it is a mystery without a murder. Sayers herself chose this as the book out of all of her novels on which she would write her contribution to *Titles to Fame*. Roberts, who was the editor of this collection of essays, pointed out: "The contributors, almost without exception, have written about the book they always wanted to write, the book that they had in mind from the beginning of their careers."³¹⁷ *Gaudy Night* is set in Shrewsbury College, a fictional Oxford College for women, not unlike Somerville where Sayers herself had studied. The novel explores the relationships between the women scholars of the senior common room and the disruption of the community by a number of obscene disturbances, which escalate towards an attempted murder. The plot turns on the fact that a young scholar Miss De Vine had in the past written an essay exposing a small act of scholarly deception on the part of a male academic, who had suppressed a source which countered his thesis. The consequence of his exposure had been the termination of his academic career with the devastating repercussions of his subsequent suicide being felt by his wife and children. His widow takes a job as a scout at Shrewsbury College and is eventually unmasked as the perpetrator by Lord Peter Wimsey.

Sayers commented extensively on her purpose in writing this particular novel – it was the fruit of her desire to write a 'novel of manners,' by which she meant a serious creative work of art with a moral purpose. For *Gaudy Night* she struck on her deeply held ideals of academic

³¹⁶ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to Victor Gollancz, 31 December 1933, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume One*, p.339.

³¹⁷ Denys Kilham Roberts (ed.), *Titles to Fame* (London: Nelson and Sons Ltd, 1937), p.xvii.

integrity and the pursuit of truth.

I was playing with the idea of a “straight” novel, about an Oxford woman graduate who found... that her real vocation and full emotional fulfillment were to be found in the creative life of the intellect. While investigating the possibilities of this subject I was asked to go to Oxford and propose the toast of the University at my College Gaudy dinner. I had to ask myself what it was for which one had to thank a university education, and came to the conclusion that it was, before everything, that habit of intellectual integrity, which is at once the foundation and the result of scholarship.³¹⁸

Although Sayers’ detective fiction thus far had explored notions of the discovery of truth by means of assembling the evidence within a correct pattern, *Gaudy Night* exhibited continuity with this, whilst at the same, time breaking into a different dimension of truth. Merry notes that: “*Gaudy* falls in exactly the right groove to prosecute this idealistic quest for truth and to admire it.”³¹⁹ *Gaudy Night* sharpened for Sayers the communication of her lifelong pursuit of truth through personal intellectual integrity. She later reflected:

By choosing a plot that should exhibit intellectual integrity as the one great permanent value in an emotionally unstable world I should be saying the thing that, in a confused way, I have been wanting to say all my life.³²⁰

Gaudy Night was a huge commercial success, which in retrospect Sayers attributed to the personal stake she seemed to have as an author in the themes explored in the novel. She wrote: “I do think it sold because it was a sincere book upon a subject about which I really had something to say.”³²¹ Sayers was also writing about a context she knew intimately, the city of Oxford. Her invoking of Oxford was more than a geographical reference to the place she knew well, the city where she was born, had gone to university and where she had firsthand experience of becoming a published author. To Sayers, Oxford was indicative of a sublime

³¹⁸ Sayers, “Gaudy Night”, p.82.

³¹⁹ Merry, *Mystery*, p.26.

³²⁰ Sayers, “Gaudy Night”, p.82.

³²¹ *ibid.* p.90.

ideal – scholarship:

‘scholarship’ ... is the kind of word of which agitators are ashamed or afraid, because it brings time to the bar of eternity. Oxford, however strange or repugnant it may appear, was after all founded for scholars, and it is by her scholarship that she must survive if she survives at all... ‘What is the use’, the *Howl* may ask indignantly, ‘when civilization is rocking upon its foundations, of giving us the doctrine of the enclitic *De?*’ Not very much in itself, maybe; but it is surely of great use to acquire the scholarly judgement that can settle any doctrine upon the evidence without haste, without passion, and without self-interest. The integrity of mind that money cannot buy; the humility in face of the facts that self-esteem cannot corrupt: these are the fruits of scholarship, without which all statement is propaganda and all argument special pleading.³²²

This was a high standard to aim for indeed. In *Gaudy Night* Sayers was juxtaposing this ideal of Oxford scholarship with the painful reality of life, where people have loved and lost, where ideas have consequences at a more personal level. In a conversation with Miss de Vine, Harriet Vane explores the ideal of intellectual integrity in the real world. Miss de Vine begins:

“One cannot be pitiful where one’s own job is concerned. You’d lie cheerfully, I expect, about anything except – what?”
“Oh anything!” said Harriet laughing. “Except saying that somebody’s book is good when it isn’t. I can’t do that. It makes me a lot of enemies, but I can’t do it.”³²³

In Sayers’ mind Oxford represented pure, academic scholarship uninhibited by popular opinion, disinterested in money, clear of the propaganda tricks of the advertising agency and without regard for the personal or emotional repercussions of ideas. This is truth in some kind of vacuum. Truth untainted by the corruptions of real life. For the Christian there is a reference here to a prelapsarian situation. Sayers was challenging her readers to consider the highest of ideals of truth in the midst of the real world of pain, tragedy, inconvenience and selfishness. With a hint of nostalgia, Harriet Vane who is frequently a mouthpiece for Sayers’ own perspective, comments to one of the academics within the novel:

If only one could come back to this quiet place, where only intellectual achievement counted; if one could work here steadily and obscurely at some close-knit piece of

³²² Dorothy L. Sayers, “What is Right with Oxford?” *Oxford 2:1* (1935): 36-7.

³²³ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Gaudy Night* (London: Folio Society, 1998), p.158.

reasoning, undistracted and uncorrupted by agents, contracts, publishers, blurb-writers, interviewers, fan-mail, autograph hunters, notoriety hunters and competitors; abolishing personal contacts, personal spites, personal jealousies; getting one's teeth into something dull and durable... the fact that one had loved and sinned and suffered and escaped death was of far less ultimate moment than a single footnote in a dime academic journal establishing the priority of a manuscript or restoring a lost iota subscript.³²⁴

Yet for Sayers, the highest possible value of truth untarnished by self-interest remained a real possibility in this imperfect world, since the Christian revelation could make it viable. The truth about God is accessible to those who pursue truth with integrity, because God entered human history in Christ. Furthermore, it was only if the incarnation of Christ was actually true that it could be in any way meaningful to humanity. The pursuit of truth was at the heart of Sayers' religion:

The central dogma of the Incarnation is that by which relevance stands or falls. If Christ was only man, then He is entirely irrelevant to any thought about God; if He is only God, then He is entirely irrelevant to any experience of human life.³²⁵

In *Gaudy Night*, Sayers aimed at relentlessly applying the principles of intellectual integrity to the wider pursuit of truth in real life. Sayers explained: "the plot and the theme being actually one thing, namely, that the same intellectual honesty that is essential to scholarship is essential also to the conduct of life."³²⁶ In *Gaudy Night*, Sayers was also beginning to explore the particular challenges faced by women in the pursuit of truth. Ann McClellan writes:

Sayers presents a contradictory representation of her characters. The women dons and students are supposed to represent an Edenic world where women achieve intellectual freedom and equality with men, but at the same time they are held up to the criticisms and expectations with which society generally condemns such women.³²⁷

³²⁴ *ibid* p.15.

³²⁵ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Creed or Chaos?* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1947), p.32.

³²⁶ Sayers, "Gaudy Night", p.87.

³²⁷ Ann McClellan, "Alma Mater: Women, the Academy, and Mothering in Dorothy L. Sayers' *Gaudy Night*," *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory*, 15:4, 321-346 (2004), p.330.

Sayers confronted these dilemmas directly within the novel, acknowledging the difficulties faced by intellectual women who found themselves torn between different cultural expectations and ideologies. Harriet's description of the portrait of the Countess of Shrewsbury, the founder of Shrewsbury college, alludes to this conflict as the woman depicted had a "queer, strong-featured face," and an "ill-tempered mouth and sidelong, secretive glance", perhaps drawing attention to the fact that:

Bess of Hardwick's daughter had been a great intellectual indeed, but something of a holy terror, uncontrollable by her menfolk... She seemed, in fact, to be the epitome of every alarming quality which a learned woman is popularly credited with developing.³²⁸

Sayers' portrayal of the difficulty women face in identifying and defeating gender stereotyping was underlined by Annie's condemnations of the Shrewsbury dons that "A woman's job is to look after her husband and children!"³²⁹ However, Janice Rossen concludes that the ending of *Gaudy Night* is a "regressive solution of female fantasy, where the heroine walks off the stage with the patriarch."³³⁰ Sayers herself argued that the theme of *Gaudy Night* was not the product of: "intellect starved by emotion, but of emotion uncontrolled by intellect."³³¹ In *Gaudy Night* she was not setting out to address feminist questions directly – that was to come later in essays such as "Are Women Human?" But she was exploring the broader questions of truth and intellectual integrity for human beings within a context that she knew well, a female Oxford College.

Sayers described *Gaudy Night* as "this rather peculiar book" and proceeded to explain that it

³²⁸ Sayers, *Gaudy*, p.53.

³²⁹ *ibid.* p.402.

³³⁰ Janice Rossen, "Oxford in Loco Parentis: The College as Mother in Dorothy L. Sayers' *Gaudy Night*" in David Bevan (ed.), *University Fiction* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1990), p.142.

³³¹ Dorothy L. Sayers, "Introduction to The Omnibus of Crime" in Howard Haycraft (ed.), *The Art of the Mystery Story* (New York, NY: Carroll and Graf, 1992), p.214.

was “the only book I’ve written which embodies any kind of ‘moral.’” Moreover, she revealed:

I do feel rather passionately about this business of the integrity of the mind – but I realise that to make a ‘detective story’ the vehicle for that kind of thing is (as Miss de Vine says of Peter – Harriet marriage) ‘reckless to the point of insanity’. But there it is – it’s the book I wanted to write and I’ve written it. I wouldn’t claim that it was in itself a work of great literary importance, it is important to me and I only hope it won’t be a ghastly flop.³³²

Sayers’ interest in exploring evidence and piecing the truth together in a coherent pattern persisted in *Gaudy Night*. Sayers’ heroine Harriet Vane considered the viability of the detective novel within the era:

The pre-War solemnity and the post-War exhaustion were both gone; the desire now was for an energetic doing of something definite, though the definitions differed. The detective story, no doubt, was acceptable because in it something definite was done, the ‘what’ being comfortably decided beforehand by the author.³³³

The author was able to explore ideas of her choosing within the medium of her choosing. Sayers seemed to be reflecting on the importance of the role of the author in setting the story within which evidence unfolds. *Gaudy Night* contains a warning to readers against the dangers of jumping to unwarranted conclusions. When for example, pieces of the broken chess pieces are visible on the heel of Miss Hillyard’s shoe, the evidence seems to point in one direction:

‘Give it to me,’ said Harriet and took slipper and all. She had expected an outburst of denial, but Miss Hillyard said faintly: ‘That’s evidence... incontrovertible...’ Harriet thanked Heaven, with grim amusement, for the scholarly habit; at least, one did not have to argue about what was or was not evidence.’...

‘You’ve no evidence that I did it,’ said Miss Hillyard, with sudden spirit. ‘Only that I was in the room. It was done when I got there... You can tell your love that I saw it and was glad to see it. But he’ll tell you that’s no proof that I did it.’³³⁴

In this conflict the author is indicating that readers need to take care not to jump to conclusions

³³² Dorothy L. Sayers letter to Victor Gollancz, 26 September 1935, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume One*, p.357.

³³³ Sayers, *Gaudy*, p.147.

³³⁴ *ibid.* p.370.

but rather, to follow the story and pursue the evidence through to the correct conclusion and discover the truth of what really happened. However, at times seeking the truth and sticking to principles causes pain to others. Wimsey speaks about this possibility with Miss de Vine, explaining that even Miss Lydgate “could not prevent other people from suffering for her principles. That seems to be what principles are for somehow,” Wimsey goes on to explain that he does not claim “to be a Christian or anything of that kind. But there’s one thing in the Bible that seems to be a mere statement of brutal fact – I mean, about not bringing peace but a sword.”³³⁵ Sayers brought her readers’ attention back to the bigger issues of ultimate truth with references such as this to the Christian revelation. Sayers was emphasising the fact that her exploration of truth and scholarly integrity in her literary work was itself to be seen in the context of a wider pattern - a framework that is also a kind of story, the Christian revelation itself.

Sayers’ intention was further underscored by her use of Christian imagery. Although Wimsey is not a believer in God himself, Christian imagery is nonetheless invoked around him, with a layer of subtlety to its deployment. Thus, when *Gaudy Night* reaches its denouement and Wimsey explains the mystery, the listeners are described as if they are participating in a religious rite: “The Common Room had the hushed air of a congregation settling down to a sermon.”³³⁶

As Wimsey unravels the evidence he reminds the characters and the readers that “suspicion is not proof”.³³⁷ The college Warden still has her doubts when the whole affair has been pieced together - she wonders whether there might still be an alternative story to explain things: “Your arguments, Lord Peter, appear to be most convincing, but the evidence may bear some other

³³⁵ *ibid.* p.406.

³³⁶ *ibid.* p.388.

³³⁷ *ibid.* p.396.

interpretation... appearances are against her, but there may be falsification or coincidences.”³³⁸ However, even the Warden is persuaded when just as Peter is about to give further evidence, the perpetrator arrives and defiantly confesses. There is no available alternative end to the story, the evidence has come together within the pattern and the truth has been discovered. Nevertheless, there is a crucial prerequisite for this being possible, namely the intellectual integrity of those pursuing truth. That is the achievement of *Gaudy Night* – to remind all seekers of truth of the vested interests and personal costs that prevent us from actually following the evidence and accepting the pattern that makes sense of all of the pieces.

Conclusion

Detective fiction was the art form within which Sayers first explored her ideas about truth through story and pattern. These themes continue to prove important to her throughout her writing career as she turned her hand to genres including playwriting, essays and theological prose. The contention of this thesis is that although Sayers changed genres as her career progressed, the underlying paradigm remained the same for her – her convictions about truth revealed in the imminence and specificity of the Christian story and the undergirding moral and intellectual pattern of Christian dogma grounded meaning. Some scholars suggest as critics did during her life that the changes of genre were substantive in and of themselves. Discussing Sayers’ move from detective fiction to writing religious plays Janice Brown comments:

Sayers wrote herself out of the genre because her themes and preoccupations became more serious than the form could allow, as her focus shifted away from shallow mysteries of crime to the profound mysteries of the human spirit. From this point in her writing career, her chief concern was not in developing the intricacies of plot, but

³³⁸ *ibid.* p.401.

in exploring the intricacies of the soul.³³⁹

The contention of this thesis is that in her detective fiction, Sayers set out to create art, to write novels that were reminiscent of the same truth that she was interested in exploring in her plays and in her directly theological writing. Sayers herself commented on her detective novels in 1954: “a few reviewers called them “pretentious,” or said that I was over-weighting the detective story with a lot of tedious didacticism.”³⁴⁰ She explored the intricacies of the soul in her novels and never stopped doing this in her short stories and the unfinished “Cat O’ Mary” or the unfinished *Thrones, Dominations*. There was no abrupt end to Sayers’ writing fiction as a part of her literary and apologetic output. Sayers herself saw no dramatic shift in focus in her work, indeed, in a footnote to her essay “Gaudy Night” Sayers commented:

even the kindest critics feel it incongruous that a writer of detective stories should write a play about Christian dogma, and one of them goes as far as to say, “not by one line or phrase can we recognize the creator of... Lord Peter Wimsey.” Yet the theme of the play – the “integrity of the work” over-riding and redeeming personal weaknesses – is the theme of *Gaudy Night* viewed from a divine standpoint... But, *mutatis mutandis*, novel and play deal with the same problem and offer the same solution, and it is only the “detective” label on the one and the “religious” label on the other that has put them into different critical pigeon-holes.³⁴¹

Sayers wrote in various genres over the course of her career at different times but this did not mean that her detective fiction was “shallow” - it was her starting place as a writer, and as Reynolds argued, her writing is “of a piece.”³⁴² There may be a parallel, perhaps unintended, between the detective and the Christian apologist in Sayers’ writing. It is the detective who must pursue the truth by piecing the evidence together into the correct pattern

³³⁹ Janice Brown, *The Seven Deadly Sins in the Work of Dorothy L. Sayers*, (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press 1998), p.213.

³⁴⁰ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to John Wren-Lewis, Good Friday, March 1954, Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Four*, p.139.

³⁴¹ Sayers, “Gaudy Night,” p.88.

³⁴² Barbara Reynolds, video interview with Lyle W. Dorset, 4 April 1989, Wheaton College, Illinois.

to discover the story of what actually happened. The viability of such an endeavour is predicated upon the honesty and intellectual integrity of those involved. The detective analyses the specifics of the story and draws them together into a coherent whole so as to communicate the truth of the matter to other people. This is resonant of what Sayers did, consciously and unconsciously, in her later work when she drew attention to the revelation of the Christian story as a narrative that gives humanity an overarching reality, a pattern which has broad explanatory power. She pointed to evidences, whether historical, philosophical or scientific, that cohered with the pattern of Christian doctrine and implied the truthfulness of the Christian story.

Sayers grew and developed as a writer; her perceptions of pattern evolved and deepened, she clearly became more proficient at saying what she wanted to say, but the overarching observation that truth is revealed through story and pattern strengthened as her work progressed. It has been noted that the contrast that Sayers drew between the detective story structure of problem and solution and the creative, theologically-rooted approach to life as a whole outlined in “Problem Picture” and *The Mind of the Maker* overall, presents a potential challenge to this view of a fundamental cohesion within Sayers’ approach across her entire oeuvre. However, the more naïve drawing of plot, evidence and pattern that permeate Sayers’ early novels fades as she matured as a writer. Indeed, *Gaudy Night* provides an important qualification to her mode of unveiling truth through the intersection of the specifics of the story and the structure of the pattern; namely, that the success of Sayers’ *modus operandi* was absolutely contingent on the integrity of the reader or scholar. In Sayers’ paradigm, the person pursuing truth will not find it by means of emotion, instinct or feeling. It is only “the passionate intellect,” by which she means the scholar with dedicated, intellectual integrity,

that will find the truth. This foreshadows some of Sayers' religious convictions about theological understanding:

The "passionate intellect" is really passionate. It is the only point at which ecstasy can enter. I do not know whether we can be saved through the intellect but I do know that I can be saved by nothing else.³⁴³

³⁴³ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to John Wren-Lewis, Good Friday, March 1954, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Four*, pp.137.

Chapter Five

Plays

In the 1930s Dorothy L. Sayers discovered a further medium of literary expression that was to potentially elucidate her theological intuitions about truth and story. Sayers did not initially turn to prose to explore her intellectual ideas but fortuitously it was to be through writing plays that her emerging theological insights would first become more widely known. This was not an accident. That Sayers' theological insights were to be enacted, incarnated on the stage itself indicates something of the nature of her perceptions of Christian doctrine.³⁴⁴ Frances Clemson writes:

Sayers' plays are not simply convenient illustrations of a pre-existing theology, a theology which could be summed up, more conventionally, in prose...the plays enact a theology which can only be understood through close attention to the drama itself.³⁴⁵

³⁴⁴ Sayers' use of drama as a medium for the exploration and communication of theology positions her into a broader context for theological interest. Hans Urs von Balthasar developed a five-volume theological treatment of drama. He demonstrates the importance of theological engagement with drama in twentieth-century theological literature beginning with divine dramatic action in relation to the world. Drama is revelation of meaning through embodied action. "...the aesthetic on-stage world provides us with an unreal – and yet enfleshed – model of that given meaning that revelation incarnates, no longer unreal but with utmost reality, in the reality of history." Graham Harrison (trans.), *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory I: Prolegomena*, (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1988), p.266. See Edward, T. Oakes, S. J. and David Moss (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), and in particular Rowan Williams' essay, "Balthasar and the Trinity" pp.37-50. For a further discussion of von Balthasar's ideas see Ben Quash, *Theology and the Drama of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). Quash draws out the analogical nature of von Balthasar's approach and his attempts to uphold both the individual's need to make connections and give an account of the world but also underscores the subjectivity of each account. See also Kevin Vanhoozer *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005). Vanhoozer picks up Balthasar's work and examines in-depth a biblical foundation for theo-drama as what he terms "narrative hermeneutics" (p.21). Vanhoozer opens his argument with the statement: "The gospel – God's gracious self-communication in Jesus Christ – is intrinsically dramatic" (p.xi). Theological accounts of the interplay of the theology and drama tend towards the theoretical and abstract, thus Sayers' perspicuity in her actual works of drama, alongside her theological reflection on story and drama together lend her work significance within the wider field.

³⁴⁵ Frances Vida Amy Clemson, *The Theology of Dorothy L. Sayers' Dramatic Works: Dramatic Performance and the 'Continual Showing Forth of God's Act in History'* (Unpublished Doctoral Thesis: University of Exeter, 2012), p.24.

It is through studying these plays that we can discern how Sayers' theology developed and in particular, how she came to introduce her concept of pattern to her audience. Sayers had begun the transition from her focus upon writing detective novels to creating works of drama for the radio and the stage by writing her Wimsey play *Busman's Holiday* in 1936. She was subsequently invited to write a play for the Canterbury Festival of 1937. The decision to take up this commission was to have a significant impact on the course of Sayers' career, launching her into the sphere of Christian communication and enabling her to explore more directly her interest in the interplay of story and truth. In 1954 she wrote a letter recollecting the beginning of this season in her writing career:

I was asked to write a play for Canterbury about William of Sens. I had just done one play and wanted to do another (being fascinated by the new technique) and I liked the story, which could be so handled as to deal with the 'proper truth' of the artist – a thing on which I was then particularly keen... I wrote the thing and enjoyed doing it.³⁴⁶

Sayers was unprepared for the flood of interest and Press questions that were elicited by the apparently unforeseen transformation of a popular author of detective fiction into a serious religious writer:

Apparently the spectacle of a middle-aged female detective novelist admitting publicly that the judicial murder of God might compete in interest with the Corpse in the Coal Hole was the sensation for which the Christian world was waiting.³⁴⁷

The response of the public was overwhelmingly positive to Sayers' plays³⁴⁸ but inevitably some critics remained puzzled by the transition of genre and focus taking place in her writing.

³⁴⁶ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to John Wren-Lewis, Good Friday, March 1954, in Barbara Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Four*, p.139.

³⁴⁷ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to E. C. Bentley, July 1937, in Barbara Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Two*, p.33.

³⁴⁸ Sayers was not merely the author of the plays, she took a hands-on role in the staging, costumes, selection of cast and overall production of her plays. This is well-illustrated by the level of detail about colour, material and paint for the set and costumes in her unpublished correspondence with Norah Lambourne in the Dorothy L. Sayers Society Archive in Witham. Sayers' plays were written initially with specific performance contexts in mind. This was not unusual for the era up until the end of the Second World War: "For two centuries or so the term 'producer' had been loosely applied to leading actors, actor-managers, playwrights, stage-managers (and even prompters) who exercised a controlling function." Colin Chambers, 'Developments in the profession of theatre, 1946-2000' in Baz Kershaw (ed.), *The Cambridge History of British Theatre, III: Since 1895* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p.383. Sayers performed the roles of both playwright and producer.

In a letter written in 1937, Sayers expressed her frustration at the fact that some people: “seemed to think it indecent that a detective writer would deal in religion!”³⁴⁹ Sayers did not recognise a sense of discontinuity between the phases of her writing career, or the subject matters with which she was grappling. On the contrary, her pursuit of truth and interest in stories as a medium of truth was a cumulative, seamless, deepening interest which was to captivate her imagination and her work over the course of her career.

From Sayers’ perspective, as she embarked on creating works of drama as opposed to novels, there could be nothing more stimulating for a playwright, nor for that matter an audience, than Christian dogma. She concluded that the story of the incarnation was not only a matter of Christian theology, but that it would made for gripping drama on the stage. Referencing Voltaire’s comment: “Si Dieu n’existait pa, il faudrait l’onventer,”³⁵⁰ Sayers commented: “if the Incarnation had never happened, it would have been necessary for some dramatist to invent it.” She called the Incarnation “the most dramatic thing... that ever entered into the mind of man,” and so it made sense to her to create works of drama exploring this most explosive of stories. Sayers’ interest in presenting the Christian faith in dramatic form was related to her conviction that the story inherently encapsulated the truth. Sayers never developed a theoretical narrative theology, but was first and foremost a creative writer and as such her theology was encapsulated in the drama on the stage.³⁵¹ She held that her role as a writer, as opposed to that of a professional preacher or a priest, gave her an unprecedented opportunity to expose people to this story: “since it is not the playwright’s business to argue but to present, the only thing

³⁴⁹ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to E. C. Bentley, July 1937, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Two*, p.33.

³⁵⁰ Voltaire (*Epitres*, 96), cited in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Two*, p.43.

³⁵¹ Sayers’ direct practical engagement with writing theology as drama and her lack of analysis of her own approach in relative terms has contributed to her work being largely ignored by narrative theologians. However, her strengths as a creative writer enabled her to engage a wide audience with theology and make a significant contribution to Christian apologetics in her own era.

one can do is to put it on the stage... and let it speak for itself.”³⁵² Sayers was ready to communicate Christian doctrine through story in the form of drama, first by writing text on a page and then by helping actors animate that script on the stage or the radio.

Although the subject matter of many of her plays was directly Christian, Sayers’ self-perception was that she had not intentionally set out to evangelise people. She wrote later in 1954 that her plays were not written in order to do Christian apologetics:

I never, so help me God, wanted to get entangled in religious apologetics, or to bear witness to Christ, or to proclaim my faith to the world, or anything of that kind. It was an honest piece of work about something I really knew.³⁵³

As a creative artist and literary critic, Sayers believed that an author should make the work for the work’s own sake.³⁵⁴ Thus when dealing with a religious subject matter, the duty of the writer was first and foremost to the excellence of the work in hand, rather than to persuade or convert anybody. In her essay, “Playwrights are not evangelists”, Sayers reflected on this principle: “how such plays may best be used for evangelisation ought never to be asked of the playwright. These things are not his business...”³⁵⁵ She went on to point out that it is the writer’s business:

not to save souls but to write good plays. Should he forget this fact, he will lose his professional integrity, and with it all his power – including his power to preach the Gospel.³⁵⁶

³⁵² Dorothy L. Sayers letter to Father Herbert Kelly, 4 October 1937, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Two*, p.43.

³⁵³ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to John Wren-Lewis, Good Friday, March 1954, in Reynolds, (ed.), *Dorothy L. Sayers, Volume Four*, p.139.

³⁵⁴ This is a theme explored in *Zeal of Thy House* and it was to be a prominent focus of her theological attention subsequently in *The Mind of the Maker* and *Why Work?* in particular amongst her other writing.

³⁵⁵ Dorothy L. Sayers, ‘Playwrights are not Evangelists’ *World Theatre*, vol. 5, (1955-6): p.61.

³⁵⁶ *ibid.*

Clearly Sayers was not disparaging of a desire to persuade people of the truthfulness of the Christian faith, indeed she saw the potency of a play that could tell the Christian story to people who might not otherwise hear it:

Christian Drama is, indeed, apt to be a dangerous weapon... there is no doubt that in a world grown largely heathen, it can be very powerful. It can go where the "official" preacher is denied entry.³⁵⁷

But she argued that this desire to "preach" should not be the focus of the writer as the result would inevitably be a bad play; integrity on the part of the artist was a matter of intention as well as excellence. The work must be good on its own terms and for its own sake. After all: "A bad play is a bad play... it will do nothing to convince the world at large that the Christian religion is worthy of intelligent consideration."³⁵⁸

Sayers wrote her plays with the sole focus of creating good, truthful art and she wanted the work to be excellent in and of itself: "The duty of the dramatist is to hold fast to the truth that is in him."³⁵⁹ How then did she reconcile this with her desire that Christian truth be communicated to people? At least a part of the answer for Sayers was her belief that Christian leaders had a complementary role, working alongside the dramatist: "these workers in the missionary field may encourage and support the playwright by providing him with an opportunity and a stage."³⁶⁰ This appears to contradict her earlier assertions that her plays were not a focus for Christian evangelism or apologetics. From Sayers' perspective the Christian playwright should concentrate on the work of creating a play,³⁶¹ while the church and its leaders

³⁵⁷ *ibid.* p.66.

³⁵⁸ *ibid.* p.62.

³⁵⁹ *ibid.* p.66.

³⁶⁰ *ibid.* p.63. Sayers went on to describe how she had been able to create her religious plays in the first place; "The original impetus to a Christian drama in this country was given by the series of Festival Plays produced in the chapter house of Canterbury Cathedral, and this example has been widely followed."

³⁶¹ By this Sayers meant excellent work. In her article 'Sacred Plays 3', she comments: "all work can be dedicated work; but it will not serve God or profit mankind unless it is good by its own standards." Dorothy L. Sayers, "Sacred Plays Part 3", *Episcopal Church News*, (February 6 1955), p.24.

should be focused on the apologetic task, including telling the Christian story to the world. Plays such as Sayers' dramatic works would enable the church to fulfill its mission more effectively:

They can and indeed must, follow up such opportunities as the play affords. A drama (or any other work of art) will not by itself make anybody a Christian. It can provoke attention and stir the heart, but unless its "message" is taken up and integrated into the pattern of the church's life, it will probably do no more than arouse that "interest in religion" which offers itself as so plausible a substitute for the real thing...it is especially for the clergy to see that the springs of awareness released by a dramatic presentation – and it *can* release them – are directed into the right channels, and not suffered to spread and stagnate into a morass of undisciplined sentiment.³⁶²

Sayers appears to be conflicted here. On the one hand, she was unequivocal that she did not see herself as an evangelist and that a religious playwright had nothing to do with evangelism or apologetics,³⁶³ but on the other hand she was clear that the church should take up the evangelistic opportunities afforded by good Christian drama.³⁶⁴ However, notwithstanding her protestations, Sayers did find herself evangelising despite herself: "I always seem to be expounding the Faith in pubs!"³⁶⁵

In Sayers' mind this tension was somehow reconciled by the nature of the Christian story and its status as "truth." E. L. Mascall comments:

Her central concern is clear and it is supported by almost everything that she ever wrote about religion. It is that, when all is said and done, the only really relevant reason for accepting Christianity is that you are convinced that it is *true*; not that it is comfortable or uncomfortable ... but simply that it is *true*.³⁶⁶

³⁶² Sayers, 'Playwrights are not evangelists', p.64.

³⁶³ Dorothy L. Sayers wrote; "the artist's business is to present and not to expound," in a letter to Father Herbert Kelly, 19 October 1937, Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Two*, p.52.

³⁶⁴ Sayers hoped that people might be "persuaded" and wanted religious drama to take place in a context that would not undermine the potency of the message; "I believe people are more ready to be persuaded by a religious drama if it is not preceded by anything that looks like a preaching." Letter to Father Herbert Kelly, 19 October 1937, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Two*, p.52.

³⁶⁵ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to Father Herbert Kelly, 7 February 1938, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Two*, p.68.

³⁶⁶ E. L. Mascall, "What happened to Dorothy L. Sayers?", *SEVEN An Anglo-American Literary Review* 3 (1982):14.

As a creative writer and literary critic, Sayers believed in the power and theological resonance of any story well told but in her plays she attempted to go a step further and retell the truest of true stories on the stage. Sayers realised that a story could make for an excellent exploration of Christian dogma, since theological, cosmological and ontological truths are necessarily borne out and revealed in contingent specificities. Sayers understood that this is the nature of Christian revelation. Furthermore, she perceived that whilst Christian theology is making universal and comprehensive truth claims about reality, people come to know and experience this truth within space, time and history, in real life experiences - even in stories.³⁶⁷ She intuited that drama might be an ideal means for the exploration of the outworking of such particularities.³⁶⁸

Sayers wrote in her article, “The Greatest Drama Ever Staged”, that: “the Christian faith is the most exciting drama that ever staggered the imagination of man—and the dogma is the drama.”³⁶⁹ But as Sayers wrote her plays she began to see that something deeper than a direct presentation of the Christian story was going on. In the process of writing her plays Sayers gradually came to realise that the very activity of writing and creating art mirrored something profound about the ultimate Creator, God himself. She came to the conclusion that whatever the subject matter directly at hand, workers creating good art were themselves symbols of

³⁶⁷Sayers reflected in her Good Friday letter to Wren-Lewis, March 1954, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Four*, that it was through the power of the brilliant story-telling of G. K. Chesterton that she herself became awakened to the truth and this had inspired her to do the same. “All I did was to tell the story in words of one syllable and insist that it was an exciting story.... Chesterton performed a like office for me when I was a sullenly unreceptive adolescent.” Sayers’ friend the theologian E. L. Mascall comments in an article on Sayers that Chesterton’s writings had a similar effect on them both: “It was the sheer excitement of the drama, combined with its amazing power of intellectual synthesis, that convinced me that if any religion was true it must be historic, traditional, orthodox Christianity.” Mascall, ‘What Happened to Dorothy L. Sayers?’ p.15.

³⁶⁸ Reflecting on this from the point of view of literary technique Sayers contrasted writing the specific details of a play with those in a novel: “People can turn back and verify, whereas in a play, points must be made once and for all so as to stick in peoples’ minds.” Dorothy L. Sayers, ‘Stage and Story’ unpublished notes Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois. MS-207, 3., p.1.

³⁶⁹ Dorothy L. Sayers, “The Greatest Drama Ever Staged is the Official Creed of Christendom” in *Sunday Times*, 3 April 1938, p.1. This was later published in *The Triumph of Easter* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1938).

something much greater, namely the divine Creator. Sayers purposefully developed this thought in her essay, “The Christian Faith and the Theatre” in which she explored the idea that symbol and analogy are forms of evidence inextricably interwoven with story, pointing humanity to deeper truths about the reality of God.

Thus, the playwright can in his manner and in his degree, show forth God to the world. In himself he is a small pitiful and desperately inadequate image of Godhead – no more like his Divine original than the rough IHS scrawled on the wall of a catacomb is like the tremendous Personality for which it symbolically stands. Yet he is a true symbol, such as he is, and he ought to know it and never to forget it.³⁷⁰

There was a further coherence for Sayers in truth and story coming into the particular sphere of the theatre because the existence of the Creator reflected through an author’s creativity was further amplified for her by actors taking to the stage and performing the written work. Sayers came to understand that acting entailed something inherently sacramental and that this might be recognisable in a way that transcended culture and time. She wrote:

Yet there is an enduring truth in the ancient idea that the actor’s profession is sacred – sacred in itself, quite apart from the character or purpose of the play performed. Simply by being what he is and doing what he does, the actor is a living symbol of certain universal truths...³⁷¹

Sayers became convinced that the process of telling a story, whether in fiction or drama, revealed truth, and that the actual writing or acting of a good play also demonstrated essential truths about the existence of God as Creator and His act of revelation in the world through the incarnation. She reflected on the way in which a theatrical production engaged the imagination of an audience and therefore had the potential to communicate theological insights profoundly by embodying and incarnating them in drama. Any specific instance of this process would speak not just of the particular dogma being explored in a given play, but also of the universal

³⁷⁰ Dorothy L. Sayers, ‘The Christian Faith and the Theatre’ Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois. MS-43, p.11.

³⁷¹ *ibid.* p.3.

truth that the Creator God who became incarnate in history is alluded to by every act of creation or incarnation attempted by His image bearers:

The actor is a living symbol of certain universal truths – truths which are formulated for us in Christian dogma. In dogma, truth is presented to the intellect in the form of a statement; in a symbol, the same truth is presented to the imagination in the form of an action.³⁷²

Sayers' invocation of the idea of 'symbol' as an important motif in Christian theology and communication is expounded in her published lecture, "Creative Mind,"³⁷³ but here her focus was on delving into precisely how a grasp of the world of the theatre might contribute to theological deliberation and expression:

... some of those great fundamental truths which we know as dogmas of the Christian faith are also fundamental truths about the theatre ... For after all, what is the theatre for? And what if it comes to that is a Church for? ... the quite simple answer is that the Theatre is there to present a play, and the Church to live the Gospel. **Both of them exist to tell a story in action.**³⁷⁴

This concept of "story in action" is a further indicator that Sayers understood truth both in the context of pattern, an overarching worldview or structure, and in terms of the specificity of character, plot and circumstance. Theology or dogma must live and breathe in the actions of lives lived and stories played out in particular cultural and historical contexts. This paradigm applied to the defined dramas that she created with their characters, dialogue, costumes, and stage directions as well as the original contexts within which they were written to be performed.³⁷⁵ Thus in the process of analysing Sayers' religious plays, this thesis will explore

³⁷² *ibid.* p.4.

³⁷³ See Sayers, "Creative Mind" in *Unpopular Opinions*. In the next chapter of the thesis, *The Mind of the Maker* will be analysed including Sayers' ideas about "image". In Chapter 8, Sayers' work on Dante notions of "image" and "symbol" are further explored as they relate to her concept of pattern.

³⁷⁴ Sayers, "The Christian Faith and the Theatre" p.4. (Emphasis hers.)

³⁷⁵ As has already been noted, Sayers took a hands-on part in the production of her plays. Wells and Hauerwas observe the importance of her detailed production notes for the radio broadcasts of *The Man Born to Be King* play cycle: "One of the most rewarding aspects of this absorbing sequence of plays is the notes that Sayers wrote to assist in the first production of the cycle on BBC Radio in 1941." Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells "An Apostle with Reservations On Judas and the Vocation of Christian Ethics", in (eds.) Natalie K. Watson, Stephen Burns, *Exchanges of Grace: Essays in Honour of Ann Loades* (London: SCM, 2008), p.38.

her plays as more than words recorded on the page and published as texts. This analysis will take into consideration the original contexts both for the performance or broadcast of her work and the conditions Sayers worked in whilst creating her plays in order to fully appreciate her emphasis on the inherent specificity of “the story in action.”

Sayers perceived that drama and story were inextricably linked and at times she appears to have used the words interchangeably.³⁷⁶ However, a concept she invoked when seeking to explore the interplay between story and truth in the Christian worldview was “myth.” In her article “Sacred Plays”, Sayers argued: “Christianity resembles all great religions in being founded upon a myth.”³⁷⁷ By using the word “myth” here, Sayers does not imply that Christian dogma is unhistorical, or in some way fantastical.³⁷⁸ She believed profoundly in the historicity and veracity of the creeds of the church. She wrote that Christianity is “unique among religions in this; that its myth is part of history... whether we deny it or accept it, we have to come to terms with history.”³⁷⁹ Sayers understood “myth” to mean an archetype, or even a story-based pattern:

A myth is not necessarily a fiction, but it is a story – in the Christian case, it is a true story: the central, veritable, and unique myth from which all other myths derive whatever shadows of truth they may contain.

³⁷⁶ As Chapter One of the thesis explained, Sayers did not have a forensic approach to language nor did she carefully define her terms. Drama was certainly written to be ‘enfleshed’ – acted out upon the stage or on the radio, but in Sayers’ mind, it was still story. Story incarnated beyond the page but story nonetheless.

³⁷⁷ Dorothy L. Sayers, “Sacred Plays 1”, *Episcopal Church News*, January 9 1955, p.20.

³⁷⁸ For example, John Thurmer points out that although “sceptical critics have made havoc of the various accounts of the discovery of the empty tomb and of the Lord’s appearances... Sayers will have none of it. “All of them, without exception, can be made to fall into place in a single orderly and coherent narrative without the smallest contradiction or difficulty... beyond a trifling effort to imagine the natural behavior of a bunch of startled people running about in the dawn light between Jerusalem and the Garden,” (see *TMBTBK* p.35.) John Thurmer, “The Greatest Story, or from mystery to Mystery”, *SEVEN: An Anglo-American Literary Review* 10, (1993): 92-3.

³⁷⁹ Sayers, “Sacred Plays Part 1”, p.20.

If Christianity is “the archetypal myth,”³⁸⁰ it is a true story, grounded in history and not a subjective experience arising out of humanity’s intellect, emotions, psychology or conscience:

Christianity... is not primarily an emotional experience, or a set of logical conclusions or a code of ethics: it is a story. It is not constructed out of man’s feelings or reason or even his moral imperatives. It is the story of God’s act in history.³⁸¹

This helps explain why fiction and drama were such important media for Sayers in her development as a Christian apologist. Moreover, the Christian story was electrifying and absolutely ideal material for a dramatist to work with: “To make of His story something that could neither startle, shock nor terrify, nor excite, nor inspire a living soul is to crucify the Son of God and put him to open shame.”³⁸² If Christianity is a true story, communicating that truth to the contemporary culture would involve telling stories. Sayers’ move into writing religious plays does precisely that work of directly telling the Christian story and her own pleasure in this work was infectious.³⁸³ She later reflected on the fact that: “She (the church) has vacated a particularly dominating pulpit (the stage) and has no right to appear pained and surprised if she finds it occupied by other preachers with powerful lungs.”³⁸⁴ Sayers was determined to play her part in rebalancing things and helping the church to find a voice in such an influential arena.

Over the course of sixteen years Dorothy L. Sayers wrote nine plays with six being religious in character. *The Busman’s Holiday* (1935) was a play depicting the marriage and honeymoon of Sayers’ detective hero and heroine Peter Wimsey and Harriet Vane. *The Zeal of Thy House*

³⁸⁰ *ibid.* p.21. Cf. C. S. Lewis’s “Myth Became Fact” *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), pp.63-7, and Austin Farrer’s “Can Myth Be Fact?” in Charles C. Conti (ed.), *Interpretation and Belief* (London: SPCK, 1976), pp. 165–75.

³⁸¹ Sayers, “Sacred Plays Part 1”, p.21

³⁸² Sayers, *TMBTBK*, p.21.

³⁸³ In their essay comparing the approach of Barth and Sayers in understanding the figure of Judas, Hauerwas and Wells examine her theological plays and note the “joy manifest in the work of ... Sayers” *Exchanges of Grace*, p.35.

³⁸⁴ *ibid.* p.22.

(1937) was written for the Canterbury Festival and tells the fateful story of William of Sens' efforts to rebuild Canterbury Cathedral in 1174 after a fire destroyed it. *He That Should Come* (1938) was written for radio as a one-act play depicting the birth of Jesus using non-religious, contemporary language. It was broadcast on Christmas Day 1938 and Sayers hoped that the play would bring the Christian story to life for ordinary people, removing it from "other worldly" planes. *The Devil to Pay* (1939) was written for the Canterbury Festival and was based upon the Faust legend. *Love All* (1940) was a comedy involving a romance writer, his mistress and his wife who is a successful playwright. It explores themes of work and gender with both women prioritizing their careers over their relationship with the man. *The Man Born to be King* (1941) is a play cycle of 12 plays about the life of Jesus, written for radio and broadcast during the Second World War by the BBC. The plays were aired by the BBC Home Service on Sunday evenings from 21 December 1941 at four-week intervals until 18 October 1942. *The Just Vengeance* (1946) was written for the Lichfield Cathedral Festival 1946 and it is about an airman who has been shot down. His spirit returns to Lichfield where he explores various theological questions before entering heaven. *Where Do We Go From Here?* (1948) was the final play in a series of six written by assorted writers in the "Detection Club"³⁸⁵ but it was never performed. *The Emperor Constantine* (1951) was Sayers' final play and it is about the discussions of the church during the writing of the Nicene Creed at the Council of Nicaea in the year 325. In her religious plays Sayers kept the clear objective in mind of telling the Christian story:

The primary object of the Mystery is thus to tell the story in the most lucid and impressive way possible... we may class all plays which aim at telling the story – whether to inform the ignorant or refresh the interest of the faithful – as Mystery Plays.³⁸⁶

³⁸⁵ The Detection Club was a private members club, formed in 1930 meeting for regular dinners and discussion in London, comprised of authors of mystery fiction. Dorothy L. Sayers was President of the club 1949-57.

³⁸⁶ Sayers, "Playwrights are not Evangelists", p.66.

The Zeal of Thy House and *The Man Born to be King* stand out as being of particular relevance with regard to Sayers' interest in truth, through story and pattern, and we will now examine them in turn.

The Zeal of Thy House

In 1928 the Dean and the Chapter of Canterbury Cathedral brought Christian drama into the nave of the Cathedral for the first time since the days of Oliver Cromwell. The Canterbury Festivals hosted a cycle of dramas written each year for the purpose. These included T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* and Charles Williams' *Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury*. Dorothy L. Sayers' play *Busman's Holiday* was in the process of going into rehearsals when on 6 October 1936, Margaret Babington wrote inviting Sayers to write the 1936 Canterbury Festival play. Charles Williams had recommended her for this role. The decision to take up this commission was a critical step in Sayers' development as a Christian apologist. Peter Wimsey and Harriet Vane had made Sayers into a best-selling author and her Canterbury festival play, *The Zeal of Thy House* drew her into writing directly about theology as an established public figure for the first time. It is in this play that Sayers first expressed her insights about the doctrine of the Trinity and its importance as a pattern for understanding human creativity.

The theme of the 1937 festival, celebrating artists and craftsmen, had been agreed in advance and Miss Babington sent Sayers a history of the Cathedral, a Latin chronicle detailing the story of the burning and rebuilding of the Cathedral and a photograph of the Chapter House, which was to be the venue for the play. Despite being in the midst of rehearsals for *Busman's Holiday*, Sayers began work on *Zeal* and by December had arranged to meet set designer Laurence Irving to discuss the play from a visual perspective. The inspiration for calling the play *The Zeal of*

thy House came from Irving who drew on Psalm 69:9, “For the zeal of thine house hath eaten me up” and John 2:17 after Christ turned over the tables of the money changers in the Temple: “his disciples remembered that it was written, ‘The zeal of thine house hath eaten me up.’” The title was well received by the organisers and Sayers wrote to Miss Babington: “I am so glad you like the title “The Zeal of Thy House”: it was Mr. Irving’s inspiration, and though I sat grinding my teeth with jealousy for two hours, I could not think of anything half as good!”³⁸⁷

The first performance of *Zeal* was on 12 June 1938 and the Canterbury Festival was a huge success, requiring additional trains to be laid on from London Victoria to Canterbury. Following the festival, the play was published and Sayers was asked to organise a tour of *Zeal* but the church authorities did not come up with any money to back it. Sayers was absolutely committed to the success of the tour and raised some money by writing advertising copy for Horlicks. When she was criticised for this in *The Times* she replied in a letter: “Since no assistance was forthcoming from the Church for a play written and performed in her honour, I unblushingly soaked Mammon for what I could get in that quarter.”³⁸⁸ The tour of *Zeal* was not a financial success; the Second World War was about to begin, the Munich crisis and extreme weather presented real challenges to the production. Consequently: “the tour of *Zeal*... was very nearly killed off dead by the crisis.”³⁸⁹

The plot of the play *The Zeal of Thy House* is based upon the story of the French architect William of Sens who was commissioned to rebuild Canterbury Cathedral after the fire of 1174.

³⁸⁷ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to Miss Babington, 18 January 1937, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Two*, p.5. John Carey notes that Sayers’ play *Zeal of Thy House* was performed at William Golding’s school whilst he was there and that Golding’s novel, *The Spire*, was significantly influenced by Sayers’ *Zeal of Thy House*: “Quite a lot of this appears to have lodged in the mind of the author of *The Spire*” *William Golding The Man Who Wrote Lord of the Flies* (London: Faber & Faber, 2012), p.131. William Golding won a Nobel Prize for Literature for his work in 1983.

³⁸⁸ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to The Editor of *The Times*, 22 November 1933, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Two*, p.99.

³⁸⁹ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to Ivy Shrimpton, 6 November 1938, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Two*, p.95.

He triumphs over two English rivals in receiving the commission and goes on to swindle the Chapter's monks and have an affair with a wealthy widow. The goal driving all of William's efforts was his own exaltation. He relentlessly pursued excellence in his work out of a determination to be recognised as the greatest master-craftsman. His work on the Cathedral is outstanding but his pride is of legendary proportions:

We are the master-craftsmen, God and I-
We understand one another. None, as I can,
Can creep under the ribs of God, and feel
His heart beat through those Six Days of Creation;³⁹⁰

Four years into the project William is placing the keystone into the main arch of the Cathedral and owing to the distraction of Ursula, a rope breaks and he falls from a height of fifty feet to the altar. He survives but he is completely incapacitated and finds himself in a state of persistent pain. Despite his condition and inability to continue with the commission, he refuses to hand over his work for others to finish it until he finally leaves Canterbury forever.

The plot for *Zeal* is based upon the writings of Gervase, a monk who witnessed the destruction and rebuilding of the Cathedral. He attributed William of Sens' accident to "either the Vengeance of God or the Envy of the Devil"³⁹¹ and Sayers took this story as a basis for exploring her theological ideas of integrity, truth, creativity and work.

In *Zeal* Sayers intentionally interwove the thoughts, words and actions of heavenly angelic beings with the unfolding temporal drama taking place in twelfth-century Canterbury. The four angels Michael, Raphael, Gabriel and Cassiel open the play in the Chapter House of Canterbury Cathedral. The monk Gervase understood Canterbury to symbolically represent the

³⁹⁰ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Zeal of Thy House*, (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1947), p.69.

³⁹¹ *ibid.* p.6.

ancient city of God, Jerusalem, and Sayers appears to have adopted this symbolism in the play. She drew the audience into a story in which the temporal and the eternal are not separate, with one being real and the other a delusion. In *Zeal* the spiritual and historical discreetly coalesce, mirrored by the specificities of the actions played out, interfacing with the overarching structure of the pattern. It is in this context that the primary motif of the play is introduced – the architect who is both visionary and master craftsman. The connection between the divine Creator and the human artist is made from the very outset of the play with William of Sens commenting: “Possibly God is an abler architect than any of us.”³⁹² In her introduction to the publication of *Zeal of Thy House* Sayers underlined the centrality of this theme by quoting from St Michael’s final speech in the play:

Behold, then, and honour, all beautiful work of the craftsman, imagined by men’s minds, built by the labour of men’s hand, working with power upon the souls of men, image of the everlasting Trinity, God’s witness in world and time. And whatsoever ye do, do all to the Glory of God.³⁹³

As the play unfolded, Sayers developed both the idea of human beings reflecting the image of the Creator by making things and the idea that human acts of creation could be acts of worship. The architect or artist epitomises and exhibits the Creator while their work conveys something of the transcendent reality impacting the temporal world. This is how artists glorify God, their work speaks of Him and to Him long after their liturgies and hymns have fallen silent:

Men worship the Eternal Architect.
So, when the mouth is dumb, the work shall speak...
The unsleeping arches with perpetual voice
Proclaim in Heaven, to labour is to pray³⁹⁴

³⁹² *ibid.* p.22.

³⁹³ *ibid.* p.7.

³⁹⁴ *ibid.* p.34. “To labour is to pray” is a reference to ‘laborare est orare’, the motto of the Benedictine Order. Canterbury Cathedral was a community of Benedictine monks from the tenth century until the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1540.

However, the play also raises important questions about integrity and work.³⁹⁵ Despite his brilliance as an architect and craftsman, William of Sens' dubious financial and sexual morality caused some to question the appropriateness of his commission to rebuild Canterbury Cathedral. Theodatus comments:

I would rather have
A worse built church with a more virtuous builder.³⁹⁶

If the individual falls short of the church's visions of morality, can their creative work still have merit? Sayers' view was unequivocal: artistic integrity was primarily located in the excellence and honesty of the work itself and was not impugned by the proclivities or foibles of the artist:

Make God the loser for your conscience' sake?
This is God's House, and if on any pretext
We give him less than the best, we shall cheat God³⁹⁷

Questions about the morality of the worker and by implication the integrity of the work should be seen in the light of the work of Christ, who selected unworthy human beings to play significant roles:

For God founded His Church, not upon John,
The loved disciple, that lay so close to His heart
And knew His mind – not upon John, but Peter;
Peter the liar, Peter the coward, Peter
The rock, the common man

The integrity of the work for Sayers was rooted in the forthright distinction of the work itself and should be measured in such terms.³⁹⁸ She argued that Christ's use of flawed disciples such as Peter in building the Christian church locates truth in the real world:

³⁹⁵ These themes will be further examined in Sayers' writings in Chapter Five of the thesis, when her essay "Why Work?" will be analysed.

³⁹⁶ *ibid.* p.59.

³⁹⁷ *ibid.*

³⁹⁸ Sayers underlines this point about the integrity of a piece of work with regard to her own professional standards as a playwright: "We must distinguish much more resolutely than we usually do between the aim of the work (*finis operis*) and the aim of the worker (*finis operantis*). The aim of the play itself may very properly be worship or edification; and that may also, very properly, be the intention of the person or body responsible for choosing and putting on the play in the first place. But once the play has been put into production, the aim of

Peter is the stone
Whereof the world is made. So stands the Church
Stone upon stone, and Christ the corner-stone
Carved of the same stuff, common flesh and blood,
With you, and me, and Peter.³⁹⁹

The temporal and the transcendent meet when God the artist uses imperfect people, and yet his work the Church, is well made. Sayers goes on in this apologetic vein, exploring the theological purpose of the incarnation and dispelling the common misconception of Christ as a rather feeble ingénu:

We need not
Play nursemaid to the babe of Bethlehem
To shield Him from the harlot and thief...
He can touch dirt without defilement, for Himself hath said,
“what I have cleansed, that call not thou unclean.”⁴⁰⁰

Sayers’ interest in exploring the integrity of creative work appears to be a direct repercussion of her convictions about the nature of truth.

Truth is glorious...
And all the truth of the craftsman is in his craft.
Where there is truth, there is God; and where there is glory,
There is God’s glory too.⁴⁰¹

Theological truth was not a matter of perspective or opinion for Sayers, rather it underpinned her ideas about work, integrity and creativity. Truth was a matter of integrity and so an individual craftsman’s work should be utterly excellent on its own terms, honestly and truthfully conveying the idea and intent of the artist. This reflected Sayers’ idea that God’s workmanship, his creation, beautifully glorified him, never more so than when those creatures

all concerned must be simply to produce and act the play as well and effectively as they possibly can.” Sayers, “Sacred Plays 3”, p.24.

³⁹⁹ Sayers, *Zeal*, p.61. In fact, Sayers states in a letter to E. C. Bentley, 20 July 1937 that this particular speech is inspired by G. K Chesterton: “By the way I hope you spotted the influence of G. K. C. in the passage about Peter and John.” Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Two*, p.33.

⁴⁰⁰ Sayers, *Zeal*, p.61.

⁴⁰¹ *ibid.* p.59.

echo their Creator and make beautiful, truthful, excellent art or craft. In *Zeal*, she used the story of a man rebuilding a Cathedral to explore what she regarded as this ultimate truth about God and about humanity. In a letter written in the October after the Canterbury Festival Sayers declared that “The play was seriously conceived as a presentation of Christian doctrine.”⁴⁰² Sayers believed that the glorious truth of a craft well made, pointed people to the existence of a greater pattern, that of the Divine Creator revealed in this world and in human beings with the capacity to be creative themselves.

Sayers’ portrayal of this ‘glory’ in true creativity is set into a wider context of a warning. In *Zeal* she cautioned that humanity’s creativity is not always where God’s glory is to be found. William’s pride - “He knows that I am indispensable... The work is all; when that is done, good night – My life till then is paramount with God.”⁴⁰³ - and his devastating fall from the top of the arch to the floor, culminate in his refusal to let another complete his work: “My work is mine; He shall not take it from me.”⁴⁰⁴ Sayers insightfully contrasted William with the incarnate Christ who “made no reservation of Himself” and was willing to lay his life down and redeem the world (“it is finished!”), who was the “Master Architect”, and was able to leave and let others continue the work of his Kingdom (“For lo! God died- and still His work goes on”).⁴⁰⁵ The moment that William understands the incarnation of Christ, “Lord I believe; help Thou mine unbelief”, he truly realises his own fatal pride:

O, I have sinned. The eldest sin of all,
Pride, that struck down the morning star from Heaven
Hath struck down me from where I sat and shone⁴⁰⁶

⁴⁰² Dorothy L. Sayers letter to M. Channing-Pearce, 20 October 1937, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Two*, p. 59.

⁴⁰³ Sayers, *Zeal*, pp.70-1.

⁴⁰⁴ *ibid.* p.102.

⁴⁰⁵ *ibid.* p.104.

⁴⁰⁶ *ibid.* p.105.

William's recognition of the incarnate Christ and his subsequent admission of his own pride demonstrate Sayers' commitment to the personal relevance of Christian dogma. Truth is transcendent but it is not abstract. Truth is most perfectly encapsulated for Sayers in the dogmas of the church and in particular the story of the incarnation of Jesus and this will make a real impact upon the lives of those who truly see it. This recognition of the power and vibrancy of truth was the foundation of everything she was creating with *Zeal*. She commented in a letter:

I don't think any of the people who saw *Zeal of Thy House* acted were in much doubt about what I was trying to say as regards the Incarnation doctrine. What they found great difficulty in believing was that the doctrine as presented was orthodox C. of E. Their attitude was not so much "this is too good to be true" as "this is too exciting to be orthodox."⁴⁰⁷

Sayers wanted her play to show forth the true drama of what she called "sheer hard dogma." She argued that "nothing can be more essentially dramatic than Catholic doctrine"⁴⁰⁸ – the story or drama of the incarnation was the foundation of Sayers' own theology and she wanted to make this known to the general public, whom she feared had lost all sight of the electrifying nature of orthodox Christian doctrine. Sayers felt that she needed to challenge directly the conception amongst theatre managers in particular that a "religious" play would be "dreary" and "send their financial spirits down to the soles of their boots." Sayers saw that as a Christian playwright she was facing deeply engrained negative perceptions of Christ:

They only know two versions of Him. There is gentle-Jesus-meek-and-mild (dull, and suitable for Christian plays for amateurs); and there is "Suppose-Christ-came-today (usually strongly Communistic and all about working-class prophets in drab surroundings) ... "Gentle-Jesus-meek-and-mild" has probably made more apostates than any other single phrase of language."⁴⁰⁹

⁴⁰⁷ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to Father Herbert Kelly, 19 October 1937, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Two*, p. 53.

⁴⁰⁸ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to Dorothy Rowe, 25 April 1937, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Two*, p.22.

⁴⁰⁹ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to Father Herbert Kelly, 19 October 1937, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Two*, pp.55-6.

She wanted by contrast to present: “a Christianity with colour and humour and suitable for use under ordinary conditions of life.” Sayers’ concern over negative and misleading preconceptions about Christ amongst the British public was an important factor in her approach to writing and producing *Zeal*; she hoped that her play would raise questions about truth in her audience and cause people to consider Christian dogma for themselves.

Reaction to *Zeal* meant that Sayers was invited to write about her theological views in the national press and she wrote “The Greatest Drama Ever Staged is the Official Creed of Christendom” for the *Sunday Times*, 3 April 1938, which was later published in *The Triumph of Easter* (1938)⁴¹⁰ and again in *Creed or Chaos?* (1947). The piece was written originally for the *Daily Mail* but “when they saw it they were too afraid to print it.”⁴¹¹ She wrote the article in the context of staging *Zeal* and reading *Punch* magazine’s theatre critic accuse her of: “free and easy theology.” The result of Sayers’ article is that she received many supportive letters encouraging her to write more theological articles for the general public. *Zeal* and her explanations of the incarnation arising from the play had placed Sayers into a new public arena, where she found herself fulfilling the role of a Christian apologist. Nonetheless she remained reluctant about her new-found role and continued to prefer the medium of drama over that of journalistic articles. She wrote in a letter: “I do not really feel that the Press is my proper pulpit; I think myself that my Canterbury play now running at the Westminster represents my ideas better.”⁴¹²

⁴¹⁰ Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Triumph of Easter* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2 June 1938).

⁴¹¹ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to S. Dark, 6 April 1938, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Two*, p.72. This may help to explain what Sayers calls her “rather bludgeoning style” in the article.

⁴¹² Dorothy L. Sayers letter to Dame Christabel Pankhurst, 19 April 1938, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Two*, p.75.

Perhaps the most significant opportunity *Zeal* afforded Sayers theologically was the chance to articulate her emerging ideas about the doctrine of the Trinity. She was to develop these thoughts in her book, *The Mind of the Maker* (which we will examine in Chapter Four), but it was in the closing speech of *Zeal* by the archangel Michael that Sayers first advanced her ideas about the Trinity. Even at this early stage in her thinking, Sayers envisaged the Trinitarian being of God as a kind of pattern which creative works intrinsically reflected: “For every work of creation is threefold, an earthly trinity to match the heavenly.”⁴¹³

Michael’s speech goes on to lay out Sayers’ threefold paradigm for the act of creation that was to underpin all of her later writing about the Trinity and creative work, namely, Idea, Energy and Power.

First: there is the Creative Idea; passionless, timeless, beholding the whole work complete at once, the end in the beginning; and this is the image of the Father.

Second: there is the Creative Energy, begotten of that Idea, working in time from the beginning to the end, with sweat and passion, being incarnate in the bonds of matter; and this is the image of the Word.

Third: There is the Creative Power, the meaning of the work and its response in the lively soul; and this is the image of the indwelling Spirit.⁴¹⁴

Father Herbert Kelly, founder of the Society of the Sacred Mission at Kelham Hall, Nottinghamshire, read *Zeal of Thy House* when it was first published and wrote to Sayers thanking her for her apologetic effectiveness. He admired Sayers for bringing out:

the vital force of a Christian faith in God and His Christ, not in the abstract fashion which is all we theologians can teach, but in a living, pictorial fashion which common people can follow.⁴¹⁵

However, it was Father Kelly’s comments about Sayers’ Trinitarian theology in the final speech of archangel Michael in the play that were to influence the next years of her life

⁴¹³ Sayers, *Zeal*, p.110.

⁴¹⁴ *ibid.* pp.110-111.

⁴¹⁵ Father Herbert Kelly letter to Dorothy L. Sayers, September 1937, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Two*, p.42.

significantly.⁴¹⁶ Their ensuing correspondence went on to form the basis of her thinking as expressed in *The Mind of the Maker*.

Zeal opened up many opportunities for Sayers not only to develop her ideas about the Trinity as a pattern and the foundation of all truthful creativity,⁴¹⁷ but also to become more directly involved in the world of Christian apologetics. Despite her protestations – “you know I am really a novelist and dramatist and not a Christian evangelist”⁴¹⁸ – she did want to convey her message in the most creative and plausible way possible. Sayers felt that this endeavour would be hindered if she were to become an official representative of the Christian church: “any imaginative treatment of the Christian faith comes with less force from anybody who has become an official apologist.” She argued that “the business of writers like myself is primarily to show rather than to exhort.”⁴¹⁹

Nonetheless, the play became an outlet for Sayers’ apologetic skills placing her alongside other Christian literary luminaries who became known for their faith. Sayers’ friend Maurice Reckitt commented at the time: “Such writers as T. S. Eliot, Middleton Murry, Charles Williams and Dorothy Sayers are listened to because to prophecy they add, in their different manners, the compulsive power of art, and an insight which only the artist can have.”⁴²⁰

⁴¹⁶ Father Herbert Kelly letter to Dorothy L. Sayers, September 1937: “I wonder if you recognise, or are interested in recognising, how closely your book images the principles of the Athanasian Creed – the two-fold necessity of faith in the Trinity of God, and the Incarnation?” in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Two*, p.42.

⁴¹⁷ In a letter to Father Herbert Kelly on 4 October 1937, Sayers described recognising the Trinity as a pattern with which various temporal created realities cohere. She began by “trying to work out a little picture of my own... of an earthly three-in-oneness which I know by experience to exist and which may therefore serve as an inadequate analogy of the Divine Three-in-Oneness.” Reynolds (ed.) *Letters Volume Two*, p.46.

⁴¹⁸ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to Dorothy Rowe, March 1939, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Two*, p.119.

⁴¹⁹ *ibid.*

⁴²⁰ Maurice B. Reckitt, *As it Happened: An Autobiography*, (London: Dent, 1941), p.279.

After the success of *Zeal* Sayers wrote a nativity play, *He That Should Come*, in 1938 for broadcast on the BBC. The reception of this play prompted the Director of Religious Broadcasting at the BBC, Dr. J. W. Welch, to write to Sayers in February 1940 inviting her to write a series of plays on the life of Christ for broadcast on Sundays in the Children's Hour. This resulted in *The Man Born to Be King* play cycle.⁴²¹

The Man Born to be King

These plays were written and sent to the BBC in sequence: *Kings in Judea*, about the birth of Jesus; *The King's Herald*, about John the Baptist and Jesus' calling of the first disciples; *A Certain Nobleman*, about the wedding at Cana and the healing of a child; *The Heirs to the Kingdom*, in which the friends and foes of Jesus discuss their ideas and motives; *The Bread of Heaven*, in which the teachings and miracles of Jesus are enacted; *The Feast of Tabernacles*, a set of short sequences leading up to Christ's Godhead being revealed; *The Light and the Life*, about Mary, Martha and Lazarus; *Royal Progress*, which contrasts the values of this world and the next and brings together the main characters of the Passion narrative Pilate, Caiaphas, Judas and Mary Magdalen; *The King's Supper*, about the last supper; *The Princes of this World*, about Christ's trials; *King of Sorrows*, about the crucifixion; *The King Comes to His Own*, a play about the resurrection. Broadcasting on the BBC took Sayers' works to a considerable audience, and significantly increased her influence in Britain. Sayers' plays also provided the national broadcaster with an opportunity to communicate its own "Christian" founding principles amidst the political turmoil of the early years of the Second World War.⁴²² A. N.

⁴²¹ There were twelve plays in all, each dramatizing an aspect of Christ's life from his birth through his public ministry to his death and resurrection.

⁴²² "The BBC did not interpret its task as the provision of entertainment alone; to supply entertainment by itself was thought of as the betrayal of trust. 'Education' in the broadest sense was thought of as an equally important objective." Asa Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom Volume 1 The Birth of*

Wilson comments: “Sayers’ religious plays had an enormous impact on the radio audiences of wartime England.” Radio was a relatively new medium of communication which Sayers adeptly co-opted for her uncompromising commitment to present Christian dogma as truth to as large an audience as possible. The apologetic impact of her work was largely due to the fact that she made “plausible, in a modern sense such scenes as Jesus walking on water or reappearing from the grave after three days.”⁴²³

Sayers accepted the commission to write plays for the radio with various conditions, including the proviso that she could script Christ actually speaking and using everyday language. Her conditions were accepted and she began work on the play. Dr. Welch later noted that Sayers took “immense pains... over the study and handling of her sources.”⁴²⁴

Sayers was commissioned to write for children “between the ages of seven and fourteen”⁴²⁵ but she was concerned not to over simplify her work. She commented: “Children have a disconcerting knack of not liking the things intended for their liking... you can’t generalize about children, except that talking-down is pretty well always fatal.”⁴²⁶ Sayers asked Dr. Welch if her trusted friend Val Gielgud could produce her plays, but the request was denied on the grounds that the plays were being broadcast from Bristol by the Children’s Hour Department

Broadcasting (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), p.8. Reith wrote in 1924: “I think it will be admitted by all, that to have exploited so great a scientific invention for the purpose and pursuit of entertainment alone would have been a prostitution of its powers and an insult to the character and intelligence of the people.” J.C.W. Reith, *Broadcast Over Britain* (London: Hodder and Stoughton 1925), p.17. The construction of Broadcasting House in 1932 and the inscription in the arch DEO OMNIPOTENTI ‘To God Almighty’ underlined the fact that whilst entertainment and public service were both integral to the output of the BBC, religion was also a stalwart component under the influence of Director General Lord Reith. Stobart wrote a few months before the Corporation was founded: “We began by assuming that we are living in a Christian land and that services were to be Christian and Catholic in the broadest sense.” Asa Briggs *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom Volume II The Golden Age of Wireless* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p.227.

⁴²³ A. N. Wilson, “Complete with spats”, *London Review of Books*, Vol. 15, No. 10, 27 May 1993, p.4.

⁴²⁴ J. W. Welch, Foreword to Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Man Born to be King: A Play Cycle on the Life of our Lord and Saviour JESUS CHRIST* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1969), p.9.

⁴²⁵ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to J. W. Welch, 18 February 1940, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Two*, p.146.

⁴²⁶ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to Rev. F. A. O’Neil and Rev. A. M. Stack, 21 March 1940, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Two*, p.156.

and so Derek McCulloch was agreed upon as the producer. In a letter to McCulloch, Sayers wrote that she had gathered from Dr. Welch that “one of the ideas is to catch adults in the net that we spread for the children, and that if that is so, then we shall have to get a little above the quite simple.”⁴²⁷ On 5 November 1940, Sayers sent off the first of the plays to Derek McCulloch, who was working in Glasgow for a few days and so the Assistant Director, Miss May E. Jenkin, wrote to Sayers about the play. Her letter enthused: “we have now all read it and let me say at once that we are quite delighted with it.” However, she went on to ask whether Sayers would mind the BBC making some changes as some of the speeches would be over the heads of children and some of the idiom was too modern. Sayers was incensed - she reacted with fury at the idea of a committee judging her work and she utterly rejected the suggestions. Her correspondence with Miss Jenkin, whom McCulloch supported, nearly caused the entire project to derail. Sayers adduced that her passionate commitment to the excellence of the artist’s work and the integrity of the craftsman was under threat.⁴²⁸ Sayers concluded that she could not work with McCulloch as a producer if he was going to try and edit her writing using a managed committee. She wrote:

you can reject the play, in which case the matter is closed; or you can accept it, in which case you must offer me another producer with whom I can deal on the usual terms, which are perfectly well understood among all people with proper theatrical experience... I am a professional playwright, and I must deal with professional people who understand where their appropriate spheres of action begin and end.⁴²⁹

Welch handed the play over to Val Gielgud to produce and Sayers was placated.⁴³⁰

⁴²⁷ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to Derek McCulloch, 11 October 1940, Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Two*, p.182.

⁴²⁸ Sayers wrote in a letter to Dr. Welch on 2 January 1941; “the writer’s duty to God is his duty to the work, and ... he may not submit to any dictate of authority which he does not sincerely believe to be to the good of the work... To be false to his work is to be false to the truth: All the truth of the craftsman is in his craft.”” In Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Two*, p.218.

⁴²⁹ Dorothy L. Sayers to Derek McCulloch, 28 November 1940, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Two*, p.202.

⁴³⁰ However, Miss Jenkin saw Sayers’ correspondence and was offended. She insisted that in the absence of McCulloch it would be her responsibility to produce the plays. On 23 December 1940, Sayers cancelled the contract and requested the return of the scripts. It was once more down to Welch to smooth things over, which he did and Val Gielgud was engaged as producer. For Sayers, these specifics of detail with regard to contract and direction played into her convictions about integrity and truth. The craftswoman wanted to be sure that the craft broadcast in her name was true to its creator. The specifics were an important part of the truthfulness of the whole. As a consequence, Sayers was perceived as ‘difficult’.

Sayers began work on the second play but further threats to the production came in the shape of external opponents to the potential of blasphemy being attached to the very idea of a play dramatising the life of Jesus. In the foreword to *The Man Born to be King*, Welch observed that: “the Corporation was bound to take notice of protests from listeners and of a question asked in the House of Commons.”⁴³¹ In response to the protests about blasphemy, a meeting of the Religious Advisory Committee of the BBC was called to advise on whether to proceed with broadcasting the plays. The committee was a group largely made up of men over the age of sixty who had made their careers in the church and rather surprisingly they recommended the Corporation go ahead with only a very minor proviso. Welch commented: “This was, for me, an unforgettable meeting and ought to go down in the annals of Christian cooperation.”⁴³²

The motive of Dr. Welch in broadcasting Sayers’ play cycle was clear: “Now the task of the Church in any age is to reveal Christ. It cannot do more, and it should not attempt less. To reveal Christ and to persuade men and women to respond to that truth is the whole task of the Christian Church.”⁴³³ Sayers was selected for the task on the basis that she had great ability as a Christian apologist. Her plays were commissioned with the expectation that Christian truth might be communicated to a vast array of people. The truth in this context was focused around Christ and the story of his life. Welch hoped that *The Man Born to be King* play cycle would:

chisel away the unreality which, for the majority, surrounds his person, might hurt some of the minority; yet the task was to destroy only the unnecessary and false, and so to release the true. Could we, for man today, and in the language of today, make Christ and his story live again? The answer lies in the plays printed in this book.⁴³⁴

⁴³¹ J. W. Welch, Foreword to Sayers, *TMBTBK*, p.10.

⁴³² *ibid.*

⁴³³ *ibid.* p.11.

⁴³⁴ *ibid.* p.12.

The result was that over two million people heard the plays. Sayers had reached a huge audience with her work, using story brought to life by drama. Welch commented that: “Miss Sayers has put the Christian Church in this country in her debt by making Our Lord – in her fine phrase – “really real” for so many of us.”⁴³⁵

An essential aspect of Sayers’ achievement with *The Man Born to be King* plays was her commitment to using vernacular language which had the effect of locating the story in the real world. She believed that writing for radio seemed “to present an admirable medium through which to break down the convention of unreality surrounding Our Lord’s person and might.”⁴³⁶

Sayers wanted to find an appropriate balance in her use of language so that the drama of the Christian story could come home to people in an accessible way without resorting to trite or hackneyed speech that might offend.⁴³⁷ An important factor in her use of language in the plays was the apologetic challenge presented by the public misconceptions about Christ and his story. Sayers realised that the wider British public conceived of Christ as a rarefied figure located in a folk story or morality tale as if:

Christ wasn’t born into history – He was born into the Bible (Authorised Version) – a place where nobody makes love, or gets drunk or cracks jokes, or talks slang, or cheats, or despises his neighbours... no wonder the story makes so little impression on the common man. It seems to have taken place in a world quite different from our own, - a world full of reverent people waiting about in polite attitudes for the fulfillment of prophecies.⁴³⁸

Sayers’ down to earth use of language in her plays and her decision to have the actor playing Christ speak using straightforward contemporary English without necessarily quoting directly

⁴³⁵ *ibid.* p.16.

⁴³⁶ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to Dr. J. W. Welch, 18 February 1940, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Two*, p. 146.

⁴³⁷ In a letter to Dr. J. W. Welch 18 February 1940, Sayers expressed this dilemma; “the difficulty is not really insuperable; it is just a question of choosing language which is neither slangy on the one hand, nor Wardour Street on the other.” in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Two*, p.147.

⁴³⁸ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to Father Taylor, 8 March 1942, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Two*, p.354.

from the gospels was a direct challenge to the cultural ambivalence towards the insipid views of Christ prevalent in the popular imagination. This decision to use modern language enabled Sayers to fulfil her intentions that: “our Life of Christ... should be handled, not liturgically or symbolically, but realistically and historically: “this is a thing that actually happened.””⁴³⁹ Indeed, Sayers also painted the characters as everyday people in the moments of their lives in between the incidents in which they were particularly mentioned in the gospels. Hauerwas and Wells note that: “the drama of *The Man Born to be King* forces the dramatist and the audience to face up to the humanity of the character, of the need to ponder what they were doing between appearances in the gospel text.”⁴⁴⁰ Sayers was trying to explore her ideas about truth through the medium of drama and she located the Christian story squarely in the sphere of everyday reality by using modern English.⁴⁴¹ Sayers was unprepared for the repercussions that were to follow.⁴⁴²

The public outcry against *The Man Born to be King* play cycle erupted before one of the plays had even been broadcast. The BBC had organised a press conference on 10 December 1941 to publicise the series. Dr. Welch addressed the journalists and Sayers read out a prepared statement about the plays addressing various aspects but focusing on the fact that Christ would be a character performed by an actor, and that modern English would be used. She was asked

⁴³⁹ Sayers, *TMBTBK*, p.17.

⁴⁴⁰ Hauerwas and Wells, *Exchanges of Grace*, p.41.

⁴⁴¹ Sayers’ use of contemporary English in her religious plays potentially had a wider cultural impact, paving the way for an acceptance amongst British Christians of various new English versions of the Bible supplanting the predominance of the Authorised Version. Thurmer comments: “It is difficult to realise, over fifty years later, both the force of the controversy and the impact of the language when heard. For many the spell of the Authorised Version was broken, and the widespread use of new translations began with the Knox New Testament (1945), the American Revised Standard Version (1946), and the New English Bible (initiated 1947). It would be too much to say that the Sayers plays produced this development; but they certainly helped to create the climate in which these versions flourished.” John Thurmer, ‘The Greatest Story, or from mystery to Mystery’, p.84.

⁴⁴² Dorothy L. Sayers letter to Dr. John Shirley, 16 January 1941: “I never before really believed in the apocryphal gentleman who said: ‘never mind the ‘ebrew and the Greek, give me the sacred English original’ – but he exists in enormous numbers”, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Two*, p.343.

to read out some examples of dialogue and did so. The newspapers reported this the next day with a degree of sensationalism; the *Daily Mail* had the headline “BBC “LIFE OF CHRIST” PLAY IN U.S. SLANG.” The Lord’s Day Observance Society and the Protestant Truth Society began to campaign against Sayers and her plays without having read them. The question of every-day modern language and the representation of Christ on the stage proved enormously controversial. But it is in such details that Sayers contended for her ideal of truth being located both in the specificities of a story or drama created by an author in a particular way and being grounded in the logical structure of the grand pattern. This question of the use of vernacular language was an undertaking that Sayers was absolutely committed to as the author of these particular plays.

Sayers was attacked by religious organisations for the very apologetic methodology she was hoping would enable the wider British public to consider creedal Christianity in a fresh light. Yet Sayers’ ability to articulate Christian truth creatively and relevantly was to become accepted by scholarship as one of her most significant contributions to the church. E. L. Mascall in *The Secularisation of Christianity* later observed:

Popular theological writing is one of the most difficult of all forms of communication and its practitioner needs to be careful and self-critical to a degree... I can vividly remember how impressed I was many years ago at the extreme trouble which that great Christian apologist Dorothy L. Sayers took in her popular writings on religion to ensure that what she was trying to express in contemporary idiom was the authentic teaching of Christianity and that the technique which she had worked out was neither ambiguous nor misleading.⁴⁴³

Sayers wanted the people who heard her plays on the radio to realise that the Christian story is not remote, but rather, it is truth that is accessible and germane to real life. She wrote: “God was executed by people painfully like us, in a society very similar to our own.... If you show

⁴⁴³ E. L. Mascall, *The Secularisation of Christianity* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1965), p.107.

people that, they are shocked. So they should be.”⁴⁴⁴ She defended the sense of surprise and consternation engendered in audiences who would hear Christ’s death represented on the radio: “If the mere representation of it has an air of irreverence, what is to be said about the deed?”⁴⁴⁵ Sayers hoped that the audiences who heard her plays would be disturbed out of thinking of Christianity as something “they know to the point of boredom... something that never actually happened, something that never looks to them remotely like anything that actually *happened*.”⁴⁴⁶ Her apologetic intention was to communicate truth by telling the story as it happened in history. She wrote: “My job, as I see it, is to present the thing, as best I can, as something that really did happen, as actually and unmistakably as *The Battle of Britain*”⁴⁴⁷

Sayers began her “Introduction” to the published collection of plays *The Man Born to be King*, by quoting Berdyaev: “Historical reality.... is above all a concrete and not an abstract reality”⁴⁴⁸ Sayers understood Christian truth and the historical evidences for Christ to be inextricably linked: “Jesus Christ is unique... He is the only God who has a date in history.”⁴⁴⁹ In her role as a playwright she wanted to take care to avoid preaching or moralising; her apologetic approach was narrative: “the dramatist.... Must set out, not to instruct but to show forth; not to point a moral but to tell a story.” She appeared to be conflicted – on the one hand wanting the Christian story to be appreciated and known, but on the other resisting the idea that she had any agenda “to do good.” She reflected:

But that was in fact not my object at all, though it was quite properly the object of those who commissioned the plays in the first place. My object was *to tell that story* to the best of my ability, within the medium at my disposal.⁴⁵⁰

⁴⁴⁴ Sayers, *TMBTBK*, p.23.

⁴⁴⁵ *ibid.*

⁴⁴⁶ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to Father Taylor, 8 March 1942, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Two*, p.355. Accordingly, in the introduction to Sayers, *TMBTBK* p.25, she asks the question: “...are we sufficiently disturbed by this extremely disturbing story?”

⁴⁴⁷ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to Father Taylor, 8 March 1942, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Two*, p.355.

⁴⁴⁸ Sayers, *TMBTBK*, p.17.

⁴⁴⁹ *ibid.* p.20.

⁴⁵⁰ *ibid.*

Sayers was frustrated at the thought that her work might not be judged on its own merits as a piece of art. She addressed the confusion she thought prevailed in the minds of both religious and non-religious interested parties with an appeal to the universality of Christ's truth:

The idea that religious plays are not to be judged by the proper standard of drama derives from a narrow and lop-sided theology which will not allow that all truth – including the artist's truth – is in Christ, but persists in excluding the Lord of Truth from His own dominions.⁴⁵¹

Sayers was returning here to her deeply held convictions about integrity and work, and she was determined that a religious subject matter should not cloud the clarity of the principles at stake.⁴⁵² A religious theme should not be an excuse for poor workmanship, but neither should theological ideology be allowed to become preeminent over story:

Accordingly, it is the business of the dramatist not to subordinate the drama to the theology, but to approach the job of truth-telling from his own end, and trust the theology to emerge undistorted from the dramatic presentation of the story.⁴⁵³

Sayers saw no conflict between truth and story, they flowed to and from each other. In fact, story revealed and contained truth. Theology, for Sayers, could be made known through the drama, poetry and specificity of story. She wrote: "the history and theology of Christ are one thing: His life is theology in action, and the drama of His life is dogma shown as dramatic action."⁴⁰⁴ There was no conflict between theology and the art of story writing in her mind.⁴⁰⁵

On the contrary, assuming that theology emanated from story, revealing poetic and specific truth, Sayers also envisaged theology as a kind of pattern, providing overarching structural integrity for her writing: "From the purely dramatic point of view the theology is enormously

⁴⁵¹ *ibid.*

⁴⁵² "All good writing springs from the kindled imagination after that, it is a matter of technical skill, and either of these is useless without the other. This is always so, and a religious purpose will not make it otherwise." Dorothy L. Sayers, 'Playwrights are not Evangelists', p.62.

⁴⁵³ Sayers, *TMBTBK*, p.20.

advantageous, because it locks the whole structure into a massive intellectual coherence.”⁴⁰⁶

In referring to “structure” and “coherence” here, Sayers is invoking the concept she sometimes refers to as “pattern.” Sayers saw no conflict between story and pattern; they were complementary and necessarily overlapped. Her big-picture concept of pattern within which truth coheres and the idea that the story of the incarnation is both a one-off event in history and a grounding for the archetypal pattern for reality:

This story of the life and murder and resurrection of God-in-Man is not only the symbol and epitome of the relations of God and man throughout time; it is also a series of events that took place at a particular point *in* time.⁴⁵⁴

In the seventh and eighth plays of the *Man Born to be King*, Sayers has the character of Lazarus directly articulate her theory of pattern. The seventh play, *The Light and the Life* explores Jesus’ raising of Lazarus from the dead. In the introductory notes to the play Sayers explained her thinking:

The play represents two sharp contrasts: (1) That between the will to life and the will to death. Jesus, Mary, Martha, Jacob, each in their own way, accept life. Lazarus rejects it and has to find the will to live by passing through death and finding life there... (2) That between trust and mistrust. On the one hand Lazarus, whose attainment of the will to life is conditioned solely by his personal recognition of and faith in Jesus... On the other, we have the mistrustful suspicion of Judas.⁴⁵⁵

The centrality of Jesus is unequivocal. Sayers wanted her audience to consider the impact of recognising who Christ is regardless of one’s predisposition to be religious or not, or to want life rather than death. In fact, it is clear that the Lazarus character is disenchanted with life. In the opening scene Mary asks Jesus about this:

MARY: “But Lazarus is always sad in the autumn. Rabbi, tell my brother he should be merrier.”

LAZARUS: “In a world like this, what is there to be merry about? There is much labour and great disquiet, fear and a little trembling laughter. The most a man can hope for is tranquility, and perhaps even that is too much to expect.”⁴⁵⁶

⁴⁵⁴ *ibid.* p.21.

⁴⁵⁵ *ibid.* p.182.

⁴⁵⁶ *ibid.* pp.186-7.

Lazarus is a man whom Mary describes as “quiet and melancholy – my grave elder brother.”⁴⁵⁷

At this point Lazarus epitomises a sense that life leaves him indifferent – he is certainly a long way from any kind of religious confidence or zeal. Scene 4 is juxtaposed with this. When Lazarus stumbles out of the tomb alive exclaiming, “Lord Jesus!”, the following dialogue underscores the transformation that has happened:

MARY: You are smiling – you are laughing – you are alive!

LAZARUS (*joyfully*): Yes, I am alive!

MARTHA: Where have you been?

LAZARUS: With life.

MARY: Do you know who called you back?

LAZARUS: Life. He is here and he has never left me.

JESUS: Loose him and lead him home.⁴⁵⁸

The Lazarus who describes himself as “rather a depressing companion”⁴⁵⁹ and who held on to life with “only one hand”⁴⁶⁰ is now very much alive. And despite having been dead for four days he describes his death as being “with life” because Jesus never left him. The statement of the first mourner, “Alas no man is strong enough to deliver the world from death”,⁴⁶¹ has been subverted by the drama. An accepted truth has been shattered by the incarnate Christ entering history and involving himself in the specificity of an ordinary, unexcitable man’s story. How can the Lazarus who has this ‘will to life’ be harmonised with the Lazarus who exhibits ‘the will to death’? Surely only as a result of a tangible intervention – only if something true has actually happened. In Sayers’ work, as story was incarnated on the stage, such questions brought her theological insights to life.

⁴⁵⁷ *ibid.* p.187.

⁴⁵⁸ *ibid.* p.201.

⁴⁵⁹ *ibid.* p.188.

⁴⁶⁰ *ibid.* p.187.

⁴⁶¹ *ibid.* p.200.

In these questions Sayers was moving her audience to Lazarus' climactic statements about pattern in the subsequent eighth play, *Royal Progress*. In her notes introducing this play Sayers explains that a "stupid woman" will ask him what it is like to see death and he will try "to explain something of it; after all, she too has her place in the "pattern".⁴⁶² Sayers goes on to explain her theological intention:

What Lazarus has seen in death is the identity of Christ the Creator ("the Weaver") with Christ in His mystical body ("the Loom" of Creation), and the identity of both with Christ Incarnate – but there is no theological language for this...⁴⁶³

Through enacting the story, drama enables the audience to grasp theological truth in a way that transcends the language of prose. Clemson comments: "Drama is... concerned with the working out of human existence. This working out is involving; drama draws audiences into participatory and creative response."⁴⁶⁴ And for Sayers the resonance of her approach as a playwright and the work itself is inextricably linked with her concept of pattern. The questioning woman after all has a place in the pattern. It is precisely because humans have been designed by the Creator to operate and think within a pattern that they can recognise patterns of truth and resonate with the Author and Designer when they "see" his handiwork. Sayers recalled the insights of another writer to emphasise this insight:

"I felt when I first saw Him (in a vision) as if there were some old and forgotten connexion between us, as though He had said, but not in words, 'I am He through whom you were created'. I felt... My old love came back to me; I knew I had been his before."
– (The Sadhu Sundar Singh.)⁴⁶⁵

⁴⁶² *ibid.* p.209.

⁴⁶³ *ibid.* p.209.

⁴⁶⁴ Frances Clemson, unpublished PHD *The Theology of Dorothy L. Sayers' Dramatic Works: Dramatic Performance and the 'continual showing forth of God's act in history.'* University of Exeter, 2012. p.66.

⁴⁶⁵ Sayers, *TMBTBK*, pp.209-10. Sadhu Sundar Singh was an Indian convert from Sikhism to Christianity in 1905 who became known for his teachings using stories and his mission work in India. See Sadhu Sundar Singh, *At The Masters Feet* (London: Fleming H. Revel Company, 1922) and *Meditations on Various Aspects of the Spiritual Life* (London: MacMillan and Co. Limited, 1926).

In Scene I, Lazarus is asked by the '3rd Woman' during dinner: "What does it *feel* like to be dead?" His reply eloquently expresses Sayers' growing intuitions about what she called pattern:

LAZARUS: *This* life is like weaving at the back of the loom. All you see is the crossing of the threads. In *that* life you go round to the front and see the wonder of the pattern.

3RD WOMAN: What sort of pattern is it?

LAZARUS: Beautiful and terrible. And – how can I tell you? – it is *familiar*. You have known it from all eternity. For He that made it is the form of all things, Himself both the weaver and the loom.⁴⁶⁶

The peculiarities of this life - "the crossing of the threads" - make coherent sense when seen in the light of "that life" and the pieces of the picture do fit together meaningfully into an intelligible whole. Sayers acknowledged that the structure or pattern cannot be easily described using language, she commented: "there is no theological language for this" and her Lazarus character conveys this hesitancy with his question: "how can I tell you?" Yet despite this difficulty in articulating this concept precisely, it is enacted everywhere and subsequently it is "familiar" when seen.

The difficulty of perceiving God in the world is emphasised by the Lazarus drama precisely as Sayers articulates her concept of pattern. Pattern is not a simplistic solution; in fact, Sayers' empathy with the messiness of life, the "crossing of the threads," and the lack of clarity of thinking that this inevitably entailed ran contrary to her natural instincts. Sayers' *modus operandi* was to be habitually direct, clear and dismissive of "mess." Yet here we detect a greater nuance in her thinking: pattern is not easily described or discerned; Sayers herself was reaching for the concept and the words to describe it.

Lazarus' attempts at resolving this messiness for the onlookers and audience culminate in his explanation of pattern. But his audience are left with a question – is this idea of pattern

⁴⁶⁶ *ibid.* p.214.

something one must first accept in order to make sense of reality, or is it a conclusion one comes to on the basis of experience? Lazarus has been given the experience of resurrection through which he can then reinterpret life. He has been around to the front of the loom and seen the “wonder of the pattern,” but where does the audience stand? The audience is still at the back of the loom. In fact, this is emphasised in the very next portion of dialogue in the play, as Sayers immediately followed her dramatisation of the story of Lazarus taken from John 11:38-44 with Jesus telling the parable of the rich man and Lazarus recorded in Luke 16:19-31. The audience has just observed as Lazarus was raised from the dead and then watched him explain his experiences to a group of disinterested people. In Jesus’ parable when the rich man in hell begs Father Abraham to send someone back from the dead to warn his relatives, Father Abraham responds: “Your brothers have their Bibles. All they have to do is pay attention to what Moses and the Prophets say,” and the rich man replies: “Yes of course, but if somebody went to them from the dead, they really *would* listen.”⁴⁶⁷ The audience is challenged both by Lazarus’ hearers (“I made up my mind to behave exactly as though nothing has happened” or “I daresay the whole thing’s been exaggerated”),⁴⁶⁸ and by Jesus’ conclusion: “If they will not heed Moses and the Prophets, they will never be persuaded, even though a man should rise from the dead.”⁴⁶⁹ Sayers’ selection of these two Lazarus stories and her positioning of them in such a way as to explore how truth is discovered, presented her with an ideal dramatic context within which her ideas about pattern could begin to be articulated.

Lazarus points us to a Divine Author or Producer of the pattern who actually turns out to involve Himself directly in the substance of His creation: “he that made it is the form of all things.” His very being is the ultimate pattern to which all patterns owe their existence and so

⁴⁶⁷ *ibid.* p.215.

⁴⁶⁸ *ibid.* p.214.

⁴⁶⁹ *ibid.* p.215.

He is present both in the big picture (as the weaver) and in the peculiarities of detail (in the loom and the threads). Sayers was arguing that when a person perceives the divine Creator, the God described in the Christian creeds, that person will recognise Him and the pattern of His existence in the logical structures of rational thought as well as in the details and drama of life. Clemson writes: “the maker of the pattern is the pattern, and, indeed... the pattern is not so much a summation of parts as it is a presence in particulars.”⁴⁷⁰

Thus far in her writing Sayers had alluded to her concept of pattern and her work appears to have been shaped by her intuitions about structure and archetype, but here we see pattern directly articulated by a central character in her plays for the first time in this way. Sayers’ radio plays about the life of Christ provided her with a conducive literary context within which she could explore the apologetic potential of truth, story and pattern. The process of writing these plays accelerated her emergence as a Christian apologist beyond the medium of drama as she found herself being invited to speak about Christianity all over the country.⁴⁷¹ By the time she came to publish the plays and write the introduction to *The Man Born to be King*, Sayers was regularly publishing and speaking about directly apologetic subjects.⁴⁷² Her religious plays form a significant part of her apologetic canon, and although they were written for the general public and critics feared that her use of modern language might in some way undermine the church, the plays brought the ideas and dogmas of Christianity to the attention of the cultured as well as the masses. Sayers reflected on this in her article, “Sacred Plays”:

Today the most common criticism of the work of such writers as, say, T. S. Eliot, Charles Williams, Ronald Duncan – and even of C. S. Lewis and me... is that it is rigidly dogmatic, harsh, disquieting, and aridly intellectual to the point of obscurity.

⁴⁷⁰ Clemson, *Sayers’ Dramatic Works*, p.39.

⁴⁷¹ C. S. Lewis greatly admired *The Man Born to be King* play cycle; “For my own part, I have re-read it in every Holy week since it first appeared, and never re-read it without being deeply moved.” ‘A Panegyric for Dorothy L. Sayers.’ In C. S. Lewis, *On Stories*, p.93.

⁴⁷² In the Introduction to *TMBTBK*, Sayers recommends that people read Frank Morrison, *Who Moved the Stone?* (London: Faber and Faber, 1930) – a historical apologetic work for the Resurrection of Jesus. Sayers, *TMBTBK*, p.34 and again p.36.

Christianity once despised as soothing syrup for low-brows, seems to be in danger of being feared and hated as a superior vintage for high-brows.⁴⁷³

Sayers' decision to produce plays that would convey truth through the story of Christian dogma incarnated on the stage and the radio enabled her to articulate her ideas about pattern and in turn set her on a path of communicating Christian doctrine to a wide audience. In *The Mind of the Maker* Sayers would go on to develop this concept of pattern further with relation to the Trinitarian being of God and his creativity. In the next chapter this thesis will be examining that text closely, but here in *Zeal of Thy House*, *The Man Born to be King* play cycle, and indeed her other religious plays we see that Sayers found drama to be a conducive medium for inviting her audience into a deeper understanding of her theological insight and the framework that shaped her own thinking thus far.

⁴⁷³ Dorothy L. Sayers, "Sacred Plays 1", p.22.

Chapter Six

The Mind of the Maker

Dorothy L. Sayers finished writing her most overtly theological work, *The Mind of the Maker*, in 1941. Britain was fully embroiled in the Second World War and Sayers played her part in the war effort, offering her services as a writer to the Ministry of Information,⁴⁷⁴ and writing various articles and numerous letters to her many correspondents. *The Mind of the Maker* was to be part of a wider project called “Bridgeheads” conceived by Sayers and some of her friends.⁴⁷⁵ The aim was to give a rational Christian perspective on the big issues facing the nation – political, social and economic. The series never took off but *The Mind of the Maker*, which, as Thurmer comments, was “dashed off amidst much other work,”⁴⁷⁶ was an immediate success and is still in print today. C. S. Lewis commented that: “much of her most valuable thought about writing was embodied in *The Mind of the Maker*: a book which is still too little read.”⁴⁷⁷ Sayers wrote to J. H. Oldham in September 1939:

I don't think it's going to be enough merely to keep the Christian flag flying; I fancy that now or never is the time to bring it out and carry it ostentatiously down the street. In a sense Christianity is in a good position – even if it is only that of being able to say “I told you so.” Materialism is dead, and the people who have been busy for the last fifty years secularising everything are now thoroughly frightened of the results when they see the idea being carried to its full conclusion. Even the intellectuals, whom the

⁴⁷⁴ She was invited to serve on the Author's Planning Committee of the Ministry of Information whose brief was to advise on how various authors might be put to work if war were to break out. Sayers was tasked with reporting on two secret pamphlets but the Ministry of Information found her difficult to work with and ended the association. Barbara Reynolds, *Dorothy L. Sayers: Her Life and Soul* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1993), p.295.

⁴⁷⁵ “Bridgeheads” was advertised as “a series of books” responding to the intellectual and spiritual consequences of the “increasingly specialised, analytical, and disintegrated” modern world. Dorothy L. Sayers, *Why Work?* (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd.), p.23. Sayers wrote to Dr. Oldham 2 October 1939, explaining: “We are trying to get together a little group of people who will write, lecture, etc., on anything that comes to hand... to set forth in the accompanying expression of our common aims and beliefs... Our idea is that we should each and all get our stuff published as far as possible through our usual channels and not call ourselves anything in particular.” The group was mixed: “Of the three of us who started in, one is R. C., the other C. of E. and the third rather inclined to be anti-organised-religion of any kind, so that we can scarcely be called sectarian.” Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Two*, p.138.

⁴⁷⁶ John Thurmer, *Reluctant Evangelist: Papers on the Christian Thought of Dorothy L. Sayers* (Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 1996), p.1.

⁴⁷⁷ C.S. Lewis, *On Stories and Other Essays on Literature* (London: Harcourt, 1982, first published 1966), p.92.

Church was foolish enough to lose, seem to be wavering... I do think it is necessary to bring the statement of Christian doctrine into some sort of relation with reality.⁴⁷⁸

The question as to how far Sayers' Britain could be considered to be a "Christian" country is of some importance here. Historian Hugh McLeod wrote of Britain in the early 1900s that: "Whilst most did admit to some kind of religious belief, there was a general realisation that they lived in times when Christian orthodoxies were under widespread challenge."⁴⁷⁹ Weber and Marx's analysis has been used to portray the first half of the twentieth century as a time of slow, terminal decline for Christianity. This approach was best articulated by the social historian Alan D. Gilbert in *The Making of Post-Christian Britain* examining statistical evidence of participation in Christian services by British people. Whilst acknowledging that no culture could ever be entirely religious or entirely secular, Gilbert sets out to demonstrate that religion, which he defines as: "any system of values, beliefs, norms, and related symbols and rituals arising from attempts by individuals and social groups to effect certain ends, whether in this world or in any future world, by means wholly or partly supernatural,"⁴⁸⁰ is diametrically opposed to secularism. Gilbert defined secularism as a "social and cultural process" emancipating the thoughts, values and understandings of a people "from assumptions of human dependence on supernatural agencies or influences."⁴⁸¹ As a society becomes increasingly modernised, mechanised and industrialised Gilbert suggests that it is inevitable that it becomes increasingly secular. Analysing Gilbert, Thomas Heyck writes: "His thesis then is that the decline of Christianity in Britain and 'the emergence of a complex urban industrial society' have been causally related."⁴⁸²

⁴⁷⁸ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to Dr. J. H. Oldham, 10 September 1939, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters, Volume Two*, p.133.

⁴⁷⁹ Hugh McLeod, *Religion and Society in England, 1850-1914* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1996), p.176.

⁴⁸⁰ Alan D. Gilbert, *The Making of Post-Christian Britain* (London: Longman, 1980), p.5.

⁴⁸¹ *ibid.* p.9.

⁴⁸² Thomas William Heyck, "The Decline of Christianity in Twentieth-Century Britain" *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, 28:3 (1996): 437-453.

However, the publication of Callum Brown's *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularization 1800-2000*⁴⁸³ caused an upheaval in how theologians and historians had come to understand the place of the church in twentieth-century British society. Brown directly challenged the theory of secularisation. Before Brown, the general consensus was that an inevitable process of secularisation took hold in Britain after the Enlightenment and throughout the Victorian and Edwardian ages, so that after two World Wars and the emergence of a new world, there was a predictable and drastic drop in church attendance and Christian adherence. The 1960s was the culmination of a long drawn out, inevitable, terminal decline in Christianity. However, Brown points out that the precise era of Sayers' prominence as a Christian communicator, the 1940s and 50s, seems to contradict this consensus:

During the later 1940s and first half of the 1950s, organised Christianity experienced the greatest per annum growth in church membership, Sunday School enrolment, Anglican confirmations and Presbyterian recruitment of its baptised constituency since the eighteenth century.⁴⁸⁴

Indeed, although Sayers spoke of the ignorance and nominalism of many Christians, the statistics indicate that the late 1940s and 1950s in particular were a time of flourishing for many churches. Callum Brown's thesis is that contrary to the view of many social historians that there was an inevitable gradual process of secularisation post the Enlightenment in Britain, what actually occurred was a resurgence of religion in the Victorian, Edwardian and even the post Second World War era until the 1960s. Sayers' prominence as a Christian writer and communicator occurred precisely in this era. Brown argues that statistical church attendance, latent religiosity, records of confirmations and baptisms and the religious engagement with national cultural high points such as the Coronation and the dedication of war memorials

⁴⁸³ Callum Brown *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularization 1800-2000* (London: Routledge, 2001).

⁴⁸⁴ *ibid.* p.172.

cumulatively point to the established place of religion in British society.⁴⁸⁵ It is in this broader religious context that Sayers set out to write theological prose for lay people.

The Mind of the Maker, as a part of the wider Bridgeheads vision, began to take shape following the success of Sayers' play, *Zeal of Thy House*, and its subsequent publication in June 1937 by Gollanz. Sayers had embarked upon a correspondence with a clergyman called Father Kelly. Kelly was particularly taken with the final speech of the archangel Michael in *Zeal*, which articulated an early form of Sayers' Trinitarian analogy of creative work as Idea, Energy and Power. He wrote to Sayers asking her:

I wonder if you recognise, or are interested in recognising, how closely your book images the principles of the Athanasian Creed - the two-fold necessity of faith in the Trinity of God, and the Incarnation?⁴⁸⁶

The ensuing correspondence was to help Sayers formulate and then deliberate over her Trinitarian ideas in a way that significantly influenced her writing during the war period and in particular her book, *The Mind of the Maker*.

In her preface, Sayers explained that she was attempting to simply provide a commentary to the creeds of the church. In her view these creeds were not mere "speculation" about truth but were written with the purpose of "finding a formula to define experienced truth under pressure of misapprehension and criticism."⁴⁸⁷ *The Mind of the Maker* is predicated on Sayers' conviction that the Christian doctrine of the Trinity provided a foundation for truth, reality and

⁴⁸⁵ See R. Currie et al., *Churches and Churchgoers: Patterns of Church Growth in the British Isles since 1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), Table B1, pp.167-168, and Notes, p. 168. http://www.brin.ac.uk/wp-content/documents/Table-6-10-CofE-Baptisms-SunSch-Confes-1872-1970_000.xls (Accessed 17 April 2013.) Brown also advocates the idea of what he calls "discursive Christianity," a more personal religious faith across British society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, unquantifiable by statistical attendance in church, but of which he sees a good deal of inferential evidence. See Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain*, pp.12-3 and pp.115-4.

⁴⁸⁶ Herbert Kelly letter to Dorothy L. Sayers late September 1937 in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Two*, p.42.

⁴⁸⁷ Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (London: Continuum, 2005, First Published London: Methuen, 1941), p.3.

human creativity. Furthermore, God in his Trinitarian being is recognisably real for human beings since his reality is reflected in the specifics of humanity's known experience and in particular in the sphere of creative art. Sayers argued that a perceptible tri-fold pattern, constituting a framework that makes sense of everything, underlies reality. In *The Mind of the Maker* she set out to demonstrate how this pattern was peculiarly reflected in a tri-part specific process that she personally knew well – the work of an author and of human creativity more generally. She wrote to a correspondent in 1940:

I am writing a short book which has some bearing on the subject, (the Trinity) from the point of view of the creative artist, who keeps a kind of “working model” of the Trinity inside his own mind, forming a useful analogy to the Great Trinity that created the world.⁴⁸⁸

The central paradigm of *The Mind of the Maker*, drawn from Michael's final speech in *The Zeal of Thy House*, is that the creative work of any human being, but in this case specifically the creative writer, is recognisably: “an earthly trinity to match the heavenly.”⁴⁸⁹ Sayers elucidates this trinity as being made up of the Idea, the Energy or Activity and the Power. For the creative writer the Idea of a work of fiction exists in the writer's mind, and as such is already in one sense the whole work of fiction. The Idea is made known to the writer and to others by the Energy or Activity, which is the process of writing the book, its physical incarnation. The Idea is revealed in the Energy through the working of the Power, which is the effect of the reading and the response to the book. This creative trinity is a kind of pattern, a structure by which truth can be seen and known. Ultimately it points beyond itself to a greater pattern with which it coheres, the Trinitarian God himself.

⁴⁸⁸ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to D. G. Jarvis, 18 October 1940, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Two*, p.185.

⁴⁸⁹ Sayers, *Mind*, p.28

In the introduction to *The Mind of the Maker*, Sayers explained that she was not attempting a work of personal religious belief. Although she would go on to argue from her own experience, she was intending to offer “a study of the creative mind” based upon the statements of the Christian creeds. In a letter to Maurice Reckitt in May 1941, she reflected on what she had been trying to achieve and called *The Mind of the Maker*: “a sort of exercise in Applied Theology.”⁴⁹⁰ This term did not entail an emotional component for Sayers. Indeed, she intended to demonstrate that Christian doctrine was not a matter of feeling, opinion, fancy or speculation: “It is not my invention, and its truth or falsehood cannot be affected by any opinions of mine.”⁴⁹¹ Neither should statements about God be “arbitrary mystifications irrelevant to human life and thought.”⁴⁹² *The Mind of the Maker* was an attempt to make a rational connection between human experience and the reality of the divine. Sayers’ “commentary” might also be described as an apologetic interpretation of the evidence of human experience for a Creator.⁴⁹³ In a letter to a correspondent following the publication of *The Mind of the Maker*, she articulated her broader intuition about the need for Christians to apply their knowledge of the universe to their understanding of the divine:

The totalitarians do at least know what they worship and that is their advantage; but Christians have too weakly acquiesced in a vague religiosity and the worship of nothing in particular. We have been so anxious to avoid the charge of dogmatism and heresy hunting that we have rather lost sight of the idea that Christianity is supposed to be an interpretation of the universe.⁴⁹⁴

It was on the basis of *The Man Born to be King* and *The Mind of the Maker* that the Archbishop of Canterbury Dr. William Temple had written to Sayers “in recognition of what I regard as

⁴⁹⁰ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to Maurice B. Reckitt, 8 May 1941, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Two*, p.256.

⁴⁹¹ Sayers, Preface to *Mind*, p.4.

⁴⁹² *ibid.* p.3.

⁴⁹³ Although Sayers opens the Preface with the words: “This book is not an apology for Christianity,” Sayers, Preface to *Mind*, p.1.

⁴⁹⁴ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to The Provost of Derby, 21 March 1940, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Two*, p.158.

the great value of your work”⁴⁹⁵ asking if she would allow him to confer upon her the Degree of Doctor of Divinity. When Sayers wrote back declining the Doctorate she alluded to her own self-doubt in her letter to the Archbishop:

I should feel better about it if I were a more convincing kind of Christian. I am never quite sure whether I really am one, or whether I have only fallen in love with an intellectual pattern.⁴⁹⁶

In *The Mind of the Maker* Sayers wanted to set out the ‘intellectual pattern’ that she regarded as being of central importance to Christian doctrine in particular, reflecting on the creative potential of the doctrine of the Trinity. She took an Augustinian approach to her subject for the time, focusing upon the doctrine of the Trinity primarily as an analogy.

Sayers’ Trinitarian analogy articulated in *The Mind of the Maker* is of interest within the wider theological debates of the twentieth-century around the place of analogy in Christian theology, largely associated with the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar.⁴⁹⁷ Sayers’ and von Balthasar’s concepts of analogy are entirely different since dissimilarity between God and humanity is crucial for von Balthasar. He emphasised the contention of the Fourth Lateran Council 1215 that: “Whatever similarity there may be between the creature and God, the dissimilarity is always greater.”⁴⁹⁸ For von Balthasar analogical theology should emphasise dissemblance between the divine and the human:

⁴⁹⁵ Archbishop William Temple letter to Dorothy L. Sayers, August 1943, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters, Volume Two*, p.428.

⁴⁹⁶ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to Archbishop William Temple, 7 September 1943, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Two*, p.429.

⁴⁹⁷ Frances Clemson explores this twentieth-century discussion of the theological concept of “analogy” with reference to pneumatology in particular in her unpublished PhD *The Theology of Dorothy L. Sayers’ Dramatic Works: Dramatic Performance and the ‘continual showing forth of God’s act in history.’* University of Exeter, 2012. Clemson examines Hans Urs von Balthasar’s *Theo-drama: Dramatic Theory*, trans. Graham Harrison, 5 vols. (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1988-1998), and Ben Quash, *Theology and the Drama of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁴⁹⁸ This formula does not appear in the Doctrinal Decree of the Council (called the Lateran Creed), but in a second section devoted to the errors of Abbott Joachim. See <http://www.ewtn.com/library/councils/lateran4.htm>, accessed 26 May 2017.

The point of all this dialectic is first and foremost to make clear that no neutral, common ‘concept’ of being can span the realities of both God and creature; the analogy of an ever-greater dissimilarity stands in the way, preventing all conceptualization of the fact and the way they are.⁴⁹⁹

However, Sayers’ very instinct to explore the Christian doctrine of the Trinity analogically, despite her lack of academic theological credentials, places her work within a broader theological landscape of the twentieth-century wherein the analogical mode was beginning to be deployed once again.

In *The Mind of the Maker* Sayers references Thomism’s invocation of “analogy” as a legitimate means of discussing the actions of God.⁵⁰⁰ However, Sayers did not intend to focus her energies upon describing what God is like, instead she was concerned with demonstrating that human experience “fits” into the pattern of a Trinitarian theology. This is perhaps where her professional experience as a popular writer rather than a theoretical theologian was an advantage. She could think towards God from the perspective of human experience and hence “analogy” was a natural tool in her hand. In her work Sayers was attempting to build a bridge of understanding between the realm of human stories or experience and divine truth. Sayers drew on her own story, her literary experience as a creative writer, in order to build such a bridge. She was seeking to demonstrate that the creativity of the human writer is analogous with a specifically Christian understanding of the nature of the divine. She expected that having established the correspondence of human creativity with the Trinitarian God of Christian faith, this would lead to the natural apologetic conclusion that God is the unifying point of all that exists:

... the Trinitarian structure which can be shown to exist in the mind of man and in all his works is, in fact, the integral structure of the universe, and corresponds, not by

⁴⁹⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy: The Universe According to Maximus the Confessor*, translated Brian E. Daley, S. J. (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1988), p. 89.

⁵⁰⁰ For example, “All language about God must, as St. Thomas Aquinas pointed out, necessarily be analogical.” Sayers, *Mind*, p.17.

pictorial imagery but by a necessary uniformity of substance, with the nature of God, in whom all that is exists.⁵⁰¹

In *The Mind of the Maker*, Sayers' hitherto emerging instincts about the importance of an essential synthesis in reality and her desire to discover a cohesive unity or "pattern" behind the specificities of life and experience are explored theologically with a focus on the Christian doctrine of the Trinity as the ultimate "pattern". However, Sayers was not interested in the Trinity as a theoretical pattern, she was determined to connect her concepts of ontological truth and her instincts about the essential unity and synthesis of reality in God with the particular stories and experiences of human life.

Although Sayers begins *The Mind of the Maker* with a claim that "This book is not an apology for Christianity", it is noticeable that she did in fact attempt to make a connection between the realm of human experience of creativity and the notion that the God of the Christian creeds actually exists in Trinitarian form. Sayers' letters reveal that although she had not set out to write a work of Christian apologetics, *The Mind of the Maker* was popularly received as such with some commentators apparently surprised that a writer of Sayers' success and stature should be writing persuasively about God.⁵⁰² In response to a letter from a reader of *The Mind of the Maker* Sayers wrote with a tinge of exasperation:

I am weary of this evil and adulterous generation, with its monstrous deification of insignificant personalities. If a thing is not true in itself, the fact that I say it will not make it any truer; nor is it any addition to God that a popular novelist should be so obliging as to approve of Him.⁵⁰³

⁵⁰¹ Sayers, *Mind*, p.16.

⁵⁰² This is perhaps a reflection on the paucity of intellectual rigour in the church. Crystal Downing comments in *Writing Performances*, that Sayers herself argued that: "if the structure or "intellectual pattern" of Christianity coheres through the ages, despite self-serving appropriations made by its followers... it must be true." p.128.

⁵⁰³ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to The Rev. Dom. R. Russell, 28 October 1941, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters, Volume Two*, p.316.

Upon publication of *The Mind of the Maker in 1941*, Sayers replied to another correspondent, setting out her conviction that eternal truth is reflected in the observable law, reason and design of the universe. Despite her protestations, it appears that Sayers was actively advocating a rational defense of Christian faith.

...orthodox Christianity... purports to be a rational explanation of the universe. All the stuff about faith being opposed to reason is misleading: Christianity is rooted in reason, and the first thing it requires anybody to believe is that the universe is intended to, and does, make sense. This is, in a way, the only act of pure faith that it demands: the steadfast conviction that human experience does somehow correspond to eternal truth.⁵⁰⁴

This universe that ‘makes sense’ was itself a reflection of the rational creator and part of a broader belief on the part of Sayers that human experience could be shown to be part of a structured coherent pattern, which was ontologically rooted in the divine.

The *Mind of the Maker* received a mixed reception, with *The Spectator* repudiating a perceived arrogance in Sayers’ use of her own experience of writing her books whilst discussing theology.⁵⁰⁵ The *Commonweal* dubbed her efforts “dubious and obscure”.⁵⁰⁶ The Roman Catholic reviewers in *The Tablet*, *The Dublin Review*, and *Downside Review* were fairly positive about Sayers’ work while wary of her eschewing of Roman Catholic theological conventions.⁵⁰⁷ Others have been rapturously positive. Susan Howatch writes in an introduction to the 1994 edition:

Her great lay contemporaries in the Church of England were T. S. Eliot, C. S. Lewis and Charles Williams, but none of them wrote a book like *The Mind of the Maker*. In

⁵⁰⁴ Dorothy L. Sayers unpublished letter to Eng. R. W. Wordley, RNPS, 20 April 1941, Wade, DLS Letters. Folder 21/59.

⁵⁰⁵ “It is a dangerous analogy and it is not made less dangerous by Miss Sayers’ very personal approach and the importance she obviously attaches to her own work.” Anon. Review of *The Mind of the Maker*, *Spectator*, 167 (22 August 1941): 190.

⁵⁰⁶ Riggs T. Lawrasan, untitled review, *Commonweal* XXXV, (27 March 1942): 572.

⁵⁰⁷ Conlan Thomas M., untitled review in *Dublin Review*, CCXII (January 1943): 87-89. “This artistic approach to the doctrine of the Blessed Trinity is skillfully and entertainingly indicated by Miss Sayers. But it has its dangers in proportion to its value, and it cannot be said that the author has avoided them. It is hardly carping to remark that the revelational nature of the doctrine receives scant attention.” See also “Creation” *The Tablet Books of the Week* (January 10, 1942): 20.

this crisp, elegant exercise in theology, Sayers illuminates the doctrine of the Trinity...⁵⁰⁸

John Thurmer wondered: “why has it not had more impact?”⁵⁰⁹ and suggested a number of reasons as to why such an important book in Sayers’ canon may not have been as influential as others. He posed a few possibilities including Barth and Macquarrie’s misgivings regarding the theological legitimacy of “analogy,” the tendency amongst Christians to be suspicious of and thus avoid the word “Trinity” and the unpopular interdisciplinary nature of Sayers’ approach with her literary experience being applied to theology. Thurmer suggested that since “Sayers was not a theologian but a detective novelist, and theologians find it hard to accept an insight from such a stable... she remained like Chesterton, an oddity, and an outsider.”⁵¹⁰ But perhaps the most persuasive reason as to why *The Mind of the Maker* has not made more of an impact is that Sayers’ analogical study is strained by the natural, temporal, finite limitations of any analogy involving the divine. One of Sayers’ strengths in communication is her confidence and clarity but her less than sufficient circumspection in this regard in *The Mind of the Maker* does not exempt her work from the challenges presented, as a study of each chapter reveals to a greater or lesser degree.

In the opening chapter, ‘The Laws of Nature and Opinion’, Sayers began by establishing the difference between law and statements of observed fact. She noted that a village may vote that the earth is flat and “modify its system of physics accordingly” but this would not in turn “modify the shape of the earth.”⁵¹¹ She went on to argue that universal moral law or natural law likewise “is discoverable, like any other law of nature, by evidence” and is thus not a

⁵⁰⁸ Susan Howatch, “Introduction,” in Sayers, *Mind*, p.ix.

⁵⁰⁹ John Thurmer, *Reluctant Evangelist Papers on the Christian Thought of Dorothy L. Sayers* (Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 1996), p.3.

⁵¹⁰ *ibid.* p.3.

⁵¹¹ *ibid.* p.5.

“question of opinion but of fact.”⁵¹² Sayers stressed that there is a crucial distinction to be made between opinion and the actual nature of reality regardless of how individuals may feel about it. Consequently for Sayers, the Christian creed was not a matter of opinion, but a matter of reality, or as she put it: “a witness of eternal truth.”⁵¹³ Moreover, she quoted Lord David Cecil emphasising her point: “Christianity has compelled the mind of man not because it is the most cheering view of man’s existence but because it is the truest to the facts.”⁵¹⁴ In this way Sayers connects her conception of pattern as a structure within which truth and facts can cohere and be understood, with the apologetic appeal of Christianity.

This first chapter of *The Mind of the Maker* is an appeal to the “truth” of Christianity as an accurate description of reality that has been historically born out – this is the foundation upon which her analogical theology would rest. It was important to Sayers that her use of analogy not be primarily metaphorical, it must also be “true” in a wider, deeper sense. Although axiomatic, this question of historical truth was not in itself to be the focus of *The Mind of the Maker*. Sayers did set out further thoughts on the matter in her complementary essay, “A Vote of Thanks to Cyrus”, where she explored the intersection of historical figures of classical history with the biblical record. This was clearly pertinent to her intuitions about the coalescing power of her concept of pattern:

I think it was chiefly Cyrus and Ahasuerus who prodded me into the belated conviction that history was all of a piece, and that the Bible was part of it... It is just as well that from time to time Cyrus should march out of Herodotus into the Bible, for the synthesis of history and the confutation of heresy.⁵¹⁵

The second chapter of *The Mind of the Maker*, ‘Image of God’, explored how exactly human beings can be said to resemble God. Sayers directly connected the “image of God” with human

⁵¹² *ibid.* p.7.

⁵¹³ *ibid.* p.13.

⁵¹⁴ *ibid.* p.7.

⁵¹⁵ Sayers, *Unpopular Opinions*, pp. 24-8.

creativity which she describes in its most basic form as “the desire and ability to make things.”⁵¹⁶ This connection between the divine Creator and human beings as inherently creative was to form the foundation for the analogy that Sayers would build the rest of her argument upon. She introduces the methodology she is proposing in the following way:

The fact is, that all language about everything is analogical; we think in a series of metaphors. We can explain nothing in terms of itself, but only in terms of other things.⁵¹⁷

The Mind of the Maker set out to be an exploration of this connection between the Trinitarian divine Creator and the tri-part creative process of human beings.

Sayers was aware that such analogising of the divine and the human could open Christianity up to the Freudian charge that humanity had created God in its own image as a form of wish fulfillment. She anticipated this apologetic challenge to her ideas and responded to it by acknowledging the limitations of human language and analogy but ultimately defending her cause: “To complain that man measure God by his own experience is a waste of time; man measures everything by his own experience - he has no other yardstick.”⁵¹⁸

Sayers was careful to draw a distinction between human beings as creators who “rearrange the unalterable and indestructible units of matter in the universe and build them up into new forms”⁵¹⁹ and the Creator who makes things *ex nihilo*. Sayers completed the chapter with an eschewing of the tendency to isolate different kinds of knowledge into separate unconnected analytic categories and she called instead for an intellectual “move towards a synthesis of experience,”⁵²⁰ a further invocation of the unifying potential of her concept of “pattern.”

⁵¹⁶ Sayers, *Mind*, p.17.

⁵¹⁷ *ibid* p.17.

⁵¹⁸ *ibid*. p.19.

⁵¹⁹ *ibid*. p.21.

⁵²⁰ *ibid*. p.24.

In this chapter we see that ‘image’ as a concept was important to Sayers, but it was not primary. Image was a connection point between pattern and human experience of truth. Image pointed to pattern. In her lecture, “Towards a Christian Aesthetic” (1944), Sayers expounded upon what she had argued in *The Mind of the Maker* regarding a Christian understanding of the Arts: “If we commit ourselves to saying that the Christian revelation discovers to us the nature of all truth, then it must discover to us the nature of the truth about Art”.⁵²¹ Furthermore, she clearly defined her understanding of the concept of image:

Suppose having rejected the words “copy”, “imitation” and “representation” as inadequate, we substitute the word “image” and say that what the artist is doing is *to image forth* something of the other, and connect that with St. Paul’s phrase: “God... hath spoken to us by His Son, the brightness of this glory and *express image* of His person – Something which, by being an image, *expresses* that which it images.”⁵²²

Sayers understood image as primarily an expressive mode, substantially grounded in the relationship between the human and divine so that human creativity was a manifestation of divine pattern. Sayers went on to further clarify what she meant by image:

But now that the artist has made its image – imaged it forth – for me, I can possess and take hold of it and make it my own... *This is the communication of the image in power*, by which the third person of the poet’s trinity brings us, through the incarnate image, into direct knowledge of the in itself unknowable and unimaginable reality.⁵²³

Indeed, ultimately art that communicates the image in power brings about an encounter with truth:

This recognition of the truth that we get in the artist’s work comes to us as a revelation of new truth ...I mean the recognition of a truth which tells us something about ourselves that we had *not* been “always saying” – something which puts a new knowledge of ourselves within our grasp. It is new, startling, and perhaps shattering – and yet it comes with a sense of familiarity. We did not know it before, but the moment the poet has shown it to us, we know that, somehow or other, we had always really known it.⁵²⁴

⁵²¹ Sayers, *Unpopular Opinions*, p.30.

⁵²² *ibid.* p.37.

⁵²³ *ibid.* pp.39-40.

⁵²⁴ *ibid.* p.40.

Sayers' theories of creativity have been severely critiqued by Nicholas Wolterstorff, who regards analogies between divine and human creation as troublesome since: "unless one goes on to point out the differences, the drawing of such analogies can be as dangerous as it is illuminating."⁵²⁵ Furthermore, Wolterstorff goes on to reprimand Sayers for what he regards as her "Collingwoodian aesthetics". When Sayers' lecture, "Towards a Christian Aesthetic", was published in *Unpopular Opinions* she added a paragraph acknowledging her debt to R. G. Collingwood's *Principles of Art*. Collingwood has been critiqued for disavowing the importance of the material manifestation of art and by extension, Sayers has been criticized on the same basis⁵²⁶. Wolterstorff writes that in *The Mind of the Maker*, Sayers acquiesces to: "the lead of Collingwood – a lead which in my judgment, she would have been well advised to resist. [That] Artistic creation can occur – and apparently divine creation can also occur – without any material manifestation."⁵²⁷ However, this seems to be a misunderstanding of Sayers, who, despite appreciating Collingwood's philosophy of language and in particular his contention that any distinction between scientific and poetic language was specious, did clearly recognise the intrinsic value of material art work:

a poet is a man who... puts the experience into words in his own mind, and in so doing recognizes the experience for what it is... Now, what the poet does for himself, he can do for us. When he has imaged forth his experience he can incarnate it, so to speak in a material body – word, music, painting – the thing we know as a work of art.⁵²⁸

However, at moments in this chapter her analogical approach is stretched beyond coherence and she lacks her characteristic clarity. In fact, C. S. Lewis had concerns about *The Mind of the Maker*, commenting: "in an age when idolatry of human genius is one of our more insidious

⁵²⁵ Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Evangelicalism and the Arts" in *Christian Scholar's Review*, 17:4 (1988): 449-73, p.454.

⁵²⁶ See Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action: Toward a Christian Aesthetic* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1980); Richard Wollheim, *Art and Its Objects* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

⁵²⁷ 'Evangelicalism and the Arts', p.464.

⁵²⁸ Sayers, *Unpopular Opinions*, p.39.

dangers Miss Sayers would have been prudent to stress more continuously than she does the fact that the analogy is merely an analogy”.⁵²⁹

It is in the third chapter of *The Mind of the Maker*, entitled ‘Idea, Energy, Power’, that Sayers’ critics find the statement: “The creative act... does not depend for its fulfillment upon its manifestation in a material creation.”⁵³⁰ The implication seems to be that Sayers undermined the material or physical necessity of art, separating the work itself from the “creative mind”. However, the wider context of the chapter makes it clear that Sayers was trying to avoid the heretical implication of her Trinitarian analogy that God would “depend on” his creation in any way for his existence, as the poet depends on his written poem. In fact, Sayers calls this “an abuse of the metaphor” and in this chapter specifically connects her interpretation of St. Augustine’s Trinitarian thinking with her application of her creative analogy through her own experience of making material pieces of art. She introduces the perspective of “workers of creative imagination” and “the writer” particularly as a way into comprehending the nature of the divine Trinity. Quoting from the concluding speech of her own play, *Zeal of Thy House*, Sayers shows how her thinking had been developing:

For every work [*or act*] of creation is threefold, an earthly trinity to match the heavenly. First [*not in time, but merely in order of enumeration*] there is the Creative idea... and this is the image of the Father.
Second, there is the Creative Energy [*or Activity*] begotten of that idea...being incarnate in the bonds of matter: and this is the image of the Word.
Third, there is the Creative power, the meaning of the work and its response in the lively soul: and this is the image of the indwelling Spirit.
And these three are one, each equally in itself the whole work, whereof none can exist without the other: and this is the image of the Trinity.

Sayers is offering here an apologetic for the divine Trinity, claiming that “the creative artist can recognize as a true relation to his own experience” the threefold nature of the creative

⁵²⁹ C. S. Lewis, review of Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (London: Methuen, 1941), in *Theology*, 43:256 (1941), p.248.

⁵³⁰ Sayers, *Mind*, p.32.

process: Idea, Energy and Power. These mirror the Father, the Son and the Spirit and are imaged or reflected in the work of a writer as he or she conceives of (Idea), writes down (Activity) and releases a book and people read it and are affected (Power). Moreover, just as Idea, Energy and Power can be intellectually distinguished but are in reality indivisible, so Father, Son and Holy Spirit are “consubstantial”. The potential apologetic appeal of her conception of the Trinity as a pattern with the capacity to connect into the life experience of her audience appears to be what is driving Sayers here. Furthermore, although she did not directly use story or drama in *The Mind of the Maker*, the analogy she reached for still involved story (Activity) at a theoretical level. Pattern was the underlying concept that connected the Creator and the created, with image functioning as the operative communication of this connection. However, the chapter is beset by the ambiguity wrought by her earlier statements appearing to separate creative mind and matter.

In her fourth chapter, ‘The Energy Revealed in Creation’, Sayers delved into the relationship between the mind of the creator of a given entity and the minds of others. This question of communication was for Sayers a question of immanence and transcendence. The maker or Maker, human or divine should not be understood as being in any way confined by his work. The immanence of the Activity should not detract from the transcendence of the Idea - in fact, an incarnation would be necessary in order to reveal the Idea. A fuller, deeper understanding of an author or Maker might be sought by exploring a synthesis of all their work that has been created, but even this is in some way inadequate since “the mind is not the sum of its work, though it includes them all”⁵³¹. Sayers was reaching the limit of her analogy here as she was in danger of implying an inherent reliance of a maker on the work they produced if an incarnation was strictly “necessary”, entailing the possibility of the divine Creator being dependent upon

⁵³¹ *ibid.* p.44.

his creation. Sayers attempts to defray this potential interpretation rested upon her appeal to the divine being beyond human understanding. Sayers encouraged her readers to conceive of Him as a “living author, whose span of activity extends infinitely beyond our memory in both directions. We never see His great work finished”⁵³² Given that the purpose of her analogy was to shed light on the connection between human creativity and the divine Creator this is a significant moment. In this chapter Sayers grappled with the limitations of her analogy, given the immeasurable, eternal, infinite nature of the Maker. The serious acknowledgment of the challenges of her task led her to a significant conclusion:

We are thus considering the temporal universe as one of those great serial works of which installments appear from time to time, all related to a central idea whose completeness is not yet manifest to the reader. Within the framework of its diversity are many minor and partial unities...⁵³³

Sayers’ invoking of the “framework” is significant here. Where her analogy was in danger of collapse, in what may be regarded as the weakest chapter in *The Mind of the Maker*, Sayers appealed to pattern. Multiple, partial unities were an integral part of the temporal world but each had a role in forming the pattern. There would be multiple patterns within the pattern. However, any apparent lack of completeness would not undermine the fundamental unity Sayers believed in. Where Sayers’ particular engagement with analogy was weak, her foundational appeal to the concept of pattern was unshaken.

In chapter 5, ‘Free Will and Miracle’, Sayers introduces what she describes as a “permanently baffling problem”, namely the potential of free will in a creature. With regard to human free will Sayers argues that while all characters “must express some part of the maker’s mind” this would be “dull, mechanical and untrue” if all creatures were to do this in an identical fashion.

⁵³² *ibid.* p.45.

⁵³³ *ibid.* p.46.

When projecting this prospect of “helpless puppets bound to obey”⁵³⁴ from an author of characters in a book onto the prospect of created human beings in a perfect creation, the importance of free will becomes clearer. At this point Sayers reaches for a more helpful analogy and suggests that procreation might be a more useful image for exploring the necessity of free will than artistic creation. Having explored the question of free will, Sayers returned to the author/creator analogy and explored the interaction of plot and “true nature” in the sphere of creative writing as analogous with human free will and the Divine will working together. This outworking of Sayers’ undergirding intuitions about truth and pattern appears to invoke her concept of an inescapable pattern within which specificities will cohere. Characters and situations in a book will not need to be forced into a particular solution: “If each is allowed to develop in conformity with its proper nature, they will arrive of their own accord at a point of unity.”⁵³⁵ She takes an incident from *Gaudy Night* as an instance of this “odd coming-together of plot and character.”⁵³⁶ Harriet Vane had accepted the gift of a chess set from Lord Peter Wimsey which was a tremendous effort of pride-conquering on her part and left her in what Sayers describes as a “gratitude-situation” that “leave the normal person so little disposed to fall into the arms of the benefactor”⁵³⁷. The malefactor of *Gaudy Night* was “carrying on a revenge-campaign of petty destructiveness against certain women who (she felt) were sacrificing the emotional to the rational”⁵³⁸ and destroyed the chess set. The destruction helped Vane recognize her feelings for the giver over the gift. Sayers describes how one reader commented: “I realised, the moment they were mentioned, that those chessmen were doomed.” But Sayers herself had no sense of this at all in the writing.

When the plot demanded their destruction they were ready... it was not until my reader pointed it out to me that I understood the incident to have been in actual fact predestined

⁵³⁴ *ibid.* p.50.

⁵³⁵ *ibid.* p.60.

⁵³⁶ *ibid.* p.61.

⁵³⁷ *ibid.* p.61.

⁵³⁸ *ibid.* p.61.

– that is that plot and character, each running true to its nature, had inevitably united to bring the thing about.⁵³⁹

Sayers reflecting back on her greatest work of detective fiction is able to discern in that story the influence of her ideas about truth and pattern, before she had fully articulated them herself. Sayers calls this the “curious collaboration of free will and predestination wherever plot and character are allowed to develop in obedience to their law of nature.”⁵⁴⁰

In the midst of this coalescence of truth, story and pattern, Sayers reflected on the theological significance of miraculous revelation. A miracle occurs for Sayers when the Creator becomes a character in his own story. This was not in violation of the free will of any individual since it is “necessary that God should act in conformity with His own character.”⁵⁴¹ Indeed, Sayers went on to argue that the author/story analogy for God and the universe leads to the conclusion that God will only use miracle: “when it is an integral part of the story.” For Sayers this was how Jesus’ incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection are all miracles that lead: “the story back, by the... powerful way of grace, to the issue demanded by the way of judgment, so that the law of nature is not destroyed but fulfilled.”⁵⁴²

In the next chapter, ‘Energy Incarnate in Self Expression’, Sayers developed this supposition of the divine Author appearing in his own story. Having established her analogy of the human author of a book resembling the Trinitarian God as the Maker of all things, Sayers explored the concepts of truth and falsity in what she calls the “structural sense.” Here Sayers invoked the imagery of a structure or building, which is a palpable way of invoking her concept of

⁵³⁹ *ibid.* p.62.

⁵⁴⁰ *ibid.*

⁵⁴¹ *ibid.* p.66.

⁵⁴² *ibid.* p.67.

pattern.⁵⁴³ An autobiography, or any kind of story within which the author is also a character will show itself true or untrue “not in the moral sense of telling lies, but in the structural sense, which is what the builder means by saying that a line is “out of true.”” She argues: “If the structure is truly knit, it will stand any strain, and prove its truth by its toughness.” The implication here is that the Trinitarian God’s incarnation in Jesus Christ is “true” since it coheres with the structure of things. This articulation of truth as a kind of intellectual and structural integrity was to form the foundation of Sayers’ ideas about work published as *Why Work?* and will be analysed in the next chapter. But here in *The Mind of the Maker*, Sayers makes the point that truth is closely related to the idea that reality coheres in a pattern and that this is observable in the embodied specificities of life. She concludes by alluding to the enormity of the divine incarnation when the ultimate source for pattern entered history and revealed truth in a specific story: “Nobody but a god can pass unscathed through the searching ordeal of incarnation.”⁵⁴⁴

In Chapter 7, ‘Maker of all Things Maker of Ill Things’, Sayers addressed the question of the nature of evil. She writes of evil as “the deprivation of the negation of the Good” rather than viewing evil as a created entity in and of itself. In comparing the Trinitarian God’s creation of Good and the creeping in of contingent evil, with the analogy of the creative writer, Sayers suggests imagining a poet and his or her work. The poem as the creation of a perfect poet:

is only safe from the interference of other wills so long as it remains in his head. By materializing his poem – that is by writing it down and publishing it he subjects it to the impact of alien wills... They can, for example, misquote, misinterpret, or deliberately alter the poem. This evil is contingent on the poet’s original good...⁵⁴⁵

⁵⁴³ Sayers envisaged pattern metaphorically as a structural or architectural concept when she wrote of a “vast interlocking structure”, Dorothy L. Sayers, “Creed or Chaos?” in *Creed or Chaos?* p. 37.

⁵⁴⁴ Sayers, *Mind*, p.74.

⁵⁴⁵ *ibid.* p.84.

The only way to deal with evil once it had been experienced in our world would be to redeem it. According to Christian doctrine, Sayers argued that redemption could be possible but it would need to occur within the realm within which evil actually operated. Thus the importance of the historical incarnation since evil: “could only be redeemed within the medium of experience – that is by an incarnation in which experience was fully and freely in accordance with the Idea.”⁵⁴⁶

In the following chapter, ‘Pentecost’, Sayers explored in more detail the concept of the “Power” of a work. She argued that Power is immaterial and timeless. She took Hamlet as an example and explained that when we read the play our context means that there is a whole Hamlet in our minds to which we refer every specific word and action. Energy, Idea and Power all relate together but it is the pattern that makes sense of the particulars:

Our knowledge of how the whole thing “hangs together” gives us a deeper understanding and a better judgement of each part, because we can now refer it, not only to the past but also to the future; and, more than that, to a unity of the work which exists for us right outside the sequence of time.⁵⁴⁷

Here Sayers invokes her concept of pattern with this phrase “hangs together”, indeed she understood that although the work unfolded within time there was an essential unity to the piece independent of the sequence of time. Here pattern is envisaged along the lines of textiles, with a sense of the fabric pattern for a garment rather than an architectural structure, however, the metaphor reaches for the same underlying concept.

In this context of a “unity of the work” existing “outside of the sequence of time”, Sayers invites scrutiny and testing both for works of literature but also the analogous creedal claim of

⁵⁴⁶ *ibid.* p.86.

⁵⁴⁷ *ibid.* pp.97-8.

the Incarnation of God. Truth is unafraid of investigation. Here Sayers' apologetic instincts are evident:

No considerations of false reverence should prevent us from subjecting the incarnations of creators to the severest tests of examination. It is right that they should be pulled about and subjected to the most searching kind of enquiry...⁵⁴⁸

This is somewhat resonant of the impetus of Lazarus in *The Man Born to be King* who also invoked the metaphor of fabric for exploring the pattern. The probing necessary to discern truth was akin to pushing and pulling the texture of fabric around so as to discover the pattern.

Chapter 9, 'The Love of the Creature', provides us with perhaps the clearest indication yet that Sayers' use of analogy in *The Mind of the Maker* is firmly grounded in her concepts of truth and pattern:

To the human maker, therefore accustomed to look within himself for the extra-temporal archetype and pattern of his own creative work, it will also be natural to look beyond himself for the external archetype and pattern of his own creative personality – the threefold person in whose image he is made, as his own work is made in the image of himself.⁵⁴⁹

At this point Sayers drives home the logical outworking of her analogy connecting the Trinity with human craftsmanship and demonstrating how foundational her concept of pattern is to the functioning of her theology and in particular her Trinitarian analogy. Sayers argued that the instinct of the creative mind was to search for a point of unity, an archetype that might provide an ontological foundation for the meaning and coherence of the art. She then invokes this impetus to challenge the artist to ask for a similar archetype not for the art itself but for the creativity of the artist and the pattern of that creativity.

⁵⁴⁸ *ibid.* p.92.

⁵⁴⁹ *ibid.* p.102.

Sayers' critics such as Wolterstorff, who argued that her theory of art was too abstract or 'ideal', predicate their appraisal on the contention that she failed to uphold the material dimension of art. Such a position is seriously undermined by Sayers' argument in this chapter, in which she assumes that the physicality of any given piece of art echoes the pattern of divine creation. Sayers imagines "The human maker, working in unself-conscious matter."⁵⁵⁰ She writes:

So far as his particular piece of work is concerned, he is Godlike – immanent and transcendent; but his work and himself both form part of the universe, and he cannot transcend the universe. All his efforts and desires reach out to that ideal creative archetype in whose unapproachable image he feels himself to be made.⁵⁵¹

Crystal Downing concurs that Sayers understood human creativity to require an outworking that was a "performance" of "otherness" and this was not merely a state of the artists' mind:

Like the otherness inherent in the trinity itself, otherness became, for Sayers, necessary to any successful writing performance... Because God, through Creation, performs the Other, creative writing, at its best, performs otherness.⁵⁵²

Chapter 10, 'Scalene Trinities', contains a summary of Sayers' artist and Creator analogy. In this context she went on to explore the question of God's perfection in comparison with the relative imperfections of the human artist and their works. Sayers imagines the Trinitarian God as perfectly balanced Idea, Activity, Power. If this were to be seen in the form of a shape it would be an equilateral triangle. However, for human creators the triangle is scalene, inevitably it is out of balance and this then becomes evident as it is reflected in the works of art created. Sayers believed that human authors: "tend to have their trinities permanently a little out of true."⁵⁵³ The outworking of this can be discerned in works that are "turgid" or "flat" since they have not undergone the "discipline of a thorough incarnation" and they are operating: "without

⁵⁵⁰ Sayers, *Mind*, p.114

⁵⁵¹ *ibid.*, p.115.

⁵⁵² Crystal Downing, *Writing Performances*, p.110.

⁵⁵³ Sayers, *Mind*, p.125.

the coherence that derives from reference to the controlling idea.”⁵⁵⁴ Sayers was arguing that the unity of a work, reflecting the coherence of pattern, is of the utmost importance for the viability and beauty of any piece of art:

But if there is no unity of Idea within which the whole meandering structure can be included; or if the work, having started out as one kind of thing, ends up as another kind of thing; or if it contradicts its own nature and purpose in the process of development; or if... it enchants us in the reading by the elegant succession of its parts, and yet leaves in our memories no distinct impression of itself as a whole – in such cases, there is something radically wrong⁵⁵⁵

Sayers’ thoughts here resonate with Jeremy Begbie’s analysis of an approach to the arts found in reformed theology with its emphasis on unity, proportion and integrity:

I suggest that if we *are* to speak of beauty as belonging to God and/or the created world, and conceive it (provisionally at least) according to some version of the so-called “great theory” – where beauty is said to be characterized, for example, by proportion and consonance of parts, brightness or radiance, perfection or integrity, and as granting pleasure upon contemplation – these strands will need to be subject to a constant re-shaping through the Church’s repeated return to God’s reconciling self-disclosure.⁵⁵⁶

The final chapter of *The Mind of the Maker*, ‘Problem Picture’, is regarded by many, including the reviewers at *Dublin Review*, as: “the best chapter in the book.”⁵⁵⁷ Here Sayers draws together her argument clearly and succinctly, underscoring her reliance on the cohesive structure provided by her concept of pattern. She writes:

...if we conclude that creative mind is in fact the very grain of the spiritual universe... We shall have to ask ourselves whether the same pattern is not also exhibited in the spiritual structure of every man and woman. And, if it is, whether, by confining the average man and woman to uncreative activities and an uncreative outlook, we are not doing violence to the very structure of our being.⁵⁵⁸

⁵⁵⁴ *ibid.* p.124.

⁵⁵⁵ *ibid.* p.127.

⁵⁵⁶ Jeremy Begbie, “The Future of Theology amid the Arts: Some Reformed Reflections” in Roger Lundin (ed.), *Christ Across the Disciplines: Past, Present, Future*, (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2013), p.154.

⁵⁵⁷ *Dublin Review*, 212 (January, 1943): 87-90.

⁵⁵⁸ Sayers, *Mind*, p.149.

The vocational outworking of this concern that human experience coheres with the pattern of creativity ordained by the Creator is taken up and developed in Sayers' essays on work, which will be analysed in the next chapter. However, Sayers' powerful articulation of creativity in "the very grain of the spiritual universe" demonstrates her conviction that exploration of the divine pattern is for all of humanity and not only the creative artist, despite her focus in this particular work upon the analogical connection between the artist and the divine Trinity.

Bringing her creative analogy to a conclusion, 'Problem Picture' goes on to revisit Sayers' own detective fiction and plays as literature that constitutes a connected whole, in the light of her Trinitarian observations. She thus concludes the entire book with a discussion of pattern, describing how the creative artist is concerned with fashioning "a synthesis which includes the whole dialectic of the situation in a manifestation of power."⁵⁵⁹ The author envisions something true (Idea), and communicates this (Activity) through a medium of writing which will produce effects (Power) on those who read it. This instinct to see the particulars in the context of a coherent whole is to understand truth, story and pattern. Thus, it could be argued that Sayers regarded human creativity as in some way sacramental as the physical participates in the divine.⁵⁶⁰ The artist in the midst of their own peculiar artistic endeavours is working on the basis of patterns set in motion by God but present within the artist and intrinsic to the wider universe:

⁵⁵⁹ *ibid.* p.171.

⁵⁶⁰ Jeremy Begbie notes a rise in "enthusiasm to speak of the arts as sacramental" within theological discourse which he puts down to a number of factors including an "eagerness to recover the physicality of the arts", the fact that "the supposed sacramentality of the arts gives us a way of conceiving God's presence in culture at large" and a resistance of "the modern drive to reduce the world to a bare, godless mechanism". Begbie comments; "I find myself deeply sympathetic to the concerns that make the notion of sacramentality so appealing to many at work in the theology and arts world. At the same time, awkward questions are bound to arise, and they are not eased by the fact that I have not yet found a sufficiently robust and theologically compelling case for extending the language of sacramentality to the practices and products of the arts." pp.160-2. Clemson however, makes a strong argument for a "sacramental aesthetic" in Sayers' work on the basis of Sayers' sacramental theology in her lecture "Worship in the Anglican Church" and her play *Zeal of Thy House*. See Clemson, *Sayers' Dramatic Works*, p.302.

This is the vocation of the creative mind in man. The mind in the act of creation is thus not concerned to solve problems from within the limits imposed by the terms in which they are set, but to fashion a synthesis which includes the whole dialectic of the situation in a manifestation of power. In other words, the creative artist, as such deals, not with the working of the syllogism, but with that universal statement which forms its major premise.⁵⁶¹

Furthermore, this artistic realisation is a recognition of something profound about being itself and the very nature of human existence:

I find in myself a certain pattern which I acknowledge as the law of my true nature, and which corresponds to experience in such a manner that, while my behavior conforms to the pattern, I can interpret experience in power... I also find that theologians attribute to God Himself precisely that pattern of being which I find in my work and in me.

Sayers concludes that this pattern is itself evidence for God. As such, pattern does not only function as an explanation as to why things work as they do, it also provides an apologetic, a persuasive reason, for her to have come to believe in God.

I am inclined to believe, therefore, that this pattern directly corresponds to the actual structure of the living universe and that it exists in other men as well as in myself... If you ask me what is this pattern which I recognize as the true law of my nature, I can only suggest that it is the pattern of the creative mind – an eternal Idea manifested in material form by an unresting Energy, with an outpouring of power... And this, I observe, is the pattern laid down by the theologians as the pattern of the being of God.⁵⁶²

Pattern is recognisable in the structure of the universe, in the process and experience of human creativity and in the Trinitarian being of God. Sayers' instincts about truth, story and pattern evidenced in her detective fiction and her religious plays form the basis of the conclusion of her most important theological publication. She finishes these thoughts by concluding: "If all this is true, then the mind of the maker and The Mind of the Maker are formed on the same pattern, and all their works are made in their own image."⁵⁶³ Regardless of how persuasive Sayers' anthropology or theological interpretation of Augustine's Trinitarian analogy, or even her view of the creative arts may be, it is clearly the case that central to Sayers' thinking about

⁵⁶¹ Sayers, *Mind*, p.171.

⁵⁶² Sayers, *Mind*, pp. 172-3.

⁵⁶³ *ibid.* p.173.

creativity was this concept of pattern as a way of expressing a God-given structure for eternal truth within which specificities “fit” coherently together. A particular outworking of this Trinitarian pattern in Sayers’ work was to be her exploration of human vocation. Following the publication of *The Mind of the Maker*, Sayers took up a number of different issues about which she gave lectures and wrote essays. In the next chapter her ideas about vocation and gender will be analysed in greater depth.

Chapter Seven

Essays

Essays (and lectures that went on to be published as essays) were an important aspect of Dorothy L. Sayers' writing career. Alongside her books, shorter pieces of prose encapsulated her ideas in a more immediate way, often for a specific audience at a particular time. Published collections of her essays such as *Unpopular Opinions*, *Begin Here* and *Creed or Chaos?* have helped to make this aspect of her work more accessible to readers. However, Sayers was careful not to alter her work for appearance in compendiums, thus maintaining the vibrancy of her opinions and insights as originally voiced. In this chapter Sayers' essays about Work and Women will be examined as specific examples of this genre within her oeuvre. Sayers wrote three essays on the subject of work: "Living to Work", "Why Work?" and "Vocation in Work" and two essays on the place of Women: "Are Women Human?" and "The Human-Not-Quite-Human".

"Living to Work", was originally written to be broadcast on the radio. Sayers explored her ideas about work and specifically the assertion that there are two broad approaches to work – one group perceives any work as "a hateful necessity"⁵⁶⁴ for a human being, useful only for making money. The other group views work as a vocation and "an opportunity for enjoyment and self-fulfillment... Their work and their life are one thing".⁵⁶⁵

Sayers approved of a move by Church leaders in Britain in 1940-1 to encourage the recapturing of a sense of divine vocation in daily work.⁵⁶⁶ In her essay "Vocation in Work", she spoke of

⁵⁶⁴ Dorothy L. Sayers, "Living to Work" in *Unpopular Opinions* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1946), p.122.

⁵⁶⁵ *ibid.*

⁵⁶⁶ Sayers was invited to participate in the Malvern Conference which took place in January 1941. Malvern was the Archbishop's "Conference of Industrialists and Economists with Theologians" and represented a serious

the task of “lifting the subject of labour out of the sphere of economics, and calling for a sacramental relation between man and his work.”⁵⁶⁷ A theology of work became a central concern in her writing during and after the Second World War, flowing out of her dual convictions about the creative nature of the divine (and thus the *imago dei* discussed in *The Mind of the Maker*) and the wartime need for a widespread socio-economic reconstruction of society.

In her essay, “Why Work?”, Sayers hoped to stimulate: “a thorough-going revolution in our whole attitude to work.” She wanted to show that within the Christian worldview work should not be seen “as a necessary drudgery to be undergone for the purpose of making money, but as a way of life in which the nature of man should find its proper exercise and delight and so fulfill itself to the glory of God.”⁵⁶⁸

In her writing about work, Sayers was trying to suggest that her own generation had an opportunity both within the church but also in society at large to rethink human vocation. Sayers perceived of all work as belonging primarily to the creative rather than an exclusively economic sphere and thus as having theological importance. Humanity created in the image of a Creative God images forth God by working: “work is the natural exercise and function of man – the creature who is made in the image of his Creator.”⁵⁶⁹ Sayers believed that this conceptual, theological starting point for thinking about work would dramatically impact a worker’s attitude to their work along with the value of the work that was produced. She wrote that work:

initiative by church leaders to consider issues of unemployment, work, welfare and poverty. “Programme for the Malvern Conference,” Lambeth Palace Library, William Temple Papers, vol. 33, folder 139.

⁵⁶⁷ Dorothy L. Sayers, “Vocation in Work” in A. E. Baker (ed.), *A Christian Basis for the Post-War World* (London: SCM Press, 1942), p.88.

⁵⁶⁸ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Why Work?* (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd.), p.3.

⁵⁶⁹ *ibid.* p.11.

... should in fact, be thought of as a creative activity undertaken for the love of the work itself; and that man, made in God's image, should make things, as God makes them, for the sake of doing well a thing that is well worth doing.⁵⁷⁰

In her writings on work, Sayers sought to counteract what she regarded as a fundamental theological misconception about work – the idea that human work is a part of the Fall. She believed that a misunderstanding of Gen 3:17 had led many to conclude that work itself was cursed: “Work, it seemed, was a curse and a punishment; perhaps this encouraged men to feel that no blessing and no sacrament could be associated with it.”⁵⁷¹ In *The Artist and The Trinity*, Christine Fletcher argues that:

Sayers' writings centred on the idea of integrity in work, and work as essential to a good human life. All her speeches and writing about work were based on a sacramental understanding of creation, and her anthropology of the human as bearing the image of God in the ability to create. The doctrine of the Fall meant work was seen as a punishment for sin and would now be attended with difficulties, but not that work itself was a punishment.⁵⁷²

Fletcher recognises the clear theological impetus behind Sayers' writing, but does not analyse this with regard to Sayers' wider concept of pattern. Sayers' theological methodology is of interest in this thesis in this particular instance because the crux of her argument rests on an appeal to divine pattern. Sayers argued that the first thing the writer of Genesis tells us about God “in whose image both man and woman were created, is that He was Himself a Creator. He made things.”⁵⁷³ This is a pattern that is then imaged forth and enfleshed in human experience: “Even in this fallen and unsatisfactory life, man is still so near His divine pattern that he continually makes things.”⁵⁷⁴ Sayers takes examples from everyday life to distinguish humanity from animals who might make a “uniform set of necessary things, as a bee makes

⁵⁷⁰ *ibid.* p.3.

⁵⁷¹ Sayers, “Vocation in Work”, p. 88.

⁵⁷² Christine Fletcher, *The Artist and The Trinity: Dorothy L. Sayers' Theology of Work* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013), p. 94.

⁵⁷³ *ibid.* p.89.

⁵⁷⁴ *ibid.* p.89.

honeycomb”, demonstrating that humanity’s work and creativity is various, vibrant and sometimes “unnecessary.” Humanity’s work is not merely utilitarian or even economic, since such work in its glorious creativity and “interminable variety of different and not strictly necessary things” is an outworking of a divine pattern. Work as Sayers describes it is in the image of the divine creator and is thus evidence of a divine pattern:

He is *homo faber* – man the craftsman... Man is a maker who makes things because he cannot fulfill his true nature if he is prevented from making things for the love of the job. He is made in the image of the Maker, and he must himself create or become something less than a man.⁵⁷⁵

The specifics of enfleshed life, including the everyday reality of humanity’s need to work, points to a bigger picture of truth. Sayers’ approach to discussing and analysing human vocation from a theological point of view is rooted in her concept of pattern.

This deep theological conviction about work was an ongoing concern for Sayers; indeed, in her letter to the Rt Rev. Mervyn George Haigh, Bishop of Coventry 26 June 1944, Sayers wrote of her fear that the Church had lost all vision of Christ as the truth in an ultimate sense that would be worked out in every sphere of life including human vocation.

We’ve lost God the Son. We’ve still got a rather whittled-down Jesus, preaching and teaching and doing kind things and being judicially murdered – what we’ve mislaid is the Cosmic Energy, and the Living Wisdom and the Eternal Beauty and the Unalterable Truth... Consequently, Jesus seems irrelevant to the things we are doing: ‘We can do our science, or our painting, or our doctoring quite well without Christ’ – sounds a very reasonable thing to say and if we forget or were never told that Christ is precisely the truth we are discovering, the beauty we are expressing, the life we are restoring, and the energy and skill we put into all these things.⁵⁷⁶

Apart from drawing the attention of her readers to the theological paradigm of human creativity and vocation reflecting the pattern of the divine image of God the Creator, and the divine power

⁵⁷⁵ *ibid.* p.89.

⁵⁷⁶ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to the Bishop of Coventry, 26 June 1944 in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Three*, p.26.

of God the Son, Sayers also perceived that there was a specifically redemptive outworking of the atonement in the sphere of human vocation: “The first Adam was cursed with labour and suffering: the redemption of labour and suffering is the triumph of the second Adam – the Carpenter nailed to the cross.”⁵⁷⁷ This redemptive potential of human work was something Sayers had already begun to explore in her address to the Church of England Malvern Conference in 1941: “If she [the Church] undertakes to sanctify humanity, it must be the whole of humanity. She must include within her sacraments all arts, all letters, all labour and all learning.”⁵⁷⁸ In fact, the redemptive potential of work done with integrity was explored by Sayers initially through story in her novel *Gaudy Night*. When Peter Wimsey challenges Harriet Vane to “write a book about human beings for a change.” She replies “I’ll think about that. It would hurt like hell.” Wimsey instantiates Sayers own thoughts when he retorts “What would that matter, if it made a good book?” He continues by probing the redemptive potential of such a piece of work:

‘You haven’t yet... written the book you could write if you tried. Probably you couldn’t write it when you were too close to things but you could do it now... Yes, you could. And you’ll get no peace till you do. I’ve been running away from myself for twenty years, and it doesn’t work.’⁵⁷⁹

Through Wimsey Sayers vocalises her own belief in the redemptive potential of creative work done well in spite of or perhaps because of the pain of producing something authentic.

Yet despite her belief in the redemptive possibilities of human vocation, Sayers was not so naïve as to ignore the reality of the everyday experience of work for many people as difficult and perhaps even “cursed.” If work itself is not the curse, Sayers posed the question “what is the operative part of the curse?” Her answer was an interpretation of Genesis and it entailed

⁵⁷⁷ *ibid.* p.89.

⁵⁷⁸ Dorothy L. Sayers, “The Church’s Responsibility,” in *Malvern 1941 The Life of the Church and the Order of Society Being the Proceedings of the Archbishop of York’s Conference* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1941), p.67.

⁵⁷⁹ Sayers, *Gaudy*, p.275.

the reality that “The work was to be more difficult” but perhaps more importantly as a consequence of the Fall, human work was to be inextricably linked to the provision of human needs: “in the sweat of thy face thou shalt eat thy bread” suggested that “work was to be conditioned by economic necessity – that was the new and ominous thing.”⁵⁸⁰ Instead of the joyful reflection of the divine pattern, where the Creator has imprinted human beings with his image and they are thus themselves creators, finding fulfillment and satisfaction in creative work, a new and darker dimension has been introduced. Work must now pay. Sayers concluded that as a result of the “judgment of man’s corruption” described in Genesis, “economic man” is Adam under the curse.⁵⁸¹ This war-time analysis of Christian theology applied to contemporary society demonstrates how Sayers’ concept of pattern was worked out in the particulars of her writings. Sayers saw that: “The economic factor of human society is... a reality, as sin and pain and sorrow and every other human evil are realities; and it is the duty of Christians to accept and redeem those real evils.”⁵⁸² She challenged the underlying assumption that economic necessity should be uncritically accepted as the starting place and the primary lens or pattern through which work is viewed:

To assume... that economics is the sole basis of man’s dealings with nature and with his fellow-men, is the very negation of all Christian principle. This assumption is rooted in a lie; it is a falsehood that runs counter to the law of human nature... To get the economic situation dealt with we must lift it out of the economic sphere altogether and consider first what is the right relation between the work itself and the worker who is made in the image of the eternal Craftsman.”⁵⁸³

Sayers believed that the impact of seeing human work in purely economic terms was seriously detrimental to human beings. In a letter to the Editor of the *Stoke Newington Observer*, Sayers wrote of a common misconception of the nature of work as if “mankind’s normal way of

⁵⁸⁰ Sayers, “The Church’s Responsibility,” p.90.

⁵⁸¹ *ibid.*

⁵⁸² *ibid.*

⁵⁸³ *ibid.*

working approximates to that of a conveyer-belt, to which each operative contributes his small, standardised operation with as little variation as may be.” She countered:

Now this may be usual, but it is not the normal, in the sense of the natural, function of an artist, or of a craftsman – or indeed of a human being at all; it is the function of a machine; and we cannot subdue either art or man to the rhythm of the machine without destroying their proper nature as man and art. Yet that is what our civilisation continually tends to do, and to persuade us into accepting as the norm... (for) a workman.⁵⁸⁴

Any approach based upon an economic rather than a creative pattern would lead to what Sayers regarded as: “A society in which consumption has to be artificially stimulated in order to keep production going is a society founded on trash and waste, and such a society is a house built upon sand.”⁵⁸⁵ She was arguing that structuring a society upon the basis of a false pattern, rather than a true pattern which actually coheres with reality, had led to disaster:

War is a judgment that overtakes societies when they have been living upon ideas that conflict too violently with the laws governing the universe... false economics are one of the root-causes of the present war; and one of the false ideas... was a false attitude to Work and to the goods produced by Work.”⁵⁸⁶

The Second World War had led to a shift in government policy with the British population “no longer being urged to consume but to conserve”,⁵⁸⁷ and Sayers regarded this as an opportunity for the Church to speak up and call for a new way of structuring the work of the nation. She wanted to: “bring the whole fantastic economy of profitable waste down to the ground... by refusing to co-operate with it.”⁵⁸⁸ She was concerned that after the war the nation would return to the cycle of consumption and waste: “we shall again be bamboozled by our vanity, indolence and greed into keeping the squirrel cage of wasteful economy turning.”⁵⁸⁹

⁵⁸⁴ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to the editor of *The Stoke Newington Observer*, 12 June 1944, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Three*, pp.20-1.

⁵⁸⁵ Sayers, *Why Work?* p.3.

⁵⁸⁶ *ibid.* p.4.

⁵⁸⁷ *ibid.* p.5.

⁵⁸⁸ *ibid.* p.9.

⁵⁸⁹ *ibid.* p.9.

Sayers instantiated her ideas about work in her novel *Gaudy Night*, where the ideas expressed in her essays were first explored in the form of a story. At the beginning of the novel when Harriet Vane had arrived at Shrewsbury College for her gaudy, she was having coffee with the dons and was asked to speak about her latest plot. Miss Barton wonders why after her own experience of being tried for murder Harriet would “care about writing that kind of book.”

Harriet explains:

‘I know what you’re all thinking- that anybody with proper sensitive feeling would rather scrub floors for a living. But I should scrub floors very badly, and I write detective stories rather well. I don’t see why proper feeling should prevent me from doing my proper job.’⁵⁹⁰

Through her semi-autobiographical character Harriet Vane, Sayers articulated something of her commitment to work as a creative vocation and not merely an economic matter. She expressed a commitment to the integrity and excellence of a work for its own sake on its own terms of reference. This is a point that Peter Wimsey picks up later in the novel. Visiting Oxford prompts him to observe:

‘Here’s where the real things are done Harriet... God! How I loathe haste and violence and all that ghastly, slippery cleverness. Unsound, unscholarly, insincere – nothing but propaganda and special pleading and “what do we get out of this?” ... If only one could root oneself in here among the grass and stones and do something worth doing, even if it was only restoring a lost breathing for the love of the job and nothing else.’⁵⁹¹

While Sayers’ convictions about work are developed and analysed in her essays, they were first manifested in story in her fiction.

⁵⁹⁰ Sayers, *Gaudy*, p.26.

⁵⁹¹ *ibid.* p.253.

Sayers was trying to call for a whole new way of thinking so that work would not be merely something people have to do in order to make money, but something inherently human, creative and life-giving:

We should ask of an enterprise not “will it pay?” but, “is it good?” of a man, not “what does he make?” but “what is his work worth?” of goods, not “can we induce people to buy them?” but “are they useful things well made? Of employment, not “how much a week?” but “will it exercise my faculties to the utmost?”⁵⁹²

She acknowledged that this sounded highly impracticable and naïve⁵⁹³ but she did point to what she called “a peculiarity of war economy that usually goes without notice” - namely that goods that are produced during a period of conflict are not valued for what they can be sold for but only for what they are worth in and of themselves. Sayers argued that: “A war consumer does not buy shoddy. He does not buy to sell again. He buys the thing that is good for its purpose”.⁵⁹⁴ Sayers perceived a kind of inescapable pattern at work here, confirming her theological convictions about work and creativity in a highly practical way:

And whether by strange coincidence, or whether because of some universal law, as soon as nothing is demanded of the thing made but its own integral perfection, its own absolute value, the skill and labour of the worker are fully employed and likewise acquire an absolute value.⁵⁹⁵

In *The Artist and the Trinity*, Fletcher seeks to make an argument that Sayers’ theories are in fact practically workable. She writes: “Sayers’ criteria for good work are realistic, and, when

⁵⁹² *ibid.* p.10.

⁵⁹³ In an unpublished letter to Rev. W. H. J. Mercer, 14 September 1948, Sayers acknowledged that her ideas about work were initially received as rather unworldly: “When I first began to talk on the subject, the Gospel of Work was usually dismissed as the dream of a literary person unrelated to the needs and desires of the working man; now, serious-minded people have begun to admit that it is not undesirable but only impossible – so that we might say that some progress has been made in the right direction.” Wade Document 235/14.

⁵⁹⁴ Sayers, *Why Work?* p.11. In her essay “Vocation in Work” Sayers noted that in war time the work force had utterly committed to the excellence of their creations rather than making something as quickly and cheaply as possible: “The enthusiasm with which labour went to work after the Dunkirk disaster and during the “Tanks-for-Russia” week suggest that the power that enables men to work with enthusiasm is a real conviction of the worth of their work. They will endure much if like the artist, they passionately desire to see the job completed and to know it is very good.” Sayers, “Vocation in Work”, p.97.

⁵⁹⁵ Sayers, *Why Work?* p.11.

implemented, they produced good economic results,”⁵⁹⁶ only acknowledging later that Sayers’ criteria for good work seem to “give insufficient weight to the effects of the institutional organisation of the economic sphere as a contributing factor.”⁵⁹⁷ To aid in presenting Sayers’ ideas on work as practically and economically applicable, Fletcher turns to MacIntyre and his conception of virtue and practice to “fill out Sayers’ account of good work.”⁵⁹⁸ Fletcher argues that “MacIntyre’s account of the family as a practice complete and clarifies Sayers’ account of good work.”⁵⁹⁹ This thesis is less curious about the practical applicability of Sayers’ theories about work within the economic structures of western society and more concerned with analysing her writing about work with regard to her concept of pattern, so as to argue that Sayers’ work on work coheres with her wider theological contribution.

Sayers’ writing on work is of importance because her theological mindset enabled her to stand back and look at the big picture in order to glimpse such a pattern, arguing that unlike the theologian: “The economist is inside the squirrel cage and turning within it.”⁶⁰⁰ Sayers’ approach implied that the question of work needed to be considered at a much deeper level than merely the economic,⁶⁰¹ since work was a moral question, a matter of human value and divine image:

Any question about absolute values belongs to the sphere not of economics but of religion. And it is very possible that we cannot deal with the economics at all unless we

⁵⁹⁶ Fletcher continues: “Peter Drucker, in *The Practice of Management*, gave an example of a restructured manufacturing plant which follows Sayers’ prescriptions, even though we have no evidence that he had read any of her work. In the factory producing aircraft-engine parts, the process was restructured so that one worker performed the eighty component operations to produce the complete part. “Much to everyone’s surprise, this resulted in more, faster and better work than could possibly have been turned out either by highly skilled machinists or on the orthodox assembly line.” This would meet Sayers’ standards allows (sic) the worker to perform a complete task at their own rhythm.” Fletcher, *Artist and Trinity*, p. 101

⁵⁹⁷ Fletcher, *Artist and Trinity*, p.106.

⁵⁹⁸ *ibid.* See Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* 2nd edition (Notre Dame: IL: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984) and *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1999).

⁵⁹⁹ Fletcher, *Artist and Trinity*, p.112.

⁶⁰⁰ *ibid.* p.11.

⁶⁰¹ Here I am in agreement with Fletcher. Indeed, the great contribution of Chapter Five of *Artist and Trinity* is the way in which she places Sayers’ ideas alongside MacIntyre’s philosophical and ethical approach to work. This is particularly valuable in emphasising Sayers’ contribution to the wider endeavour of examining human vocation more broadly than as a merely economic phenomenon.

can see economy from outside the cage; that we cannot begin to settle the relative values without considering absolute values.⁶⁰²

This concern connected to Sayers' wider passion to call the Church to a thoroughgoing commitment to human flourishing. In her lecture to the Malvern Conference 1941, Sayers had set out her theological reasoning regarding a Christian vision for society:

If the Church...is concerned with civilisation, or with politics and economics, it can only be on the grounds of a realistic and sacramental theology of the Incarnation. For this means that the whole of man's humanity, at its most vital, developed, and characteristic, is the vehicle of the divine part of his nature; that he cannot grow closer to God by dissociating himself from his own humanity, or from the rest of humanity; but that on the contrary, the response of the Spirit to the Father is best expressed in the response of a fully developed and characteristically human society.⁶⁰³

Sayers wanted the national Church to recognise that human vocation was specifically an outworking of divine pattern and that it was thus an ultimate good that would lead to human flourishing. But human work was not only an ultimate good for Sayers, work was also a means of worship: "All human activity, whether of spirit, mind or body, is potentially good – not negatively, by repression, but positively, and as an act of worship."⁶⁰⁴ Sayers regarded the Churches' failure to grasp the reality that work falls within the remit of a divine pattern for human life and flourishing, as leading inevitably to the Churches' impotency in speaking out publicly for the good of society. Sayers argued: "I am persuaded that the reason why the Churches are in so much difficulty about giving a lead in the economic sphere is because they are trying to fit a Christian standard of economics to a wholly false and pagan understanding of work."⁶⁰⁵ Rather than pointing to a divine pattern, the church was in Sayers' view colluding with a pagan pattern of economics that was doomed to fail, since it was not "true" to the way things actually are.

⁶⁰² *ibid.*

⁶⁰³ Sayers, "The Church's Responsibility", p.66.

⁶⁰⁴ *ibid.* p.67.

⁶⁰⁵ Sayers, *Why Work?* p.12.

Alongside liberating work from the curse of “economic man”, Sayers believed that Christian theology entailed a qualitative vision of what work could be for humanity. She wrote:

work is not, primarily, a thing one does to live, but the thing one lives to do. It is, or it should be, the full expression of the worker’s faculties, the thing in which he finds spiritual, mental and bodily satisfaction, and the medium in which he offers himself to God.⁶⁰⁶

Sayers maintained that this commitment to work as the outworking of divine pattern and the envisaging of work as a form of worship, needed to have further repercussions than the important concern of many in the Churches that “work should be performed under decent living and working conditions.”⁶⁰⁷ In “Why Work?”, she explicitly highlighted four considerations that she believed to be equally significant.

Firstly, Sayers challenged the idea that work should necessarily be paid for out of profits generated by the worker. She drew on the example of people pursuing hobbies for no financial gain but for the sheer love of the work as a justification for this, arguing that for such a worker: “his satisfaction is found in the fulfillment of his own nature, and in contemplation of the perfection of his work.” Sayers acknowledged that this may not work out particularly practically but skated over the economic question, asserting that: “As long as Society provides the worker with a sufficient return in real wealth to enable him to carry on the work properly, then he has his reward.”⁶⁰⁸

Secondly, Sayers advocated that “every man should do the work for which he is fitted by nature”⁶⁰⁹, as opposed to the employer seeking the cheapest labour for any given work or the

⁶⁰⁶ *ibid.*

⁶⁰⁷ *ibid.*

⁶⁰⁸ *ibid.*

⁶⁰⁹ *ibid.* p.13.

worker seeking the best-paid job. She wanted to see a separation between the financial recompense and the nature of the work itself. Her third consideration followed logically that if we changed our perceptions of work, humanity could regain a perspective of work as a reflection of the divine image, designed to bring us fulfilment as human beings:

We should no longer think of work as something that we hastened to get through in order to enjoy leisure; we should look on our leisure as the period of changed rhythm that refreshed us for the delightful purpose of getting on with our work.⁶¹⁰

A fourth application is that human beings should fight for the quality of the work they do. Sayers argued that: “The greatest insult which a commercial age has offered to the worker has been to rob him of all interest in the end-product of the work and to force him to dedicate his life to making badly, things which were not worth making.”⁶¹¹ But conversely the Church had also failed to acknowledge the value of human work in the world: “It is the business of the Church to recognise that the secular vocation, as such, is sacred... the work itself must be accepted and respected as the medium of divine creation.”⁶¹² It was a particular source of frustration to Sayers that the Church had failed to recognise and affirm the sacred nature of human work. She believed that this failure had apologetic implications since it undermined the relevance of the Church in an area so fundamental to human experience:

In nothing has the Church so lost her hold on reality as in her failure to understand and respect the secular vocation... How can anyone remain interested in a religion which seems to have no concern with nine-tenths of his life?⁶¹³

This was a prevailing irritant since Sayers regarded human vocation and creativity to be crucial indicators of the truth of Christian dogma, rooted in the pattern of the divine Creator. She argued that Christian truth ought to be lived out and demonstrated in the work produced by a human being, and that the crucial question was not the piety of the worker but the truthfulness

⁶¹⁰ *ibid.* pp.13-4.

⁶¹¹ *ibid.* p.14.

⁶¹² *ibid.* p.15.

⁶¹³ *ibid.*

and authenticity of the work. This was a core commitment within Sayers' entire oeuvre, a principle at the very heart of her vision of the world. In "The Church's Responsibility" Sayers had elucidated it in this way: "the Divine Beauty is sovereign within His own dominion... if a statue is ill-carved or a play ill-written, the artist's corruption is deeper than if the statue were obscene and the play blasphemous."⁶¹⁴ Here in "Why Work?" Sayers argued with passion for this familiar point of the rectitude of the work: "No piety in the worker will compensate for work that is not true to itself; for any work that is untrue to its own technique is a living lie."⁶¹⁵

In the denouement of *Gaudy Night* Sayers' passion for the quality of the work was articulated by Wimsey as he explained that the scholarly commitment to the integrity of the dons' academic research was to prove to be a significant factor in the solving the mystery at hand: "I established for a certainty, what I was sure of in my own mind from the start, that there was not a woman in this Common Room, married or single, who would be ready to place personal loyalties above professional honour."⁶¹⁶ An unflinching commitment to the quality of a given piece of work was to be the lynchpin upon which the entire plot of "Gaudy Night" would hang. When Annie, the culprit of the misdemeanours speaks, it is this prizing of scholarly integrity over the personal fate of a married man with dependents, against which she rails: 'I say you murdered him. What had he done to you? He told a lie about somebody else who was dead and dust hundreds of years ago. Nobody was worse for that... You broke him and killed him – all for nothing.' The scholar who had uncovered Annie's husband's lie, Miss de Vine responds simply 'it was my job.'⁶¹⁷ The integrity of the work must come first. In her story, *Gaudy Night*, Sayers explored this tension between personal feeling, domestic consequence and the integrity of the work. Her passion for truth expressed in the quality of honest work formed the basis of

⁶¹⁴ Sayers, "The Church's Responsibility", p.75.

⁶¹⁵ Sayers, *Why Work?* p.9

⁶¹⁶ Sayers, *Gaudy*, p.402.

⁶¹⁷ *ibid.*

her most successful work of fiction. In her essay, “Gaudy Night”, Sayers explained that her realisation that what she most valued from a university education was the “habit of intellectual integrity which is at once the foundation and the result of scholarship” and this had provided the impetus for *Gaudy Night*: “intellectual integrity (w)as the one great permanent value in an emotionally unstable world.”⁶¹⁸ A commitment to the quality of the work on its own terms and for its own sake, substantiated in her essays was the moral basis of *Gaudy Night*.

This theme of the integrity of work on its own terms as a means of truth, in *Gaudy Night* and taken up in her essays, echoes Sayers concern in *Zeal of Thy House*, and *The Mind of the Maker*, that human work has the potential to reveal truth: “the living and eternal truth is expressed in work only so far as that work is true in itself, to itself, to the standards of its own technique.”⁶¹⁹ In fact from Sayers’ perspective this revelation of truth occurs in so-called “secular” work in a way that transcends Church preaching and ecclesiastical leaders would do well to stop distracting people from their God-given work with church activities: “Let the church remember this: that every maker and worker is called to serve God *in* his profession or trade – not outside it.”⁶²⁰ Such professions and trades are as valuable as a priestly vocation within the church since they reflect the divine image.

Sayers’ reflections on work were undergirded by her convictions about truth and pattern. False patterns bring about the collapse of civilisations or ideologies which are built upon them since their foundations did not cohere with truth and reality. The divine pattern does precisely the opposite – it is a strong foundation in this particular case for an understanding of work - because it is true. In Sayers’ view the divine pattern serves as a foundation for an approach to work that

⁶¹⁸ Sayers, “Gaudy Night”, p.82.

⁶¹⁹ Sayers, *Why Work?* p.16.

⁶²⁰ *ibid.*

would bring about human flourishing, but could also serve as evidence from everyday life for the truth the Christian faith.

Sayers acknowledged that her vision for work opened her up to the charge of unrealistic idealism and she chose to try to counter this by drawing on her own sphere of professional experience to make her point, selecting artists as an example of a community of workers who “live by and for the works”⁶²¹ of creative imagination. Artists do not work in order to make money so that they may enjoy leisure time, they make money to live and go on working. Sayers contrasted this vision of human flourishing through work with what she called the “economic worker”⁶²² who sets great store by “leisure for its own sake... a polite word for idleness.”⁶²³ The unintended consequence of organising a society on purely economic terms for people was antithetical to the divine pattern for humanity as people were forced to seek fulfillment disconnected from their work: “their existence is an effort to escape what they are doing. And the inevitable result of this is a boredom, a lack of purpose, a passivity which eats life away at the heart.”⁶²⁴

A further consequence was what she termed “the appearance of a parasitic and exploiting class”, those who aspire to do no work at all, but to instead be economically carried on the backs of the rest of the population. It was in this context that Sayers introduced her concerns about the phenomenon of women being asked during the war to take up “men’s work” but then: “when the crisis is past the women are to be pushed out of the trades and professions and restored... to their homes.”⁶²⁵ Sayers argued that the economic system of the commercial age

⁶²¹ Sayers, “Vocation in Work”, p.91.

⁶²² *ibid.* p.92.

⁶²³ *ibid.* p.94.

⁶²⁴ *ibid.* p.95.

⁶²⁵ *ibid.*

had produced “a class of really leisured women – pampered and exploiting women, with no creative job to which they might set hand and brain” so that “the possession of an idle woman became the hallmark of a man’s success.”⁶²⁶ Sayers pleaded that the Church and “all social reformers... take seriously the warning that they cannot have a society of creatively-working and unexploited men unless they can also arrange a society of creatively working women.”⁶²⁷

Women

Sayers addressed questions about the role of women throughout her life but she wrote two essays particularly focused upon it. “Are Women Human?”, an address given to a Women’s Society, 1938 and the subsequent “The Human-Not-Quite-Human”.⁶²⁸ Both essays were published in her collection of essays, *Unpopular Opinions* in 1946. In the Foreword to *Unpopular Opinions*, Sayers explained that some of the essays in the volume were “so unpopular with the persons who commissioned them that they were suppressed before they appeared.” This was in part due to what the BBC described as the notion that “our public do not want to be admonished by a woman.”⁶²⁹

⁶²⁶ *ibid.* p.96.

⁶²⁷ *ibid.*

⁶²⁸ In fact, given that Sayers grew up during the era of the suffragettes’ campaign, she addressed questions of female empowerment relatively rarely. On March 28 1917, the House of Commons voted 341 to 62 that women over the age of 30 who were householders, the wives of householders, occupiers of property with an annual rent of £5 or graduates of British universities should be able to vote. Dorothy L. Sayers was 23 when this legislation passed. After the passing of the “Qualification of Women Act” the first actual opportunity to vote for women was in the General Election of December 1918. Sayers does not allude to this in her papers.

⁶²⁹ Sayers, *Unpopular Opinions*, p.7. In support of this analysis of the sentiment of the time note that the BBC Radio 4 Woman’s Hour, which started on 7 October 1946, billed as “a daily programme of music, advice and entertainment for the home”, was originally presented by a man. Alan Ivimey, a journalist and ex-RAF intelligence officer: “specialised in writing for and talking to women”. It was felt that the radio audience would not want to listen to a woman’s voice. One BBC memo about the Radio 4 show, which was created in 1946, stated: ‘You are right, I feel, in putting a man in “talking” charge. Women can’t bear being talked at by other women. What they will take from a man – I speak purely radiographically – they will resent from a woman.’ BBC WAC, R51, 1946. See also <http://www.pressreader.com>

In her provocatively titled essay, “Are Women Human?” Dorothy L. Sayers set out her central argument regarding questions about gender. She did not describe herself as a feminist, but in fact suspected that “an aggressive feminism might do more harm than good”⁶³⁰ in the cause of creating a society that recognised and valued the full humanity of women as individual persons. She considered the tendency to assert women’s rights or the identification of women as a particular class of human being, to be a form of reductionism and as such antithetical to her Christian faith. Instead the focus of her intellectual energy in her writings regarding gender, and the essay “Are Women Human?”, in particular, was the shared humanity of male and female, eschewing any forced distinction between the genders. This was the pattern she was working with and in her writing she sought both to explain her paradigm and to demonstrate that it “made sense” and had persuasive explanatory power for the good of wider society. Deborah Savage comments: “At the nub of Sayers's argument is a discernible if latent personalism that, though never made explicit by the author, reflects the sort of realism that characterizes the best of the Christian philosophical tradition.”⁶³¹

Sayers disparaged the tendency of feminism to argue for a blanket parity of ability between men and women: “‘A woman is as good as a man’... means nothing whatever until you add: ‘at doing what?’”⁶³² Sayers, by seeking to emphasise the humanity of women, hoped to avoid generalisations about the competence of women in comparison to men. She warned that the issue at stake was not strictly binary as to the capacities and abilities of a person with regard to gender. She acknowledged:

not that every woman is in virtue of her sex as strong, clever, artistic, level-headed, industrious and so forth as any man that can be mentioned; but that a woman is just as

⁶³⁰ Dorothy L. Sayers, “Are Women Human?” in *Unpopular Opinions*, p.106.

⁶³¹ Deborah Savage, “Introduction to Dorothy L. Sayers “Are Women Human?” from *Unpopular Opinions: Twenty-One Essays*.” in *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 8:4 (2005):158-164.

⁶³² Sayers, “Are Women Human?” p.106.

much an ordinary human being as a man, with the same individual preferences, and with just as much right to the tastes and preferences as an individual person.⁶³³

Rather than regarding every human being primarily as a member of a specific gender class, Sayers was interested in individual personhood within the larger framework of shared humanity. Whilst she did not wish to align herself specifically with feminism per se, she argued that there was a widespread societal failure to appreciate the diverse opinions and experiences of different women.

A certain amount of classification is, of course, necessary for practical purposes... what is unreasonable and irritating is to assume that *all* one's tastes and preferences have to be conditioned by the class to which one belongs. That has been the very common error into which men have frequently fallen about women.⁶³⁴

Sayers addressed the reproach that women nowadays always want to “copy what men do.” She argued that there had been a significant number of jobs and pleasurable pastimes, which men had categorised as belonging exclusively to their domain. The example she chose lay within the remit of her own interest and experience – Sayers lamented that for a long time “men had a monopoly of classical education”. As one of the beneficiaries of belonging to the first cohort of women to graduate from Oxford, Sayers called to mind “the pioneers of university training for women” who had demanded that women should be admitted to the universities. The question repeatedly posed to them, “Why should women want to know about Aristotle?”, could be countered with Sayers’ appeal not to a feminist narrative of female equality with or even superiority over men but a direct assertion of female humanity and individuality and a determination to avoid the reductionism of perceiving the physiological elements of gender as in any way determinative of the intellectual capacity of a particular human being:

The answer is NOT that all women would be the better for knowing about Aristotle... - but simply: “What women want as a class is irrelevant. I want to know about Aristotle. It is true that most women care nothing about him... but I, eccentric individual that I

⁶³³ *ibid.* p.107.

⁶³⁴ *ibid.*

am, do want to know about Aristotle, and I submit that there is nothing in my shape or bodily functions which need prevent my knowing about him.⁶³⁵

Sayers' arguments did not resonate widely with First Wave Feminism since she was eschewing the underlying assumptions of "women as a class" and working from a different pattern.⁶³⁶

Susan Haack pointed out that Sayers did not anticipate the concerns of Second Wave Feminism either:

Doubtless some will see Sayers' whole approach as passé, a hold-over from the Dark Ages before Second-Wave feminism; but I see it as a much-needed antidote to the emphasis on women-as-a-class which predominates in feminism today. A focus on women-as-a-class was the basis of old practices of exclusion, and those who fought to get rid of those practices had no alternative but to focus on women-as-a-class themselves. Now, however, focussing too exclusively on the category, Woman, risks playing into the hands of the oppressors.⁶³⁷

Sayers central concern that: "Every woman is a human being – one cannot repeat that too often", led her to argue as a direct consequence of this something that would be of particular

⁶³⁵ *ibid.* p.108.

⁶³⁶ First Wave Feminists were campaigning for women to have the same basic legal rights as men. See Mary Lyndon Shanley, *Feminism, Marriage and the Law in Victorian England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), Margaret Forster, *Significant Sisters: The Grassroots of Active Feminism 1893-1939* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1984), Lee Holcombe, *Wives and Property: Reform of the Married Woman's Property Law in Nineteenth-Century England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983) and Susan Magarey, *Passions of the First Wave Feminists* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2001).

⁶³⁷ Susan Haack "After My Own Heart Dorothy L. Sayers' Feminism" *Think* 7:9 (2008): 23-33. Second Wave Feminism arose in the 1960s amidst the Women's Liberation Movement and thus after Sayers' death. There was widespread recognition of the need for a theory that accounted for the persuasiveness of women's oppression throughout history and to allow for the different forms this oppression had assumed in different societies. Initially second wave feminists sort to argue that women and men were basically the same, however, radical and socialist feminists began to argue for a "difference" feminism which asserted the essential differences between men and women and has also been labeled "gynocentric." See Catherine MacKinnon, "Feminism, Marxism, Method and the State: An Agenda for Theory", *7 Signs Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 3:7 (1982): 515-44; Eric Engle, *Marxism, Liberalism and Feminism: Leftist Legal Thought* (New Delhi: Serials Publications, 2010), Nancy Chodorow, *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* (London: Yale University Press, 1989). This essentialist understanding has been challenged by feminists resistant to the homogenization of women as a class and asserting the legitimate differences and diversities amongst women. Here it seems that Sayers did have something to add to the debate with her insistence that women have diverse tastes, abilities and interests. Third Wave feminism is navigating challenges to essentialism alongside the impact of postmodern and post-structural critiques of language and identity within feminist theory. Sayers did not anticipate the identity politics of the twenty-first century. See (ed.) Leslie L. Heywood, *The Women's Movement Today: An Encyclopedia of Third Wave Feminism* (2006), Elizabeth Spelman, *Inessential Woman* (Boston: Beacon, 1988), (ed.) Linda Nicholson, *A Reader in Feminist Theory* (London: Routledge, 1997) and Judith Grant *Fundamental Feminism: Contesting the Core Concepts of Feminist Theory* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1993).

concern for women – that “a human being must have occupation.”⁶³⁸ On this ground Sayers directly challenged the contemporary economic concern to keep women as a class out of the workplace in order to keep jobs for the men. Echoing the points raised in her essays on work, Sayers argued against restricting women to the sphere of the home, pointing out that even the more fulfilling work done by previous generations of women in their homes had been taken away from them:

It is all very well to say that a woman’s place is the home – but modern civilisation has taken all the pleasant and profitable activities out of the home, where the women looked after them, and handed them over to industry, to be directed and organised by men.⁶³⁹

Sayers believed that women as human beings should have access to enjoyable, creative vocations inside and outside of their homes. She challenged the thinking behind both the feminist tendency to speak of women as a separate class in order to argue for this right, and the economically motivated societal pressure to keep women as a group in their homes and out of the workplace. Both of these impulses to distinguish women from men in the context of work were undermining to the central truth that Sayers sought to uphold. In the biblical pattern of creation women and men are equally human. Women have human intuitions, abilities and creativity, just as men do.

Sayers went on to argue that, however well-intentioned, any notions of purposefully keeping women dependent on men economically demeaned both the men and the women involved, since it was a fundamental challenge to the true pattern of humanity as both male and female:

The boast, “My wife doesn’t need to soil her hands with work,” first became general when the commercial middle classes acquired the plutocratic and aristocratic notion that the keeping of an idle woman was a badge of superior social status. Man must work and woman must exploit his labour... And if the woman submits, she can be cursed for her exploitation; and if she rebels, she can be cursed for competing with the male: whatever she does will be wrong.⁶⁴⁰

⁶³⁸ Sayers, “Are Women Human?”, p.110.

⁶³⁹ *ibid.*

⁶⁴⁰ Dorothy L. Sayers, “The Human-Not-Quite-Human” in *Unpopular Opinions*, p.120.

Sayers' concern about the underlying challenge to the humanity of women, presented by the subservient economic status of women as expressed in this essay was not a new concern. In an unpublished collection of her papers from 1928 known as "Vitae", a young Sayers clearly expressed her views regarding financial independence for married women:

Women and Marriage: consider that chief difficulties in most cases are economic. Extremely keen that all women, married or not, should be able to make money for themselves and take their share in the upkeep of the home. Consider that it will soon be thought as degrading to be "kept" by a husband as "kept" in any other way. Would welcome legislation to abolish husband's liability for wife's income-tax, personal debts and other unfair distinctions.⁶⁴¹

Indeed, in her novel *Gaudy Night*, Sayers had explored this very question in the course of the story. She later reflected on her instinct that Harriet Vane could not embark upon a romantic relationship with Peter Wimsey until she was clearly his equal: "At all costs, some device must be found for putting Harriet back on a footing of equality with her lover."⁶⁴² This was juxtaposed with the attitude of the perpetrator of the disturbances, Annie who remarks that it is "a dreadful thing to see all these unmarried ladies living together. It isn't natural" and who wonders at the point of a women's college investing in a library: "it seems a great shame to keep up this big place just for women to study books in. I can't see what girls want with books, Books won't teach them to be good wives."⁶⁴³ Later on in the novel when Harriet Vane is questioning one of the female Oxford students, Miss Cattermole, it becomes clear that she loathes studying at Oxford and is only there because her mother is: "one of those people who work to get things open to women – you know professions and things." But Miss Cattermole has no such ambitions – she explains: "I think I should have liked to be a cook. Or possibly a hospital nurse, but I think I should have been better at cooking. Only, you see, those are two of

⁶⁴¹ Dorothy L. Sayers, "Vitae", undated (Barbara Reynolds labels it 1928), Wade document 21/9ff.

⁶⁴² Sayers, "Gaudy Night", p.81.

⁶⁴³ Sayers, *Gaudy*, p.100.

the things Mother's always trying to get people out of the way of thinking women's sphere ought to be restricted to.'⁶⁴⁴ Sayers' instinct to challenge the idea that women belong to a particular sphere is evident as *Gaudy Night* unfolds in her acknowledgment that just as all women do not wish to be housewives, neither do all women wish to be scholars. Sayers' essays reflect the exploration of gender roles and relationships she had begun through story as the author of popular fiction.

Moreover, Sayers consistently sought to resist any attempt to categorise women as a separate class of human at all, however well intentioned, with its inherent tendency to speak of "the woman's point of view". In "Are Women Human?", she returned to her conviction that there should be no such thing as 'the woman's point of view' and that to collude with such reductionism was to undermine the biblical pattern of shared humanity by both male and female:

Even where women have special knowledge, they may disagree among themselves like other specialists. Do doctors never quarrel or scientists disagree? Are women really not human, that they should be expected to toddle along all in a flock like sheep?⁶⁴⁵

Susan Haack picked up the ongoing significance of Sayers' contention that women should not be regarded as one group holding one theological, intellectual, political or practical perspective:

Heterodox in her own day... Sayers deliberately plays down the idea of women as a class, category, or group. On some topics, she grants, women are likely to have special knowledge, though even there they will probably disagree among themselves; but on most questions, she insists, there is no 'woman's point of view.'⁶⁴⁶

In like manner, Sayers went on to tackle the question of public and private demands on a person, pointing out that a man is rarely required to choose between a job and a family. In fact,

⁶⁴⁴ *ibid.* pp.140-1.

⁶⁴⁵ Sayers, "Are Women Human?" p.113.

⁶⁴⁶ Susan Haack, "After My Own Heart Dorothy L. Sayers' Feminism" p.30.

if he wants to have a romantic relationship leading to a family with children he will be expected to have a job to support his lifestyle since human beings do need to make choices as individuals and bear the economic consequences of those choices. Sayers argued that women should find themselves equally in this logical position alongside men, since such decisions are a fact of human existence and flourishing regardless of gender. She argued that in the very rare cases where a person does put their job before every other earthly consideration, male and female are perceived differently: “if that one person in a thousand is a man, we say, simply, that he is passionately keen on his job; if she is a woman, we say she is a freak.”⁶⁴⁷ Despite this, Sayers pointed out that some women have committed to their job above all for its own sake, eschewing marriage and children. The examples Sayers chose to illustrate this point reveal her determination to show that women could find human fulfillment in a particular vocation outside of family life. Elizabeth I happened to be a woman uniquely suited to the role of sovereign and ruler, and committed to this calling above personal attachments, and Florence Nightingale “had the choice, and chose the job and made a success of it.”⁶⁴⁸

In addressing the perennial question: “What on earth do women want?”, Sayers emphasised her commitment to a pattern that she believed was a true representation of reality. Men and women are human and as such both genders fundamentally want the same things:

I do not know that women, as women, want anything in particular, but as human beings they want, my good men, exactly what you want yourselves: interesting occupation, reasonable freedom for their pleasures, and a sufficient emotional outlet.⁶⁴⁹

She concluded her essay summarising this central commitment to the mutual humanity of male and female: “Indeed, it is my experience that both men and women are fundamentally human,

⁶⁴⁷ Sayers “Are Women Human?”, p.111.

⁶⁴⁸ *ibid.* p.110.

⁶⁴⁹ *ibid.* p.114.

and that there is very little mystery about either sex, except the exasperating mysteriousness of human beings in general.”⁶⁵⁰

In her subsequent essay, “The Human-Not-Quite-Human”, Sayers built upon the intellectual foundation she had explored in “Are Women Human?” but sought to address the church more directly with her argument. She warned that she felt it “necessary to speak plainly, and perhaps even brutally, to the Church,”⁶⁵¹ and reiterated her central argument that “the fundamental thing is that women are more like men than anything else in the world. They are human beings.”⁶⁵² This concern over the relationship between women and the church was not merely an interesting subject for an essay or two, but Sayers took it up vociferously in her correspondence. For example, she warned the Rt Rev. Meryvn George Haigh the Bishop of Coventry in a letter written on the 26th June 1944 that “the Church ought not to treat women as dogsbodies... but as human beings whose activities are not all and always comprised within their sexual function.”⁶⁵³

“The Human-Not-Quite-Human” essay probed into precisely why women might have been treated as less than fully human. Sayers went back to explore the Latin words that signified human beings in general and by gender. She wrote: “*Vir* is male and *Femina* is female: but *Homo* is male and female.”⁶⁵⁴ However she noted that a general use of language has not reflected the mutuality of “Homo”: “No matter what arguments are used, the discussion is vitiated from the start because Man is always dealt with as both *Homo* and *Vir*, but Woman

⁶⁵⁰ *ibid.* p.115.

⁶⁵¹ Sayers, “The Human-Not-Quite-Human”, p.116.

⁶⁵² *ibid.*

⁶⁵³ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to the Rt Rev. Meryvn George Haigh, Bishop of Coventry, 26 June 1944, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Three*, p.28.

⁶⁵⁴ *ibid.*

only as *Femina*.⁶⁵⁵ This frustration for the intellectual woman to be consistently observed through the lens of one's biology is expressed by Sayers as she sought to draw the Church's attention to the implicit reductionism of such a *modus operandi*:

Probably no man has ever troubled to imagine how strange his life would appear to himself if it were unrelentingly assessed in terms of his maleness; if everything he wore, said, or did had to be justified by reference to female approval; if he were compelled to regard himself, day in day out, not as a member of society, but merely as a virile member of society... If, instead of allowing with a smile that "women prefer cave-men," he felt the unrelenting pressure of a whole social structure forcing him to order all his goings in conformity with that pronouncement.⁶⁵⁶

Sayers wanted to challenge the church and its hierarchy to see that this was an area where Jesus Christ had modeled something entirely different. Christ had not reduced women to their biology or to a particular sociological sphere and yet the Church was failing to follow her Lord in this matter. Sayers pointed out in her letter to the Bishop of Coventry that Jesus:

... met lots of women, so He did give us a direct [line] on them. And the most remarkable thing (though nobody seems to have noticed it) is that, alone among teachers and founders of religion, He did and said nothing special about them. He never said they were tempters, or snares, or weaklings, or imbeciles, or inspirations, or angels; He never mapped out a special sphere of duties for them; or told people to keep clear of them or shut them up; when they asked him intelligent questions He replied seriously and intelligibly... He never patronised, or condescended, or scolded, or nagged at women for being women, or turned shy or silly or self-conscious or superior on them, and not one teaching or parable of His ever turns on funny stuff about wives or horrid warnings about women... you could read the whole gospel from end to end without learning from it that there was anything peculiar about women or that mankind was divided into two sections, the one consisting of complete human beings with certain sexual functions, and the other of perambulating sex-organs with a distant resemblance to humanity. You don't realise how extraordinary that is. It is unparalleled. There has been nothing like it before or since. There has certainly never been anything like it in Christ's Church.⁶⁵⁷

⁶⁵⁵ In this letter to the Bishop of Coventry she continued to emphasise the fact that it is not in a woman's best interest to be constantly categorised according to her gender: "I should like to see something said about encouraging women to have human interests as well as "women's needs" ... It's not good for women to be everlastingly forced to think of themselves in terms of sex." In Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Three*, p.29.

⁶⁵⁶ Sayers, "The Human-Not-Quite-Human", pp.117-8.

⁶⁵⁷ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to Bishop of Coventry, 26th June 1944 in (ed.), Reynolds, *Letters Volume Three*, p.29.

This conviction that Jesus demonstrated how women should be regarded and treated led to the apologetic finale of her essay, “The Human-Not-Quite-Human” and thus presented the Church with a serious challenge to consider:

Perhaps it is no wonder that the women were first at the Cradle and last at the Cross. They had never known a man like this Man – there never has been such another. A prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, never flattered or coaxed or patronized; who never made arch jokes about them, never treated them as “The women, God help us!” or “The ladies, God bless them!”; who rebuked without querulousness and praised without condescension; who took their questions and arguments seriously; who never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered them for being female; who had no axe to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend; who took them as he found them and was completely unself-conscious. There is no act, no sermon, no parable in the whole gospel that borrows its pungency from female perversity; nobody could possibly guess from the words of Jesus that there was anything “funny” about woman’s nature.⁶⁵⁸

If Jesus was God incarnate revealing both the ultimate pattern of truth and its specific outworking in history and society, might the church look and reconsider her treatment of women and consider following his pattern? Sayers’ essays were an attempt to provoke a conversation about this within the church. This does not appear to have been particularly successful. Ann Loades commented: “Many of her... essays on spiritual and theological themes are... little read or remembered.”⁶⁵⁹ Nevertheless, Sayers continued challenging the Church in this area. Her unpublished papers include a collection of writings entitled “Oecumenical Penguin” in which she identified fear as the corrupting component, undermining the Church’s thinking about women in contrast to Christ’s. She wrote:

... the dealings of the Church with sex are, throughout her history, corrupted by the bad kind of fear. Nothing is more startling and indeed horrifying, than the contrast between the perfect simplicity of Jesus in His relations with women, and His complete silence as to any special duties, frailties, mysteries, dangers, or dirt connected with their sex, and the self-consciousness and interminable chatter of His followers on the subject... He had no fear.⁶⁶⁰

⁶⁵⁸ Sayers, “The Human-Not-Quite-Human”, p.122.

⁶⁵⁹ Ann Loades, “Are Women Human? Dorothy L. Sayers as a Feminist Reader of Dante’s Beatrice”, *Feminist Theology*, vol. 3 no. 8. (January 1995), pp.21-38.

⁶⁶⁰ Dorothy L. Sayers, “Oecumenical Penguin” unpublished, MS-312d, 5-6. Wade Center, Illinois.

Sayers was frustrated by the attitude of the clergy towards this question of gender - she detected a reluctance to discuss the concerns of women lest they be drawn into debate over the ordination of women. She wrote in reply to a letter from a Miss J. Hodgson in July 1943 about the possibility of female priests in the Church of England that she regarded the more basic consideration of the full humanity of women to be of much greater importance than their potential ordination. In fact, the question of priesthood appeared to be undermining a serious engagement in the Church with the equal humanity of women with men:

As matters stand it is almost impossible to get the clergy to tackle the subject of the status of women, because they always think it is going to be something or other about Orders; and the agitation about this has only succeeded in side-tracking the dispute and confusing the issues. I think that to clamour for admission to the priesthood (whether or not it is desirable) is to throw the whole thing out of proportion; it is bound to look like just one more effort to get women into a paid profession, whereas the real controversy is about something much more fundamental.⁶⁶¹

Sayers' views on this matter do not appear to have been widely understood or appreciated even by her friends. On 13 July 1948, C. S. Lewis wrote a letter to Sayers raising the subject of the potential of the Church of England allowing the ordination of women to the priesthood:

News has just reached me of a movement to demand that women should be allowed Priests' Orders. I am guessing that, like me, you disapprove of something that would cut us off so sharply from all the rest of Christendom... the Priest at the Altar must represent the Bridegroom to whom we all are, in a sense, feminine.⁶⁶²

Sayers replied that she thought any such movement unlikely to be successful: "I should have thought it could be trusted to perish on the barricades of prejudice before arriving at the citadel."⁶⁶³ Furthermore she was concerned for the global unity of the church: "Obviously, nothing could be more silly and inexpedient than to erect a new and totally unnecessary barrier between us and the rest of Catholic Christendom." However, she did not share Lewis' certainty

⁶⁶¹ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to Miss J. Hodgson, July 8, 1943, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Two*, p. 421.

⁶⁶² C. S. Lewis letter to Dorothy L. Sayers, 13 July 1948, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Three*, p.386.

⁶⁶³ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to C. S. Lewis, 19 July 1948, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Three*, p.387.

about the necessary maleness of the clergy. With regard to potential women priests she warned: “I fear you would find me an uneasy ally. I can never find any logical or strictly theological reason against it.”⁶⁶⁴ Despite her Anglo-Catholic theology, Sayers’ reasoning for the possibility of female priests rested upon her convictions about the essential humanity of both male and female and this was itself rooted in the pattern laid out in Genesis that male and female were created in the image of God:

In so far as the Priest represents Christ, it is obviously more dramatically appropriate that a man should be, so to speak, cast for the part. But if I were cornered and asked point-blank whether Christ Himself is the representative of male humanity or all humanity, I should be obliged to answer “all of humanity”; and to cite the authority of St Augustine for saying that woman also is made in the image of God.”⁶⁶⁵

Her frustration with the Church’s approach to women was unabated: “Unfortunately, the Church’s whole attitude to women has always been so pagan and oriental as to be very thorny in the handling.”⁶⁶⁶ Thus her strategy with regard to this issue and communication about Christian faith with contemporary feminists appeared to be silence on her part, since she would be unable defend the Church. She wrote: “The most I find I can do is to keep silence in any place where the daughters of the Philistines might overhear me.”⁶⁶⁷ Such a tactical retreat from direct apologetic engagement with a contemporary question pertaining to the credibility of Christian faith was perhaps uncharacteristic for Sayers but she drew a clear line between the Church’s behaviour and the teaching and practice of Christ himself. A related issue arose around the Church’s communication of the doctrine of the Virgin Birth of Christ. This time Sayers was not prepared to remain quiet. The issue at stake was not the possibility of a miracle having occurred at the conception of Christ, but what people regarded as the implied rationale for such a miracle, namely a sense that sex within marriage was vitiated:

⁶⁶⁴ *ibid.*

⁶⁶⁵ *ibid.* p.387.

⁶⁶⁶ *ibid.* p.388.

⁶⁶⁷ *ibid.*

Whatever we say or do not say about this there is one point that *must* be dealt with. Almost every non-Christian, together with a great many Christians believe that this doctrine implies a total condemnation of sex and marriage as being in themselves dirty, disgusting and defiling. This makes decent and normal people quite sick. It is at the bottom of a very great deal of violent hostility to Church Faith... In face of the Churches' historic record in the treatment of women and the handling of sexual matters it cuts no ice whatever to point to the fact that Catholics recognise marriage to be a sacrament and that everybody babbles a great deal about the sanctity of Christian motherhood and the Christian family... The widely felt repugnance to this dogma is not, I am sure, caused by – though it finds support and rationalisation in – scientific difficulties about miracles; plenty of people will accept the resurrection who boggle at the Virgin Birth. It is due to a retching discomfort about what is commonly thought to be the rationale of the doctrine.⁶⁶⁸

Sayers saw that the widely held but fallacious aspersion that sex must be inherently sinful within a Christian way of thinking had led people to think that it was this that necessitated the incarnation occurring without sex and thus the requisite, miraculous, Virgin Birth. This misapprehension was based on a flawed understanding, unwittingly perpetuated by the Church that Genesis described the fall of humanity primarily in terms of sexual intercourse:

The real trouble here is the misconception of what is meant by sin. It is one thing and a perfectly right thing, to say that sex, like every other human function, partakes the corruption of the fall. Everybody can understand that, provided you have explained what the fall is. It is even possible to make clear to people that sex exhibits in a very marked manner the cleavage and duality introduced, by the fall, into human nature. But if you give people the impression that sex *is* the fall and the sin of sins (whether in marriage or out of it), you are producing an atmosphere in which the Virgin Birth appears as a rather dirty story, told by nasty old Puritans.⁶⁶⁹

Sayers felt that antipathy to the doctrine of the Virgin Birth arose “in the presentation of the dogma, if not the dogma itself, from a sense that something integral to human nature is being violated.”⁶⁷⁰ By contrast Sayers appealed to the substance and historicity of the dogma itself as expressed by J. S. Whale: “The meaning of the Virgin Birth is ultimately dogmatic: it is one of the many ways in which the New Testament asserts that the Son of God came into history; he

⁶⁶⁸ Sayers, “Oecumenical Penguin” MS-312d, 4.

⁶⁶⁹ *ibid.* MS-312d, 5.

⁶⁷⁰ *ibid.* MS-312d, 7.

did not come out of it.”⁶⁷¹ The incarnation of Christ was a truth in history, a lived story and thus the incarnate Son of God was not a figment of human imagination but rather a truth revealed from outside. The Church’s failure to articulate this dogma was, according to Sayers, directly related to her inability to truly reflect the attitude of Christ to women or to what she regarded as a truly biblical understanding of sex.

Sayers’ essays reverberate with her convictions about truth and her intuitive appeal to a correct pattern within which the pieces cohere and make sense. Without such a structure humanity goes adrift, and the consequences are far from abstract. The specifics of life are directly impacted by a failure to apply biblical patterns: rather than work providing humanity with a gift of creativity reflecting the Creator and fulfilling the worker, it becomes tedious, oppressive and economically driven; rather than male and female equally reflecting the image of God in their shared humanity, women and men are both demeaned by a reductionist view of women as a separate class economically dependent upon men and restricted in their spheres of activity and creativity on the basis of arbitrary cultural prejudice. The divine pattern for humanity as male and female, equally human, reflecting the image of God, is upheld in the ministry of Jesus. God incarnate in human history invited women to be first at the Cradle and last at the Cross. Where the Church had failed women Christ as the truth incarnate gave humanity the perfect pattern as to how to affirm the full humanity of women. In the next era of Sayers’ work she was to discover resonant echoes of this pattern in the writing of Dante and in particular his drawing of his heroine, Beatrice.

⁶⁷¹ *ibid.* Citation of J. S. Whale, *Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1941), p.100.

Chapter Eight

Dante

In 1943 Sayers read Charles Williams' book on Dante, *The Figure of Beatrice* and she subsequently unearthed a family copy of Dante's *Inferno* and read it in her bomb shelter in 1944. Her connection with the *Comedy* was instantaneously powerful and she found herself unable to put it down regardless of food, work or correspondence.⁶⁷² Given Sayers' emotional reserve, the experience of being utterly "enthralled" took her by surprise. She commented: "Coming to him as I did, for the first time, rather late in life, the impact of Dante upon my unprepared mind was not in the least what I had expected."⁶⁷³ In her essay, "The Faust Legend and the Idea of the Devil", Sayers described Dante as: "The greatest poet, the most exact theologian, the most adult intellect of all."⁶⁷⁴ Sayers began to realise that relatively few people of her generation had read Dante and she set out to make Dante accessible to the general public beyond the realms of scholarship: "I have tried to present Dante – not to a few scholars, but to the thousands of ten-thousands of my countrymen to whom he is a sealed book."⁶⁷⁵ She wanted to make the case that Dante was a "living poet, who has something vital to say to them here and now."⁶⁷⁶ Penguin Books published her translation of *Inferno* in 1949 and within three months, fifty thousand had been sold. Her introduction to Dante and the translation was particularly well received. In 1955 her translation of *Purgatorio* was published, again with a substantial introductory essay. However, Dorothy L. Sayers died in 1957 before completing

⁶⁷² Sayers remained unperturbed by the "doodle-bug" bombs falling and described, having finished the Divine Comedy, finding "the rest of the world's literature so lacking in pep and incident that (she) pushed it all peevishly aside and started out from the Dark Wood all over again." Dorothy L. Sayers, "...And Telling You a Story" in Dorothy L. Sayers, *Further Papers on Dante* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1957), p.2.

⁶⁷³ *ibid.* p.2.

⁶⁷⁴ Dorothy L. Sayers, "The Faust Legend and the Idea of the Devil" (Cardiff: William Lewis Printers Ltd., 1946), p.18.

⁶⁷⁵ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to Signor Foligno, 25 July 1952, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Four*, p.61.

⁶⁷⁶ *ibid.*

her work on the *Paradiso*. Her friend Barbara Reynolds completed her translation and published the third book with her own introduction in 1958.

Sayers' fascination with Dante was nurtured by an intense correspondence with Charles Williams that began on 16 August 1944 with a letter from Sayers beginning: "I have embarked upon an arduous enterprise for which you are entirely responsible."⁶⁷⁷ Sayers wrote nineteen letters to Williams between August 1944 and April 1945, in return for which she received eleven replies from him. This correspondence was to help shape her thinking about Dante, and Williams encouraged her to undertake the task of translating Dante and publishing it for the general public. He sensed that her endeavour would advance the cause of the Christian faith in society as well as introducing a wider audience to Dante:

It would be very extraordinary if you succeeded in exciting people about Dante, and I am not sure that it would not do as much in the matter of the Lay apostolate as anything else. After all, the result of a few more people getting the right side of Dante might easily be that some of them go the right side of the Christian religion.⁶⁷⁸

Sayers sent him a number of translated cantos but he was unwell and only managed two short notes to her before he died in April 1945.

This chapter will examine Sayers' writing on Dante and her theological reflections inspired by the process of translating Dante from Italian into English rhyming verse for a popular audience. Sayers' admiration began with professional esteem: "he was simply the most incomparable story-teller who ever set pen to paper"⁶⁷⁹; but on top of this she seemed to find a resonance with and even a completeness in her own theological thinking through discovering Dante. In a letter to Barbara Reynolds in April 1953, Sayers commented that "a good detective story has

⁶⁷⁷ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to Charles Williams, 16 August 1944, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Three*, p.45.

⁶⁷⁸ Charles Williams letter to Dorothy L. Sayers, 1 January 1945, in Barbara Reynolds, *The Passionate Intellect: Dorothy L. Sayers' Encounter with Dante* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1989), p.42.

⁶⁷⁹ Sayers, "... And Telling you a Story", p.2.

to be constructed with as rigid a formal framework as a ballade or sonnet.” She went on to explain that it was precisely this structure that appealed to her in Dante:

The resolute working-out of every narrative and doctrinal problem in the course of the three Books is a thing to stagger one – particularly when one sees the whole elaborate pattern with all its twisted strands.⁶⁸⁰

Sayers was convinced that the theological insight of Dante should not remain confined to his own era: “If truth is eternal truth, it is true then and now – in 14th century Florence or in 20th century Wimbledon.”⁶⁸¹

First and foremost, Sayers came to *The Divine Comedy* as a story: “what nothing in the ordinary references to Dante had led me to expect was the masterly telling of the mere story.”⁶⁸² She understood the pattern of the story to run on two dimensions - the temporal and the eternal:

But we must have Dante’s theory in our minds while reading the Comedy, if we are to follow the unfolding of its great twofold pattern of temporal and eternal salvation, and understand the passion and bitterness with which he assails those who have undermined the Empire and corrupted the Church.⁶⁸³

As a story on two levels she decoded the layers of meaning around the main participants in the *Comedy* in her introduction to Hell, so as to give the reader clarity about both the eternal and the temporal.

Sayers began with Dante himself, explaining that Dante in the story is always himself. He is a Florentine poet, philosopher, writer and politician, and he is the man who loved Beatrice. In the allegory, however, Dante is “the image of every Christian sinner, and his pilgrimage is that which every soul must make.”⁶⁸⁴ The story takes place in the context of a temporal Empire

⁶⁸⁰ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to Barbara Reynolds, April 1953, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Four*, pp.90-91.

⁶⁸¹ *ibid.* p.91.

⁶⁸² Dorothy L. Sayers letter to Charles Williams, 14 September 1944, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Three*, p.76.

⁶⁸³ Dorothy L. Sayers (trans.), *The Comedy of Dante Alighieri The Florentine Canitica I Hell (L’Inferno)* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1949), p.47.

⁶⁸⁴ Sayers (trans.), *Hell*, p.67.

with cities such as Florence and Rome within which well-known figures from Dante's era appear. But there is also the City and Empire of Dis in Hell and the Eternal City or Heavenly Rome in Paradise. Sayers believed that the whole allegory could be interpreted politically, since the way of salvation was explored not only for the individual human being, but also for communities of people. Dante was clear that civilisations as well as persons needed to know the Hell within them and purge their sins before entering into a state of Grace, Justice and Charity. This struck Sayers as extraordinarily pertinent given the contemporary context of the Second World War. Indeed, before reading Dante, Sayers had written a series of essays entitled *Begin Here* during the course of which she explored past attempts to create political structures. She argued that Christian efforts relied on the theory that all problems could be referred "to one absolute Authority beyond history and beyond humanity" and that in:

this tremendous conception of human life, nothing was omitted or neglected... It embraced the world eternal as well as the world of time; it provided minutely for the most trifling acts of daily life as well as for the rule of empires.⁶⁸⁵

Although this could be read as a commentary on Dante, Sayers had not yet encountered him when she wrote it, thus the resonance with Dante's understanding of the temporal and eternal empires he describes is striking.

In the *Comedy*, Virgil is Dante's companion - he is the poet of the Roman Empire and represented a unifying focal point for the civilised world. In the Middle Ages Virgil was regarded as having been an unconscious prophet of Christianity. In Dante's allegory, Virgil is the image of Human Wisdom - he represents the best that humanity can become in his own

⁶⁸⁵ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Begin Here* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1940), pp.35-37. Sayers concluded that such structures ultimately broke down not "because the theory itself collapsed when brought into contact with real life; but because the human instruments who had to carry it out failed to realise the implications of their own theory."

strength. He exemplifies the best of human philosophy, human morality; he also speaks for the arts, the best of human feeling and imagination.⁶⁸⁶

Dante's Hell is "the place or condition of lost souls after death"⁶⁸⁷ - it was a gigantic pit shaped like a funnel that extended all the way to the centre of the earth. It was situated underneath the city of Jerusalem, at the centre of Dante's northern hemisphere. Directly opposite Jerusalem, at the centre of the southern hemisphere, is the mountain of Purgatory. The Inferno's funnel is made up of nine circles. The first circle is the widest and, progressively, the ninth circle is the smallest. Upper Hell is the first five circles and Lower Hell begins with the City of Dis through whose gates lie the next four circles. Each circle of Hell has further subdivisions and complexity - for example the seventh circle is divided into three rings and the eighth circle into ten ditches.⁶⁸⁸ Sayers included a number of maps and illustrations to help guide her readers through the complicated geography of Dante's *Inferno*. The people located there are historical and legendary sinners who are fixed in the perverted choices of their lives. Sayers commented that Dante "looked outwards upon the corruption of Church and Empire, and he looked inwards into the corruption of the human heart; what he saw was the vision of Hell."⁶⁸⁹ In the allegory Hell is the image of the deepening possibilities of evil within the human soul but it is specifically not a place of punishment to which anybody is arbitrarily sent: "it is the condition

⁶⁸⁶ Sayers (trans), *Hell*, p.12 and Sayers (trans), *Purgatory*, pp.21-23.

⁶⁸⁷ Sayers (trans.), *Hell*, p.68.

⁶⁸⁸ In "The Faust Legend and the Devil", Sayers explained Dante's structure of Hell: "Down the great sterile circles of perverse and petrified choice, Hell goes narrowing to its frozen centre, deep after deep; at the top are the irresponsible, who refused choice; below them, the people who incontinently lapsed into evil through failure to control their choice, blown on the winds or sodden in the marsh-water of their passions; then the deliberate hardening of the will to the choice of the wrong made in full knowledge - the will to violence, the will to deceit - circle below circle of fire and filth and disease, down to the ultimate treachery in which all feeling, all intellect, every conception, is frozen. And, fixed in the ice at the bottom, the ultimate corruption, resentful and despairing, passive and rebellious, petrifying and petrified, fixed forever in a misery without dignity, the grotesque and ghastly reality behind the façade. In a sense he still appears not less than archangel ruined; but the ruin is here complete; the beauty does not shine through the corruption: it is the corruption of beauty itself" (p.19).

⁶⁸⁹ Sayers (trans.), *Hell*, p.49.

to which the soul reduces itself by a stubborn determination to evil, and in which it suffers the torment of its own perversions.”⁶⁹⁰ Sayers understood Dante’s Hell to be deadly serious. In her essay, “The Faust Legend and the Devil”, she concluded her thoughts by describing Dante’s hell:

At the entrance to his [the Devil’s] realm stand the two dreadful sentences:
‘Here dwell the wretched people who have lost the good of the intellect.’
and the fearful paradox of the corrupted will:
‘All their fear is changed into desire.’

That is the picture seen by the poet who took evil seriously. And we cannot evade Dante by saying that we do not believe in that particular kind of judgement after death. For he himself said that his poem was indeed, literally, an account of what happens in the world beyond the grave, but allegorically an account of what happens within the soul. His Hell is the picture of an eternal possibility within the heart of man; and he adds that the gate to that Hell always stands wide open.⁶⁹¹

Sayers wanted readers of Dante to reflect personally on what Hell might mean. In a letter to C. S. Lewis, in November 1949, Sayers wrote approvingly of the fear that Dante’s vision of Hell could generate: “I think the Inferno is really frightening. It has the quality of Hell – the infinite dreary malice and the infinite vicious monotony.”⁶⁹²

Purgatory is the second book in the *Comedy* and it was Sayers’ favourite. In Dante’s scheme it is the place or condition of redeemed souls after death. Purgatory is portrayed physically as a lofty mountain on an island. The mountain has seven encircling cornices where souls are purged successively of the taint of the seven deadly sins, eventually being made fit to ascend into the presence of God in Paradise. Sayers deciphered and explained the scholastic philosophy that was so pervasive in Dante’s depiction of purgatory in her extensive notes alongside the translation. In January 1955, Sayers wrote to professor Cesare Foligno on the production of *Purgatory*: “I think it is better, on the whole, than the Inferno; but what with scholastic philosophy and innumerable biographies of Italian noblemen, and the complexities

⁶⁹⁰ *ibid.* p.68.

⁶⁹¹ Sayers, “The Faust Legend and the Devil”, p.20.

⁶⁹² Dorothy L. Sayers letter to C. S. Lewis, 18 November 1949, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Three*, p.467.

of the allegorical pageants, the notes and glossary have swollen to vast proportions.”⁶⁹³ In a letter to Barbara Reynolds, in December 1953, Sayers spoke of her particular attraction to what she called “the poetic pattern of history”⁶⁹⁴ in Dante’s *Purgatory*. Sayers had been thinking about how symbolic patterns repeat themselves in prophetic literature and she noted that “the historic pattern, as it appears in the Biblical writes, is an exact type of the Pope and Emperor situation as it appears in Dante’s time.”⁶⁹⁵ Sayers recognised Dante’s invocation of pattern in his tracing of the lives of historical figures:

Pope Boniface did not see himself as an antitype of a corrupt Maccabean priesthood, nor did Philippe le Bel, suppose himself to be a new Nebuchadnezzar. But literature repeats itself consciously, because it sees the pattern. The line of direct communication is not from Nebuchadnezzar to Philip, but from Daniel to Dante. Daniel and his contemporaries... were making a poetic image which the later poet [Dante] consciously accepted and repeated, because the moment he set eyes upon the pattern he instantly recognised it as prophetic.⁶⁹⁶

Within all of the inherent complication in Dante’s *Purgatory* regarding the historical figures he described, Sayers connected with a clear historic and prophetic pattern that the great poet was tracing in his work. The pattern was more than a repetition of tendencies or behaviours in the lives of individuals who appear to repeat the past mistakes of others in history. Indeed, Sayers came to the conclusion that in *Purgatory*: “The overall pattern is Messianic – whether that pattern grows out of history, or is imposed on it by poets, or is, in fact, the pattern inherent in the structure of all things.”⁶⁹⁷

The third book, *Paradiso* is the place or condition, after death, of beatified souls in Heaven. Dante depicts recognisable figures from history and literature ascending the stages of bliss,

⁶⁹³ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to Professor Cesare Foligno, 3 January 1955, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Four*, p.201-2.

⁶⁹⁴ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to Barbara Reynolds, 11 December 1953, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Four*, p.113.

⁶⁹⁵ *ibid.*

⁶⁹⁶ *ibid.* pp.113-4.

⁶⁹⁷ *ibid.* p.114.

consisting of the ten heavens typical of medieval astronomy, all beneath a Mystical Rose. Paradise is the image of the soul in a state of grace, “enjoying the foretaste of Heaven which it knows to be its true home and city.”⁶⁹⁸ In the Middle Ages, astronomy was widely studied and was regarded as being of central importance for understanding reality. Dante’s landscape of Heaven in the *Divine Comedy* reflects this influence. As Alison Cornish comments:

Dante's continual recourse to astronomical imagery derives from an analogous notion: the stars, *quelle cose belle*, are perfect and unchanging yet also visible and, indeed, supremely beautiful. They have a physical influence on the body, but more important, they suggest to the mind an invisible and far superior reality.⁶⁹⁹

Sayers admired the structural form of Dante's Heaven and Hell since they were markedly Aristotelian and his notion of a corruptible and ever-changing earth surrounded by a series of immutable, nested crystalline spheres whose perfection increased with their distance from the Earth, was derived directly from the Greek philosophical tradition.⁷⁰⁰ Aristotle had consigned everything that is corruptible and imperfect to the sub lunar realm, the region of the universe inhabited by the people and the animals of the Earth, reserving Divinity and perfection for the celestial spheres, the Moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn with the moon being the lowest.⁷⁰¹ The “celestial bodies” believed to govern the spheres were comprised of an ethereal substance and this is reflected by Dante in each heavenly sphere becoming more perfect as he travelled closer to the highest heaven, the sphere known as the Empyrean where God resided.⁷⁰²

⁶⁹⁸ Sayers (trans.), *Hell*, p.69.

⁶⁹⁹ Alison Cornish, *Reading Dante's Stars*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 12.

⁷⁰⁰ See Sayers' essay, “Dante’s cosmos,” in Dorothy L. Sayers, *Further Papers on Dante*, pp.78-101.

⁷⁰¹ See Deborah Parker, *Commentary and Ideology: Dante in the Renaissance* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993).

⁷⁰² Sayers wrote: “Beyond the spheres of the planets was that of the Fixed Stars; beyond that, the crystalline sphere, or Primum Mobile, whose speed could not be measured...Beyond this, physically, there was nothing, for, as Dante has already pointed out, the true Heaven or Empyrean “is not in space and turns upon no pole”...But if we consider its metaphysical aspect, we shall find our ideas somewhat enlarged, for we must now take into account the hierarchy of Being. Of Absolute Being, there is One and One alone – God...Having thus postulated God, we come to the order of creation which extends in a continuous chain from highest to lowest. Highest are the nine angelic orders – pure Intelligences... These nine orders are the Movers of the nine celestial spheres. At the lowest end is the Prime Matter.” “Dante’s Cosmos,” pp.90-91.

Dante's *Inferno* and *Paradiso* both echo Aristotle's hierarchical structure so that in the same way that the heavens become increasingly perfect upwards through the crystalline spheres, so the circles of Hell become more despicable descending into the centre of the universe. Sayers encouraged her readers to take into consideration that, whilst of course Copernican calculations had corrected the Ptolemaic view of the universe, Dante's perspective is nonetheless useful. After all, according to Sayers: "as seen from the Earth, the movements of the heavenly bodies do trace precisely such patterns as the medieval astronomers described."⁷⁰³ The pattern that Dante understood and worked within made sense within the *Commedia* and could even be said to describe "observed phenomena,"⁷⁰⁴ thus for Sayers it was a pattern that needed to be understood by the reader.

The work of translating Dante was to become a gigantic effort of Christian communication for Dorothy L. Sayers. The methodology of translation was by no means straightforward. Whilst Sayers realised that "no translation could ever be Dante",⁷⁰⁵ and that inevitably any translation would "necessarily take some colour from the age in which it is written," she also maintained that "all great works of art should be retranslated from time to time to avoid asking a reader to struggle with two strange frames of discourse instead of one."⁷⁰⁶ Despite the challenges involved Sayers committed herself to a poetic rather than a prose translation, even taking on *terza rima* "despite the alleged impossibility of finding sufficient rhymes in English."⁷⁰⁷ She believed that the form itself, *terza rima*, contributed substantially to the power of the poem since it could carry "his narrative along so swiftly on the flowing rhyme-linked stanza." In fact,

⁷⁰³ Sayers (trans.), *Hell*, p.295.

⁷⁰⁴ *ibid.* p.295.

⁷⁰⁵ *ibid.* p.56.

⁷⁰⁶ Dorothy L. Sayers, "On translating the *Divina Commedia*" in *The Poetry of Search and the Poetry of Statement* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1963), p.91.

⁷⁰⁷ Sayers (trans.), *Hell*, p.56.

Sayers went so far as to argue that *terza rima* was theologically significant: “his form and matter are as indissolubly three-in-one as the Trinitarian Persons and Substance in whose honour he is thought to have invented the *terza rima* itself.”⁷⁰⁸

Sayers received mixed reviews for this as *The Times* described her as “struggling with the gloriously hopeless task of turning *The Divine Comedy* into contemporary English.”⁷⁰⁹ Sayers’ friend C. S. Lewis called her translation as a whole “a model of judicious popularisation”, although he took issue with her “colloquialisms and comically violent rhythms”.⁷¹⁰ The reviewers at *The Scotsman* commented that “Dante’s rhyme scheme is of the essence of his great work, and its retention, lacking in so many English translations, is admirable.”⁷¹¹ *The Cambridge Review* asserted that “a *terza rima* version by a translator sympathetic to Dante’s point of view as a Christian and a poet is certainly the best.”⁷¹² And the *Dublin Review* called her translation of *Hell* in *terza rima* “a very distinguished piece of work.”⁷¹³ The *Times Educational Supplement* review was, however, scathing:

Her adoption of the original rhyme-scheme has bound Miss Sayers too closely and the exigencies of metre often lend her version a Procrustean air... it lacks the advantages of literalness. The simplicity and concreteness of the original are lost owing to her preoccupation with rhyme and metre.⁷¹⁴

For Sayers, an integral part of reaching “a vast multitude of ordinary readers”⁷¹⁵ was to convey the excitement of reading Dante – and not just the thrilling story but something of the rhythm, pace, flair and energy of his writing. Sayers hoped that her *terza rima* style would capture Dante’s essential quality revealing to the English reader:

⁷⁰⁸ *ibid.* p.96.

⁷⁰⁹ “Dante Up to Date.” *The Times* (November 8 1958), p.7.

⁷¹⁰ C. S. Lewis, “Rhyme and Reason.” in *The Daily Telegraph* (1 December 1963).

⁷¹¹ “Dante for Everyman.” *The Scotsman* (28 July 1955), p.9.

⁷¹² E. R. Vincent, “Book Reviews.” *Cambridge Review* (4 March 1950), p.3.

⁷¹³ Bernard Wall, “Dante.” *The Dublin Review* (March 1950): 113.

⁷¹⁴ “Inferno in English” *The Times: The Times Educational Supplement* (13 January 1950) in “*Dante’s Divine Comedy: I. Inferno*” Book Review Folder in the “Wade Center Article File” Record #19166. Wade Center, Illinois.

⁷¹⁵ Sayers, “On Translating the *Divina Commedia*” in *Poetry of Search*, p.94.

something of his spare and sinewy strength, his astonishing speed and drive, his salty and astringent humour, his curious mixture of extreme simplicity and intellectual subtlety.⁷¹⁶

In her essay, “On Translating The Divina Commedia”, Sayers’ drew out five requirements for the translator of Dante. Firstly, since the pace of Dante’s narrative is outstanding, the translator must avoid dreariness or monotony. This was Sayers’ main point of contention with Laurence Binyon’s contemporary effort:

Binyon says: “A melodious smoothness is not characteristic of Dante’s verse so much as an extraordinary fullness and volume.” That is doubtless true; but what strikes me most forcibly about it is neither of these things but its speed and versatility. The first thing his translator must avoid at all costs is slowness, stiffness or dullness.⁷¹⁷

Secondly, Sayers felt it important to “err on the side of exaggerating the variety of his style,”⁷¹⁸ rather than suppressing this multiplicity out of a misplaced reverence for a religious poet, and thus dulling the impact of his creative flair. Thirdly, Sayers appealed for fidelity to Dante’s text that could transcend a linguistic literalism: “He must get the theology right, and he must get the astronomy right, and he must get the shades of meaning as right as possible.”⁷¹⁹ Fourthly, Sayers argued that the humour of Dante’s work was in danger of being overlooked. Her translation sought to bring out Dante’s “sly, dry, delicate” comedy and humorous grasp of social situations, which she considered to be rivaled only “by Jane Austen.”⁷²⁰ This appears to have been a particular strength of Sayers’ translation and reviewers immediately picked up on it. One reviewer entitled his piece “Dante’s Cheerful Side.”⁷²¹ Fifthly Sayers argued that translators needed to embrace rhyme unflinchingly. These five objectives guided Sayers’ efforts at translation and shed light on the structure of her methodology.

⁷¹⁶ *ibid.* p.95.

⁷¹⁷ *ibid.* p.108.

⁷¹⁸ *ibid.* p.109.

⁷¹⁹ *ibid.* p.110.

⁷²⁰ *ibid.* p.111.

⁷²¹ *Daily Worker*, (7 July 1955) in “*Dante's Divine Comedy: II. Purgatory*” Book Review Folder in the “Wade Center Article File” Record #19197. Wade Center, Illinois.

Despite being known as *The Divine Comedy*, Sayers felt that Dante's humour had been masked by previous translations into English. She wrote: "Dante's humour... of all his qualities, has been most hopelessly obscured by his translators and critics." Sayers in contrast describes Dante's humour as "subtle... dry and delicate and satirical"; she appreciated that his self-portrait was "tinged through with a charming self-mockery."⁷²² Charles Williams recognised that Sayers was capable of making a particular contribution to wider understanding of Dante since she understood and even delighted in the humour of his writing. "I do very much want people to get all you say about the laughter and lightness and fun – of Dante."⁷²³ Williams hoped to publish their private correspondence about Dante but Sayers did not wish her "innocent carefree, personal letters"⁷²⁴ to become public.

Allegory

Sayers' admiration for Charles Williams and her subsequent appreciation for his book, *The Figure of Beatrice* sparked her interest in reading Dante for herself and contributed significantly to her understanding of *The Divine Comedy* and in particular Dante's penchant for allegory. Williams argued: "Dante is one of those poets who begin their work with what is declared to be an intense personal experience... the experience is recalled and confirmed." Dante's sight of the Florentine woman Beatrice and the ensuing experiences through their interactions was "something objectively outside of him... an exterior fact and not... an interior desire. It was sight and not invention."⁷²⁵ Sayers later observed in her essay "The Writing and

⁷²² Sayers (trans.), *Hell*, p.62.

⁷²³ Reynolds, *The Passionate Intellect*, p. 35.

⁷²⁴ Dorothy L. Sayers letter to Charles Williams, 14th September 1944, in Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Three*, p.75.

⁷²⁵ Charles Williams, *The Figure of Beatrice: A study on Dante* (London: Boydell & Brewer Ltd., 1943), p.7.

Reading of Allegory” that the term ‘allegory’ “is often used as a mere pejorative.”⁷²⁶ She recognised that allegorical literature was generally “excluded from serious critical attention” as if whole generations have “fallen out of touch with it” as a worthy literary genre. Dante’s interrelated use of allegory, image and symbol enraptured Sayers both as a storyteller and a theologian. She described *The Divine Comedy* as a poem that “is an allegory of the Way to God – to that union of our wills with the Universal will in which every creature finds its true self and true being.”⁷²⁷ It is perhaps unsurprising that Sayers was drawn to Dante as an allegorist, since she herself had pursued the analogy of human creativity as a way of reflecting on the doctrine of the Trinity in *The Mind of the Maker*. Reynolds argued:

This vision of the trinity of human creativity, as well as Dorothy Sayers’ own experience of constructing an allegory and modulating with skill between the levels of meaning had an important result: when she came to read the *Divine Comedy* her mind was exceptionally alert to its three allegorical meanings.⁷²⁸

Sayers defined allegory as:

a distinct literary form, whose aim and method is to dramatize a psychological experience, so as to make it more vivid and more comprehensible...The story is told, not for its own sake, but for the sake of what it signifies.⁷²⁹

Furthermore, Sayers understood allegory to be “a story which says one thing, and means another.”⁷³⁰ Moreover, a distinctive feature of allegory “is that the personages of the literal story are *personified abstractions*.”⁷³¹ Given Sayers’ commitment to the mediation of truth through the particularities of history or the drama of a story enacted on a stage one might have expected her to eschew any affection for allegory. Indeed, she warns against the potential confusion of the literal and figurative strands of meaning when using allegory as a writer:

We must not... be led away by our own eloquence into attributing to abstractions the kind of reality that belongs to actual persons. And we must also take care that the literal

⁷²⁶ Sayers, *Poetry of Search*, p.201.

⁷²⁷ Sayers (trans.), *Hell*, p.19.

⁷²⁸ Reynolds, *The Passionate Intellect*, p.13.

⁷²⁹ Sayers, *Poetry of Search*, p.202.

⁷³⁰ *ibid.* p.202.

⁷³¹ *ibid.* p.203.

and the figurative meanings can be so separated as to form two independent stories, corresponding at all points, but each coherent and complete in itself.”⁷³²

This did not diminish Sayers’ enthusiasm for the literary potential of allegory to take readers to new heights and depths: “Allegory...always *begins* as an effort to express something for which terms have not yet been invented.”⁷³³ Yet perhaps Sayers’ greatest point of connection with allegory was her intuition that allegory relied on established patterns or structures of truth accessible to a civilisation, whether they be “great traditional archetypes” or “universal poetic sources”, albeit remaining out of the reach of a society that suffered from “a widespread superficial literacy.”⁷³⁴ Sayers intuits that there is a broader psychological landscape within which allegory could potentially flourish, noting: “A strong and disturbing awareness of psychological dislocation tends to result in the production of Allegory.”⁷³⁵ Whilst apprehending and welcoming a resurrection of allegory as an intellectual phenomena in her own era, Sayers argued that this had not primarily occurred in the literary sphere but rather, in the emerging field of psychoanalysis. She noted that this renaissance was:

brought about, not by the poets, but by the psycho-analysts, particularly those of the Freudian school... This vocabulary is not scientific, but poetical, and imposes a poetical and indeed fictional form on the whole presentation of their subject.⁷³⁶

Dante’s use of personifications in particular in his allegory resonated with Sayers’ understanding of the psychological potency of the *Commedia* and its consequent appeal centuries after its publication: “In this way we can work out quite a complicated psychological pattern, and at the same time entertain the reader with an exciting and colourful tale of adventure.”⁷³⁷

⁷³² *ibid.* p.213.

⁷³³ *ibid.* p.221.

⁷³⁴ Dorothy L. Sayers, “Dante’s Virgil” in *Dorothy L. Sayers: Further Papers on Dante* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1957), p.54.

⁷³⁵ Sayers, “The Writing and Reading of Allegory,” in *Poetry of Search*, p.221.

⁷³⁶ *ibid.* p.221.

⁷³⁷ Sayers (trans.), *Hell*, p.12.

Despite her enthusiasm for Dante and his invocation of allegory in the *Commedia*, Sayers took care to draw out the potential dangers of allegory as Dante had articulated them and in particular the risk “that we should be led into mistaking ... poetic truth for concrete fact.”⁷³⁸ Sayers analysed this danger as being threefold. Firstly the temptation to read too much importance into every detail, which she describes as “a finicking insistence on finding a significance for every word in the text, even in passages which are obviously only put in to give vividness and verisimilitude to the literal story.”⁷³⁹ The second is to make a category mistake and to confuse “the allegorical with the literal meaning.”⁷⁴⁰ The third deviation is perhaps counter-intuitive for Sayers given her previous emphasis on the work for its own sake, but in her study on Dante’s allegory she challenges the tendency to become utterly caught up in the art for its own sake without seeing a deeper meaning. She warns against the sentiment “that the best way to enjoy Allegory is to read for the sake of the “poetry”, or the literal story and not bother about what it signifies....”⁷⁴¹ Her explanation that this third error is an infallible recipe for “weariness of the flesh and vexation of spirit...” perhaps answers this apparent contradiction by addressing the author’s intention: if the piece of art is intentionally created by the maker to have allegorical layers of meaning, to miss this would be a failure of meeting the art on its own terms.

In her introduction to her translation of the *Inferno*, Sayers describes allegory as: “the interpretation of experience by means of images.”⁷⁴² Her concepts of image and symbol are

⁷³⁸ Sayers, *Poetry of Search*, p.222.

⁷³⁹ *ibid.* p.224.

⁷⁴⁰ *ibid.* p.225.

⁷⁴¹ *ibid.* p.225.

⁷⁴² Sayers, (trans.), *Hell*, p.11.

integral to how she interacted with allegory and with Dante in particular. Dante's allegory differed from others in two important ways:

(1) in its literal meaning, the story is – up to a certain point and with a great many important qualifications – intended to be a true story; (2) the figures of the allegory, instead of being personified abstractions, are symbolic personages.⁷⁴³

Symbols

Sayers noted that the characters in Dante's allegory were what she called "natural symbols." According to Sayers there were two kinds of symbols. A conventional symbol is a sign such as a mathematical figure or letter arbitrarily chosen to represent or "stand for" something with which it has no integral connection. Whereas Dante's symbolism, on the other hand, is natural: "A natural symbol is not an arbitrary sign, but a thing really existing which, by its very nature, stands for and images forth a greater reality of which it is itself an instance."⁷⁴⁴ Sayers approved of the way in which Dante used "modern historical personages as allegorical symbols"⁷⁴⁵ and she resonated with this "natural symbol" idea which seemed to echo her own dramatic explorations of the incarnation. Sayers' appreciation of Dante may also be understood in the light of her intellectual commitment to pattern. She seems to have recognised her own understanding of pattern in Dante's *modus operandi*, undergirding the conception and literary outworking of his approach to symbolism:

A natural symbol is a particular instance of a universal truth. Merely by being what it is, it displays in its very structure a pattern which runs throughout space and time, so that by examining the symbol we become aware of the cosmic truth it symbolises.⁷⁴⁶

Natural symbolism meant that Dante's characters were "complex human beings, some legendary, some historical, some simply and others more elaborately handled." In other words

⁷⁴³ *ibid.* p.12.

⁷⁴⁴ *ibid.* p.13.

⁷⁴⁵ Sayers, "Dante's Virgil", p.54.

⁷⁴⁶ *ibid.*

they were multi-faceted and recognisably human but they could also be said to be representative of others and in a way to stand for “the vices and virtues with which Dante connects them.”⁷⁴⁷ Furthermore, Sayers explained that Dante’s method of writing about specific people that his contemporary readers knew of saved time since he could assume a shared knowledge of context and detail in the minds of his audience that he did not need to describe.⁷⁴⁸ This had theological implications since a well-known figure such as Ciacco who was commonly ridiculed by his contemporaries for his “monstrous indulgence” could by the mere mention of his name summon a powerful impression of gluttony. Sayers argued that in “showing us his images, Dante has already told us all we need to know about the sin.”⁷⁴⁹ Sayers understood symbols as being evidenced by what she called ‘images’ and that whilst the literal story of the *Comedy* is true, “the story with its images is only there for the sake of the truth which it symbolises.”⁷⁵⁰

Image

Sayers’ usage of the terms “symbol” and “image” were closely interconnected. She explained the source of this dynamic accordingly: “I shall follow the example of Charles Williams and others and refer to Dante’s natural symbols as his “images”.”⁷⁵¹ She then went on to distinguish

between a simple allegorical figure and a symbolic image. The allegorical figure is a personified abstraction... Dante uses the allegorical figure only occasionally; by far the greater number of his figures are symbolic images. Thus, he is accompanied through Hell, not by a personified abstraction called Reason, or Wisdom, or Science, or Art, or

⁷⁴⁷ *ibid.* p.55.

⁷⁴⁸ “To the fourteenth-century Italian, the personages of the *Comedy* were familiar.” Sayers (trans.), *Hell*, p.17.

⁷⁴⁹ *ibid.* p.16.

⁷⁵⁰ *ibid.* p.14

⁷⁵¹ *ibid.* p.13. Sayers commented to Williams in her third letter to him on 31st August 1944: “All this business of the Images is very important, and you are about the only person who seems to bother about the relation of the Image to what it images.” Reynolds (ed.), *Letters Volume Three*, p.70.

Statecraft, but by Virgil the Poet, a real person, who is, by his own nature, qualified to symbolise all these abstractions.⁷⁵²

Each personage selected by Dante to appear in *The Divine Comedy* was to play a part in the narrative structure, all the while significantly imaging forth a deeper theological truth. Sayers appreciated that Dante avoided what she regarded as the “often fatal weakness in allegory”, which she described as “frigid abstractions” by filling his poem with “real people who do not cease to be their earthly selves because they also typify everybody’s sins and virtues.”⁷⁵³ It was this ability to create an image-laden piece of literature that attracted Sayers to Dante with such force. She commented that upon reading *The Divine Comedy*: “it became immediately evident that here was an Image, and here an Image-maker, with whom one had to reckon, and that the world had been right to call Dante a great Poet – perhaps the greatest.”⁷⁵⁴ Dante’s genius was in part related to his use of language. Taking the word “via” as an example, Sayers pointed out that like the word “way” in English, it can literally mean a road or, figuratively, a method. Sayers continued:

The word *processo*, like the word *proceeding*, can mean no fewer than four things. By derivation it is a *going forth*: a literal ‘going forth’ or progress along a road, as in ‘the royal cortege was *proceeding* along the Mall’: and also, theologically, a going-forth of the Godhead: as in ‘the Holy Ghost *proceeding* from the Father.’ It also may mean a *process*, as in: ‘during the course of these *proceedings*’; or, by a further transference, a process at law, as in: ‘*legal proceedings*.’ It is by a play on all those meanings that Dante calls up the images.⁷⁵⁵

Taking this example specifically, Sayers argued that images could be successfully evoked by Dante as he juxtaposed two ambiguous words “via” and “processo”, where “univocal words such as ‘method’ and ‘operation’, would have left the images unsummoned.”⁷⁵⁶ Assuming the reader had a grasp of Christianity, Dante could leave much to the imagination giving his writing

⁷⁵² *ibid.* p.13.

⁷⁵³ Sayers, “...And Telling you a Story”, p.15.

⁷⁵⁴ Sayers, *Further Papers*, p.2.

⁷⁵⁵ Sayers, “Dante The Maker” in *Poetry of Search*, pp.41-42.

⁷⁵⁶ *ibid.*

a theological succinctness that Sayers appreciated: “The working of the spell relies upon the associations that the words call up,”⁷⁵⁷ and this allowed him to introduce multiple layers of imagery and to cover a great deal of narrative ground.

Sayers understood Dante’s approach to image to be far more than a perception within the mind of a creator or a beholder – image was in fact a brush with reality and an encounter with something outside of oneself. She wrote: “What is experienced is the immediate and intuitive awareness of an eternal reality... What is beheld is the transfiguration of something actually existing in the outer world of sense... it has its basis in the natural order.”⁷⁵⁸ As shall become clear, this understanding of image is the basis of what Sayers called “The Beatrician Vision.” Sayers resonated with the rootedness of Dante’s approach to image as it coalesced with her own sense of the importance of history. In her essay on Charles Williams, “A Poet’s Critic”, she notes that Williams wishes to “impress upon all the learned commentators of Dante... that ‘the thing does happen’. Whatever symbolism the interpreters or Dante himself may build upon it, the basis of the whole towering structure is the living experienced fact.”⁷⁵⁹ Sayers recognised in Dante her own conviction that truth is communicated both in the specificities of history or story and in the grand sweep of a theological pattern. Image is a bridge of connection and communication between the two, diminishing neither. In her essay “Creative Mind” Sayers had explored the meaning of image and symbol in the context of the dynamics of language and communication:

this is the way in which all creative mind works – in the sciences as everywhere else – in divine as well as in human creation, so far as we can observe and understand divine methods of creation. That is, that within our experience, creation proceeds by the discovery of new conceptual relations between things, so as to form them into systems

⁷⁵⁷ *ibid.* p.43.

⁷⁵⁸ Dorothy L. Sayers, “The Beatrician Vision” in *Poetry of Search*, pp.48-9.

⁷⁵⁹ Dorothy L. Sayers, “Charles Williams A Poet’s Critic” in *Poetry of Search* p.73.

having a consistent wholeness corresponding to an image in the mind, and, consequently, possessing real existence.⁷⁶⁰

For Sayers, discovering Dante was an unparalleled joy since he successfully created literature whose images creatively portrayed God himself:

Of all the images of Deity with which religious literature has supplied us, I know nothing, not even among the Metaphysicals at their most extravagant, which can compare for boldness, for gaiety, and for sheer, breathtaking excitement, with this picture of God the Falconer, riding out, hawking for souls, whirling the whole glitter of the immeasurable heavens about his head like a lure.⁷⁶¹

Such a direct engagement with the Divine through this characteristically vivid imagery caused Sayers to reflect on Charles Williams' analysis of two theological tendencies with regard to image which he called 'The Way of Rejection' and 'The Way of Affirmation'. He asserted that Christian thought has tended either towards the renunciation of all images or a drawing near to God through images.⁷⁶² Sayers observed that the "Affirmative Way" is rooted in three core Christian doctrines. Firstly, the doctrine of creation – namely that the "visible universe is not an illusion... It is made by God, as an artist makes a work of art, and given a genuine, though contingent, real existence of its own"⁷⁶³ Thus a person, however "in-godded", is truly distinct from the Creator. This insight deeply resonated with one of the central concerns of Sayers' book, *The Mind of the Maker* and her exploration of human creativity as a theological outworking of God the Creator so that: "a work of art is an image of its maker."⁷⁶⁴ Sayers believed that in writing *The Divine Comedy* Dante was an exemplary image-bearer of the ultimate creator:

His glory goes out, and the reflected splendor returns to him, so that he himself is seen as an analogue and image of the Absolute Creator, concerning whom he said:

⁷⁶⁰ Sayers, "Creative Mind", *Unpopular Opinions*, p.49. Sayers continued: "The function of imaginative speech is not to prove, but to create – to discover new similarities, and to arrange them to form new unities, to build new self-consistent worlds out of the universe of undifferentiated mind-stuff." p.56.

⁷⁶¹ Dorothy L. Sayers "The Cornice of Sloth", *Further Papers*, p.146.

⁷⁶² Charles Williams, *The Figure of Beatrice*, pp.8-9.

⁷⁶³ Dorothy L. Sayers, "Dante and Charles Williams", *Further Papers*, p.187.

⁷⁶⁴ *ibid.*

The glory of Him who moves all things soe'er
Impenetrates the universe, and bright
The splendor burns, more here and lesser there.⁷⁶⁵

Elsewhere Sayers describes Dante's poem as a kind of mirror reflecting truth: "To gaze upon the mirror of the sun and stars and in himself to mirror forth the truth. This was the task which Dante had set himself"⁷⁶⁶ Sayers was careful to introduce some nuance here, however, as she cautioned against jumping to a conclusion that the person and their work were in some sense interchangeable, lest the author and their personal life become the focus of analysis and criticism rather than the work itself:

For the poet and his work are not the same... You can never fully understand the poet by analysing his work, neither can you fully understand the work by analysing the poet; it is the great corrupting heresy of contemporary literary criticism to believe that you can. The image by the poet includes an image of himself, though he himself transcends that image.⁷⁶⁷

The second doctrine undergirding the Affirmative Way with regard to image for Sayers was the Incarnation: "whereby God Himself became manifest in mortal flesh. In that flesh his glory dwelt".⁷⁶⁸ The Incarnation is the foundation for "the indwelling of the mortal by the immortal, of the material by the spiritual" and so Dante's focus on the physical beauty of Beatrice and the earthiness of this image of divine love appealed to Sayers who was already enamored with the physicality of his use of imagery.

Sayers argued that the third Christian doctrine underpinning the Affirmative way was the Trinity, which, she asserted, affirmed that the mystery of the Godhead itself was the foundation of image. Sayers wrote: "It is because of this eternal presence of the Image within the Godhead that it is possible to pursue the Way of Affirmation to the very confrontation of the soul with

⁷⁶⁵ *ibid.* p.184.

⁷⁶⁶ Sayers (trans.), *Hell*, p.48.

⁷⁶⁷ Sayers, "Dante and Charles Williams", p.185.

⁷⁶⁸ *ibid.* p.187.

the immediate presence of God.”⁷⁶⁹ In Dante’s work the primary image through which he recognised Divine love was a woman called Beatrice.

Beatrice

Charles Williams wrote that for Dante, Beatrice was “an image of nobility, of virtue, of the Redeemed Life and in some sense of Almighty God himself.”⁷⁷⁰ It is perhaps unsurprising that Dorothy L. Sayers who had written “Are Women Human?”, herself a female lay theologian and creative writer, should become fascinated with a medieval poet who created what Williams called “the greatest expression in European literature of the way of approach of the soul to its ordained end” by means of “the image of a girl.”⁷⁷¹ Beatrice was a real person whom Dante met and fell in love with. Sayers described this encounter as providing Dante with a mirror through which to see, perceive and communicate truth:

It was while he was still a child that he underwent a personal experience which, trivial as it might appear at first sight, was yet to prove the most important and the most enduring influence upon his life and genius, and to provide, as it were, the mirror in which at the height of his powers and to the end of his days, he beheld all heaven and earth reflected.⁷⁷²

Sayers draws upon Dante’s *Vita Nuova*, which told the story of him falling in love with Beatrice at first sight in Florence at the party of a mutual friend when they were both children. Beatrice married a banker called Simone Dei Bardi in 1287 and Dante’s love for her was from a distance. He was eighteen when she first spoke to him in the street giving him “a salutation” but subsequently she ignored him and then at a party apparently made fun of him. Sayers comments

⁷⁶⁹ *ibid.* p.188.

⁷⁷⁰ Charles Williams, *The Figure of Beatrice*, p.8.

⁷⁷¹ *ibid.*

⁷⁷² Sayers (trans.), *Hell*, p.25.

that Dante “learned that love could be an initiation into suffering as well as ecstasy.”⁷⁷³ When in 1290 Beatrice died, Dante grieved “and it seemed to him that the light had gone out of life”.⁷⁷⁴ The historical facts about Dante’s interactions with Beatrice are relatively sparse, indeed he does not appear to have met her on more than a few occasions. Yet Beatrice signifies something far beyond herself – she personifies goodness, grace and salvation. But she can only do this by actually existing. Sayers was enthralled by the fact that this one Florentine girl of the thirteenth century could be for Dante: ““The God bearing image”, the vehicle of the Glory, and type of all other such communications of Grace.”⁷⁷⁵ Sayers understood the deep connection between the historical specificity of a girl who lived in Florence and the story that Dante was now writing as he created *The Divine Comedy*: “Beatrice remains in the *story* what she was in real life: the Florentine girl whom Dante loved from the first moment that he saw her, and in whom he seemed to see Heaven’s glory walking the earth bodily.”⁷⁷⁶ This resonated deeply with what she had been trying to accomplish in her religious plays – elucidating truth through a piece of creative art with dogma and drama, historical reality and a story played out on the stage. Dante seemed to Sayers to have taken this to far greater heights in his writing of Beatrice. She commented: “for him, she was thus in fact the vehicle of the Glory – the earthly vessel in which the divine experience was carried.”⁷⁷⁷ The story in the hands of such an author had the power to convey deep theological truth and transport the reader accordingly. In Dante, Sayers recognised a genius at work who seemed to have achieved in the thirteenth-century what she had been reaching for as a creative artist herself.⁷⁷⁸ But the *Comedy* was more than a story – it

⁷⁷³ *ibid.* p.27.

⁷⁷⁴ *ibid.*

⁷⁷⁵ *ibid.* p.28.

⁷⁷⁶ *ibid.* p.67.

⁷⁷⁷ *ibid.*

⁷⁷⁸ Sayers reflected that she had tried to follow a similar methodology in her own creative writing before having read Dante: “I deal...in images and anecdotes and concrete examples, because I am not a philosopher, but what used to be called a ‘poet’ and ‘maker’ and is now called, more cumbrously, a ‘creative writer’; and therefore cannot think very readily in abstract terms.” Dorothy L. Sayers, “Poetry, Language and Ambiguity”, in *Poetry of Search*, p.264.

was also an allegory and Sayers recognised that Dante's portrayal of Beatrice had powerful allegorical effect:

... she is, in the *allegory*, from time to time likened to or even equated with, those other "God-bearers": the Church and Divine Grace in the Church; the Blessed Virgin; even Christ himself. She is the image by which Dante perceives all these...⁷⁷⁹

But more than this, Sayers concluded that Beatrice had become for Dante "the God-bearing image, the revelation of the presence of God." This was to be the foundation of what Sayers called "Beatrician Vision", which she understood to be a profound metaphysical experience with some basis in the material world that leads a creative artist on the mystical way to final eternal and ecstatic fulfilment. Sayers argued that despite the theological outworking of Dante's vision of Beatrice, the basis for "Beatrician Vision" is "the natural order" and furthermore, although this will ultimately lead to the Divine, it does not begin there: "the first vision is not necessarily religious, much less necessarily Christian."⁷⁸⁰ Sayers was insistent that this vision, although a "mystical gift" was "a natural, not a supernatural gift, and is far less rare than is usually supposed." She cites Blake, Trahene, Charles Williams and Coventry Patmore as examples of artists with such mystical vision, whilst arguing that Yeats, Browning and Wordsworth "fell short of the ultimate ecstasy."⁷⁸¹

Sayers described Dante's own "natural" experience that led to his own Beatrician vision:

...he says that at the prospect of receiving Beatrice's *salute*...he was taken hold of by such a flame of charity that he forgave everyone who had ever offended him... The soul adores and loves. It prostrates itself before a fellow-creature whose bodily presence is somehow felt to be a vehicle of grace, and the image of a greater Reality that informs and indwells it and is the eternal truth of its being.⁷⁸²

⁷⁷⁹ Sayers (trans.), *Hell*, p.67.

⁷⁸⁰ Sayers "The Beatrician Vision", p.49.

⁷⁸¹ *ibid.* p.49.

⁷⁸² *ibid.* pp.40-50.

The primary factor is that the physical experiences inspiring the author are a channel for deeper truth: “they are the blessed means by which the truth is made known to us, but they are not in themselves the whole truth.”⁷⁸³ The truth about Beatrice is both that she was a Florentine girl in the street and that she is this beautiful, celestial, eternal soul. Charles Williams described this phenomenon:

What Dante sees is the glory of Beatrice as she is ‘in heaven’ – that is, as God chose her, unfallen, original; or (if better) redeemed but at least, either way, celestial. What he sees is something real. It is not ‘realer’ than the actual Beatrice who, no doubt, had many serious faults, but it is as real. Both Beatrices are aspects of one Beatrice. The revealed virtues are real; so is the celestial beauty.⁷⁸⁴

Sayers was careful to emphasise that this means that Beatrician Vision is unlike other kinds of mystical experiences since it is not inward-looking or imaginary, solely in the mind of the artist. The eyes of the soul are turned outward to a “true Other”; Beatrician Vision is a response to stimuli outside of oneself and ultimately this interested Sayers since, whilst it did not guarantee an artist necessarily discovered the divine, the pattern of God incarnate in matter was at least mirrored and potentially revealed by it.

Pattern

Having traced the concept of pattern in Sayers’ work up to this point and its importance as an undergirding principle for her thinking, it is striking to note how prominently the notion of pattern features in Sayers’ analysis of her own admiration for Dante. In articulating her appreciation for the *Comedy*, Sayers notes that “Clear, hard thought went to its making: its beauty is of that solid and indestructible sort that is built upon a framework of nobly

⁷⁸³ *ibid.* p.50.

⁷⁸⁴ Charles Williams, *The Figure of Beatrice*, p.27.

proportioned bones.”⁷⁸⁵ From her perspective, it was this framework and structure that set Dante’s work and genius apart and Sayers wanted her readers to understand this: “If we ignore the theological structure, and merely browse about in it for detached purple passages... we shall be disappointed, and never see the architectural grandeur of the poem as a whole.”⁷⁸⁶ The “architectural grandeur” is the complex coherent pattern holding the piece together as a whole. Sayers understood pattern both in architectural or structural terms and in terms of a textured, woven fabric. Dante’s pattern had various dimensions. Initially Sayers was drawn to the power of Dante’s numerous personifications within his allegory, the layers of meaning he was able to thus convey drew the reader into the adventure of the story whilst at the same time working out what she described as “quite a complicated psychological pattern”.⁷⁸⁷

The brilliance of the structure of “Purgatory” inspired Sayers to call it: “this tenderest, subtlest, and most human section of the *Comedy*.”⁷⁸⁸ She regarded the beauty of Dante’s work in this second cantica to be due to the “sheer artistry” of his structure. She detected “increased architectural skill, greater freedom of handling and technique, a smoother and more assured mastery of the verse.”⁷⁸⁹ This instinct for structure in Dante’s work caused Sayers to speculate that Dante was “a born dramatist” and that had he been born in a different time when “drama was the dominant form” he would have been a playwright:

His work has all the marks: the solid planting and setting of a dramatic action; the brisk economy of the dialogue; the instinctive avoidance of scenic incongruities; the sure recognition of the *scene-a-faire*; the knack of relieving a situation with a touch of high comedy; the ability to establish character in a line or two; the rejection of ramblings and embroideries; the knowledge of when to stop. It is this compact and sinewy quality in his narrative which holds the reader’s attention. Other medieval poems delight by their surface texture his, by its *architecture*.⁷⁹⁰

⁷⁸⁵ Sayers (trans.), *Hell*, p.11.

⁷⁸⁶ *ibid.*

⁷⁸⁷ *ibid.* p.12.

⁷⁸⁸ Dorothy L. Sayers (trans.), *The Comedy of Dante Alighieri The Florentine Canitica II Purgatory II Purgatorio* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1955), p.9.

⁷⁸⁹ *ibid.* p.11.

⁷⁹⁰ *ibid.* p.27.

Sayers' noted both the "surface texture" and the "architecture" of Dante's poetry, which were each in their own right, crucial concepts in her understanding of pattern. Sayers appears to have discovered in Dante what she herself valued most highly in her own work – an artistic commitment to structure and intellectual coherence - pattern. Because of this Sayers particularly enjoyed the *Purgatorio* within the *Commedia* because she thought that it was "from the start, much more firmly consolidated"⁷⁹¹ and that it encouraged the reader to go deeper than enjoying the story or Dante's use of language so as to "come to grips with the intellectual substance of the poem."⁷⁹²

Sayers' attraction to the intellectual structure and substance of Dante's *Commedia* was in part due to its literary pattern. Reading Dante caused her to reflect on the difference between what she called poetry of "search" and poetry of "statement". She urges her readers to abandon "the distinction we have grown accustomed to making between "poetical" and "prosaic" subjects."⁷⁹³ She rejects the notion that poetry should be primarily personal or Romantic and notes that "Dante's sinewy, compact, and epigrammatic style is eminently adapted for the marshaling of complex facts into orderly sequences."⁷⁹⁴ Sayers distinguishes between the poetry of search and statement:

There are two kinds of poet: the one writes in order to find out what he feels, the other in order to tell what he knows. Both are concerned with personal experience; but the poetry of Search concentrates on the 'gropings', whether or not they succeed in reaching any goal...The poetry of Statement, on the other hand, is not written till the journey is ended: it maps the true route from tentative beginning to triumphant arrival. If it mentions the false wanderings it is only to warn people off them... the poet is

⁷⁹¹ *ibid.* p.10.

⁷⁹² *ibid.* p.11.

⁷⁹³ Dorothy L. Sayers "The Poetry of Search and the Poetry of Statement" in *Poetry of Search*, p. 11.

⁷⁹⁴ *ibid.*, p.14. Sayers' footnote cites *Purgatory* xviii. 49-69 as "an outstanding example." In fact, due to common misconceptions about the nature of poetry Sayers encourages her readers to "forget about the distinction between "prose" and "poetry", and ... approach the Comedy as though it were a serious and intelligent novel – which, in fact, it is."

concerned with the truth he has discovered about things in general, not merely with the workings of his own mind.⁷⁹⁵

The Poetry of Statement is created with a clear pattern in mind, drawing on archetype and leaning on a structure so as to communicate not only the journey but also the destination. Sayers' structured detective novels, religious plays and theological writings, regardless of genre, conformed to this *modus operandi*. In Dante she had discovered a master of poetry of Statement whose work enabled her to rejoice in the recognition of what she valued and who stretched her "Passionate Intellect" to its limits.

Dante invoked multiple patterns within his architectural pattern of the *Commedia* and one significant such pattern giving us insight into his work was that of movement within his landscape. The complex geography of Hell, Purgatory and Heaven operated in layers and spheres which Sayers helpfully mapped out for her Penguin readers. This geography was governed by a pattern of movement which Dante at times assumed and at other points articulated. Sayers explained that: "In Hell...souls are fixed in their eternal abode, and their only motion is a vicious circularity."⁷⁹⁶ There is no way out: "Upward or downward they cannot pass, to all eternity."⁷⁹⁷ Dante's pattern of movement is fixed and the suffering of souls in Hell at least in part relates to this ongoing experience of motion without any progress. In contrast in the second *cantica*, in Purgatory a different potentiality of advancement is posited. Sayers draws out this contrasting pattern of movement. It is possible for the soul in Purgatory to circle the *Cornice*, but once it has attained freedom from the stain of sin the soul can enter into the Pass of Pardon and move onwards and upwards: "In Purgatory, the pattern of movement acquires a new dimension. Purgatory is not eternal; it is a temporal process, and therefore

⁷⁹⁵ *ibid.* pp.8-9.

⁷⁹⁶ Sayers "Dante the Maker", p.33.

⁷⁹⁷ *ibid.*

allows of progress in a right line.”⁷⁹⁸ Having entered into Heaven the pattern of movement is “a free and spontaneous expression of communal joy.” The soul in heaven is free to move within a new and beautiful pattern: “In Heaven, the movement is threefold: the new dimension that is added is the intricate *patterning* of the celestial dance, which varies from Heaven to Heaven, and is accompanied with song.”⁷⁹⁹ Sayers notes that the contrast with the compulsive circular pattern of movement in Hell could not be clearer as in Dante’s Heaven the souls do not move in circles but rather it is “the wheeling spheres” that are in motion, propelled by the love and joyous activity of the heavenly beings: “the Movers in their moving, move the spheres.”⁸⁰⁰ In one sense this might imply that the soul is less free in Heaven since in Hell the circling movement is imposed from outside, but in Purgatory the compulsive movement is not from outside: “it is a discipline accepted from within.”⁸⁰¹ Yet in Heaven the soul is again moved or propelled. Sayers understood that Dante’s pattern resolved this dilemma by examining humanity’s free will. She noted that the “movement of the spheres – that is the observed order of nature – exerts upon Man an influence which may be resisted. He is a free agent for good or for evil.” Dante “believed that the spheres were informed by Intelligences” or angels but that this was not a mechanistic relationship of dominance or control: “Dante did not think of a sphere pushed about by an exterior Intelligence as a man kicks a football, but of a sphere indwelt by a spirit, as a man’s spirit indwells his mind and body.”⁸⁰² These powers of Nature were not blind or mechanical in Dante’s thought, God and Nature could enjoy each other without reference to humanity. And so within all of this potential movement the human body and soul in heaven may move freely: “At the positive pole is God, who is pure act; at the negative pole is the prime matter, pure potentiality; between them lies the whole creation,

⁷⁹⁸ *ibid.* p.33.

⁷⁹⁹ *ibid.* p.34.

⁸⁰⁰ *ibid.*

⁸⁰¹ *ibid.* p.35.

⁸⁰² *ibid.* p.36.

compounded of act and potentiality mingled in various proportions.”⁸⁰³ In heaven this pattern of movement within the potential scope given to human freedom and the influence of the spheres is determined by love: “What, then, keeps them circling about that still point which, having no motion, yet moves all things? Dante says that it is love.”⁸⁰⁴

Dante’s medieval cosmology informed his writing as it formed the basis for his analogy of divine order with the material universe, but Sayers did not perceive a problem here for the modern reader, for whom the Ptolemaic system of “spheres” might seem alien. Sayers observed that:

Beatrice gets over this difficulty by explaining that the innermost order of Intelligences governs the outermost sphere, and so onwards in order. But had Dante known about the rotation of the earth, which makes the hypothesis of the spheres unnecessary, he would have found that the proper motion of the planets...was the only motion he need take into account, and that this obeyed precisely the law which he had ascribed to the Intelligences. Type and ectype would then (so far as the solar system goes) have fitted perfectly.⁸⁰⁵

Dante’s pattern of movement in *The Divine Comedy* provides the poem with a structured sense of progression mirroring the story itself. This finds ultimate resolution in the themes of love and light as time and eternity merge at the climax of Heaven:

The threefold pattern of motion in the *Paradiso* is thus the line, the circle, and the dance: but in the thirtieth canto the pattern is transformed. The onward and linear motion of time is seen as a river of light, which, when Dante has bathed his eyes in it, becomes the still circle of the Rose: time and eternity are known as one.⁸⁰⁶

Sayers draws her readers’ attention to this intentional pattern of movement in Dante’s poem as a crucial component of the genius of “Dante the Maker”. The place of “pattern” in his methodology, his “art of making” contributed deeply to her critical appreciation of his literary oeuvre.

⁸⁰³ *ibid.* p.34.

⁸⁰⁴ *ibid.* p.36.

⁸⁰⁵ *ibid.* p.37.

⁸⁰⁶ *ibid.* pp.38-9.

Pattern was not only significant for Sayers' appreciation of Dante's literary achievement, she also understood his commitment to an outward facing pattern to be profoundly theologically significant. Sayers wrote: "The eyes of the soul are not turned inward to the true Self, but outward to a true Other." Sayers argued that Dante's Beatrician Vision encapsulated this theological pattern of engagement with the physical and the spiritual:

Where Christianity is concerned, a total retreat from the material world is not merely heretical but impossible; for the central Christian doctrine is precisely that of God incarnate in matter, its central act of worship the bodily receiving of God's substance in the sacrament of bread and wine, and its unique eschatological expectation the Resurrection of the Flesh.⁸⁰⁷

Sayers then takes four poets as examples of those who have understood and engaged with this theological pattern to a greater or lesser extent, with Dante as the "pioneer".⁸⁰⁸ But it was not only the importance of matter and spirit that interested Sayers, she perceived in Dante an empathy for questions of time and eternity, free will and potentiality, and ultimately the role of human volition in the progress of a person to salvation or judgement. Sayers believed that this was Dante's focus: "*The Divine Comedy* is precisely the drama of the soul's choice."⁸⁰⁹ In her essay, "Oedipus Simplex", Sayers explored the importance of pattern with regard to these complex theological dilemmas, asking whether a pattern is determinative or whether there can be space for multiple potential outcomes taking account of the will of a free human being. She began by thinking about how time works within the familiar process of an author writing a story:

Real time is the rhythm or dimension in which the author himself has his being; created time is the time which takes place inside the story – known to the characters in it as a linear movement in one direction, but to the author as a simultaneity in which all its

⁸⁰⁷ Sayers, "The Beatrician Vision", p.51.

⁸⁰⁸ "I have endeavored to sketch a certain *fundamental pattern* in the spiritual experience of four poets who appear to have gone by the same way to the final goal of all vision." Sayers, "The Beatrician Vision", p.67.

⁸⁰⁹ Sayers (trans.), *Hell*, p.11.

moments are present at once. The two times have nothing in common, except that they are both known to the author.⁸¹⁰

Given that the author is in control of the characters and knows in advance the ultimate outcome of the story, might this not imply that those inside the story are automatons? Sayers argued that this was not the case since the author was himself bound by the laws operating within his creation and that one could not make “created people behave otherwise than in accordance with the natures he has bestowed upon them.”⁸¹¹ On the basis of this parallel of an author creating a story Sayers concludes that God’s knowledge of his pattern for the universe remains compatible with the freedom of a human being to take responsibility for their own spiritual state:

Even in an imagined story the characters have a certain simulacrum of free will which the author must needs respect and this encourages us to suppose that in the actual created universe a measure of free will may be compatible in the creature with the infinite Author’s knowledge of the pattern.⁸¹²

Sayers concluded that any created pattern had two operative wills - that of the creator and the created, and a double time-scheme – that of the author and that of the story. In the light of this she concluded that: “we have to find room in it for both necessity...and potentiality.”⁸¹³ Ultimately questions as to potentiality in any specific situation could only be sensibly referred to the creator. This could be applied to the author of a story and ultimately to the Creator himself – the ultimate maker of pattern:

Unfortunately, no one can tell us that, except the Author of the pattern. When contact is established with the mind of the Author, then the vision is... revelation, and as such it forms no part of our subject.⁸¹⁴

⁸¹⁰ Dorothy L. Sayers, “Oedipus Simplex”, in *Poetry of Search*, p.256.

⁸¹¹ *ibid.* p.257

⁸¹² *ibid.*

⁸¹³ *ibid.* p.258.

⁸¹⁴ *ibid.* p.260.

Sayers' reading of Dante with her emphasis on truth, story and pattern, occurred within a wider twentieth-century European literary context, in which Dante's work was experiencing something of a renewal of interest. As has been noted, Sayers' interest in Dante was initially sparked by Charles Williams and her approach to Dante was substantially inspired by Williams and, in particular, his book *The Figure of Beatrice* as an exposition of what they both termed "The Way of Affirmation of Images."

Williams traced the way in which Dante's central image of Beatrice represented transcendent beauty in feminine form, and anticipated the subsequent scholarly emphasis on Dante as a philosopher, as well as a poet. Williams' book should also be read in the context of a wider literary debate concerning the nature of love in medieval literature and its influence on later Western culture.⁸¹⁵ These are all interests that Sayers developed further in her work and she was indebted to Williams in that his approach and priorities were reflected in her methodology in her Dante writings. Sayers, like Williams, experienced a kind of recognition of ultimate truth in Dante and thus her critical writing on the *Comedy* was that of a wholehearted believer rather than an interrogator. Williams wrote to Sayers that his reaction on first reading Dante was to say "But this is *true*."⁸¹⁶ This was in contrast with their contemporary T. S. Eliot, who in his essay 'Dante', had said:

My point is that you cannot afford to *ignore* Dante's philosophical and theological beliefs, or to skip the passages which express them most clearly; but that on the other hand you are not called upon to believe them yourself... For there is a difference between... philosophical *belief* and poetic *assent*.⁸¹⁷

⁸¹⁵ In *The Figure of Beatrice*, Williams argued that in Dante a model for courtly love as Christian love could be seen, as illustrated in Dante's apprehension of Beatrice: "What Dante sees is the glory of Beatrice as she is 'in heaven' – that is, as God chose her, unfallen, original; or (if better) redeemed; but at least, either way, celestial. What he sees is something real. It is not 'realer' than the actual Beatrice who, no doubt, had many serious faults, but it is as real. Both Beatrices are aspects of the one Beatrice. The revealed virtues are real; so is the celestial beauty." (p. 27.) Indeed, he asserts that such love is the foundation of the Way of Affirmation: "To love is to love and serve the function for which the loved being was created, whatever that may mean or involve; this is the definition of the Way." (p. 51.)

⁸¹⁶ Dorothy L. Sayers: *The Poetry of Search and the Poetry of Statement*, p.73.

⁸¹⁷ T. S. Eliot: 'Dante' in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1972), p.257.

However, Sayers concurred with Eliot's superlative literary admiration for the *Comedy* - "Dante and Shakespeare divide the modern world between them; there is no third"⁸¹⁸ - and she agreed with Eliot's analysis of the nature and importance of allegory in Dante's *Comedy*:

We have to consider the type of mind which by nature and practice tended to express itself in allegory: and, for a competent poet, allegory means clear visual images. And clear visual images are given much more intensity by having a meaning – we do not need to know what that meaning is, but in our awareness of the image we must be aware that the meaning is there too.⁸¹⁹

Furthermore, her approach to translation adhered to Eliot's sense that the very form of the original ought to be reflected in any attempts at translation into English: "Dante thought in *terza rima*, and a poem should be translated as nearly as possible in the same thought-form as the original."⁸²⁰ This passion for the energy and power of a poem as performance was not a concern for form or structure for its own sake, rather it was a conviction that the very rhythms and rhymes of the original carried poetic nuance as much as the words were linguistic signifiers of meaning and, as such, were an integral part of Dante's pattern. Such admiration for the vibrancy of Dante's writing is echoed in the comments of the Russian poet, Osip Mandelstam, in 1933:

If the halls of the Hermitage were suddenly to go mad, if all the paintings of all the schools and the great masters were suddenly to break loose from their hooks, and merge with one another, intermingle and fill the rooms with a Futurist roar and an agitated frenzy of colour, we would then have something resembling Dante's *Commedia*.⁸²¹

⁸¹⁸ *ibid.*, p.265.

⁸¹⁹ T. S. Eliot, *Excerpts from Dante* (2nd edition, London, 1965), pp.14-15.

⁸²⁰ *ibid.* p.129.

⁸²¹ Osip Mandelstam "Conversation About Dante," translated 1933 by Jane Gary Harris and Constance Link, in *The Poet's Dante* (eds.) Peter S. Hawkins and Rachel Jacoff (New York, NY: Farrer, Straus and Girroux, 2001), p.93.

Sayers' delight in the evocative power of Dante resonates with Mandelstam's reaction, as does her admiration for the poet's philosophical genius: "Such is Dante's precise thought."⁸²² However, Mandelstam substantially differed from Sayers in his critical emphasis on movement over matter or structure in Dante's poem:

In talking about Dante it is more appropriate to bear in mind the creation of impulses than the creation of forms: impulses pertaining to textiles, sailing, scholasticism, meteorology, engineering, municipal concerns, handicrafts and industry, as well as other things; the list could be extended to infinity. In other words, syntax confuses us. All nominative cases must be replaced by the case indicating direction, by the dative. This is the law of transmutable and convertible poetic material existing only in the impulse to perform... Here everything is turned inside out: the noun appears as the predicate and not the subject of the sentence. I should hope that in the future Dante scholarship will study the coordination of the impulse and the text.⁸²³

In contrast, Sayers' relative interest in the pattern or architectural structure of the *Comedy* is closer to Benedetto Croce's *La Poesia di Dante*, which compared Dante's work to a Gothic Cathedral.⁸²⁴

Sayers as a woman of letters can be read alongside literary figures of her generation with regard to her literary interest in Dante. Nonetheless, her work stands out because she emphasised the theological importance of the great poet. This was in marked contrast with contemporary Dante scholar Charles Singleton who commented: "if we must choose between Dante as theologian and Dante as poet, then, I suppose, we take the poet."⁸²⁵ Singleton understood the *Comedy* to be designed around a specific spiritual journey, an individual confessional act echoing Augustine in his *Confessions*. He argued that Dante's poem was an account of one particular

⁸²² *ibid.*

⁸²³ *ibid.*

⁸²⁴ Benedetto Croce, *La Poesia di Dante* (Bari: Laterza, 1921), pp.68-9.

⁸²⁵ Charles S. Singleton, "*Commedia*": *Elements of Structure* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954), p.86.

man's experience of the journey to God which could stand as representative of all humanity.⁸²⁶ Although Sayers agreed that the poem was "an allegory of the Way to God," she warned that "as Dante himself has shown, it may be interpreted at different levels."⁸²⁷ Sayers wanted the broader theological structure of the work to be apprehended and valued by her readers.

Sayers' work on Dante sits in the midst of such contemporaneous literary responses to Dante. Her analysis of the poetic and theological structure of the *Comedy* was intentionally written at a popular level, with a view to enabling the wider public to appreciate the work of the great poet. This particular emphasis upon accessibility renders Sayers' reading of Dante entirely defensible amongst the plurality of contemporaneous interpretations of his approach. However, the question remains as to how Sayers' reading of Dante stands up in the light of more modern scholarship.

There are multiple modern readings of Dante's *Comedy*, far too numerous to be mentioned here. However, a number of themes in Dante scholarship have emerged. Teolinda Barolini in *The Undivine Comedy* has sought to "detheologise" Dante's poem by emphasising the interplay of pure fiction and narrative virtuosity in Dante's "hall of mirrors." Her approach attempts to break out of the hermeneutic guidelines that Dante structured into his poem and that she argues have resulted in theologised readings. By detheologising, she focuses on the narrative techniques and analyses Dante's work as a piece of "true fiction":

In my opinion Dante self-consciously used the means of fiction – poetic and narrative strategies – in the service of a vision he believed to be true... I suggest we accept Dante's insistence that he is telling the truth and move on to the consequences, which we can only do by accepting that he intends to represent his fiction as credible, believable, true.⁸²⁸

⁸²⁶ Charles Singleton, *Dante Studies Volume II: Journey to Beatrice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), p.5.

⁸²⁷ Sayers, *Hell*, p.19.

⁸²⁸ Teolinda Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp.11-13.

Barolini's detheologising provides a genuine challenge to Sayers' understanding of what Dante was pursuing in his quest for truth, since she regarded this objective of discovering truth as intrinsically theological. Yet, Barolini's interest in the relationship between fiction and truth is consonant with Sayers' emphasis on the importance of story and truth in Dante's approach.

In contrast, postmodern literary reflection upon Dante has offered a more equivocal investigation of the *Comedy* which is exemplified by Jeremy Tambling in his 1988 study, *Dante and Difference*. Tambling wrote of a "Derridean Dante" for whom meaning is relativised and constantly deferred: "the problem of belief is never relevant since belief entails a hierarchy of meanings."⁸²⁹ Tambling proposes a reading of the *Comedy* inspired by what he terms "Derridean open-endedness," anticipating that multiple relative interpretations of each canto would displace the traditional certainty of religious and literary contextualised interpretations. Sayers' concepts of theological truth and the intellectual structure of pattern have no place here.

For Antonio C. Mastrobuono "Dante is symbolic of humanity."⁸³⁰ The *Comedy* is humanity-centred and is to be read as a study of the human condition. Dante is the hero of his epic and it is this human experience of the divine order that determines the structure and content of the poem. Giuseppe Petronio regarded the *Comedy* as an important piece of cultural analysis; Dante is to be read today primarily for the insights into the priorities, language, characters and civilisation of thirteenth-century Florence – it is "a synthesis of medieval culture." In contrast, Nicholas Boyle writes that the *Comedy* is an archetypal piece of Christian art: "*The Divine Comedy* is not just a Christian poem; it is the paradigm of what Christian poetry is... not the

⁸²⁹ Jeremy Tambling, *Dante and Difference: Writing in the "Commedia"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p.100.

⁸³⁰ Antonio C. Mastrobuono, *Dante's Journey of Sanctification* (Washington, D. C.: Regnery Gateway, 1990), p.8.

representation of a timeless ideal nor a self-contained fiction, but part of the process of history, which it (partially) depicts.”⁸³¹ This is a view Sayers’ work supports.

Douglas Hedley in his essay “Neoplatonic Metaphysics and Imagination in Dante’s *Commedia*”, argues that whereas Sayers and Eliot saw Dante as a representative of a lost Christendom, and Benedetto Croce had played down the theology of the *Comedy* and exalted the aesthetic component of Dante’s work, there remains a need to highlight the Neoplatonic aspect of Dante’s aesthetics with a particular emphasis upon the indwelling divine spirit. Hedley asserts that Romantic era Neoplatonists Coleridge and Schelling had recognised a compatible spirit in Dante – perceiving his aesthetics as Neoplatonic – specifically the “paradoxical insistence on the transcendence and the immanence of the divine, on estrangement from and intimacy with God.”⁸³² Hedley contends that although Dante is commonly seen by scholars as following “Platonism”⁸³³ a Christianised Neoplatonism is a more fitting explanation of the unifying and underpinning pattern sustaining Dante’s work:

It is the presence of God in man that enables Dante to maintain the conviction that the long and painful ascent of the soul to God is at the same time a journey within the divine sphere.. Here we encounter the Neoplatonic absolute or One, whose center is everywhere and circumference nowhere. The goal of the *Commedia* on this interpretation, is the vision of the invisible, that immaterial principle which is the transcendent source of all being. The light that dominates Dante’s poem is intellectual, not physical.⁸³⁴

Hedley agrees with Christopher Ryan that “the central quest of Dante’s understanding in the poem... was to grasp how the divine is present in the human... God is supremely to be

⁸³¹ Nicholas Boyle, “The Idea of Christian Poetry,” *New Blackfriars*, 67:798 (1986): 436–454. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/43247947

⁸³² Douglas Hedley, “Neoplatonic Metaphysics and Imagination in Dante’s *Commedia*” in (eds.) Vittorio Montemaggi and Matthew Treherne, *Dante’s Commedia Theology as Poetry* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), p.246.

⁸³³ Platonism emphasises the transcendence of the divine rather than the immanence of the divine presence.

⁸³⁴ *ibid.* p.247.

discovered in human nature.”⁸³⁵ Although he concedes that alongside the dialectical struggle between the need for (Neoplatonic) oneness and similitude, Dante in the *Comedy*, expresses the equally pressing need for (Aristotelian) differentiation and individuality, Hedley detects what he describes as “a Neoplatonic view of symbols”. Dante’s symbols preserve both aspects of humanity’s relationship with God:

symbols as representations of the divine that are truthful and therefore not merely fanciful, but that are also not fully adequate to their object given the latter’s transcendence and the nature and limitations of the human mind.⁸³⁶

On the basis of such Christianised Neoplatonic metaphysics Hedley concludes that if “there is an ontological bond between the “images” of the mind’s imagination and “Being” in the most exalted sense of that word, then the poet can indeed be a vehicle of truth.”⁸³⁷ In the light of Hedley’s arguments for a Neoplatonic reading of Dante, Sayers’ approach whilst appreciating the power of symbol in connecting the human and divine, falls short of challenging the traditional Aristotelian assumptions of Dante scholarship.

In the study of Dante’s writing, a further debated question is that of the unity of his work. Jespe Hede notes that some Dante scholars reject the idea of unity – instead envisaging that the *Comedy* “arose with astonishing vigor from Dante’s genius of imagination and powerful sensibility.”⁸³⁸ Hede helpfully argues that approaches to Dante fit broadly within two categories that he defines as connectionist readings and segmental readings. Hede contrasts a connectionist reading “that tries to connect the themes and structural elements of Dante’s vision in order to come to terms with the global meaning of the poem” with a segmental reading -

⁸³⁵ Christopher Ryan, “The Theology of Dante” in (ed.) Rachel Jacoff, *The Cambridge Companion to Dante* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp.136-152.

⁸³⁶ Hedley, “Neoplatonic Metaphysics”, p.262.

⁸³⁷ *ibid.* p.263.

⁸³⁸ Jespe Hede, *Reading Dante: The Pursuit of Meaning* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007), p.15.

“the kind of reading that focuses on the meaning of the different segments of elements of the poem in their local narrative context.”⁸³⁹ Examples of connectionist readings would include Patrick Boyde, *Perception and Passion in Dante's Comedy*,⁸⁴⁰ in which Boyde argues for the influence of the thirteenth-century science of psychology as the overarching theme holding the *Comedy* together.⁸⁴¹ Also, Marc Cogan's *The Design in the Wax: The Structure of the Divine Comedy and Its Meaning*,⁸⁴² which advocates reading the *Comedy* with its medieval structure in mind such that a single consistent moral and theological principle organises each of the three books and the overall narrative – this connecting theme is love and its representation in human beings made in the image of God.

In contrast, segmental readings approach the *Comedy* emphasis reading the text sequentially with a focus on its immediate literary context. An example would be John A. Scott's *Dante Political Purgatory*,⁸⁴³ with a focus on the political ideas expressed in Purgatorio. Or Natalino Sapegno who comments: “The *Comedy* must be seen as a work that takes shape as it goes along, not an organic preconstituted block of forms and concepts.”⁸⁴⁴

Hede proposes a connectionist reading of Dante inspired by T. K. Seung who set out to investigate the enigma of the unity of the *Comedy* in *The Fragile Leaves of the Sibyl: Dante's Master Plan*.⁸⁴⁵ Seung had asked: “What is the principle of unity that holds together the nine

⁸³⁹ *ibid.* p.18.

⁸⁴⁰ Patrick Boyde, *Perception and Passion in Dante's Comedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) see in particular pp.275-301.

⁸⁴¹ Boyde examines how the emotions were understood in Dante's lifetime, and rereads various episodes in the *Comedy* with this in mind, analysing Dante's narrative technique. Dante's treatment of human perception and feeling is set in the context of Aristotelian epistemology, ethics and physics.

⁸⁴² Marc Cogan, *The Design in the Wax: The Structure of the Divine Comedy and Its Meaning* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1999).

⁸⁴³ John A. Scott, *Dante's Political Purgatory* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996).

⁸⁴⁴ Lettario Cassata, “The Hard Begin,” in (ed.) Allen Mandelbaum, *Lectura Dantis: Inferno: A Canto-by-Canto Commentary* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1988), p.11.

⁸⁴⁵ T. K. Seung, *The Fragile Leaves of the Sibyl: Dante's Master Plan*. (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1962).

circles of Hell, the seven terraces of Purgatory and the ten heavens of Paradise?”⁸⁴⁶ Hede notes that Seung went on to argue for a Trinitarian scheme:

the systematic correlation of the tripartite soul with its three distinctive powers and the Triune God constitutes the central framework for reading the *Commedia*. The framework provides not only a systematic classification of all the virtues and sins Dante describes in the *Commedia*; it also provides an orderly method for a Trinitarian interpretation of every scene and action in the poem.⁸⁴⁷

Hede argues for the principle of Dante adhering to a well-ordered design or pattern in his writing, noting the Trinitarian implications of this analysis. Sayers’ reading of Dante with truth, story and pattern as a crucial framework within which to approach the *Comedy* sits alongside other connectionist readings of the great poet.

Robin Kirkpatrick analyses Dante’s *Comedy* in the context of wider discussions about the relationship between literature and theology. He writes:

The specific matters, and this is as true of the *Commedia* – for all its apparently universal aspirations – as of any other text. Dante is a poet... I wish to propose that both poetry and theology are better realized in a detailed engagement with texts and historical situations than in any pursuit of vision or theoretical system.⁸⁴⁸

Kirkpatrick argues that familiar answers to the question of the nature of poetry and its relationship to theology do not suffice with regards to appreciating Dante’s *Comedy*. He states that perceiving the poetry of the *Comedy* as an epiphany presenting us with a world

⁸⁴⁶ T. K. Seung, “The Metaphysics of the *Commedia*” in (eds.) G. C. Scipio and A. Scaglione, *The Divine Comedy and the Encyclopedia of Arts and Sciences* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Co., 1988), p.181.

⁸⁴⁷ Hede, *Reading Dante*, p.viii.

⁸⁴⁸ Robin Kirkpatrick, “Polemics of Praise: Theology as Text, Narrative, and Rhetoric in Dante’s *Commedia*,” in (eds.) Vittorio Montemaggi and Matthew Treherne, *Dante’s Commedia: Theology as Poetry* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), p.15.

transfigured, or poetry as sacramental, is to misunderstand Dante. Dante's importance lies in the fact that he was a great theorist as well as a great writer:

poetry takes time... his interest in the painstaking and time-consuming processes of the poetic craft... The poet for Dante is one who labors in the "workshop of rhetoric," who files and polishes or else who weaves subtle textures out of... words.⁸⁴⁹

Kirkpatrick seeks to discourage the tendency to see Dante's poetry as systematically monolithic, enveloping the entire realm of human experience and divine revelation. Indeed, Kirkpatrick argues that the form of the poem is far more important as a piece of Christian performance than the theological nuance any particular canto may espouse:

If Dante is a theologian, then his contribution lies less in any definition of doctrinal nicety than in the *form* of what he says – in his ability to make us reflect upon and appreciate the linguistic and narrative action of a Christian performance.⁸⁵⁰

Kirkpatrick's view is a challenge to Sayers' approach here. Whilst Sayers emphasised the form and structure of the *Comedy* as integral to its power, she certainly did not perceive this as being in conflict with any dogma or "doctrinal nicety". Rather, Sayers believed that the linguistic pattern of the structure of the poem supported both the story and the theological pattern that Dante sought to explore.

An assessment of Sayers' reading of Dante in the wider context of contemporary Dante scholarship leads to a conclusion that her work remains credible and that it is defensible on its own terms. Whilst Sayers' approach is in direct contrast with the Derridean postmodern readings, a detheologised reading, the humanity centred standpoint, or a segmental approach, her emphasis on truth, story and pattern resonates with other connectionist readings. The sheer

⁸⁴⁹ *ibid.* p.19.

⁸⁵⁰ *ibid.* p.25.

scale of the multitude of potential approaches to Dante's poem leave room for Sayers' proposition of the importance of truth, story and pattern in grasping the meaning of Dante's masterpiece. What is more, bearing in mind her intention of engaging with a popular, rather than an academic, audience, Sayers' handling of the *Comedy* stands up well in the light of more modern scholarship, since a number of her insights – but in particular her emphasis on pattern – make sense within the frameworks of other critical approaches. Sayers' articulation of the importance of pattern in Dante's work echoes Hede's concern for a connectionist approach. Indeed, Sayers' instinct to look for pattern and overarching structure rather than taking a segmental approach bears Hede's thesis out. Sayers did not expressly address Neoplatonism, however Hedley's insights about symbol and truth culminating in his view of the poet as a potential vehicle of truth, would surely have fascinated Sayers. Moreover, Kirkpatrick's literary emphasis on the form of the poem as a mode of performance resonates with Sayers' insights about theology and drama that preceded her work on Dante. Overall, Sayers' understanding of truth, story and pattern in Dante can credibly take its place within the broad landscape of numerous theories as to how to read Dante given her particular strength in articulating poetic truth and resisting any false division between literature and theology.

In Dante's *Comedy* the unfolding story of a human being after death operates within a framework, a pattern of truth and reality. Multiple patterns are in play as the author unveils layers of complexity, but for Sayers, Dante's sensitivity to the power of pattern and his understanding of potentiality within pattern, allowed her to consider hitherto unexplored dimensions of her own theological commitment to pattern. Reading Dante was like looking through a mirror for Sayers, as she read and translated she recognised what she had already come to believe, and she could reflect it out again to her reading public. Chris Willerton notes the importance of the 'recognition' of something true in Sayers' approach to apologetics:

But Sayers seems to remind us that the most important term for success in apologetics is sometimes *recognition* or *realization*, perhaps even *vision* or *epiphany*. The reader/hearer/spectator is not only an object of conversion but one of the enactors... active participation in a realization, [was] an experience of Sayers's while writing notes for her *Inferno* translation.⁸⁵¹

In Sayers' work on Dante her hitherto inchoate commitment to discovering or recognising truth, through story and pattern reached a point of confirmation and even completion as she discovered an articulation of her own greatest values in the work of the great poet.

⁸⁵¹ Chris Willerton, "Dorothy L. Sayers, Dante, and the Modern Reader" *The Journal of Inklings Studies* 3:2 (2013): 41-58.

Chapter Nine

Conclusion

This thesis has set out to examine the apologetic value of theological truth through story and pattern in the works of Dorothy L. Sayers. By studying the breadth of Sayers' oeuvre through the lens of this unifying framework of truth through story and pattern, the deeper theological meaning operative throughout her work becomes clear. Whilst there have been two important recent contributions to the landscape of Sayers scholarship acknowledging the importance of the concept of pattern in Sayers' approach in particular areas, by Frances Clemson on the theology of Sayers' dramatic works, and Crystal Downing on the dynamic of performance in Sayers' work, this thesis has contributed to theological study by analysing Dorothy L. Sayers' entire oeuvre and assessing her work as a unified whole.

Chapter One – a literature review pertaining to previous studies of Sayers – revealed the tendency amongst scholars of Sayers to examine her primarily from a biographical point of view, despite her own emphasis on the importance of the literary work itself over and above the personal life of the author. Questions were raised as to why Sayers has not been studied with anything like the depth of analysis deployed by the scholars examining Lewis or Chesterton was introduced with a view to giving Sayers' work the scholarly attention it deserves in spite of her lack of academic status, her implacable personality, her gender and her habit of transitioning to a new genre just as she achieved public recognition in the previous mode. In Chapter Two of the thesis Sayers' early biography was explored with a view to uncovering the theological foundation upon which her writing career was built. Unpublished letters shed light on how Sayers came to hold her theological convictions and how her instincts about pattern in particular emerged. The third chapter delineated the operative meanings of the

themes truth, story and pattern in Sayers' own words, defining the terms and laying some parameters for the overall scope of the thesis.

In the fourth chapter, the first study of one of Sayers' genres – detective fiction – I demonstrated how the argument of the thesis that Sayers pursued her ideal of truth through story and pattern was already evident to some degree in Sayers' detective fiction and in particular in *The Nine Tailors* and *Gaudy Night*. Although pattern was perhaps not yet deployed with subtlety or nuance, as a theological concept it undergirded Sayers' explorations of how truth is discovered in stories. In Chapter Five Sayers' plays were analysed. Her theological instincts including her “dogma as drama” motif were scrutinised as Sayers enfolded story on the stage incarnating her ideas beyond words on a page through living, breathing actors. Pattern was both the undergirding structure of a given play and at times the subject of theological discussion through the drama itself and a particular concern of her character Lazarus in *The Man Born to be King*. Drama as story enfolded and “...pattern (as) ... *familiar*. You have known it from all eternity. For He that made it is the form of all things, Himself both the weaver and the loom”⁸⁵² were explored in this chapter of the thesis demonstrating how Sayers' thinking was maturing.

In Chapter Six Sayers' theological inquiry into human creativity as an outworking of the divine Trinity, *The Mind of the Maker*, was examined. Since Sayers is known amongst theologians mostly for her work on the Trinity, this chapter asked whether the weaknesses of *The Mind of the Maker* have dissuaded scholars from engaging with her theology more broadly. In this chapter I set Sayers' Trinitarian analogy into the broader context of her pursuit of truth and her interest in patterns, arguing that her work on the Trinity should be regarded as an example of a wider phenomenon – her fascination with the theological explanatory potential of pattern in

⁸⁵² Sayers, *TMBTBK*, p.214.

exploring the divine nature and human experience. Sayers' theological contribution consists of so much more than her Trinitarian analogy of creativity. But her articulation of this analogy does usefully alert readers to her overall apologetic approach. This chapter showed how Sayers attempted to point to the apologetic appeal of her tripartite pattern of creativity in demonstrating the veracity of Christian faith by asserting that human creativity was demonstrably a reflection of this ultimate divine pattern.

In Chapter Seven Sayers' essays on work and women were analysed as examples of this prominent genre of her writing. The chapter showed how many of the theological concerns explored through story especially in her novel *Gaudy Night*, were taken up in her essays. Her essays are concise pieces of prose pursuing truth. This chapter delineates how the lucidity with which Sayers wrote about the divine pattern for human dignity in work as well as with regard to gender, leaves her readers with a greater clarity as to how she understood the relationship between ultimate truth and human experience. The apologetic appeal of her essays was explored with regard to Sayers' efforts at pointing readers to a divine pattern that humanity longs to emulate. The falling short of human experience is in fact a misapplication of pattern – things are not as they should or could be – but Sayers opined that even this dissonance could point humanity to the Christian revelation.

In the eighth chapter Sayers' work of explaining and translating Dante was studied. Sayers' writings on Dante are little known outside of a small circle of Sayers enthusiasts. This is true of both her translation of the great poet into English and her essays analysing the *Commedia*. Yet Sayers regarded her work on Dante as the intellectual climax of her career as she recognised in Dante an affirmation of her own priorities and instincts. In this chapter I argue that at the heart of her intuitive connection with Dante was a personal sense of identification

with both the vibrancy of story-telling and the compelling coherence of pattern in his work. This culmination of Sayers' career was the clearest point of coalescence for her lifelong passion for truth, story and pattern as she recognised a fulfillment of her intellectual and theological instincts in the work of the great poet. The chapter concluded with an analysis of how Sayers' approach compared with attitudes to Dante in her own day as well as demonstrating how her reading of Dante stands up in the light of more modern scholarship.

Overall this thesis has made an argument for pattern, alongside story and truth, as a unifying undergirding concept for all of Sayers' work. This thesis has also drawn attention to Sayers' apologetic effectiveness as a Christian communicator and related this potency to her passion for truth, the clarity and coherence of her work rooted in pattern and her ability to excite and make connections with readers and audiences by evoking resonance and even *wonder* through story.

The thesis has argued that Sayers' oeuvre can be understood as a Trinitarian unity with her pursuit of truth in story and pattern in mind. This tripartite structural perspective has real explanatory power with regard to Sayers' work, shedding light on what she was trying to accomplish as a writer and providing readers with a fresh insight as to why her work had such public appeal, including her explicitly religious work. In the analogy of this thesis if pattern serves as "Pater" – the heavenly father of the Holy Trinity – and "Pater" and pattern are etymologically connected, and the story is the Son incarnate in the drama of history, then the truth is that which proceeds from both pattern and story as the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. The pattern (Pater) is made known in the story (Son) and truth (Spirit) is revealed and personally apprehended as both transcendent and imminent. In *The Mind of the Maker* Sayers analysed St Augustine's writing on the Trinity and was particularly interested in

his observation of the pervasiveness of trinities in the observable world. She wrote: “We may perhaps go so far as to assert that the Trinitarian structure of activity is mysterious to us just because it is universal...”⁸⁵³

Sayers anticipated that the Trinitarian nature of God would be reflected in his creation in multifarious ways. Pattern and tripartite patterns in particular were operative in Sayers’ attempts at understanding and communicating deep theological meaning. Thus, it is unsurprising that pattern is so inescapable for Sayers that any comprehensive attempt to analyse her work might be naturally expressed itself as an argument in the form of a tripartite pattern. The very structure of this thesis has unintentionally borne this out.

Notwithstanding the importance of gaining a deeper understanding of Sayers’ work on its own terms, this thesis is not limited to the field of Sayers scholarship; it also sits within a wider landscape of contemporary theological scholarship. Sayers’ work overlaps with broader areas of theological interest, opening new potential avenues for further research.

One such area into which Sayers’ work could speak would be that of narrative theology and the place of story in Christian thought. It has been argued in this thesis that through reflecting on the experience of writing fiction, Sayers came to a position whereby she was able to apply her literary creativity and theory to her theological engagement lending her writing a poetic flair. Sayers saw no discontinuity between theology and literature. Paul Fiddes notes that: “Stories and poems incarnate a concept of truth which is nothing to do with verification, but rather manifestation – letting be what shows itself... the experience of cross and resurrection

⁸⁵³ Sayers, *Mind*, pp.26-7.

judgement on actuality has an analogy in all poetics.”⁸⁵⁴ Sayers was able to see the connection between theology and story and thus in a sense to anticipate the emphasis on narrative that was to come within theology in the twentieth century with the rise of the Yale School, Post-Liberalism or Narrative Theology. Furthermore, Sayers’ adroitness in writing story and drama as well as analyzing the theological implications of performance is a positive connection point within the branch of Narrative Theology that has embraced dramatic embodiment and performance theology.⁸⁵⁵ Sayers’ apologetic appeal whilst writing fiction and drama with poetic imagination positions her as a potential conversation partner in ongoing theological discussion around narrative, apologetics and ethics. Stanley Hauerwas has eschewed the tendency of proponents of what he calls ‘story theology’ to “reproduce the apologetic strategies of Protestant Liberalism in a new guise.” He has hoped to avoid this since “calling attention to the narrative character of Christian revelation cannot be a strategy to avoid questions of the truth of that which is revealed.”⁸⁵⁶ Hauerwas underlined the theological value of Christian stories in shaping character and forming identity:

As Christians, we are not, after all, called to be morally good, but rather to be faithful to the story that we claim is truthful to the very character of reality... we are people who affirm that we have come to find our true destiny only by locating our lives within the story of God... We become part of God’s story by finding ourselves within that story.⁸⁵⁷

Hauerwas has become increasingly committed to the enactment of the story with performance operating as a kind of “embodied knowing” as opposed to a mere intellectual acknowledgment of story within Christian theology. Further research in this area could fruitfully draw upon Sayers’ work.

⁸⁵⁴ Paul S. Fiddes, “Story and Possibility: Reflections on the Last Scenes of the Fourth Gospel and Shakespeare’s ‘The Tempest’” in (eds.) Gerhard Sauter and John Barton, *Revelation and Story*, pp.29-52.

⁸⁵⁵ See David Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology Volumes 1 and 2* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009).

⁸⁵⁶ Stanley Hauerwas “Introduction” in (eds.) Gerhard Sauter and John Barton, *Revelation and Story*, p.3.

⁸⁵⁷ Stanley Hauerwas, “The Gesture of a Truthful Story” in *Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church, World, and Living in Between* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1988), p.102.

For Sayers, apologetics and dogmatics were most eloquent together when clearly operating within a framework of story and pattern. This is evidenced in her religious plays and in her work on Dante's *Commedia*. Although the Barthian⁸⁵⁸ influence on narrative theology led to a tendency toward a rejection of apologetics by some,⁸⁵⁹ perhaps Dorothy L. Sayers' approach to the story of the Christian revelation as integral to her apologetic approach may pave the way for further research into this area.

An additional context within which Sayers' work has potential relevance to wider contemporary theology is that of feminist Christian apologetics. Clearly Sayers' portrait of Jesus to a sceptical world recalling how women appreciated his inherent affirmation of their humanity (women "were first at the Cradle and last at the cross"), resounds with theologically orthodox movements affirming feminism within the church, including but not limited to the ordination of women. A further pathway for ongoing research could perhaps include Sayers as a conversation partner amidst current theological scholarship resisting sexism in the Church.⁸⁶⁰ Intriguingly, in the 1940s and 50s a leading voice in theology pertaining to Christianity and culture and the communication of the Church's creed to the world was a woman's voice who argued that Jesus Christ had uniquely affirmed the voice of women. Sayers' voice was listened to whether by her broadcast messages on BBC radio, her plays on stage and radio, or her books, which sold in their thousands because she was regarded as a clear, sensible and coherent

⁸⁵⁸ For example, Karl Barth writes eschewing apologetic in his *Epistle to the Romans*: "Anxiety concerning the victory of the Gospel - that is, Christian Apologetics - is meaningless, because the Gospel is the victory by which the world is overcome. ... It [the Gospel] does not require representatives with a sense of responsibility... God does not need us." Karl Barth, (Trans. E. C. Hoskyns), *Epistle to the Romans* (Oxford University Press; sixth edition, 1968) p.35

⁸⁵⁹ For example, early postliberal theologians such as Hans Frei and George Lindbeck.

⁸⁶⁰ See Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000); Elaine Storkey, *What's Right with Feminism?* (London: SPCK, 1985); Amy Plantinga Pauw and Serene Jones, *Feminist and Womanist Essays in Reformed Dogmatics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006).

thinker. Her ideas and her confidence in Christian truth as exciting, relevant and foundational for the health of any society can be rediscovered.

Alongside Sayers' writings on women, her postulations about human work provide a theological foundation of vocation affirming the dignity and creativity of humanity and challenging both capitalism's and Marxism's visions of work. Despite her naivety about market forces, her writings resound with an unconventionally positive and constructive vision for human work. In the politically divided landscape of the church in post-industrial Britain, Sayers' vision of Christian vocation paves the way for greater originality and creativity in theological engagement with questions about work.

A further contribution to wider theological scholarship of understanding Sayers through the lens of truth, story and pattern is that this was the paradigm through which she was able to bring the arts and theology together. What is more, she was able to reflect at more than a theoretical level on theology and the arts because she was a practitioner of both.⁸⁶¹ Sayers' unique position in this regard lends her perspective the potential to contribute to this increasingly important field of study for the contemporary Church.⁸⁶² As Jeremy Begbie comments:

⁸⁶¹ Clemson argues that "It is as a dramatist more thoroughly and creatively than as an essayist, that she is a theologian." Clemson, *Sayers' Dramatic Works*, p.307.

⁸⁶² Whilst Catholic and Orthodox traditions have historically strongly supported the coalescence of theology and the arts, for a flavour of the burgeoning of scholarship pertaining to theology and the arts within the Protestant tradition see Trevor Hart, *Between the Image and the Word: Theological Engagements with Imagination, Language and Literature* (London: Routledge, 2016); Trevor A. Hart and Ivan Khovacs (eds.), *Tree of Tales: Tolkien, Literature and Theology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007); Trevor A. Hart and Steven R. Guthrie (eds.), *Faithful Performances Enacting Christian Tradition* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), *Patterns of Promise* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2012); William A. Dyrnes, *Visual Faith: Art, Theology and Worship in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 2001); Belden C. Lane, *Ravished by Beauty: The Surprising Legacy of Reformed Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Jeremy Begbie (ed.), *Sounding the Depths: Theology Through The Arts* (London: SCM Press, 2002); Lyn Holness and Ralf Wustenberg (eds.), *Theology in Dialogue: the Impact of the Arts, Humanities and Science on Contemporary Religious Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002).

The arts are able to do their own kind of work in their own kind of way, articulating depths of the Word of the gospel and our experience of it that are otherwise unheard or unfelt, while nonetheless being responsible and faithful to the normative texts of the faith... A major research agenda opens up here, as well as a major practical challenge to all who care about the arts in the Church.⁸⁶³

Given the clarity of Sayers' methodology and approach due to her commitment to truth through story and pattern, she would make an increasingly rewarding creative collaborator in this "major research agenda."

Dorothy L. Sayers operated as a successful author, dramatist, essayist and literary translator. However, it is her unique contribution to the Christian apologetic witness of the church that has been hitherto undervalued. As a professional woman in the 1950s she marshaled the medium of her day – the radio, drawing on lessons learned in mass communication through the advertising industry and successfully capturing the imagination of the general public Christian theology. Her grasp of the power and vibrancy of story and the intrinsic coherence of pattern lent Sayers an apologetic edge such that her works reached thousands of people. Her focus on dogma and the creeds of the church as a simple but irreducible core of Christian truth which inexorably connected with the known world of historical, scientific, philosophical, political and moral reality in an identifiable pattern, held genuine apologetic appeal in her day. Dorothy L. Sayers was able to speak sensibly and relevantly about Christian Dogma. She repeatedly expressed her lack of confidence in her capacity to speak of any emotional or personal experience of God, instead focusing on what she called "the passionate intellect." When considering the question as to why it is so difficult to speak of God himself, Nicholas Lash in *The Beginning and the end of "Religion"* comments:

...When some Romeo starts stammering unable to find words that will do justice to his love, it is not because the beloved is unknown to him... it is because she has become

⁸⁶³ Jeremy Begbie, "The Future of Theology amid the Arts: Some Reformed Reflections" in Roger Lundin (ed.), *Christ Across the Disciplines: Past, Present, Future*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013) p.173.

too well-known for glib description to be possible. God is not far from us. God's self-giving constitutes our very being, intimates each element and movement of our heart. It is not those who know not God who find God difficult to talk about, but those who know God well.⁸⁶⁴

Sayers came to God through her love of the intellectual pattern of Christian faith, the dogmatic and doctrinal pattern expressed in the story of Christ. It was this irresistible interplay of pattern and story that gave rise to her "passionate intellect", that passion for truth that is everywhere manifested in her work, albeit with varying degrees of explicitness and maturity. Thus motivated and equipped, she was able to speak cogently and persuasively about theology to the Church and the wider public and so become the best-known and most effective female Christian apologist of the English-speaking world in the twentieth century.

⁸⁶⁴ Nicholas Lash, *The Beginning and the end of "Religion"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp.170-1.

Abbreviations

Creed or Chaos – Creed

Gaudy Night – Gaudy

The Man Born to Be King – TMBTBK

The Mind of the Maker – Mind

The Zeal of Thy House – Zeal

The Comedy of Dante Alighieri The Florentine Canitica I Hell (L'Inferno) – Hell

*The Comedy of Dante Alighieri The Florentine Canitica II Purgatory (Il Purgatorio) –
Purgatory*

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