

Detective Fiction, Religion, and Dorothy L. Sayers

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Introduction

The writing career of Dorothy L. Sayers can broadly speaking be divided into two parts – detective fiction and explicitly theological writing. This thesis examines the detective fiction in the light of the concerns of the theological writing. My argument is not that Dorothy L. Sayers' detective fiction should be read in terms of religious parable, rather, that one can discern a two-fold religious dimension to her detective fiction. Most obviously, on the level of setting character and plot, the Church - its representatives, rituals and calendar - provides a pervasive backdrop to many of Sayers' stories. Moreover, on the level of moral, intellectual and emotional engagement, her stories can be seen to deal with the problem of evil, with the moral ramifications of crime and punishment and the problematic relationship between individual and legal, human and divine judgement, embodied in the figure of the private detective.

To a certain extent, this is also true of the wider genre; inherent within all detective fiction are the themes of guilt and innocence, crime and punishment and good versus evil. In many examples, there are also a significant number of obvious references to the Church in terms of character and setting and one of the functions of these references is to draw attention to these themes. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the detection fiction of the Golden Age between 1918 and 1939.¹ What is interesting however, is that several critics identify the emergence in the nineteenth century of detective fiction as a genre with an increasing secularisation of society and this can, to some extent, be borne out by an analysis of Victorian detective fiction which presents a world in which science and logic replace faith and miracles. While moral considerations

are still inherent within these narratives, they are dealt with from a less overtly theological perspective.

It is my aim to consider briefly the differences between Victorian and Golden-Age detective fiction with regard to their presentation of religious, moral and ethical themes, and to consider the contributing factors to the marked shift in focus that can be identified in Golden-Age detective fiction with its explicitly Christian perspective. Throughout the thesis these issues will be discussed with a focus on Dorothy L. Sayers as a writer and critic of detective fiction who was fully cognizant of the potentially theological dimension to her chosen genre, something which will be examined through a close reading of her works.

Chapter One focuses on the wider writing career of Sayers, from her early poetry to her later theological works, placing her detective fiction within this wider context and demonstrating the way in which her religious upbringing, personal beliefs and academic interest in theology all influence her writing. It is not my intention to suggest that Sayers' detective fiction is an extension of her religious writing that somehow forms part of an overarching proselytizing or evangelical agenda. Rather, the argument is that the two sides of Sayers' output can be compared in terms of a concern with the problem of evil, with morality in society, and with different forms of judgement. Furthermore, that the tensions or contradictions embodied in both the detective fiction and the theological writing are both characterised and accommodated in each case by Sayers' particular qualities as a writer: the nuanced modulation between pragmatism and enthusiasm.

Chapter Two explores the wider genre of detective fiction in relation to the theological themes that it presents: guilt and innocence, good and evil, crime and punishment, and

the way that these are raised at various stages during the formulaic detective narrative. I will also consider how the structure of these narratives also highlights these themes by providing a dialectic between guilt and innocence. It is not just the structure and themes of detective fiction that are pertinent to a discussion of the genre in relation to religion, however, and Chapter Three focuses on how the changing role of religion in society in both the Victorian and inter-war eras had an influence on the evolution of detective fiction.

Chapter Four concentrates closely on the Golden Age considering the defining features of detective fiction in this era, in particular the emphasis on rules and 'fair play' which facilitated reader involvement in the process of detection, and the repeated use of an idyllic rural setting with its ubiquitous country house murders and limited cast of recognisable characters. This milieu, with its emphasis on tradition and order, had an appeal to the inter-war readership as it provided a form of escapism, and a means of achieving vicarious participation in the restoration of order through their involvement in the process of detection. The significant presence of the Established Church, I will argue, is pertinent in reinforcing the ordered world of the Golden-Age narrative, and also in highlighting the moral and theological themes that become evident in the explicitly Christian milieu of this genre.

From this point, the thesis focuses more specifically on Dorothy L. Sayers. Chapter Five considers her ecclesiastical characters, presented initially though a standard stereotype which fulfills the requirements of Golden-Age characters - easily recognised and placed within a traditional rural hierarchy - and their subsequent development beyond this stereotype as a vehicle for moral and theological themes. The development beyond the stereotype is facilitated by their interaction with the character of Lord Peter Wimsey,

Sayers' detective, and this raises several significant points about the ethical implications of the process of detection. Chapter Six explores the ethical problems encountered by Wimsey, which are related to the difficulties he perceives in his involvement in the process of achieving justice, as well as considering the detective as an emissary of both a human and divine justice system.

Chapters Seven and Eight provide close readings of two of Sayers' most pertinent texts in terms of the issues raised in this thesis: *The Documents in the Case* and *The Nine Tailors*, both of which engage closely with theological ideas. In *The Documents in the Case*, Sayers moves away from the traditional rural setting of the Golden Age and instead makes suburbia her milieu. This change marks a number of other deviations from her usual style, not least the fact that this is a collaborative work with Dr. Robert Eustace Barton, who provided the scientific element of the text. In this novel, instead of a thematic progression from detective narrative to theology, Sayers chooses to utilise the detective narrative to explore the particular theological focus of the antagonism between science and the Church, which results in probably her least successful detective story.

The tensions between the literary aspirations of genre fiction and its successful adherence to its formulae are widely recognized, and have been observed in Sayers' work in particular.² In *The Documents in the Case*, the modulation between pragmatism and enthusiasm in Sayers' writing is at its most discordant, unlike in *The Nine Tailors* which demonstrates her ability to combine her literary aspirations with the careful management of the formulaic requirements of the detective story, which, for the most part, characterises her writing in this genre. Sayers successful combination of the two elements in *The Nine Tailors* could be attributed to the fact that the theological themes are intrinsic to both setting and plot, as it is set in the closed environment of the country

village of Fenchurch St Paul, and focuses specifically on the church, its incumbent and congregation. It is also possible that, in the four years between the two texts, Sayers was developing her capacity to present the two elements to her writing in a more balanced style.

¹ For further discussion of the term 'Golden Age' see Chapter Four below.

² Tsvetan Todorov's discussion of this is dealt with in Chapter Two, p. 56, and Chapter Four, p. 113, below, and Raymond Chandler's specific criticisms of Sayers in this capacity are discussed in Chapter Four, p. 113, below.

Chapter One

Dorothy L. Sayers, Detective Fiction Writer and Theologian

Many people are aware of Dorothy L. Sayers (1893–1957) as a writer of detective fiction, and it is as such that she first came to public notice. In the inter-war years, the majority of her literary output was detective fiction: between 1923 and 1939 she published twelve detective novels and two collections of short stories, as well as various collaborative works by the Detection Club.¹ Her detective, Lord Peter Wimsey, became as well-known as Sayers herself. Sayers also wrote criticism on the genre, including the article, ‘The Present Status of the Mystery Story’, published in *The London Mercury* (November 1930) and the introduction to *Great Short Stories of Detection Mystery and Horror* (1928), which provided a brief summary of the history of detective fiction as well as some critical discussion of elements of form and style.²

However, most of her reading public are probably unaware that this only accounts for a small proportion of her literary output. Before her first detective novel, *Whose Body?*, was published in 1923³, Sayers concentrated mostly on writing verse. In addition to her letters, poetry makes up a substantial proportion of her juvenilia, with examples extant from her life at home before she went to school at fifteen, and from the Godolphin School magazine, *The Godolphin Gazette*. She continued to write verse whilst at Somerville College, Oxford; her first collection of poems, *Op 1*, was published in 1916, and a second, *Catholic Tales and Christian Songs*, was published in 1918.⁴ As the title of the second volume indicates, much of Sayers’ poetry was centered around religion, in terms both of an abstract idea and also her own personal faith, which was a fundamental

part of her upbringing and a inextricable element of her adult life, and which was to influence many aspects of it, including her writing. As Mitzi Brunsdale argues in her biography of Sayers: ‘nearly everything she wrote centered upon the conflict of Good and Evil, seen from the standpoint of the traditional Christian belief which she uncompromisingly professed and practiced’.⁵

The biographical details of Dorothy L. Sayers’ life are, by now, fairly well documented.⁶ The various biographies, as well as the letters and fragments of autobiographical writing left by Sayers, clearly demonstrate that when considering her, both as an individual and a writer, the significance of her faith should not be ignored, an idea conveniently summarised by Brunsdale:

[...] all her life [Sayers] adhered to the Christian faith in which her father had baptized her at Christ Church Cathedral. Her childhood was steeped in the magnificent imagery and rhythms of the King James Bible and the Book of Common Prayer, two of the most powerful influences on her style. Her twenty-four poems in the 1918 collection *Catholic Tales and Christian Songs* reveal a spiritual innocence and intimacy with Christ that her reviewer in the *Time Literary Supplement* found “characteristic of the Middle Ages.” (Hone, p. 30.) They also foreshadow Sayers’s treatment of Christ-as-Man in her radio dramas. Her co-workers at Blackwell’s had noticed that she was “religious” because she kept a crucifix on her desk and habitually made the sign of the cross before meals (Brabazon, p.67.), and for most of her life she went alone to early communion services at St. Thomas’s Church, Regent Street, London, and at All Souls’ Church at Witham. (Dale, p. 103.) Whatever choices she made - and lived with and suffered for - in her personal life, she remained a deeply devout woman of an Anglo Catholic persuasion.⁷

All of this underlines the way in which faith and worship were an intrinsic part of Sayers' life, both in terms of work and personal routine, and which most probably came about as a result of her upbringing. Sayers' father, Henry, came from a Church family: his father was the Reverend Robert Sayers of Tittleshall, Norfolk, and he himself was ordained in 1880. When his only child, Dorothy Leigh, was born in 1893, he was the headmaster of the Christ Church Choir School, Oxford, and when Sayers was four the family moved to Bluntisham-cum-Earith in Huntingdonshire, where Henry Sayers had been offered the living.⁸ Consequently, Sayers had a religious upbringing, with prayers and worship as part of her daily routine, as 'the family gathered in the dining-room at eight-fifteen in the morning, the servants entered and the rector said prayers'. In addition to this, divinity was part of her education, which she received entirely at home, from an early age.⁹

This religious upbringing is evident in much of her poetry, even in her very early efforts, such as 'The Gargoyle', written c. 1908, which, whilst not engaging in depth with any spiritual or theological ideas, demonstrates the way in which Sayers' immediate environment was dominated by churches, and church-going:

The Gargoyle takes his giddy perch
 On a cathedral or a church.
 There, mid ecclesiastic style
 He smiles an early Gothic smile
 And while the parson, full of pride,
 Spouts at his weary flock inside,
 The Gargoyle, from his lofty seat,
 Spouts at the people in the street;
 And like the parson, seems to say,

In accents doleful, 'Let us pray'.
 I like the Gargoyle best. He plays
 So cheerfully on rainy days –
 While parsons, no one can deny,
 Are awful dampers when they're dry.¹⁰

Considering the youthful age of its writer, this poem demonstrates a witty detachment from its subject matter and a clever use of visual metaphor in the parallel between the rain-spilling gargoyle and the sermon-spilling parson. Despite the apparent simplicity and light-hearted tone of this poem, the 'weary flock', the parson's 'doleful accents' and 'dryness' are all significant in highlighting a particular element to Sayers' faith that becomes more evident in her later poems, particularly those in *Catholic Tales and Christian Songs*, which was her feeling that an engagement with faith had to be wholehearted and passionate. What these later verses of Sayers demonstrate is that, as well as an intellectual or theological significance, the Anglican faith had a poetic and spiritual appeal for her. In Barbara Reynolds' preface to the collection, *Poetry of Dorothy L. Sayers*, she describes how:

In her later years Dorothy L. Sayers asserted that her only approach to religious belief was via her intellect. Her poetry shows that this had not always been the case and perhaps was never entirely so. A sense of joy and wonder is the starting point of several of her religious poems, notably in *Catholic Tales and Christian Songs* (p. xii).

This 'joy and wonder' to be found in religious belief seems to be, for Sayers, bound up with the lyrical poeticism of High Church worship. Poetic language always held an appeal for her: 'she loved the incantation of rhyme; she experimented with metre; she played with unusual words; she practised the fixed forms, sonnet, ballade, triolet, finding them a liberation rather than a restraint [...].'¹¹ The sense of passionate expression found

in the language of poetry is equated for Sayers in the liturgy of the Church and the ritual of the Anglican sacrament in which she seems to find a poetic and almost musical resonance, and simultaneously within with the fervent feelings that this produces. This can be seen in her poem ‘ΠΑΝΤΑΣ ΕΛΚΥΣΩΕ’, from *Catholic Tales* in which she describes how ‘I hear Thy trumpets in the breaking morn / I hear them restless in the resonant night / Or sounding down the long winds over the corn’.¹² The ‘trumpets’ evoke exultant feeling of the awareness of God’s omnipresence, which Sayers feels in all of the minutiae of her mortal life and beyond:

They blow aloud between love’s lips and mine,
Sing to my feasting in the minstrel’s stead,
Ring from the cup where I would pour the wine,
Rouse the uneasy echoes about my bed ...
They will blow through my grave when I am dead (ll. 31-35).

The ‘blowing’ of the trumpets, repeated in the first and last lines of this verse, coupled with Sayers’ lexical choice of ‘sing’, ‘ring’ and ‘rouse’ help to emphasise the onomatopoeic sound of the trumpets, but also the surge of feeling that they evoke.

Even as a schoolgirl, Sayers recognised the way in which the language of worship was linked to the emotions it produced, and Barbara Reynolds quotes briefly from Sayers’ unfinished autobiographical account of this time, *Cat O’ Mary*, detailing how: ‘[Sayers] seems to have sensed that there were two kinds of Christianity, the sentimental, which made her feel uncomfortable, and the Christianity she glimpsed in the lovely language of the scriptures and in the great churches, where the name of god was surrounded “with scarlet and blue and gold and strange birds and flowers in painted missals[...]”’.¹³ Both Reynolds and Brunsdale have suggested that this distinction between the ‘two kinds of

Christianity' is what gave Sayers her distaste for the form of worship at Godolphin, which she describes in *Cat O' Mary*, through the description of her Confirmation, arranged through the school: 'Dorothy felt uncomfortable with Godolphin's Low Church approach to religion, a puritanical pietism which crept furtively around "Gawd" and seemed to drain all the vigorous glory that she loved out of Christianity.'¹⁴ This feeling was sustained into *Catholic Tales* and is clearly evident in the fifth verse of the poem, 'Sacrament against Ecclesiasts': 'What is this bitter sin of thine / So little to have understood / To find Me in the bread and wine / And find me not in flesh and blood'.¹⁵ This verse simultaneously refers to the different beliefs concerning transubstantiation in Communion held by High and Low denominations, but also the difference between professing faith and following its rituals, 'the bread and wine', and having an active feeling of belief inherent in one's 'flesh and blood.' Hone argues that this poem 'shows what unChristlike attitudes and behaviour may obtain when Christianity becomes so institutionalized – so hardened in abstract liturgical form ("in the letter") – that it is so blinded to true implications ("the spirit")' (p. 91).

The emphasis that Sayers places on a personal and heartfelt faith is one that is evident in many of her later writings; despite her assertion that her approach to belief was an intellectual one, there is always the sense of her wholehearted conviction in her theological ideas, and a desire to make these as real and accessible to others as she could through her work. Although Sayers had no further collections of poetry published, she continued to write verse, and her poetic tendencies can be seen in her later works. This is evident in her detective fiction in a number of ways; most obviously in verses such as

the love sonnet composed by Wimsey and Harriet in *Gaudy Night*, which summarises the sense of intellectual and emotional peace that they find in returning to Oxford:

Here then at home, by no more storms distrest,
Folding laborious hands we sit, wings furled;
Here in close perfume lies the rose-leaf curled,
Here the sun stands and knows not east nor west.¹⁶

This peace, demonstrated in the first quatrain, which utilises the religious imagery of angels to emphasise the magnitude of their feeling, allows Wimsey and Harriet to achieve a basis for their relationship, in which passion is tempered by intellectual equality. This idea is presented in the sonnet through the metaphor of a perfectly balanced spinning top, which embodies the paradox of eternal motion in its spinning and simultaneous stillness in the rigidity of its axis: ‘Lay on the whips, O love, that me upright / Posed on the perilous point [...]’. This image also seems to represent the two elements to Sayers’ theological writing, in terms of the balance between the intellectual and the emotional.

There are other, more light-hearted examples of Sayers’ poetic talents in her detective fiction, such the advertising ‘jingles’ in *Murder Must Advertise*, which she also wrote in real life in her position as copy-editor at S.H. Benson’s from 1922 – 1929. It can also be seen more subtly in the lyrical moments of descriptive prose that are found in all of her novels, such as the following passage, also from *Gaudy Night*:

There, eastward, within a stone’s throw, stood the twin towers of All Soul’s, fantastic, unreal as a house of cards, clear-cut in the sunshine, the drenched oval in the quad beneath, brilliant as an emerald in the bezel of a ring [...] and Queen’s with her dome of green copper; and,

as the eye turned southward, Magdalen, yellow and slender, the tall lily of towers [...] (p. 434).

This description is typical of Sayers, and it echoes the celebratory tone of much of her poetry, achieved through the images of light and brilliance. Once again, there is an evocation of the heavens, provided by the perspective of looking down over Oxford and the sense of soaring space in the long vowel sounds in ‘dome’ and ‘green’. The use of alliteration and assonance helps to create rhythm, such as that in the line ‘yellow and slender, the tall lily of towers’, and the poetic feeling is compounded by the use of figurative language such as the metaphors of the ‘lily tower’ and the ‘emerald ring’.

Sayers' love of poetic language is also evident in the theological dramas that she wrote, along with the sustained desire to portray religious beliefs and theological ideas in a way that was passionate, yet reasoned and accessible. In 1937, as well as producing her final detective novel, *Busman's Honeymoon*, based on a play written in collaboration with Muriel St Clare Byrne (1895-1983), she wrote the play *The Zeal of Thy House*, her first theological drama¹⁷. This was written at the invitation of the Friends of Canterbury Cathedral, for performance at the Canterbury Festival in 1937. After this, aside from a collection of short stories, *In The Teeth of the Evidence* (1939), and ‘Talboys’, published posthumously in *Striding Folly* in 1973, she did not return to detective fiction.¹⁸ From this point on, she concentrated entirely on dramatic and non-fiction texts, most of which have a theological basis. She wrote other religious dramas, for both radio and stage, including *The Just Vengeance* (1946), for the Lichfield Festival and *The Emperor Constantine* (1951), for the Colchester Festival.¹⁹ The former is, in Sayers' words, ‘a

miracle-play of Man's insufficiency and God's redemptive act, set against the background of contemporary crisis' (p. 9):

The whole action takes place in the moment of the death of an Airman shot down during the late war. In that moment, his spirit finds itself drawn into the fellowship of his native city of Lichfield; there, being shown in an image the meaning of Atonement, he accepts the Cross, and passes, in that act of choice, from the image to the reality (pp. 9-10).

Although Sayers chose to locate the action of the play in the First World War, it would have had a clear resonance for its contemporary audience, with its references to the city in war time: 'Blood in the bodiless voice from the loud-speaker / Blood in the siren-song and the drone of the bombers' (p. 15). This utilisation of a contemporary, recognisable setting for the exploration of the theological concept of Atonement is typical of her approach to such themes in her writing.

One of Sayers' concerns in all of her texts was to present Christianity and its teachings in a way that was accessible. *The Man Born to be King* (1941-1942) a series of radio plays on the life of Christ, intended for an audience of children, sparked controversy because of Sayers' insistence that the plays 'must be in modern speech'²⁰ and that:

[...] nobody, not even Jesus, must be allowed to "talk Bible" [...] we shall get a good many complaints that I have not preserved the beauty and elegance of the authorised version, and that Jesus has been made to say things which don't appear in the sacred original. It seems to me frightfully important that the thing should be made to appear as real as possible, and above all, that Jesus should be presented as a human being [...].²¹

This approach is evident in *The Just Vengeance*, with the Airman providing a very ‘human’ and therefore accessible voice in his desire to understand the justification for his death and thereby obtain the answers to complicated theological questions: ‘I want to know what it is all about / And whether the thing makes sense. I have lived; I have died; / I have a right to know’ (p. 28). In the same way that the character of Jesus in *The Man Born to be King* is not allowed to ‘talk bible’ and ‘says things which don’t appear in the sacred original’, Sayers presents a number of Biblical figures in *The Just Vengeance*. Amongst these are Adam and Eve, who become ‘real’ human beings through their speech, such as Adam’s address to Eve: ‘Oh, there you are! Well now this time / I think you’ll say I’ve really earned my dinner’ (p. 33). This clearly demonstrates the other, more pragmatic approach in Sayers’ writing. Whilst expressions of faith, could, and did, move her to passionate lyricism in her work, when she needed to present ideas clearly and in an accessible way, she was capable of an entirely more down-to-earth tone, which given the often complicated or reverent nature of the subject matter, is appealing in its rejection of pretension, but still suited to the dramatic genre in its tone – ‘everyday’ does not have to mean ‘dry’ or ‘doleful’. Sayers’ techniques ensure that her ideas are accessible and interesting in their exposition, and the inclusion of the war made the action of the play pertinent to her contemporary audience. This combination of theological and contemporary issues was something that Sayers concentrated on in a number of works during the Second World War. She wrote a number of articles and addresses dealing with the issues of faith and war, beginning with an article in the *Sunday Times*, ‘What Do We Believe?’ (10th September 1939) and including *Begin Here* (1940), a Christmas message to the nation, and *The Other Six Deadly Sins*, an address to the Public Morality Council given in 1943.²² All of these works demonstrate the familiar

sense of her driven and passionate engagement with her subject matter, but also, in her expression, a desire to ensure that her ideas are accessible.

The inextricable relationship between herself as a writer, her subject matter and her faith is the focus for her 1941 thesis, *The Mind of the Maker*, in which she illustrates the doctrine of the Trinity through the analogy of the creative writer.²³ This analogy is based on the idea that the one attribute that humanity shares with God is the ability to create: ‘In the beginning God created [...] and He created man in His own image; in the image of God created He him; male and female created He them. Thus far the author of *Genesis*’:

But had the author of *Genesis* anything particular in his mind when he wrote? It is observable that in the passage leading up to the statement about man, he has given no detailed information about God. Looking at man, he sees him as something essentially divine, but when we turn back to see what he says about the original upon which the “image” of God was modelled, we find only the single assertion, “God created”. The characteristic common to God and man is apparently that: the desire and the ability to make things (p. 17).

The creative process is described by Sayers in terms of the trinity: God the Father is the Creative Idea, God the Son is the Creative Energy and God the Holy Spirit the Creative Power, an argument summarised by Brunsdale:

In terms of the creation of a book, the writer’s “idea” is an entity in his mind that allows him to recognize and use the right word, phrase, character, twist of plot, and so forth, so that the finished work has a unity in itself. The “energy” is the whole process that produces the book in tangible form. The “power” is the means by which the author

reads his own book, speaks to others and engenders their response (p. 156).

Sayers proceeds to utilise her analogy of the process of writing to discuss a number of theological issues through ‘a metaphor that the reader may understand and apply’ (p. 34).

Sayers’ characteristic accessibility of style is evident in *The Mind of the Maker*, in which she combines a layman’s vocabulary, domestic analogies and humour to convey complicated theological arguments. For example, in Chapter II, ‘The Image of God’, Sayers explains how there are several analogies, based on our experience, that man repeatedly uses to interpret God. The two most frequently used, Sayers argues, are those of ‘God as a king’ and ‘God as a father’. In seeking to explore these metaphors, Sayers wishes to show their limitations. She argues that when we use these expressions:

we know perfectly well that they are metaphors and analogies; what is more, we know perfectly well where the metaphor begins and ends. We do not suppose for one moment that God procreates children in the same manner as a human father... still less, that *all* the activities of a human father may be attributed to God, such as earning money for the support of the family, or demanding first use of the bathroom in the morning. (pp. 19 –20)

This is typical of Sayers’ ability to convey quite complicated theological notions in a way that makes them clear and interesting to those without a theological or academic background.

In her preface to *The Mind of the Maker*, Sayers states that the thesis is not ‘an expression of personal religious belief [but] a commentary, in the light of specialised

knowledge, on a particular set of statements made in the Christian creeds and their claim to be statements of fact' (p. 1). Whilst the content of Sayers' work was not always a deliberate personal statement of faith, and she clearly states that *The Mind of the Maker* is no such thing, it could be argued that the act of writing it was. As Brunsdale argues: 'even though *The Mind of the Maker* is a theoretical work resting solidly upon Christianity's established dogma, Dorothy Sayers still put the essence of herself into it' (p. 156). Whilst Sayers could write about theological matters in a purely detached and intellectual way, 'the light of specialised knowledge' that she lends to them is that of her inherent personal beliefs as well as her understanding of Christian doctrine on a purely intellectual level. The idea, clearly demonstrated in her poetry, that faith should be personally engaged with, not 'dry' or 'doleful' like that of the parson in 'The Gargoyle', is what she brings to her presentations of theology, whether these are fictional or academic. Sayers can separate theology, that is, her intellectual consideration of religious matters, from her faith, her personal engagement with religion, and she can write about the former without constantly asserting the latter, but they are inextricably linked. Indeed, this personal and consuming interest in theological matters that informs and illuminates her work was evident throughout her life.

This can be seen in the way that Sayers' response to her upbringing was not one of a passive acceptance or mere adherence to social conditioning. Even when she was quite young, she seems to have demonstrated an understanding of and interest in matters of theology that was beyond her years. In *The Mind of the Maker* she discusses her response 'in [her] childhood', to a verse of the *Quincunque Vult*²⁴: 'I remember feeling that this verse formed a serious blot upon a fascinating and majestic mystery. It was I

felt, quite unnecessary to warn anybody that there was “one Father, not three fathers; one Son, not three sons; one Holy Ghost, not three holy ghosts.” The suggestion seemed quite foolish. It was difficult enough to imagine a God who was Three and yet One; did anybody exist so demented as to conceive of a ninefold deity?’ (p. 120). Sayers does not specify her age in this anecdote, but her child-self seems to have been familiar with and interested in the Athanasian Creed in a way that Brunsdale describes as ‘unusual for a youngster, even one who grew up in a rectory’ (p. 29).

Sayers’ youthful letters demonstrate a similar desire to discuss such issues. In a letter to her cousin, Ivy Shrimpton, written when she was fourteen, Sayers asks Ivy if she remembers ‘a 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 [...]’.²⁵ Whilst the tone of this letter is somewhat ‘priggish’, a term Sayers used later to describe herself as a child (Reynolds, *Her Life and Soul* p. 26), it does demonstrate an unusual interest in theological matters for a fourteen-year-old girl. Ivy Shrimpton seems to have been on the receiving end of Dorothy’s ‘priggish’ lecturing on more than one occasion. In a letter dated 28th February 1908, Sayers writes:

I think you are a little apt to say in effect: ‘what this man did was an offence against morality, it was therefore wrong and inexcusable. I do not care what excuse this person had. He did wrong; therefore he is a wicked person, and there is an end of it.’ 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. [...] 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 [...] I think one phase of charity is making allowances for other people's mistakes.²⁶

Several biographers²⁷ have pointed out the irony of this letter: when Sayers came to 'sin a great sin' in conceiving and bearing her son, John Anthony, outside of wedlock in 1924, an event in her life that was described by Sayers as God punishing her 'bitterly' for committing the 'bitter sin' of sex outside of marriage, (Reynolds, *Her Life and Soul*, p. 167), it was to Ivy Shrimpton that she turned, and it was Ivy who undertook the task of raising Sayers' child.

The existence of Sayers' illegitimate child has prompted some adverse critical comment, particularly in relation to her faith and her role in later life as an expounder of Christian doctrine: 'much has been made of the burden of guilt which Dorothy L. Sayers, the celebrated detective novelist and pillar of the Church, supposedly carries because of her illegitimate son' (Reynolds, *Her Life and Soul*, p. 167). James Brabazon, for example, suggests that Sayers 'was deeply aware of a personal sinfulness', and suggests that this is one of the reasons for her refusal of a Lambeth Degree in 1943 (p. 215). Both Reynolds and Brunsdale, however, put forward interesting responses to the seeming tensions between Sayers' clearly-expressed beliefs and her actions. Both critics' responses deal, in different ways, with Sayers' understanding of the nature of sin and humanity, and their arguments are interesting in terms of the light that they shed on Sayers as both a Christian and a writer, and the inherent link between these two elements of her life.

Reynolds argues that to make much of Sayers' 'guilt' is 'to disregard the fact that she was an Anglo-Catholic and that, as it has been shown, it was her practice to go to confession':

Whenever it was that she entered into a state of repentance, her recourse then was to make confession and seek absolution. When she did so, the burden of guilt was lifted. There remained, however, the question of reparation. She may have asked for spiritual counselling about this. She may also have required it for any residue of psychological guilt which still troubled her. In any event, as an instructed Catholic, she would know that she must individually take responsibility for what had occurred (p. 167).

There are several significant issues raised here. The first is the identification of the difference between 'psychological' guilt, the feelings of remorse and culpability that accompany an act of 'wrongdoing', and 'guilt' in terms of its more precise theological meaning, that is, the breaking of the relationship with God for which there is a personal or corporeal responsibility. The second idea raised is that of taking responsibility and making reparation for the sin, an idea that Sayers explains carefully and characteristically in a lecture entitled 'The Meaning of Purgatory' (1948), cited by Reynolds to clarify this point. Sayers asks us to 'suppose that in a fit of anger or resentment or merely sheer wicked carelessness' we have broken a 'valuable teapot' belonging to a friend. The next step, assuming that we are 'overcome with shame and horror at what [we] have done, and want to put matters right', is to go to the friend and 'confess [our] sinful feeling and the guilty act to which it led', a point which interestingly places emphasis not just on the act, but the feeling that prompted it. We ask our friend to forgive us, and 'promise that [we] will try to make it up to her in future. That is, [we] make an act of penitence: confession, contrition and atonement.' Because

of this [we] are now released at once from the *guilt* of what [we] did: in technical terms [we] have purged the *culpa*.' However, the atonement is not complete, unless:

[We] make an act of compensation, and the technical term for that is purging the *reatus* . . . and if the sinner is truly penitent, he will be eager to purge it in any way God may appoint . . . if we are ever to be happy in his presence again, it is something in us that has to be altered.²⁸

Here, the emphasis is on the individual taking responsibility for the act of compensation for their sin. In Sayers' case, Reynolds argues, this was achieved through providing for John Anthony: 'what remained for [Sayers] was a burden of responsibility. In practical terms, this meant supporting and educating John Anthony and providing him, as best she could, with maternal love and concern for his welfare' (p. 169). Sayers met this responsibility throughout her life, financing her son's upbringing and education, which she managed in part through her income from writing detective fiction. Sayers knew that there was a market for detective fiction if she could write it, and this financial consideration, which was increased in 1924 by the need to provide for John Anthony, was certainly a factor in her departure from the initial serious 'literary' work that she had begun with her poetry. In 1919, she told a friend, Eric Whelpton, that 'she and some Oxford friends were thinking of forming a syndicate to write detective stories, for which they believed they could create a market [...] she invited Whelpton to join with them and make his fortune'.²⁹ Her letters from 1921 demonstrate how badly she is in need of finding a job, but also how she feels that 'there is a market for detective literature if one can get in and [Lord Peter Wimsey] might go some way towards providing bread and cheese'.³⁰

Whilst Reynolds' arguments in response to the 'problem' of Sayers' illegitimate child focus on the response to having sinned, Brunsdale concentrates more on the impetus to sin in the first place, exploring Sayers' 'essentially medieval Pauline position on sin and redemption', that is, 'that while Christ perfectly redeemed mankind, man's tendency toward sin remains, and so man must share in Christ's suffering before joining with him in the Resurrection' (p. 3). The innate sinfulness of man and his consequential suffering is a theme that occupies a number of Sayers' religious texts, and as she explores these ideas she places emphasis on the choices and responsibilities of the individual. In *The Just Vengeance*, the dead Airman is called upon by the Recorder, the Angel of the City of Lichfield, to give his 'claim to citizenship'. The Airman's reply focuses on how little he has had time to do in life 'except to be killed – and to kill.' The Recorder responds:

What matters here is not so much what you did
 As why you did it: the choice behind the action;
 The deed is the letter; what you believe is the spirit.
 Except a man believe rightly he cannot be saved,
 Not even by suffering. (p. 24.)

This question of 'why' man acts the way he does, of how it is 'not so much what you did / As why you did it,' is one which occupies Sayers in her writing and Brunsdale argues that, in part, it is Sayers' attempts to see herself and her own actions in terms of these theological problems that act as a stimulus to her writing:

Faced with such calamities [...] most human beings would ask Job's everlasting "why?" Only a few could roll up their sleeves and make the best of the situation as effectively as Dorothy Sayers did, and she did it by linking religious faith to her creative impulse in her concept of the sacramental nature of work. The combination led her throughout her life to undertake successively more challenging artistic attempts at

solving the “question of questions” in human existence, which she called the “mystery of wickedness.” (p. 2)

Sayers uses this expression ‘the mystery of wickedness’ in *The Devil to Pay* (1939), her second play for the Canterbury Cathedral, in alluding to the most complex theological issue that she deals with in all of her work, that of the justification of the ways of God to man, or, as she describes it, ‘the putrefying sore at the heart of creation’.³¹ This problem is outlined by Sayers in her introduction to the play:

For at the base of [the legend of Faustus] lies the question of all questions: the nature of Evil and its place in the universe. Symbolise Evil, and call it the Devil, and then ask how the Devil comes to be. Is he, as the Manichees taught, a powerful co-equal with and opposed to God? Or, if God is all-powerful, did He make the Devil, and if so, why, and with what justification? Is the Devil a positive force, or merely a negation, the absence of God? In what kind of sense can a man be said to sell his soul to the Devil? What kind of man might do so, and, above all, for what kind of inducement? (p. 25).

In the play, this conflict is summed up in the following exchange between Mephistopheles and Faustus:

Mephistopheles: Evil is one of my names

Faustus: Tell me, then, thou Evil, who made thee?

Mephistopheles: He that made all things.

Faustus: What? did God make thee? Was all the evil in the world made by God? Beware what thou sayest; I know thee for a false and lying spirit (p. 29).

In chapter VII of *The Mind of the Maker*, ‘Maker of All Things, Maker of Ill Things’, Sayers sets out her theory through the sustained analogy of creator / writer: ‘we may

[...] see whether we can find in our literary analogy anything at all which may throw light on the nature of Evil' (p. 77). In keeping with the artistic or literary analogy, the 'Evil' under discussion is not, in this instance *'moral evil'*, but "'bad art'", as Sayers puts it: 'in the choice of words for example, the "right" word will not be the morally edifying word, but the word which rightly embodies [the artist's] Idea [...] we must not, that is, confuse our minds by allowing our analogy to extrude itself outside its terms of reference' (p. 78). This need to adhere to the terms of the analogy demonstrates Sayers' desire to express her ideas clearly, but like the need to understand that God is not 'father' in the human sense of the word, she is anxious that her reader recognise the limitations to metaphors and utilise them only as a means to understanding something of far greater theological import.

Sayers goes on to elaborate this argument through a discussion of the concepts of 'Being' and 'Not-Being', and how, 'Being (simply *by* being) creates Not-Being,' for example, "'before" light, there was neither light nor darkness; darkness is not darkness until light has made the concept of darkness possible' (p. 78). In terms of the writer / creator analogy, Sayers explains that:

Shakespeare writes *Hamlet*. That act of creation enriches the world with a new category of Being, namely: *Hamlet*. But simultaneously it enriches the world with a new category of Not-Being, namely: Not *Hamlet*. (p. 82).

Sayers is, therefore, presenting us with the argument that evil exists as the 'Not-Being' to good: the existence of good necessarily creates the existence of evil: 'In this sense, therefore, God, Creator of all things, creates Evil as well as Good, because the creation of a category of Good necessarily creates a category of Not-Good' (p. 81). This, Sayers

argues, only becomes problematic when the Not-Good ceases to be negative or inactive, that is, ceases to be merely an opposing state to Good. Illustrating this through the *Hamlet* analogy, she explains:

if Not-Hamlet becomes associated with consciousness and will, we get something which is not merely Not-Hamlet: we get Anti-Hamlet. Some one has become aware of his Not Hamletness, and this awareness becomes a centre of will and of activity. The creative will, free and active like God, is able to will Not-Being into Being, and thus produce an evil that is no longer negative, but positive. (p. 82).

Once again, we see Sayers place emphasis on free will and ‘the choice behind the action’, the decision by humans to turn the Not-Good into the Anti-Good, or in terms of the analogy, the Not-Hamlet into the Anti-Hamlet. In terms of *Hamlet*, Sayers demonstrates how these Anti-Hamlets can range from a minor misquote, such as “caviare to the multitude” as opposed to “caviare to the general”, which ‘does comparatively little harm to *Hamlet*’, to ‘behav[ing] like David Garrick and re-writ[ing it] with the express purpose of improving it.’ This willful act, Sayers argues is a ‘kind of grasping at equality with God [which] really does untold damage’ (p. 85).

It is this ‘grasping at equality with God’ that is at the root of the human capacity for evil:

Men [...] desired to be “as gods, knowing good and evil.” God, according to St. Thomas Aquinas, knows Evil “by simple intelligence” – that is, in the category of Not-Being. But men, not being pure intelligences, but created within a space-time framework, could not “know” Evil as Not-Being – they could only “know” it by experience; that is, by associating their wills with it and so calling it into active being. Thus the Fall has been described as the “fall into self-consciousness”, and also the “fall into self-will” (p. 82).

In *The Devil to Pay*, Mephistopheles describes the Fall in these terms, placing emphasis on the human desire to ‘know’ as God knows: ‘I sat by Eve’s shoulder in the shadow of the forbidden tree. “Eat,” said I, “and you shall become like God.” She and her silly husband ate, and it was so’ (p. 30). This idea is one that Sayers returns to repeatedly in her theological work, as she works through man’s capacity for evil, or the ‘mystery of wickedness’. In *The Mind of the Maker*, Sayers attempts to offer ‘solutions’ to the existence of the Anti-Good, responses that the individual can make to its presence and the propensity in themselves, and others, to act upon it. Firstly, she suggests that we can ‘check the evil and prevent it from doing harm in the future, though its record of past evil remains’, or:

We can redeem it. That is to say, it is possible to take its evil Power and turn it into active good. We can, for example, enjoy a good laugh at David Garrick. In doing so we, as it were, absorb the Evil in the Anti-Hamlet and transmute it into an entirely new form of Good. This is a creative act, and it is the only kind that will actually turn positive Evil into positive good (p. 86).

It is this insistence on the ‘creative act’ as an act of faith that both Reynolds and Brunsdale identify in Sayers’ work: ‘she felt the obligation of the Christian artist, whose gifts should enable him to recognise truth more clearly than could his fellows, to tell them so, and she did it in no uncertain terms’ (p. 3).

Both critics establish a link between Sayers’ faith and her theological writings. Whether this is a matter of her reflecting on her personal beliefs, working through ‘problems’ of her own personal experience or an intelligent, religious woman attempting the analysis and presentation of some of the more complicated points of theology, such as theodicy,

sin and atonement and their relationship to the beliefs and actions of the individual, the link is clearly there. Sayers' interest in the essential weakness of humanity, including herself, is there from her early letters to *Ivy*, which, as Brunsdale says show that 'Dorothy at fifteen frankly acknowledged her capacity for wrongdoing' (p. 31). This, and other issues, are explored and developed, through her plays and her thesis, formats she chose deliberately to directly handle this subject matter.

But what of Sayers' detective fiction? Whilst many critics, including Reynolds and Brunsdale, acknowledge and explore the links between the different genres of her writing, a distinct line tends to be drawn between them, and Sayers is often viewed as a detective novelist who went on to write theology. In her introduction to *The Mind of the Maker*, Susan Howatch describes how:

Using the brand of fiction which enjoyed enormous popularity in the inter-war years - the detective puzzle which was solved by an amateur sleuth - [Sayers] developed her skills as a novelist, but just when she was reaching the point where she could jettison the formula and write novels which were unencumbered by dead bodies, she was captured by the canner clergymen of the Church of England who realized that this literate Anglican laywoman had the talent to bring Christianity to a huge audience amongst the unchurched masses (p. viii).

Sayers herself was aware of this tendency, illustrated by Howatch, to effect a complete separation between her detective fiction and her theological writings and would often relate an anecdote about a schoolboy who had written that 'Miss Dorothy Sayers [...] turned from a life of crime to join the Church Of England' (Brunsdale, p. 12).

To some degree, the separation of the two phases of her work seems reasonable: after all, popular fiction has little in common with academic theses or theological dramas. But it should not be overlooked that all of these texts were, of course, written by the same woman. In her biography of Sayers, Reynolds asserts that '[...] all [Sayers'] writings – novels, plays, poems, theological articles, translations and literary criticism – are deeply and consistently personal' (p. 167). It stands to reason, therefore, that there will be elements common to both areas of Sayers' writing, generated by the 'consistently personal' nature of their creation. This 'personal' element need not be Sayers' own beliefs, although, as has been suggested, these can be said to have influenced her works, but could equally be her role as theologian. Sayers' interest in theology did not appear suddenly in the late 1930s: her letters and early poetry show that it occupied her interest from an early age. In his introduction to *Poetry of Dorothy L. Sayers*, Ralph E. Hone gives an extract from a letter from Sayers to C. S. Lewis, dated 8th August, 1955, which makes this clear:

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. I'm not really supposed to know anything about it. Which shows that one should always go on as one began – otherwise nobody will believe one began that way (p. 1).

It might make more sense, therefore, to consider Sayers' works collectively, and to read Sayers' detective stories not as the works of a detective novelist who became a theologian, but of a theologian who wrote detective novels.

Sayers' religious upbringing and lifestyle, as well as her theological knowledge, are immediately evident in her detective stories in the form of obvious textual presences,

such as her innumerable biblical references and quotations, and the number of ecclesiastical characters and settings of which she makes use. The biblical references are frequent, forming an intrinsic part of Sayers' narrative style. She makes use of quotations as chapter headings, for example, in *The Nine Tailors*, when the tenth chapter of the second part of the book begins with the following quotation from 1 Kings: 'and he set the cherubims within the inner house: and they stretched forth the wings of the cherubims (1 Kings 6. 27) / And above were costly stones (1 Kings 7. 11).³² This quotation serves as a potential 'clue' to the reader: it is pertinent to the action of the text, as it is in this chapter that the hiding place of the stolen emeralds is located, among the carved cherubim in the church roof. Sayers also uses biblical references as part of her descriptive technique, as in *Murder Must Advertise*, when Mr Copley feels 'the inward exultation of the Jeremiah whose prophecies have come true' (p. 105) or later in the same text when she describes how Wimsey, the detective, hits a cricket ball, 'as Saul smote the Philistines' (p. 261).³³ Both these examples demonstrate that Sayers' use of biblical references is often quite light-hearted and occasionally humorous, such as when Mr Ingleby advises Wimsey / Bredon against using religion in his copy for 'Dairyfield's "Green Pastures" Margarine': 'keep Psalm 23 out of it. Blasphemous' (p. 15).³⁴ Usually, the biblical references are to be found in the speeches of Wimsey, who seems to have been endowed by his creator with her own habit of peppering her conversation and writings with eclectic literary references, ranging from *Alice in Wonderland* to the Bible. Wimsey's references, as with the previously-mentioned chapter heading, are always pertinent to the action of the text, as when he tells Detective-Inspector Parker in *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* that he will not tell him what is on his mind for 'thirty pieces of silver', as it would involve the betrayal

of a friend.³⁵ These references are numerous and clearly illustrate Sayers' biblical knowledge, but more clearly illustrative of her religious background are the number of ecclesiastical characters that she includes, which will be discussed in detail in Chapter Five. Seven of her twelve novels contain a significant ecclesiastical character, and there is only one in which no mention at all is made to a local cleric or church.³⁶

As well as these obvious textual presences, several more abstract religious and theological presences are evident in Sayers' detective fiction. These are all ideas that she highlights specifically in her theological works, such as the problem of evil, and the concept of free will. One example of this concerns the arguments regarding the Fall and the innate sinfulness of man in relation to his desire to be as God, in terms of 'knowledge', that Sayers dealt with in *The Devil to Pay* and in *The Mind of the Maker*. An episode in her detective novel *Strong Poison* (1930) demonstrates that Sayers was already exploring these ideas in her writing, albeit in a more oblique way, within the framework of the detective narrative (p. 15).³⁷ Her detective, Lord Peter Wimsey and his sidekick on this occasion, Miss Climpson, enter into a discussion on the motives for murder, and Wimsey remarks that:

'But it must be fun, in one sense, to feel that you can control the issues of life and death, don't you know.'

'That is an *infringement* on the prerogative of the Creator,' said Miss Climpson.

'But rather jolly to know yourself divine, so to speak. Up above the world so high, like a tea-tray in the sky' (p. 48).

The idea that it is 'not so much what you did / As why you did it', which is directly addressed in *The Just Vengeance* (p. 24), is raised in this conversation, which will be

discussed in greater detail in the next chapter. In addition to this, the notion that controlling matters of life and death puts the murderer in a 'divine' position foreshadows Sayers' later argument in *The Mind of the Maker* that it is man's 'grasping at equality with God [which] does untold damage' (p. 85). This brief example shows that in her detective fiction, and within the framework of references raised by the detective narrative, such as the motive for crime, Sayers sustained the focus on the theological ideas which interested her all of her life. In part, the scope for the exploration of these issues is a potential factor in Sayers' choice of detective fiction as a genre. After all, detective fiction, not just that of Sayers, concerns itself with issues of morality such as right and wrong and crime and punishment, which in turn have the potential to become the focus of theological speculation, making it an attractive genre to the theologian.

Although Sayers' reasons for writing detective fiction were, in large part, financial, this consideration is not entirely unrelated to the potential 'moral' appeal of detective fiction. The reason behind Sayers' confidence in its being a money-maker was a 'boom' in the sales of detective novels, which saw a massive increase in popularity in the inter-war years. In *Murder for Pleasure: The Life and Times of the Detective Story*, Howard Haycraft discusses this rise in sales, and cites the *Book Review Digest* as evidence: 'In 1914, the year of the outbreak of the First World War, this publication included reviews of only twelve books of a mystery-detective nature [...]. For the year 1925, the mid-point of the post war decade, ninety-seven such volumes were listed. And in 1939, the year that saw the start of the Second World War, the number was 217! [...] These figures are necessarily incomplete, but there is every reason to suppose that they are relative and representative.' Sayers as a theologian, was drawn to the 'moral' elements

of detective fiction, that is, the exploration of moral issues, the emphasis on the responsibility of the individual, and the reinforcement of a moral and social order based in part on traditional social institutions such as the Church. These might also be seen as factors that appeal to its increasing readership in post World War One Britain, an argument which will be discussed in detail in Chapter Four.

It seems significant that Sayers was not the only detective fiction writer of the inter-war to have a theological or religious background. C. Day Lewis, for example, who wrote under the pseudonym 'Nicholas Blake' was the son of a Church of Ireland minister, and Ronald Knox, author of six detective novels including *The Viaduct Murder* (1925) and *The Footsteps at the Lock* (1929), was the Reverend Monsignor Knox, and, like Sayers, also wrote a number of theological works. In addition to this, the religious presences identified so far, such as biblical references and ecclesiastical characters and settings, are not limited to Sayers' stories, or other detective works of the inter-war period and are a popular element of many detective stories throughout the history of the genre. This thesis will consider the form and origins of detective fiction in relation to religion, and then address the popularity of detective fiction during the inter-war period, and suggest some possible reasons for the number of religious presences in these works at this particular time. In doing so, it should become clear that the religious dimension of Sayers' detective fiction is, to some extent, an inherent element of the genre that she chose, and, more particularly, a product of the time at which it was written. Sayers responds to the possibilities offered by detective fiction for an engagement with complicated moral issues in a more thorough-going way than most of her contemporaries.

¹ The Detection Club was established in 1928 by Anthony Berkeley (pseudonym Frances Iles) with G.K. Chesterton as president. Members included Agatha Christie, Freeman Wills Croft, E.C. Bentley, John Dickson Carr and Dorothy L. Sayers. The Club met at premises in Gerrard Street for dinners and discussion, and financed themselves partly through their collaborative works, including *The Floating Admiral* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1931).

² *Great Short stories of Detection, Mystery and Horror*, ed. by Dorothy L. Sayers (London: Gollancz, 1928; repr. 1939).

³ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Whose Body?* (London: Unwin, 1923, repr. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977).

⁴ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Op 1*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1916); *Catholic Tales and Christian Songs*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1918).

⁵ Mitzi Brunsdale, *Dorothy L. Sayers: Solving the Mystery of Wickedness* (Oxford: Berg, 1990), pp. 2-3.

⁶ Despite Sayers expressing a wish that no account of her life be written until at least fifty years after her death, (see Ralph E. Hone, *Dorothy L. Sayers: A Literary Biography*, p. x) many accounts of her life have been published. The first biography of Sayers was the 'unauthorised' *Such A Strange Lady: An Introduction to Dorothy L. Sayers (1893-1957)*, by Janet Hitchman, (London: New English Library, 1975), which revealed the existence of Sayers' illegitimate son, [John] Anthony Fleming. (Hitchman, p. 64). This, in part, provoked James Brabazon's 'authorised' *Dorothy L. Sayers: The Life of a Courageous Woman*, (London: Gollancz, 1981), written with the permission of Anthony Fleming, and with full access to Sayers' private papers, although no information was given regarding the circumstances of Sayers' son's birth. Several other biographies have been produced, both authorised and unauthorised, since Hitchman, and those most often cited by critics and researchers on Sayers are: Alzina Stone Dale, *Maker and Craftsman: The Story of Dorothy L. Sayers* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmann, 1979); Ralph E. Hone, *Dorothy L. Sayers: A Literary Biography* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1979); Mitzi Brunsdale, *Dorothy L. Sayers: Solving the Mystery of Wickedness* (Oxford: Berg, 1990), and David Coombes, *Dorothy L. Sayers: A Careless Rage for Life* (Oxford: Lion, 1992). The two latter texts deal in particular with presenting Sayers' life from the perspective of her faith. The most recent and comprehensive Sayers biography, however, is Barbara Reynolds' *Dorothy L. Sayers: Her life and Soul*, 2nd edn. (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1998), which presents the truth about John Anthony's father for the first time. Reynolds writes from personal knowledge of Sayers, as well as from the most detailed reading of Sayers' letters and writings to date.

⁷ Brunsdale, *Solving The Mystery of Wickedness*, p 13.

⁸ Reynolds, *Her Life and Soul*, pp. 13-14.

⁹ *Her Life and Soul*, pp. 26-29.

¹⁰ *Poetry of Dorothy L. Sayers*, ed. by Ralph E. Hone (Dorothy L. Sayers Society in association with the Marion E. Wade Centre, 1996), p. 24.

¹¹ *Poetry of Dorothy L. Sayers*, p. xii.

¹² *Poetry of Dorothy L. Sayers*, p. 85, ll26-28. A footnote to the poem explains that the title is 'a phrase from the Greek text of St. John's Gospel. Xii.32: ἐξω; κάγω εαν υψωθω εκ τηδ γηδ Παντας ἐλκυσω Προδ εμαυτου, "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me."'

¹³ Reynolds, *Dorothy L. Sayers: Her life and Soul*, p. 57.

¹⁴ Brunsdale, *Solving the Mystery of Wickedness*, p. 34.

¹⁵ *Poetry of Dorothy L. Sayers*, p. 91.

¹⁶ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Gaudy Night* (London: Gollancz, 1935; repr. Hodder and Stoughton, 1970), p. 346.

¹⁷ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Busman's Honeymoon* (London: Gollancz, 1937, repr. Hodder and Stoughton, 1977); *The Zeal of Thy House* (London: Gollancz, 1937).

¹⁸ Dorothy L. Sayers, *In the Teeth of the Evidence* (London: Gollancz, 1939; repr. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1975); *Striding Folly* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1972). Sayers left notes for another detective novel, *Thrones, Dominations*, which deals with Wimsey and Harriet's life after their marriage and which was completed by Jill Paton Walsh in 1998 (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1998). Sayers also used the characters of the Wimsey family to write the 'Wimsey Papers', a series of letters concerning the Second World War, which appeared in *The Spectator* from November 1939, to January 1940. These have been used as a basis for a second novel by Paton Walsh, *A Presumption of Death* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2002).

¹⁹ Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Just Vengeance* (London: Gollancz, 1946); *The Emperor Constantine* (London: Gollancz, 1951).

- ²⁰ Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Man Born to be King* (London: Gollancz, 1943; repr. 1969), p. 9.
- ²¹ *The Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers Volume Two, 1937-1943: from novelist to playwright*, ed. by Barbara Reynolds (London: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 1997), p. 282.
- ²² Dorothy L. Sayers, *Begin Here* (London: Gollancz, 1940); *The Other Six Deadly Sins* (London: Methuen, 1943).
- ²³ Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (London: Methuen, 1941). rev. edn ed. by Susan Howatch (Mowbray, 1994).
- ²⁴ The *Quincunque Vult* (whoever wishes [to be saved]) is the English translation of the Athanasian Creed, found in the Book of Common Prayer. The verse in question is 'So there is one Father, not three fathers, one Son, not three sons, one Holy Ghost, not three holy ghosts.' (*The Mind of the Maker*, p. 86).
- ²⁵ *The Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers Volume One, 1899-1936: The Making of a Detective Novelist*, ed. by Barbara Reynolds (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1995), p. 5.
- ²⁶ *Letters, Volume One*, p. 10.
- ²⁷ See Brabazon, *The Life of a Courageous Woman*, p. 29, Brunsdale, *Solving the Mystery of Wickedness*, p. 31, and Reynolds, *Dorothy L. Sayers: Her life and Soul* p. 39.
- ²⁸ Reynolds, *Her Life and Soul*, p. 168.
- ²⁹ Reynolds, *Her Life and Soul*, p. 113.
- ³⁰ *Letters, Volume One*, p. 181. See also Brabazon, *The Life of a Courageous Woman*, p. 82, and Brunsdale, *Solving the Mystery of Wickedness*, p. 8.
- ³¹ Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Devil to Pay* (London: Gollancz, 1939), p. 25.
- ³² Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Nine Tailors* (London: Gollancz, 1934; repr. Hodder and Stoughton, 1959), p. 214.
- ³³ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Murder Must Advertise* (London: Gollancz, 1933; repr. Hodder and Stoughton, 1978)
- ³⁴ Psalms 23.2: 'He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.'
- ³⁵ Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* (London: Benn, 1928, repr. Hodder and Stoughton, 1977), p. 200. See Matthew 26.15.
- ³⁶ *Murder Must Advertise*. The reason for this may be that, within the two opposing settings for the narrative, an advertising agency and the underground world of drugs and 'bright young things', there is no place for an ecclesiastical character, although the advertising agency is to some extent morally policed by one of their clients, the aptly named 'Brotherhoods', with its connotations of a brotherhood of monks, who censor their advertising in accordance with their religious beliefs.
- ³⁷ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Strong Poison* (London: Gollancz, 1930; repr. Hodder and Stoughton, 1977).

Chapter Two

Religion and Detective Fiction: Structure and Themes

A search through any detective fiction¹ bookshelf is enough to reveal the popularity of a religious dimension in this genre: *The Murder at the Vicarage*, *Holy Disorders*, *Original Sin*, *Death in Holy Orders*, *Service of all the Dead*, *Daughters of Cain* and *Killing Orders* are just a few examples of the many titles produced over the last century which illustrate its prominence.² Whole series of detective stories have been set in and around places of worship, or have had ecclesiastical characters as their main protagonists, including G.K. Chesterton's Father Brown series, Ellis Peters' Cadfael books, Candace Robb's Owen Archer stories and Ralph McInery's Father Dowling Mysteries. Even when the title is not immediately suggestive of religious content, there are countless examples of a religious setting being used, or a religious character being involved. In Agatha Christie's *Three Act Tragedy*, the first victim is the Reverend Stephen Babbington; Ngaio Marsh's *Singing in the Shrouds* features Father Jourdain as one of its cast of characters, and the Reverend Matthews is a brief but significant witness in Minette Walters' *The Scold's Bridle*.³ The list of these minor ecclesiastical characters is endless, as are the numbers of references to religious settings in detective fiction, such as churches, chapels, graveyards, vicarages, convents and monasteries.

As one would expect, these religious presences are, for the most part, Judeo-Christian. *The Oxford Companion to Crime and Mystery Writing* suggests a few exceptions such as the: 'Hinduism, portrayed by Wilkie Collins in *The Moonstone* [...] Zen Buddhism,

basic to the outlook of the detective Commissaris in Janwillem van de Wetering's novels [...] and the Native American spiritual beliefs that permeate Tony Hillerman's novels featuring policeman and apprentice Shaman Jim Chee.⁴ But the exceptions are few and far between, although authors who normally utilise Judeo-Christian milieu or characters do make occasional use of belief systems that are 'alternative' to their standard. In *Death in Ecstasy* and *Spinsters in Jeopardy*, for example, Ngaio Marsh uses alternative 'cults' as the focus for her narratives.⁵ Dorothy L. Sayers makes use of Spiritualism in *Strong Poison*, as does Agatha Christie in more than one novel, such as *The Sittaford Mystery* and *The Pale Horse*.⁶ In all of these examples, however, the beliefs explored are presented as either unwholesome or deviant or, in the case of spiritualism, fraudulent and risible.

Specifically Christian religious presences, though, appear frequently in both British and American detective fiction, and can be found in stories throughout the history of the genre, although they are more prominent in some eras than others. The detective fiction of Britain between the two world wars, the 'Golden Age' of the genre, has a higher number of these references than that of any other time or type. The reasons for this, which include the shifting role of the Church in society between the Victorian and inter-war eras and the presence of a postwar nostalgia for an arguably non-existent pastoral past, will be discussed later in this thesis. Dorothy L. Sayers, as a popular writer of detective fiction in the inter-war period, is significant to this discussion in a number of ways. Firstly, unlike a number of her contemporaries such as Agatha Christie, Margery Allingham and Ngaio Marsh, who continued writing detective narratives after World War Two, Sayers only wrote detective fiction in the inter-war period; her first novel

Whose Body? was published in 1923, and her last pieces of detective fiction, a collection of short stories, *In the Teeth of the Evidence*, was published in 1939. Thus, all of her works can be discussed within the context of that particular time and can be used to examine the impact of the experience of one war and the imminent approach of another as a possible influence on the content of detective fiction in this era, including religious presences.

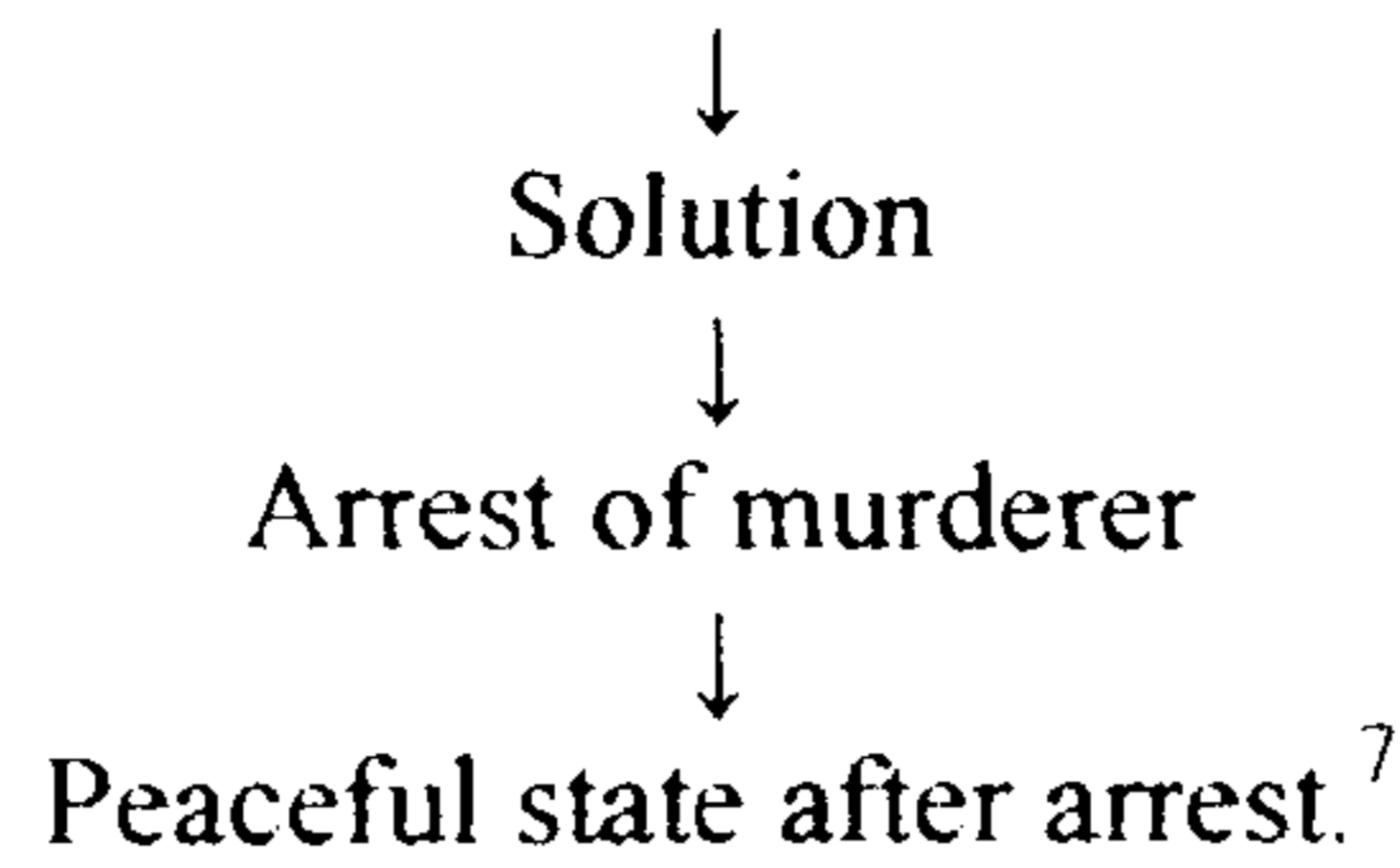
A second, biographical, factor which makes her most pertinent to this discussion is Sayers' personal faith; as shown in the previous chapter, her Anglican background shaped much of her life and is evident in all of her writings, both fictional and theological. There are innumerable religious presences to be found in her detective fiction, such as ecclesiastical characters and settings, and biblical references and quotations, many of which draw on her own experiences and knowledge. As has been indicated, these are prevalent in many works in this genre at this time, but what makes Sayers interesting and different is that, whilst she writes within the generic conventions of the time in a way that makes her comparable to her contemporaries, she is unusual in her attempts to challenge these conventions and to take her detective writing beyond the boundaries of 'popular' fiction, with its limitations on narrative structure, theme and character. Her challenge to, or expansion of, the genre usually takes the form of an introduction of a more philosophical or theological element into the processes of detection, apprehension and punishment.

Before concentrating specifically on the Golden Age and the detective fiction of Dorothy L. Sayers, however, it is important to consider the wider issues of detective

fiction and its recurrent religious presences. The combination of detective fiction and religion is not so unlikely when the genre is considered from the perspective of its main themes - law and order, justice, guilt and innocence, crime and punishment, individual responsibility and the concepts of good and evil - all of which have been central to the teachings of the Christian faith and in theological discussions throughout history. The inclusion of the Established Church and its representatives in detective fiction arguably serves to emphasise the potentially theological dimension to its themes; at the very least, these textual presences act as a signifier to the reader that religion is an element of the social milieu of the story and its characters. But whilst not all stories within the genre contain this pointed signposting to the potentially moral or theological nature of their content, the themes of law and order, guilt and innocence, crime and punishment and good and evil are fundamental to the genre and can be identified in most detective narratives. These themes can be identified through an analysis of various traditional generic features, including the presence of a crime and criminals, a mystery or puzzle, the detective, the process of investigation, clues, 'red herrings', the solution and so on, and their arrangement within a relatively formulaic narrative structure. Each stage in the detective narrative raises different moral issues, such as why man commits crime and whose responsibility it is to judge and punish the criminal, amongst many others.

In his 1948 essay, 'The Guilty Vicarage', in which he sets out to define and establish the key features of the detective story, W. H. Auden presents the following formula for the structure of its narrative:

Peaceful state before murder
↓
False clues, secondary murder, etc.



This movement from order to disorder and back to order again is one of the most fundamental structural features of the detective narrative, as Ernest Mandel observes in *Delightful Murder: A social history of the crime story*, they are all about, ‘disorder being brought into order [...] rationality restored after irrational upheavals’.⁸ Emphasis is placed on the state of order at the beginning of many detective stories, in terms of the lives of the individual characters and the societies that they inhabit. The beginning of Ngaio Marsh’s *Scales of Justice*, for example, details the village of ‘Swevenings’, which is idyllic in its beauty, and without any disorder, even in its prospect: ‘Not a *faux-pas*, architectural or horticultural, marred the seemliness of its prospect.’⁹ Seen through the eyes of Nurse Kettle, it is given the appearance of an ‘illustrated map’, a metaphor which neatly emphasises the ordered and unchanging nature of the village, with its ‘orderly pattern of hedge, field and stream’. On to this map, Nurse Kettle imposes ‘curling labels’ and ‘naïve figures’, that show the precision with which the lives of the inhabitants can be predicted: ‘On the far side of the valley on the private golf course at Nunspardon Manor there would be Mr. George Lacklander, doing a solitary round [...]. Lacklander’s son, Dr. Mark would be shown with a black bag in his hand and a stork, perhaps, quaintly flying overhead’ (pp. 9–10).

This order is then interrupted by a criminal act, in this instance the murder of Colonel Carterette, and the subsequent disorder can be seen through the behaviour of the

characters, as their routines are broken, relationships are altered, and the ordered running of their society is interrupted by questions about the crime on the part of themselves and the investigating force, either the police or a private detective. These questions usually centre on the identity of the criminal, and the realisation that it is, in fact, a seemingly innocent member of the society, as the following conversation between two characters in *Scales of Justice* illustrates:

“Mark, he doesn’t think it was a tramp.”

“Alleyn?”

“Yes, he thinks it was - one of us. I know he does.”

“What, exactly, darling, do you mean by ‘one of us’?”

Rose made a little faint circling movement of her hand.

“Someone that knew him. A neighbour. Or one of his own family” (p. 198).

In *Scales of Justice*, Marsh emphasises the disordered society through pathetic fallacy. In the same way that the order at the beginning of this story is signified by the natural world, so is the subsequent disorder; as the body is found and the investigation begins, a storm breaks, with the rain and mud obscuring the clarity of the investigation, and the neat, easily-read map-like quality of the village: ‘as they crossed [the bridge], they could hear the rain beating on the surface of the stream On the far side their feet sank into mud. They turned left on the rough path [...] “Hell of a thing to happen, this bloody rain,” said the Chief Constable. “Ruin the terrain”’ (p. 83).

Unlike the course of events suggested in Auden’s formula, there is no secondary murder in this particular example, but there are plenty of clues, false and genuine, such as the smell of fish on a cat’s breath, three cut daisy heads and a painting rag.¹⁰ Through the

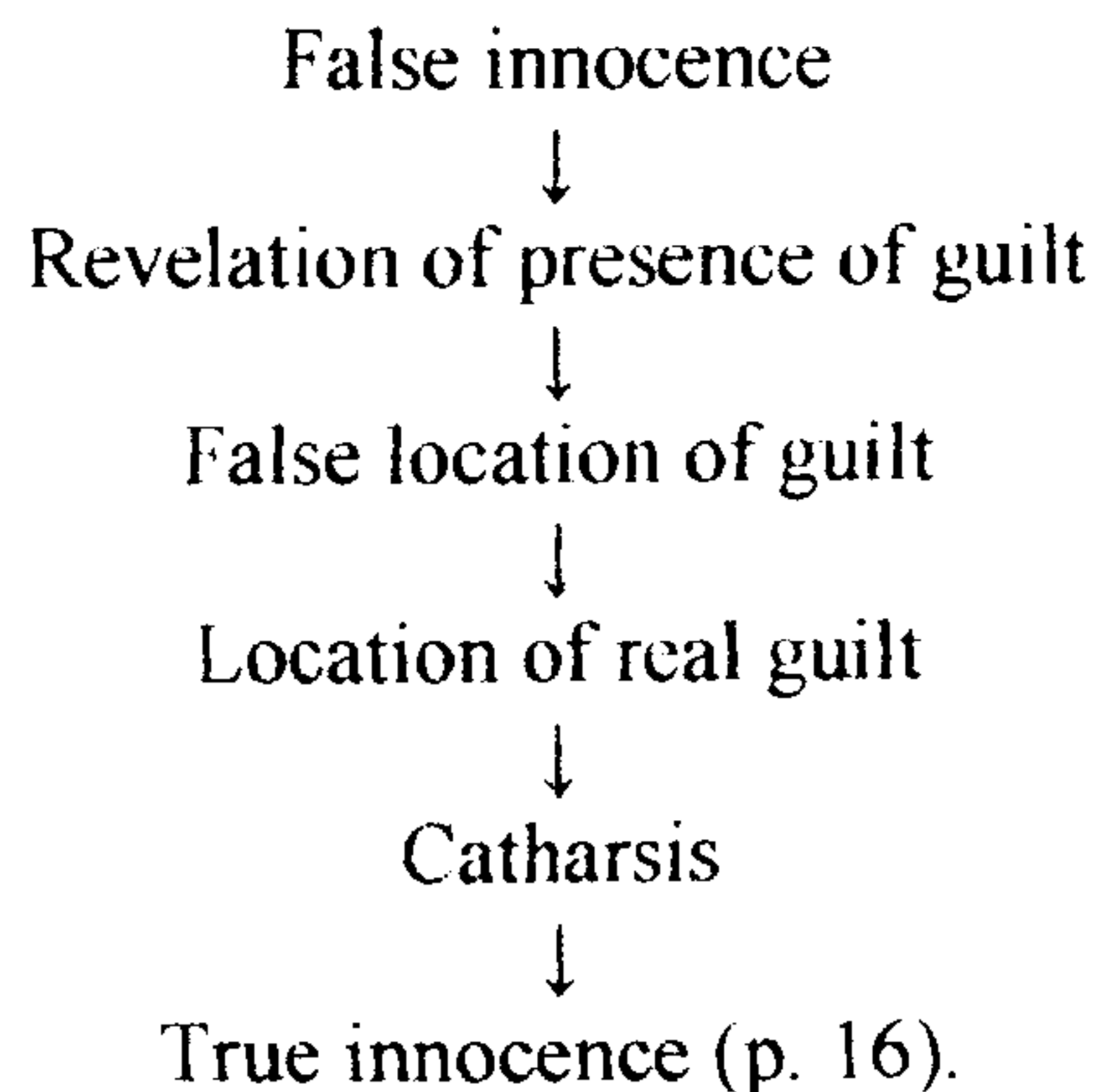
investigations of Chief Inspector Alleyn, these clues are untangled and we reach the solution, the arrest of the murderer and, as Auden suggests, the peaceful state after the arrest. This state is emphasised by a return to the image of a map, which at the end of the book becomes a reality rather than a metaphor, painted for one character by another:

[Nurse Kettle] unrolled it, peering at it in the dusk. "Oh," she cried in an ecstasy, "how lovely! How Lovely! It's my picture map! Oh, *look!* There's Lady Lacklander, sketching in the Bottom Meadow. And the doctor with a stork over his head [...]" (p. 256).

This moment of the illusory becoming an actuality cements the sense of order at the end of the book, as does the establishment of a romantic relationship between the painter of the map and Nurse Kettle: 'Commander Syce said [...] "Will You?" Nurse Kettle assured him that she would' (p. 256).

All of this makes for pleasant light reading. A puzzle has been unraveled, and a sense of order has been restored at the end of the book with a return to the social norms and patterns of behaviour, and the unification of two of the characters. We can, if we wish, read detective fiction solely from this perspective, a pure puzzle story that is worked through to its logical conclusion, focusing our interest on the issue of 'whodunit', and considering the clues, suspects and solution in that light, and regarding the crime as merely a necessary element to the puzzle, as Raymond Chandler describes it: 'murder [...] just to provide a corpse'.¹¹ To consider the detective story from this perspective only, however, is to ignore the potential depths to the genre, and the issues and themes that are raised at every stage of the narrative - law and order, justice, guilt and innocence, crime and punishment, individual responsibility and the concepts of good and evil.

One of these themes becomes the focus for Auden's essay, as, alongside the first diagram shown earlier, he places another:



This illustrates his argument that the detective story is about more than just the progression of this simple narrative framework, but that, it is in fact about 'the dialectic of innocence and guilt', where 'the interest in the study of a murderer is the observation, by the innocent many, of the sufferings of the guilty one' (p. 16).

The state of order at the beginning of the detective narrative is not real, Auden argues, because it is a state of 'false innocence'. Although the society appears to live in: 'a state of grace, i.e., a society where there is no need of the law, no contradiction between the aesthetic individual and the ethical universal [...] where murder, therefore, is the unheard-of act which precipitates a crisis (for it reveals that some member has fallen and is no longer in a state of grace)', this is not the case (p. 18). This is because, within this society of 'apparently innocent' individuals, there is a character, the murderer, whose aesthetic interest as an individual conflicts with his/ her 'ethical obligations to the universal'. Not only this, but for there to be sustained interest in the detective narrative, there have to be a number of suspects, or the reader loses interest and, therefore, there

has to be a number of characters in whom the aesthetic and the ethic are potentially in conflict:

The murder is the act of disruption by which innocence is lost, and the individual and the law become opposed to each other. In the case of the murderer, this opposition is completely real [...] in the case of the suspects it is mostly apparent (p. 20).

Auden then goes on to categorise the possible 'causes of guilt' for the suspects, including 'the wish or even the intention to murder' and 'illicit amours, which the suspect is afraid or ashamed to reveal'. This is certainly true of the characters in *Scales of Justice*, in which there are a number of characters who would have murdered Colonel Carterette out of dislike, or the fear that he would reveal hidden secrets about themselves, either concerned with adultery or previous immoral / illegal actions on their parts, such as George Lacklander's adulterous affair with Mrs. Kitty Carterette. The state of idyllic innocence, presented at the beginning of the story, is false, a fact emphasised by the name of the village, 'Swevenings', which, Marsh tells us, means 'dreams' (p. 79).

In relation to Marsh, Auden's analysis is revelatory – it shows something implicit or hidden in her narrative formulations. Sayers, however, focuses precisely on these issues and in many of her stories we do not begin with even a seeming state of innocence. *Five Red Herrings*, for example, begins with a brief description of the village 'Kirkcudbright', where there are 'little homely studios, gay with blue and red and yellow curtains and odd scraps of pottery, tucked away down narrow closes and adorned with gardens, where old-fashioned flowers riot in the rich and friendly soil.'¹² However, the text moves quickly into a drink-fuelled argument between two inhabitants of Kirkcudbright, Waters and Campbell, which immediately belies any sense of peace or

innocence evoked by the brief description of the village, as 'Waters [uses] even more regrettable language than Campbell as they wrestled together among the broken glass and sawdust' (p. 9). We learn that tensions are running high between a number of inhabitants and Campbell, especially with Hugh Farren, whose wife's name has been linked with Campbell's. The 'hidden' undercurrents, such as ill-will or clandestine relationships, that Auden identifies, and that are carefully revealed at relevant points during Marsh's narrative, are explicit from the start of *Five Red Herrings*.

This is also true in Sayers' *Strong Poison*, which begins with the trial of Harriet Vane for the murder of her lover, Philip Boyes. The state of innocence described by Auden is clearly not in evidence here, as the crime of murder has already taken place: society is already in a state of disorder, a point which is further emphasised by the fact that Harriet is, in fact, innocent of murder and so there has been a miscarriage of justice. Whilst she is not guilty of this crime, however, she is 'guilty' of having lived with Boyes outside of marriage, and this is clearly a contributing factor in the consideration of her as a potential suspect for murder, as the hostile judge makes clear: 'It is one thing for a man or a woman to live an immoral life, and quite another thing to commit murder. You may perhaps think that one step into the path of the wrong-doing makes the next one easier [...]' (p. 8). Whilst Harriet cannot be made to stand trial in a court of law for her 'immoral' actions, she seems to be being judged as much for this as anything else, as the judge comments: 'you may feel, and quite properly, that this was a very wrong thing to do. You may, after making all allowances for this young woman's unprotected position, still feel that she was a person of unstable moral character' (p. 8). Harriet is on trial at

the bench of public opinion; there is a clear implication that if she is capable of immoral acts, then she is capable of illegal ones, too.

Both of these examples illustrate Auden's assertion that the concept of 'innocence' is subjective; some characters, whilst innocent of the crime of murder, are not innocent of other criminal acts, such as fraud. Others are innocent of criminal behaviour, i.e. of committing offences against statutory law, but they are not innocent of moral or social offences, such as adultery, or malicious feeling. Finally, there is a distinction between innocence in thought and innocence in deed; 'the wish to murder' is a far more intangible and subjective 'guilt' or conflict of ethics, than the actual act of murder. Auden's arguments and diagrams clearly illustrate the argument that detective narratives should be considered on more than just the level of formulaic, popular narratives. His discussion of the dialectic between guilt and innocence shows that, when we consider crime not just as a focus for a puzzle, but as an act that separates one from many, and creates the states of 'innocence' and 'guilt' in relation to itself, it raises the potential for the basic detective story to become a far more complex, theologically focused narrative. If we consider various elements of the detective story in turn, beginning with the crime and then considering the victim and criminal and finally the apprehension and judgement / punishment of this character, we can see this complexity and the way in which the religious themes are raised.

Crime is central to nearly all detective stories, and has been considered as a defining element of the genre by many critics, including Julian Symons:

First of all, what is a detective story? What does an intelligent reader look for when he opens a book which is called by that name? He expects to find a situation in which a crime has been committed, and in which there is doubt about the means, the motive and the criminal. The crime may be of any kind, but in nine cases out of ten it is murder.¹³

It should be noted that there are exceptions to this; there are detective stories that contain no crime, that deal with hidden treasure or missing people or objects, for example Sayers' 'The Fascinating Problem of Uncle Meleager's Will', which focuses on the search for a hidden fortune, or Christie's 'The Arcadian Deer', in which Hercule Poirot tracks down a lady's maid who is missing.¹⁴ There are not many examples of these, however, and they tend to be short stories, probably because there is not enough at stake in them to sustain a novel-length narrative.

These exceptions would perhaps suggest that it is the presence of a mystery or puzzle, rather than a crime, that is the defining element of Golden Age detective fiction. They also suggest the possibility that, even when the mystery centres around a criminal act, the 'crime' and the 'mystery' are two separate elements in the narrative. This argument is put forward by Michael Cohen in *Murder Most Fair: The Appeal of Mystery Fiction*:

The mystery itself is the most evident feature – the hidden secrets of unsolved crime that every mystery story contains. The crime is the other feature – the wrongful act, frequently murder that is sometimes depicted but is always part of the story. When we ask why mysteries appeal, we are really asking two questions: why does the crime element appeal? And why does the mysteriousness appeal?¹⁵

The presence of a separate 'mystery' implies a greater depth to detective narratives when we consider the word not just in terms of the puzzle that the narrative revolves around,

but in terms of more abstract, unanswerable questions, linked to the moral and ethical themes raised by the genre. In its religious sense, the word 'mystery' implies something which is divinely known or understood but beyond human comprehension and reason, and which can only be made known through the revelation of God. Paul's first epistle to Timothy asserts that, 'great is the mystery of godliness' (1 Timothy 3. 16). In 1 Corinthians, Paul describes how this mystery is unknowable to man: 'But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things that God hath prepared for them that love him' (1 Corinthians 2. 9). However, through 'evidence', God is revealed, 'God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the gentiles, believed on in the world' (1 Tim 3. 16), and man understood the revealed truths of the Christian religion. The detective narrative does not just raise the mystery of 'whodunnit' as a puzzle with a definitive answer, but, as has been suggested and will be illustrated further, it raises a number of other, 'mysteries', a series of intangible questions surrounding definitions of crime, and human motive for criminal behaviour, to which many of the potential answers lie in the realms of theology.

For the majority of detective narratives, though, it would be true to say that the initial focus of the mystery or puzzle is a criminal act and that, as Symons observes, this act is usually murder. There have been a number of theories put forward as to why this particular crime tends to be the most popular focus for detective stories; Cohen, for example, presents two possible answers to this; firstly, that the representation of murder in detective stories performs an atavistic function: 'everyone has had the impulse to shed the restraints of civilisation and polite behaviour occasionally: everyone knows what it is

like to want to mangle, mutilate or murder someone' (p. 14). Cohen's second argument is that these representations of violence have a cathartic function:

Our fear of death is the main terror engaged by violent crime stories, and the fear of death probably explains why most mysteries are murder mysteries. Such stories acknowledge that death exists by showing us a murder, but they also find its immediate cause in the murderer, and by eliminating that one deadly agent, they seem to eliminate the threat of death itself (p. 15).

The 'fear of death' that Cohen identifies again highlights the presence of a greater mystery within the detective narrative; death is frightening because it is the unknown, and murder more so because it is different to natural death. Auden approaches the reasons for murder as a choice of crime from a religious perspective, arguing that murder is the most significant crime because: 'There are three classes of crime: (A) offenses against God and one's neighbor or neighbors; (B) offenses against God and society; (C) offenses against God. [...] Murder is a member and the only member of Class B' (p. 17). It is the presence of Class B that is of interest here, as it highlights the complexities of the detective narrative, as we consider definitions of crime from a moral as well as legal standpoint.

'Crime' can be defined as an act that is punishable by law, and most detective fiction deals with these illegal acts: killing, theft, and blackmail, for example, but, once again, there are exceptions. Disregarding the previously mentioned examples of stories where no crime has been committed, where the will has merely been hidden with no intention to defraud, or the lady's maid has run away because she is a dying dancer in disguise, there are examples of detective stories that deal with 'crimes' that do not fit the legal

definition of such acts, because they are not punishable by law, that is they are moral or social transgressions. One example of such a story is Conan Doyle's 'The Adventure of a Case of Identity' (1891), in which Miss Mary Sutherland employs the services of Sherlock Holmes to find her missing fiancé, Mr. Hosmer Angel.¹⁶ Holmes discovers that there is no such man and that it has been Mr. Windibank, Miss Sutherland's step-father, in disguise, with a view to preventing her marriage to anyone and retaining her fortune for the use of himself and his wife whilst Miss Sutherland still lives with them. Mr. Windibank has 'done nothing actionable from the first' in deceiving his stepdaughter, but he has coveted her fortune and caused her distress and therefore, as Holmes argues, although 'the law cannot touch [him], [...] there never was a man who deserved punishment more' (p. 61). This presentation of a 'crime' that does not fall within the jurisdiction of the law, where there can be no legal culpability, clearly highlights that the definition of crime is more than just legal, and that 'right' and 'wrong' are not just defined in terms of legality. Even when a criminal act is punishable by law, there is a still a moral dimension to be considered; the criminal is breaking more than just legal codes, but moral or social ones as well. In terms of legal crime, law-breakers are apprehended, judged and punished by human representatives of the legal system. The 'crimes' against morality, however, raise questions about who sets and enforces these 'laws' and who is responsible for policing society's morals.

Society is governed by moral and social 'laws' as well as statutory ones, and, to a greater or lesser degree throughout history, the Church and its teachings having been responsible for the 'policing' of society's morals and providing a set of 'laws' or guidelines for its smooth running, and the Bible provides exemplary stories of what can

happen when these are broken. The early chapters of the Old Testament, the books of Moses, deal with the guidelines and laws delivered by God through Moses to the Israelites. Many of these are rules to be observed in terms of worship, such as the ordinance of the Passover (Exodus 12. 43-50), and laws are also set out in terms of lifestyle: Leviticus is concerned with presenting guidelines for living, including what food may or may not be cooked and eaten, as well as guidelines for personal and sexual hygiene and health. In addition to these laws, however, there are those governing morality, the most obvious example being the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20. 1-17, Deuteronomy 5. 6-21), which provide an ethical basis for the ordered existence of the individual and the community, and are concerned with both sins of action, such as murder and theft, but also of thought, such as covetousness.

It is this last set of guidelines that is most useful in considering the religious presences in detective fiction because, in addition to presenting these laws, the Bible is also concerned with illustrating the penalties for transgressing them. The earliest examples of this didactic element in the Bible are of Eve's original sin in eating the forbidden fruit: of which 'God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it,' and the story of Cain, the first murderer, who 'rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him'. (Genesis 3. 3 and 4. 8) Both Eve and Cain are punished for transgressing the laws imposed on them by effectively being expelled from society; Adam and Eve are 'sent [...] forth from the Garden of Eden' (Genesis 3. 23) and Cain is made 'a fugitive and a vagabond [...] in the earth' by God (Genesis 4. 12). The fate of most criminals at the end of a detective story is a similar expulsion, either through imprisonment or execution. The stories of Cain and Eve can be simplified structurally in the following way: an existent order is

disrupted by one individual's transgression of the rules, the individual is identified, apprehended, and punished and society is returned to order. It could be argued, therefore, that, to some degree, detective fiction does replicate a religious sense of the world to the extent that, with the apprehension of the criminal, it demonstrates that 'the triumph of the wicked is short' (Job 20. 5).

This is, of course, an over-simplified presentation of both the biblical stories and the archetypal detective narrative and there are clear limitations to the parallel. The most obvious of these is the absence of a human detective in the story of Cain: there is no discovery of the body, no questions are asked or clues uncovered. The murder is 'solved' because God is omniscient, and knows what Cain has done: 'And He said, What hast thou done? The voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground' (Genesis 4. 10). An essential feature of the detective, as will be discussed in chapter five, is that despite sometimes seeming to have powers above those of his fellow man, he is fundamentally human. Aside from the consideration that it would be a very short story if the detective's omniscience were to tell him straight away 'whodunit', part of the potential appeal of the detective narrative, from a moral as well as a literary perspective, is the process of working through the problem to a conclusion. Cohen describes how the 'identification and elimination of the murderer is a kind of return to innocence', and then refers to Auden and his assertion that this 'return to the garden of Eden' appeals to the fan of detective fiction, not in the reassurance gained by the removal of the threat of death, but the removal of guilt by a cathartic process:

For Auden, though, the catharsis is not so much of fear as of guilt: he argues that the typical detective story reader is "a person who suffers

from a sense of sin". With the identification of the one real guilty party, the suspected guilt of all the others in the fiction is removed, and so vicariously, is the reader's own sense of guilt (p. 15).

This vicarious involvement of the reader in the process of detection is significant, and will be returned to in later chapters.

The complexities in the detective narrative raised by the difficulties in defining crime, and distinguishing between legal and moral culpability are further compounded when we consider, as many detectives do in the process of their investigation, not just who committed the crime, but why they did it. In 'The Adventure of a Case of Identity', Mr. Windibank's wrongful act has a motive: he deceives his stepdaughter, because he wants her money. In detective fiction, motive is often as important as the identity of the criminal, and the question of 'why?' asked in addition to the question of 'who?' takes the detective narrative once again into a consideration of morality; the motive can provide the key to the mystery, but it is also morally interesting. In Dorothy L. Sayers' *Strong Poison* (1930), Wimsey and Miss Climpson have a discussion about 'Why [...] people kill people' (p. 46). One of the answers to this, that is, the desire to be as God, with power over life and death, was discussed at the end of the last chapter. However, in the context of the demands of the detective narrative framework, this idea of a motiveless crime is not a satisfying answer, as Wimsey himself acknowledges: 'but for practical purposes that theory is the devil I beg your pardon, Miss Climpson, respect for sacred personages I mean, it's unsatisfactory, because it would suit one person just as well as another' (p. 46). The conventions of Golden Age detective fiction require that there are a limited number of suspects, and that, logically, these can be eliminated until

the guilty party is identified. If the field of suspects is unlimited, then the puzzle framework is undermined. In his essay 'The Typology of Detective Fiction' Tsvetan Todorov discusses how, in popular fiction, there is no 'dialectic contradiction between the work and its genre': 'detective fiction has its norms; to "develop" them is to disappoint them: to "improve upon" detective fiction is to write literature, not detective fiction' (p. 43). In this instance we can see how Sayers works within the framework of the detective narrative, but, in her acknowledgement of the boundaries and the possibilities beyond them, her conscious presentation of the 'dialectic contradiction' discussed by Todorov, she takes, if not the text, then the themes raised by it, towards a more 'literary' end.

Having dismissed the impossible motive, at least in terms of the genre, Wimsey and Miss Climpson's discussion then focuses on the alternative motives for the suspects, simultaneously remaining within the generic conventions and developing the theme of morality. The suggestions they put forward include, 'passion [...] I should not like to call it *love*, when it is so unregulated', 'jealousy' and greed: 'and now we go on to the next motive, and that's Money: A very good motive for murdering anybody who has any' (pp. 48-49). All of these motives are warned against in the Ten Commandments, and are, as such 'crimes' in their own right or, as they would be described in theological terms, 'sins'. The overlap between the legal and the moral is emphasised when Miss Climpson points out that it is 'so terribly *wicked*' to murder anyone, firmly placing the emphasis on the moral, rather than the legal, dimension to the crime (p. 47). Miss Climpson's comment shows that the motive behind a crime isn't just a physical or tangible one, that will result purely in monetary gain, or the removal of an individual

that is a nuisance in some way to the killer, but that it has to do with a quality in the criminal, that is, a propensity towards wrongdoing or ‘sinning’.

Motive takes crime beyond action and into the realms of emotion and intention, lust, hatred, malice or envy, and focuses on the idea expressed by the recorder in *The Just Vengeance*, discussed in the previous chapter, that ‘what matters [...] is not so much what you did / As why you did it: the choice behind the action’ (p. 24). This consideration of motive leads us to consider what it is that makes humans feel these things, and furthermore to act on them and therefore takes the detective narrative once again into the realms of theology and morality. In Chapter One of *The Mind of the Maker*, ‘The “Laws” of Nature and Opinion’, Sayers discusses the propensity of man towards sin, and gives an explanation of how the innate sinfulness in man comes about. She begins by establishing the two ‘quite distinct’ meanings of the word ‘law’. The first of these is:

[...] an arbitrary regulation made by human consent in particular circumstances for a particular purpose, and capable of being promulgated, enforced, suspended, altered or rescinded without interference with the general scheme of the universe.

Such laws frequently prescribe that certain events shall follow upon certain others; but the second event is not a *necessary* consequence of the first: a connection between the two is purely formal (p. 2).

In substantiating this point, Sayers once again demonstrates her capacity to present complicated arguments to the layman, using ‘cricket laws’ as an illustration of the purely formal connection between two events. When a cricket ball ‘hits the wicket, the batsman

is “out”. One event follows upon the other, but the batsman being “out”, however, is not a necessary consequence of the ball hitting the stumps:

There is, however, no inevitable connection between the impact of the ball upon three wooden stumps and the progress of a human body from a patch of mown grass to a pavilion. The two events are readily separable in theory. If the MCC chose to alter the “law” they could do so immediately, by merely saying so, and no cataclysm of nature would be involved’ (p. 2).

More significantly, in terms of a discussion of her detective fiction, Sayers then goes on to define this type of law in terms of crime, specifically bigamy. The event of a man marrying ‘two wives at once’ is followed by ‘prison’, but, as Sayers says, ‘only if he is found out’, as ‘there is no necessary causal connection between over-indulgence in matrimony and curtailment of personal liberty’, although Sayers’ informal style is illustrated again through her joking that some might argue that marrying even once ‘is to renounce one’s freedom’ (p. 2).

The second meaning of the word ‘law’ that Sayers identifies is ‘a generalised statement of fact of one sort or another’:

Such “laws” as these cannot be promulgated, altered, suspended or broken at will; they are not “laws” at all, in the same sense that the laws of cricket or the laws of the realm are “laws”; they are statements of observed facts inherent in the nature of the universe. (p. 3)

The fundamental difference between these and the first set of laws that she identifies is the fact that, in this case, one event must necessarily follow upon the other. Again, crime is used as an example: committing murder is not necessarily followed by punishment by execution, but swallowing a ‘tumblerful of prussic acid’ is necessarily followed, or

‘punishable’, as Sayers puts it, by death. The first connection between the two events, Sayers describes as ‘legal’ or ‘arbitrary’, the second as ‘a true causal connection’, a law of nature. Dealing first with ‘arbitrary’ law, Sayers asserts that it is valid and enforceable ‘provided it observes two conditions’ (p. 5). The first of these conditions is that it must be enforced by public opinion, otherwise it cannot work and will inevitably have to be ‘rescinded or altered’. As her example, she gives the American prohibition laws. The second condition is that ‘the arbitrary law shall not run counter to the law of nature’ (p. 6). Once more, her illustration of this point is informal and accessible: ‘Thus, if the MCC were to agree, in a thoughtless moment, that the ball must be so hit by the batsman that it should never come down to earth again, cricket would become an impossibility’. The result of the enforcement of arbitrary laws in the face of the laws of nature is, Sayers argues, impossible situations which will end in catastrophe, and ‘catastrophes thus caused are the execution of universal law upon arbitrary enactments which contravene the facts; they are thus properly called by theologians, judgements of God.’

The indiscriminatory use of the word ‘law’ by humankind, Sayers says, causes much confusion, which is at its worst when we attempt to discuss ‘moral law’. This is because we inevitably confuse moral *law* with moral *codes*. Firstly, the ‘universal moral law’ consists of ‘statements of fact about the nature of man; and by behaving in conformity with which, man enjoys his true freedom. This is what the Christian Church calls “the natural law”’ (p. 7). This law is discovered to man ‘by experience’. Once man has experienced, discovered and understood these moral laws, they create the ‘moral codes’ ‘to direct human behaviour and prevent men, as far as possible from doing violence to their own nature.’ Sayers argues that the more closely that these man-made codes

correspond to the natural law, 'the more it makes for freedom in human behaviour. When codes 'depart' from natural law, they 'tend to enslave mankind and produce', again, 'catastrophes called "judgements of God"'. Sayers claims, however, that man has a propensity to contradict or be tempted to contradict, the moral law and that it is this contradiction that is called 'sinfulness' by the Church.

The issue of 'why', which draws our attention to the differences between crime and sin, can further confuse our understanding of morality in the detective narrative, when the *insight into motive creates a degree of sympathy with the criminal in the detective and also, potentially, the reader*. These sympathies for the criminal often accompany the discovery that victim wasn't necessarily innocent, legally or morally, themselves. Like the murderer and the potential suspects, there has been a conflict between the 'aesthetic' and the 'ethical' within them. Auden comments on this in 'The Guilty Vicarage': 'the victim has to try to satisfy two contradictory requirements. He has to involve everyone in suspicion, which requires that he be a bad character: and he has to make everyone feel guilty, which requires that he be a good character.' (p. 19). In his essay, 'The Formal Detective Novel', George Grella also discusses this idea in some detail, basing his arguments on the similarities between detective fiction and the comedy of manners: 'Because only unlikeable characters are made to suffer permanently in comedy, pains are taken to make the victim worthy of his fate: he must be an exceptionally murderable man.'¹⁷ He goes on to discuss three of Sayers' victims, who, 'under [their] attractive exterior[s], conceal the personality of a bounder, a rotter, a cad.' These examples are Philip Boyes in *Strong Poison*, who, by 'espousing free love [and] writing experimental novels', makes himself socially unacceptable, Dennis Cathcart in *Clouds of Witness*,

who cheats at cards, and Paul Alexis in *Have His Carcase*, who 'is a gigolo who preys on lonely, vulnerable women, a professional cad' (p. 97).¹⁸

There are many further examples of the 'guilty' victim in Sayers' novels, where she often highlights the complexity of defining who is 'innocent'. In *Murder Must Advertise*, for example, the victim, Victor Dean, is a blackmailer, and, like Alexis, something of a cad. We can find a degree of sympathy for Tallboy, Dean's murderer, because he shows some feelings of regret and remorse, and because he behaves like a 'gentleman' and allows himself to be killed anonymously, by the gang he has been working for, to avoid scandal for his wife and child. This sympathy is compounded by Wimsey's treatment of him, and ready appreciation of Tallboy's motives (p. 279). All of the above examples illustrate once again that the dialectic between guilt and innocence is not a simple one, and that it can involve the reader in quite complicated problems of sympathy and engagement that make neat moral judgements almost impossible.

Whilst Grella's initial approach to addressing the idea of the flawed victim - a comparison of the detective narrative with the comedy of manners - differs from that aimed at in this argument, it highlights the point that victims in detective fiction are rarely individuals in a state of innocence. There are generic reasons for this; if the victim was entirely innocent, it would do away with potential motives for the murder. As Auden says, his unpleasant character 'involves everyone in suspicion, and an absence of motive would undermine the detective narrative. A second generic reason is that the victim's flawed nature makes him essentially human, and therefore of interest to the reader, like the suspects 'if they are completely innocent (obedient to the ethical) they

lose their aesthetic interest and the reader will ignore them'.¹⁹ If we lose interest in the victim, then we cease to care about the solution to his / her murder. Finally, this complexity of the victim's character once again draws attention to the fact that detective fiction presents a more complicated view of morality and justice than an initial reading might suggest.

In creating the victim as flawed, this presents the potential for their murder to be a kind of retribution for their guilt. In Sayers' *Busman's Honeymoon*, the victim, Noakes, is, once again, a blackmailer, and his death is considered by some other characters in the light of a divine retribution:

An ancient man with long grey whiskers raised his voice for the first time:

'Ill-gotten goods never thrive. 'Tis in the scripture. Because he hath oppressed and forsaken the poor, because he hath violently taken away a house which he builded not – ah! And the furniture, too – therefore shall no man look for his goods. In the fulness of his sufficiency shall he be in straits. [...] He shall flee from the iron weapon – ay – but it ain't no good fleein' when the 'and of the Lord is agin the wicked man (p. 193).

This convenient explanation, however, does not allow for the fact that the perpetrator of 'justice', Frank Crutchley, is human and that in killing Noakes he, too, was committing a legal and moral crime. Neither does this perspective allow for the fact that Crutchley was not motivated by any higher sense of justice, but out of a greedy desire for Noakes' money. Officially, as a law-breaker, Noakes should have come up against the legal system, and been tried and punished for his crimes. This becomes problematic, however,

when his criminal activities go undiscovered by the law. How is justice to be done in this instance? Even if he is caught, how do we decide who judges and punishes him; what right does one man have to decide and mete out justice to another man? And how will retribution be achieved for the moral element to the crimes that he commits, over which the law has no jurisdiction? This last question raises the point that, if there are crimes beyond the legal system, then it is implied that there is judgement and punishment beyond it as well.

This can be clearly seen at the end of many detective narratives, where the threads of good and evil, guilt and innocence, crime and punishment are drawn together with the identification, judgement and punishment of the criminal. The first point to be considered at the end of the narrative is the ‘confession’ of the criminal, which carries obvious dual connotations as it can be a confession of legal culpability, but also the process of making ‘confession’ of one’s sins, to a priest and to God. Not all criminals do confess, in either sense, and, if they do, not all confessions are made to a policeman or a priest; often, it is the role of the detective to listen to a criminal’s admission of culpability, in both the legal and moral sense. There are many examples of this, such as ‘The Adventure of the Veiled Lodger’ from *The Casebook of Sherlock Holmes*, in which Holmes hears the confession of Eugenia Ronder concerning her part in the death of her husband.²⁰ There is no detection at all by Holmes in this story; he simply listens to her narrate the events of the past. Often, the detective is the first to hear the confession, which is then delivered to the police, although occasionally with omissions or alterations in order to spare some innocent person in the murderer’s life, such as the confession of

Dr. Sheppard at the end of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, which Poirot will see is known to the police without Sheppard's sister having to endure the truth:

Well, she will never know the truth. There is, as Poirot said, one way out....

I can trust him. He and inspector Raglan will manage it between them. I should not like Caroline to know. She is fond of me, and then, too, she is proud. ... My death will be a grief to her, but grief passes....²¹

This process of listening to confession and the subsequent parallel between detective and priest is clearly emphasised in another of Christie's works *Partners in Crime*, when Tommy, the detective, says to a client that: 'my profession is not unlike that of a priest. I don't give absolution - but I listen to confessions.'²² These instances illustrate the interesting position of the detective in relation to the reinforcement of either legal or moral laws, where he seems to move between the role of policeman or priest, occasionally displaying traits of either, but moving freely between the two.

There are, of course, detectives whose main job is one or the other of these roles, Marsh's Inspector Alleyn, or Chesterton's Father Brown, for example, but they are arguably less flexible, and ultimately less satisfying as detectives, because they are bound by the rules of whichever 'law' it is they reinforce. Most police detectives have a 'maverick' element to them: Alleyn will occasionally turn a blind eye, and many modern police detectives, such as R.D. Wingfield's 'Frost' or Colin Dexter's 'Morse', will break the law themselves on occasion in order to achieve 'justice'. The same can be said of many clerical detectives; in the short story, 'The Price of Light', Cadfael turns a blind eye to the adulterous behaviour of Lady FitzHamon when it is uncovered during the course of his investigations.²³ In *Singing in the Shrouds*, Alleyn contemplates this moral

flexibility on the part of his fellow traveller and temporary investigator, Father Jourdain: 'I always want to find out at what point in an intelligent priest's progress PC Faith begins to direct the traffic. I'll swear in this one there's still a smack of the jay-walker' (p. 79). This highlights the conflict of interest between the investigation and the need for the priest to follow the laws of his faith. This need to bend the rules that they themselves reinforce, on the part of both policemen and priests, in order to achieve the solution to a mystery somehow undermines the validity of the laws that these individuals stand for, and therefore, also, their roles as detectives. The detective that has neither of these professions can tread a fine line between the two roles, without being bound by their institutional codes. The position of the detective between the two is clearly reinforced in 'The Adventure of the Veiled Lodger', as Mrs. Ronder's landlady, Mrs. Merrilow, details the conversation that has brought her to Sherlock Holmes:

"Mrs. Ronder," I says, "if you have anything that's troubling your soul, there's the clergy," I says, "and there's the police. Between them you should get some help." "For God's sake, not the police!" says she, "and the clergy can't change what is past. And yet," she says, "it would ease my mind if someone knew the truth before I died." "Well", says I, "If you won't have the regulars, there is this detective man what we read about" [...] (p. 208).

Holmes cannot offer Mrs. Ronder absolution for her past sins, but he can give her a sense of spiritual peace in hearing her confession, and he is not bound by any allegiance to the law to act on her confession of her part in her husband's murder.

Whether or not the criminal gives a confession, in either a legal or spiritual sense, the transgression of laws necessarily results in some kind of punishment and, in terms of

breaking legal rules, this may mean anything from a fine to imprisonment or, in extreme cases, execution. It should be noted that, in terms of the detective narrative there is no doubt as to the guilt of the criminal, whether they have confessed or not. This certainty is necessary to the narrative framework in achieving the desired 'closed' ending in an answer to the puzzle of whodunit. It can also be seen as necessary to any potential reader's 'needs' that are met by the detective story, either the assuaging of the fear of death identified by Cohen, or the catharsis of vicarious guilt discussed by Auden. However, not all detective narratives present a neat, legal, ending. There are instances of stories where the criminal, once identified, escapes the legal system entirely, and, indeed, any form of human justice. If this is the case, then they are usually presented as suffering some other form of 'punishment' or penalty for their transgression. Sometimes this is at the hands of another character, who also dies themselves, such as Edith de Haviland in Christie's *Crooked House*, who kills her niece, Josephine, in a car accident so that she will be spared having to stand trial for murder. Edith herself dies in the same accident, and this is essential to the closed ending in terms of justice being done. Christie carefully 'tidies' Edith's death, however, as it transpires that she only had a few months to live.²⁴ What is significant is that Edith does not see her niece as escaping justice entirely, only to prevent her suffering 'if called to earthly account for what she has done (p. 158). This distinction between 'earthly' and 'divine' justice is particularly significant in stories where the criminal's punishment does not come at the hands of another human being, when they meet death as a result of a fatal disease or a random accident, such as the death in a shipwreck of the murderers in Conan Doyle's 'The Adventure of the Five Orange Pips'.²⁵

Sometimes, the criminal is allowed to escape the legal system by the detective, such as the previously mentioned example of Tallboy in *Murder Must Advertise*. In this instance, Wimsey gives Tallboy the alternative of execution by the criminal gang that he worked for as a way to escape the disgrace of arrest or suicide:

‘Listen!’ he said. ‘I think there is one other way out. It won’t help you, but it may make all the difference to your wife and your child.’

‘How?’ said Tallboy, eagerly.

‘They need never know anything about all this. Nothing. Nobody need ever know anything, if you do as I tell you.’

‘My God, Wimsey! What do you mean? Tell me quickly. I’ll do anything.’

‘It won’t save you.’

‘That doesn’t matter. Tell me.’

‘Go home now,’ said Wimsey. ‘Go on foot, and not too fast. And don’t look behind you’ (p. 282).

Here, Wimsey is sidestepping the legal system, and offering an alternative ‘justice’ to Tallboy for his actions, which emphasises the ambiguous role of the detective in relation to both legal and moral crime control. Wimsey’s role as alternative judiciary is emphasised by Sayers as she describes Wimsey watch Tallboy walking away into the darkness and refers to the words of a judge passing the death sentence on a prisoner in court: ‘he saw the shadow slip from a neighbouring doorway and follow him. - and from thence to the place of execution ... and may the lord have mercy upon your soul’ (p. 282). The phrase concerning ‘the Lord’s mercy’ emphasises the divine element to judgement, as does Wimsey’s comment that it will not ‘save’ Tallboy, in which he could be referring to the threat on Tallboy’s life, but equally that it will not save his soul. The escape that Wimsey provides for Tallboy is only from human law.²⁶ This option of

suicide as a way of escaping the legal system is also offered by Wimsey at the end of *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*. He takes Penberthy, the murderer, into the library of the club, where he asks for, and receives, a confession of Penberthy's guilt. Then, with the help of Colonel Marchbanks, he offers Penberthy a way to avoid legal redress through shooting himself. As with the rather sinister and voyeuristic image of Wimsey watching Tallboy go to his death at the end of *Murder Must Advertise*, the end of this episode also emphasises Wimsey's detachment, and his role as a kind of emissary of justice: 'Wimsey put his hand on Penberthy's shoulder for a moment, then took the Colonel's arm. Their shadows moved, lengthened, shortened, doubled and crossed as they past the seven lights in the seven bays of the library. The door shut after them' (pp. 239-240).

Both of these episodes emphasise the flexible role that the detective can play in relation to the judicial system. These ambiguous endings which involve interventions on the part of the detective are not confined to Sayers. Sherlock Holmes allows himself the authority of these decisions on more than one occasion; in 'The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle', for example, he allows Ryder to go free, commenting that, 'I suppose I am commuting a felony, but it is just possible that I am saving a soul', again emphasising the extra-human dimension to the concept of justice.²⁷ Other examples can be found in the works of Agatha Christie. Poirot sometimes allows the criminal an alternative to the legal system, as at the end of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, for example, where he gives Dr Sheppard the option of suicide. With perhaps the exception of *The Murder on the Orient Express*, in which Poirot allows all twelve murderers to go free, Christie's endings are less ambiguous, as there is always the sense that justice can and will be

achieved.²⁸ This is most apparent in *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case*, where Poirot himself is the murderer, and punishes himself by taking his own life:

I do not know, Hastings, if what I have done is justified or not justified. No - I do not know. I do not believe that a man should take the law into his own hands. [...]

By taking Norton's life, I have saved other lives – innocent lives. But I still do not know ... It is perhaps right that I should not know. [...]

Goodbye, *cher ami*. I have moved the amylnitrate ampoules away from beside my bed. I prefer to leave myself in the hands of the *bon Dieu*. May his punishment, or his mercy, be swift!²⁹

Once again, the sense of a certainty of justice, earthly or divine, is emphasised by Poirot's commending himself to the hands of God to decide his fate. This biblical certainty that retribution will follow crime is emphasised by the wound on Norton's forehead after Poirot has shot him, which Hastings describes as looking 'like the brand of Cain' (p. 204).

For the most part, though, Agatha Christie's endings involve the criminal being brought to the human court of law, where they are judged and punished, achieving a sense of satisfactory closure at the end of the stories, and a sense of justice in as much as the criminal has 'got what they deserved', such as Jimmy Thesiger at the end of *The Seven Dials Mystery*, who, as Superintendent Battle says, 'will swing all right – and a good thing too – a more utterly depraved and callous criminal I never met'.³⁰ This assertion of the criminal's depraved and callous character is important to the sense of completion and absolute justice at the end of the majority of Christie's novels, which are presented in these explicitly untroubled terms. As Miss Marple says of the murderer at the end of *4:50 From Paddington*: 'everything he did was bold and audacious and cruel and

greedy, and I [...] really do feel that if there is anyone who ought to hang, it's Dr. Quimper'.³¹ Christie's murderers rarely have the redeeming or extenuating features of those found in Sayers' detective fiction which complicate the dialectic of guilt and innocence.

Sayers' detective novels, in fact, rarely present a simple 'closed' ending. The best example of this is the conclusion to *Clouds of Witness*, where it transpires that, in fact, there has been no murder: the dead man committed suicide. Thus the 'crime' is from group C, not group B, of Auden's classifications of crime, that is, it can be classified with the 'offences against God':

Many detective stories begin with a death that appears to be a suicide and is later discovered to have been a murder. Suicide is a crime belonging to class C in which neither the criminal's neighbours or society has any interest, direct or indirect. As long as the death is believed to be suicide, even private curiosity is improper; as soon as it is proved to be murder, public enquiry becomes a duty.³²

Clouds of Witness, however, begins with a suicide that appears to be murder, and so 'public enquiry becomes a duty'. At the end of the novel, when the truth becomes apparent, the reader is given a satisfactory closure to the puzzle, but there is no catharsis with the arrest of the murderer and no reassuring solution to death. What is achieved through *Clouds of Witness* is a clear assertion of the 'false state of innocence'; the public enquiry unearths many sins on the part of the other characters who are potential suspects for murder. The most significant of these is the adulterous behaviour of the Duke of Denver, Wimsey's brother. His 'chivalrous' silence on this subject means that he is arrested for murder and placed on trial, none of which could have happened if he were

truly innocent of any crime, legal or moral. Instead of a conclusion where the reader is reassured that criminals will be caught and punished, there is a sense that we should be sure that our sins will find us out, and that, in one context or another, we will be tried and punished for them.

In more than one case, the problematic nature of the ending emerges from the character of the murderer in some way. As with Tallboy, Sayers' murderers often have an extra dimension to them that takes them beyond the wicked individual who deserves punishment that is seen in so many of Christie's novels. Whilst we are never allowed to forget that Tallboy has committed murder, and that punishment by either human or divine forces is therefore inevitable, we are also shown his motives in a sympathetic light. Not least of these is that he is a weak man, essentially human, who has given in to temptation, and the reader recognises that there is this potential in all of us: "'I've been a bloody fool,'" said Tallboy. "Most of us are," said Wimsey."³³ Whilst we might experience a catharsis of our vicarious guilt at the identity and punishment of the murderer, there is no accompanying sense of triumphant self-righteousness that appears in the final pronouncements of Battle and Marple, and this is reinforced by Wimsey's own reaction to the events; when he is invited out by Chief inspector Parker to 'go round somewhere and celebrate' the end of the case, Wimsey replies with 'a spice of bitterness in his tone that he '[doesn't] feel quite like celebrating' (p. 283).

Wimsey experiences the same difficulties with the arrest of Ferguson at the end of *Five Red Herrings*, and his sympathy for Ferguson is compounded by his dislike of the

victim, Campbell, who like the examples of Noakes and Dean discussed earlier, was far from innocent of crime or sin himself:

The case against Ferguson was complete.

Wimsey was rather silent as they took the last train back from Glasgow.

“You know,” he said, “I rather liked Ferguson, and I couldn’t stick Campbell at any price. I rather wish - ”

“Can’t be helped, Wimsey,” said the Chief Constable. “Murder is murder, you know.”

“Not always,” said Wimsey (p. 282).

This exchange shows the strict adherence to the law by the police in contrast to the flexibility of the non-police detective. It also highlights the potentially personal involvement that the non-police detective can find evolving in a case, because they do not have an institutional code to adhere to, in order to keep the investigation purely professional. This point is also made by Munting, the narrator turned reluctant detective in *The Documents in the Case*, when he complains that:

People write books about murders, and the nice young men and women in them enjoy the job of detecting. It is a good game and I like reading the books. But the emotions of the nice young people are so well-regulated, or so perfunctory, or something. They don’t feel like worms and get put off their dinners when they have succeeded in squeezing a damaging admission out of a friend.³⁴

This concern about the fictional detective's involvement in the progress of justice is a feature that is relatively unusual, and one which Jill Paton Walsh sees as potentially unique to Sayers: “that worry, I think, is unique, I don’t remember any other detective having the slightest concern about whether they’re meddling in other people’s business

or not”³⁵ This raises several very interesting ideas concerning the detective in relation to the moral or theological dimensions of detective fiction, not least the question that, if it is so unpleasant, why do they continue to detect? This problem will be dealt with in Chapter Six, which focuses directly on the role of the detective, particularly Wimsey, in the complicated religious dimension to the detective story.

This identification of the presence of complicated issues at each stage of the detective narrative, from crime to punishment, suggests that, as well as being enjoyable puzzle-narratives, detective stories can function on a different level, raising and exploring complex questions about morality, ethics and emotional identification and involvement. The theological dimension to these questions underlines the potential for an association of detective fiction with religion, an association which arguably goes beyond structure and content and can be extended to an explanation of the very existence of the genre. Some of the specific roles of religion in the evolution of the genre of detective fiction will be the focus of the next chapter.

¹ This thesis will deal specifically with ‘detective fiction’ as distinct from ‘crime’ and ‘thriller’ stories. The primary distinction is that detective fiction must include a character whose role is ‘detective’, and whose investigations are the main focus for the action, and which are followed throughout the text by the reader. There are many other criteria for the classification of these various sub-genres, which have been given by a number of critics, indeed, much early criticism of the genre is focussed on this process of classification. Sayers gives an analysis of the various categories that she identifies in the introduction to *Great Short Stories of Detection Mystery and Horror* in 1928. In his 1966 essay ‘The Typology of Detective Fiction’, Tsvetan Todorov defines the detective narrative, or ‘whodunit’, through its basis in duality and the fact that it has ‘not one but two stories; the story of the crime and the story of the investigation’ (‘The Typology of Detective Fiction’, in *The Poetics of Prose*, tr. R. Howard (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966), p. 44). In *Crime Fiction: from Poe to the present*, Martin Priestman utilises Todorov to make clear the distinction between the ‘whodunnit’ (sic) and the ‘thriller’: ‘the whodunnit is primarily concerned with unravelling past events which either involve a crime or seem to do so. The present action is largely static, and major attention is given to the detecting activity itself [...]. in the thriller, the action is primarily in the present tense of the narrative. In one branch [...] the *noir* thriller, we identify with characters who consciously exceed the law [...].’ (Martin Priestman, *Crime Fiction from Poe to the present* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1998), p. 1).

² Agatha Christie, *The Murder at the Vicarage* (London: Collins, 1930; repr. Fontana, 1961); Edmund Crispin, *Holy Disorders* (London: Gollancz, 1946; repr. Penguin, 1958); P.D. James, *Original Sin*

- (London: Faber and Faber, 1994); *Death in Holy Orders* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001); Colin Dexter, *Service of all the Dead* (London: Macmillan, 1979); *The Daughters of Cain* (London: Macmillan, 1994); Sara Paretsky, *Killing Orders* (New York: Morrow, 1985; repr. London: Gollancz, 1986).
- ³ Agatha Christie, *Three Act Tragedy* (London: Collins, 1935; repr. Pan, 1983); Ngaio Marsh, *Singing in The Shrouds* (London: Collins, 1958; repr. HarperCollins, 2002); Minette Walters, *The Scold's Bridle* (London: Macmillan, 1994).
- ⁴ *The Oxford Companion to Crime and Mystery Writing*, ed. by Rosemary Herbert (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) p. 384.
- ⁵ Ngaio Marsh, *Death In Ecstasy* (London: Bles, 1936; repr. HarperCollins, 2001), *Spinsters in Jeopardy* (London: Collins, 1954; repr. Fontana, 1960).
- ⁶ Agatha Christie, *The Sittaford Mystery* (London: Collins, 1931; repr. Pan, 1980); *The Pale Horse* (London: Collins, 1961; repr. Fontana, 1964).
- ⁷ W. H. Auden, 'The Guilty Vicarage', in *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1948; repr. in *Detective Fiction: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Robin W. Winks, Woodstock: Foul Play Press, 1988), p. 16.
- ⁸ Ernest Mandel, *Delightful Murder: A social history of the crime story* (London: Pluto, 1984), p. 44.
- ⁹ Ngaio Marsh *Scales of Justice* (London: Collins, 1955; repr. 1956), p. 9.
- ¹⁰ *Scales of Justice*, p. 88, p. 135, and p. 150.
- ¹¹ Raymond Chandler, 'The Simple Art of Murder' (*The Atlantic Monthly*, 1944; repr. in *The Simple Art of Murder* New York: Ballentine, 1972), p. 16.
- ¹² Dorothy L. Sayers, *Five Red Herrings* (London: Gollancz, 1931; repr. Landsborough, 1959), p. 7.
- ¹³ Julian Symons, *The Detective Story in Britain* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1962), p. 7.
- ¹⁴ Dorothy L. Sayers, 'The Fascinating Problem of Uncle Meleager's Will', in *Lord Peter Views the Body* (London: Gollancz, 1928; repr. Hodder and Stoughton, 1979), pp. 39-58; Agatha Christie 'The Arcadian Deer', in *The Labours of Hercules* (London: Collins, 1947; repr. Penguin, 1953), pp. 60-76.
- ¹⁵ Michael Cohen, *Murder Most Fair: The Appeal of Mystery Fiction* (London: Associated University Presses, 2000), pp. 13-14.
- ¹⁶ Arthur Conan Doyle, 'The Adventure of a Case of Identity' in *The Adventures and Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* (New York: Random House, 2002), pp. 47-63 (first publ. in the *Strand Magazine*, 1891).
- ¹⁷ George Grella 'The Formal Detective Novel', in *Detective Fiction: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Robin W. Winks (Woodstock: Foul Play Press, 1988), p. 96.
- ¹⁸ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Clouds of Witness* (London: Unwin, 1926; repr. Hodder and Stoughton, 1976); *Have His Carcase* (London: Gollancz, 1932; repr. Hodder and Stoughton, 1977).
- ¹⁹ 'The Guilty Vicarage', p. 20.
- ²⁰ Arthur Conan Doyle, 'The Adventure of the Veiled Lodger' in *The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes* (London: John Murray, 1927; repr. Penguin, 1951), pp. 206-218.
- ²¹ Agatha Christie, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (London: Collins, 1926; repr. Penguin, 1948), p. 250.
- ²² Agatha Christie, *Partners in Crime* (London: Collins 1929; repr. 1950) p. 83.
- ²³ Ellis Peters, 'The Price of Light' in *A Rare Benedictine* (London: Headline, 1988), pp. 57-97.
- ²⁴ Agatha Christie, *Crooked House* (London: Collins, 1949; repr. Fontana, 1959).
- ²⁵ Arthur Conan Doyle, 'The Adventure of the Five Orange Pips' in *The Adventures and Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* (New York: Random House, 2002), p. 102, (first publ. in the *Strand Magazine*, 1891).
- ²⁶ The reference to 'the Lord's mercy' as an element of courtroom procedure, emphasises the links between legal and moral law and the way in which the church has been bound up with the legal system throughout history, as does the requirement for the witnesses in a court of law to swear on the Bible.
- ²⁷ Arthur Conan Doyle, 'The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle' in *The Adventures and Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* (New York: Random House, 2002), p. 143 (first publ. in the *Strand Magazine*, 1891).
- ²⁸ Agatha Christie, *Murder on the Orient Express* (London: Collins, 1934; repr. 1959).
- ²⁹ Agatha Christie, *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case* (London: Collins, 1975; repr. 1976), p. 203.
- ³⁰ Agatha Christie, *The Seven Dials Mystery* (London: Collins, 1929; repr. Fontana, 1954), p. 187.
- ³¹ Agatha Christie, *4:50 from Paddington* (London: Collins, 1957; repr. Fontana, 1960), p. 189.
- ³² Auden, 'The Guilty Vicarage', p. 17.
- ³³ *Murder Must Advertise*, p. 275.
- ³⁴ Dorothy L. Sayers *The Documents in the Case* (London: Benn, 1930; repr. Hodder and Stoughton, 1978),

p. 202.

³⁵ Interview with Jill Paton Walsh, 14 March, 2003. See Appendix 2, p. 280.

Chapter Three

The Role of Religion in the Origins and Development of Detective Fiction

Most critics agree that detective fiction as a genre has its roots in the mid-Victorian period with Edgar Allen Poe's short stories. Martin Priestman, for example, asserts that, 'as a self-conscious genre, the detection-based 'whodunnit' firmly separated itself off once and for all with Edgar Allen Poe's 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue'.¹ However, there is also a consensus of opinion which suggests that before this there exist stories to which we might apply the label of 'detective story'. Dorothy L. Sayers is one of the first critics of the form to argue this. In her introduction to *Great Short Stories of Detection, Mystery and Horror*, she presents Aesop's fables, Grimm's Fairy Tales and two stories from the Apocrypha, 'The History of Bel' (The Idol, Bel, and the Dragon. 1. 1-22.), and 'The Story of Susanna' (The History of Susanna 1. 1-64) as examples (pp. 10-11). Sayers includes the latter two because, she argues, they illustrate specific generic features of the detective narrative, respectively the 'Analysis of Material Evidence' and 'Analysis of Testimony'. In 'The History of Bel', Daniel sets out to prove to the king of Babylon that the Idol, Bel, is not a living god, 'but clay within and brass without'. The king presents as evidence to Daniel the fact that Bel eats and drinks the meat and wine that is left for him every night, and Daniel proves that this is not the case by strewing ashes throughout the temple, so that when the priests of Bel, with their wives and children, come in the night to eat and drink they leave 'material evidence' in the form of their footprints:

Then laughed Daniel, and held the king that he should not go in and said: "Behold now the pavement, and mark well whose footsteps are these." And the king said: "I see the footsteps of men, women and children."

And the king was angry, and took the priests with their wives and children, who showed him the privy doors where they came in, and consumed such things as were upon the table.²

As well as the motif of evidence, we can also see the presence of the theme of crime and punishment in 'The History of Bel', as, in response to the priests' deception, 'the king slew them' (p. 52). This narrative, given by Sayers as an example of an early detective story, does show that elements central to detective fiction can be found in earlier tales, before the genre was established, as does her identification of the 'analysis of testimony' in 'The History of Susanna', which will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

Sayers' choice of Biblical stories, fables and fairy tales as examples of early or proto-detective fiction are particularly significant in that they highlight the 'moral' element to the genre. All of these examples are of stories which have had a didactic function, teaching that certain behaviour is wrong or right, but, more importantly, that there are consequences to certain actions, especially those that are injurious to another individual, or to society as a whole, i.e. criminal and sinful acts. Earlier we saw the way in which the story of Cain (Genesis 4) might be seen to illustrate the potential structural similarity between some biblical narratives and detective fiction, through the representation of a crime and its consequential discovery and punishment. Further, thematic similarities between biblical and detective narratives are also apparent, and these can be seen more clearly in an analysis of one of Sayers' chosen examples, 'The History of Susanna'. The

story deals with a 'crime', the capture of a criminal and a trial, but the narrative is confused by the presence of several 'red herrings'. Firstly, there are three 'crimes': there is the initial, intended crime of the elders, that is, the attempted rape of Susanna, then there is the false 'crime' of Susanna's adultery, that never took place, invented by the elders to cover their initial intentions, and, finally, the real crime, the falsehood of the elders in accusing Susanna. Thus, the intended victim of one crime becomes the supposed perpetrator of another, and the victim of an entirely different one, and the original criminals become, as perjurous witnesses for the prosecution against their victim, the perpetrators of a different crime from the one they intended. 'The History of Susanna' clearly reinforces the difficulties of correctly identifying 'victim' and 'criminal', and also presents us with the concept of the distinction between different 'types' of crime, both tangible and intangible, such as the physical violation of another's person or a more abstract violation of the truth, as well as the problems of motive and intention.

The plot of 'Susanna' is worthy of any detective novel, and is one which only a detective, in this instance, Daniel, could unravel. As in the story of Cain, however, the real 'detective' is, in fact, God. Although in this instance he works through Daniel, the knowledge and the power of revelation of the truth are divine rather than human. The truth of the situation is known to God throughout, and Susanna places her trust in this:

'O everlasting God, that knowest the secrets, and knowest all things before they be; thou knowest that they have borne false witness against me, and, behold, I must die; whereas I never did such things as these men have maliciously invented against me' (1. 42-43).

This reinforces the religious connotation of the word 'mystery', as discussed in the previous chapter, where it denotes a truth knowable only to God, which remains mysterious to human understanding until a moment of divine revelation. In response to Susanna's prayer, God 'raise[s] up the holy spirit of a young youth', Daniel, in whom he places knowledge of 'the truth' and who then sets about proving her innocence: 'so he standing in the midst of them said, Are ye such fools, ye sons of Israel, that without examination or knowledge of the truth ye have condemned a daughter of Israel?' (1. 48). As in 'The History of Bel', God directs Daniel towards locating the truth, which he does in this instance through the analysis of the contradictory testimonies of the two elders as to which tree it was that they witnessed Susanna and her supposed lover under - the first elder gives his evidence that it was 'under a mastick-tree' and the other says that it was 'under a holm-tree' (1. 54-58). Thus Daniel reveals the innocence of Susanna, and her accusers as the true 'criminals': 'for Daniel had convicted them of false witness by their own mouth'. (1. 61) Daniel is given knowledge of the truth by God, but he must prove this truth to a human court, hence the need for evidence, and it is here that we see how parallels between Daniel and the figure of the detective might be established. The role of Daniel as God's emissary raises the idea of some external force, coincidental or providential, in the process of detection, which is an idea explored in many detective novels, as is the role of the detective in relation to this. This relationship between divinity and detection will be considered in more detail later in this chapter and in Chapter Six.

Sayers' inclusion of 'The History of Bel' and 'The Story of Susanna' in *Great Short Stories of Detection, Mystery and Horror* illustrates the potential for narratives written

before the middle of the nineteenth century to be considered from the perspective of the generic conventions of detective fiction. In addition to the presence of many of the themes such as guilt and innocence and crime and punishment, which make a religious perspective on detective fiction both interesting and valid, they can be seen to have some of the defining features of the genre, such as a puzzle, clues, suspects, witness statements, and even, in the examples from the Apocrypha, a ‘detective’ of sorts. Despite the clear emphasis on the moral and theological element of detective fiction which these proto-detective narratives illustrate, there are arguments to suggest that the genre emerged, in part, as a result of decline in religion in society and a movement towards secularism.³

Sayers is not the only person to suggest prototype versions of the detective narrative; other examples of these early detective stories have been put forward by various chroniclers of the genre. Martin Priestman, for example, discusses *Oedipus the King* as an ‘antecedent’ to the detective story, because ‘Oedipus conducts a series of interrogations in his official kingly role to unmask the murderer of his predecessor, King Laius’ (p. 5). Julian Symons suggests, briefly, that as ‘an interesting case of disguise and attempted murder’, ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ might also be considered, as might ‘*Arden of Faversham* or almost any play by Shakespeare.’⁴ As Symons points out, however, there is ‘a line that separates books in which interest in the nature of, motives for, and results of, a crime are at the heart of a story from those where the criminal interest is a subsidiary one’ (p. 12). Whilst many of the examples of early ‘detective fiction’ that are put forward do contain elements that can be identified as essential to the genre, a puzzle or mystery, for example, or ‘clues’ or a criminal, or even the more abstract features of

the dialectical arrangement of good and evil or guilt and innocence, their primary focus is not the process of detection and most of them do not contain a character that could really be considered in the role of detective.

In the mid-nineteenth century, however, detective fiction emerged as a genre in which the focus on crime and detection ceased to be 'subsidiary' to other considerations in the narrative, and became 'the heart of the story'. The accounts of the origins of the genre are available in many works on the subject, for example, Symons' *Bloody Murder*, H.R.F. Keating's *Whodunit? A Guide to Crime, Suspense and Spy Fiction* and Ian Ousby's *The Crime and Mystery Book: A Reader's Companion*.⁵ All of these works describe the growing popularity in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries of stories detailing crime, such as those from *The Newgate Calendar*. They also document the shift in focus in these stories away from the thieves and towards the thief-takers, which came about with the establishment and development of the police force. This can be seen in the various popular police memoirs, first in France with *Les Mémoires de Vidocq* (1828-1829), and then in Britain with *The Recollections of a Detective Police-Officer* (1856).⁶ As Haycraft argues, 'there could be no detective *stories* (and there were none) until there were *detectives*' (p. 5).

It is not feasible, at this point, to detail at length the entire history of the crime novel. The element that is particularly relevant to this thesis is the changing social circumstances, particularly in terms of the role of the Church and religion in society, that created the right 'environment' for the popularity of police chronicles, and the subsequent writing and reception of Poe's 'Murders in the Rue Morgue' in 1841, and the

Sherlock Holmes stories that followed. Reginald Hill suggests that the 'relatively recent phenomenon' of detective fiction:

[...] could not begin to exist till society had made a significant lurch in the direction of the modern, which is to say when it started to be scientific rather than superstitious, bourgeois rather than aristocratic, urban rather than pastoral, and capitalist rather than Christian.⁷

It is this movement away from a Christian social framework that is fundamental to this discussion, along with the simultaneous movement that Hill identifies in society from the 'superstitious' and towards the 'scientific'. Several other critics have identified the changing role and significance of religion in society during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a contributing factor to the emergence of the genre of detective fiction; in *Form and Ideology in Detective Fiction* (1980), for example, Stephen Knight discusses this idea in detail and there are two significant earlier essays that touch upon this idea: Sayers' introduction to *Great Short Stories of Detection, Mystery and Horror* and Nicholas Blake's introduction to the first British edition of Haycraft's *Murder for Pleasure* (1943).⁸

Knight, like Symons, comments on the limitations of identifying pre-genre examples of detective fiction. He points out that many of these comparisons erroneously 'take detective fiction to be the same as crime fiction' (p. 8). Despite the presence of characters such as Daniel, these stories are not generically intended as detective fiction, many of them having no 'detective' as such, detailing instead either a mysterious occurrence or a crime. Instead of giving these tales the label of early detective stories, Knight suggests that they are 'stories that suggest how crime could be controlled': 'Most would have been oral, and many of those that were written down were evanescent, in

pamphlet form. Yet enough material has survived to establish the nature and ideology of crime fiction without detectives' (p. 8). Knight explores these early stories of crime 'control' and shows how they developed into the specific genre of detective fiction, with specific reference to the status of religion in the societies that they emerge from. In his analysis of stories from *The Newgate Calendar*, Knight identifies two elements to the control of crime, both relevant to the discussion of religion and detective fiction.⁹ The first of these elements is the notion of individual guilt. The criminal is apprehended because, sooner or later 'the sense of guilt makes them act rashly [...] so drawing attention to themselves and to crucial evidence': 'The idea behind this is that the Christian conscience is suddenly awakened, the objective Christian pattern reasserts itself against the subjective criminal rejection of those values [...]' (p. 12).

The 'guilt' that Knight identifies as being felt by the criminal is not about their recognition of their own legal culpability, or an attack of conscience on their behalf, but 'guilt' in the theological sense, that is, an individual's breaking of their relationship with God, and the inevitability of divine judgement and punishment. This guilt on the part of the criminal is only half of the process of identification, however; the second element is social observation, the collective society recognising the guilt of the criminal manifested through his anti-social behaviour, either committing the crime itself or via his actions afterwards. Society 'is so tightly knit that escape will not be possible. The murderer is seen in the act and caught at once, or seen, described by the witness and soon recognised' (p. 12). Knight argues that 'these two systems of detecting crime, personal guilt and social observation, could only develop in a deeply Christian world with small social units where everybody is known, where hiding is hard and socialisation tends to

be public' (p. 12). The ending of most of the Newgate stories reinforce the Christian world they are set in. As Knight observes, 'the criminals go to their inevitable execution as penitents, making [...] short prayers on the scaffold' (p. 12). Nearly all of the criminals from *The Newgate Calendar* willingly acknowledge their guilt once caught, for example Mrs. Brownrigg who, after being sentenced to death 'was attended by clergymen, to whom she confessed the enormity of her crime and acknowledged the justice of the sentence by which she had been condemned.'¹⁰ Another example is that of Samuel Roberts, hanged 'for High Treason, in counterfeiting the current Coin of this Realm' and who, after conviction,

[...] was exceedingly well adapted to his unhappy situation. He was regular and devout in his attendance on religious duties, employed much time in reading books of devotion, and was regardful of the instructions given him by the ordinary of Newgate. On learning that the warrant for his execution had arrived, his seriousness and penitence appeared to be augmented, and he looked forward to eternity in the humble hope of divine pardon (p. 200).

These endings emphasise, firstly, the absolute certainty of the criminal's guilt and, secondly, that apprehension and punishment is inevitable. Their confessions of culpability are made not just to the thief takers, judge and jury, but to attendant clergymen and, therefore, to God. These are not detective stories as such – we are in no doubt as to who committed the crime, and more importantly, we are in no doubt as to whether they will be caught. The intention of the stories, with their moral endings, is to demonstrate 'the basic notion, and hope, that the all pervasive inescapable Christian reality provides a protection against crime' (Knight, p. 12).

It is the idea of 'hope' that is significant here, as it draws attention to the lack of realism which Knight identifies in the stories:

In fact, *The Newgate Calendar* is not offering a real account of crime control: it is ideological in that it offers hope and comfort to people, and in that it is itself based on ideologies, the twin beliefs that we are all Christian at heart and that our society is integral and at root a single healthy body. This would be what is normally called a 'strain ideology', that is, an optimistic account selecting and ordering material to provide a consoling fable in the face of disturbing reality (p. 12).

One of the reasons that Knight gives for this need for the 'strain ideology' in *The Newgate Calendar* is that 'in the period when the stories were printed, the implied social model was disappearing' (p. 13). At the time that the collected volumes of *The Newgate Calendar* were being published in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the 'small social units' of the rural villages were declining and industrialisation meant a movement of the population into the cities. By the Victorian era, there had been a huge increase in urbanisation, as the Industrial Revolution saw the movement of the population into the cities for employment, and this accelerated in the nineteenth century: 'every year, even before the depression of British farming in the 1870s, tens of thousands of men, women and children left the country for the towns which by 1851, for the first time, contained more people than the country [...]. The population of Greater London, which had been scarcely more than a million in 1801, had risen to well over two million by 1841, was over three million in 1861, and increased to [...] 5,571,968 in 1891.¹¹ Initially, then, stories such as those in *The Newgate Calendar* provided an optimistic sense of security in their presentation of an ordered, Christian, society where every individual was known and crime was consequently controllable. However, with

the increase in urbanisation, detective stories began to reflect the urban lifestyle and therefore a new kind of crime control – one that was suited to this new environment – was needed. This move from a necessary consolatory fable as a setting to a more realistic urban environment was, in part, due to an acceptance of this changing world, so there would no longer be any need for an escape from it. In addition to this, there was an excitement felt about elements in the new worlds such as advances in science and technology, and the desire for representations of this replaced the desire for representations of a reassuring past.

Instead of the close / closed communities, where everyone was known, the city was an open, fluctuating and anonymous population and where ‘not everybody was devotedly Christian [...] and there was a hardened and relatively successful criminal class’ (Knight, p. 13). Part of the changing world, therefore, was the decline in collective belief and worship that provided the ‘all-pervasive, inescapable Christian reality [that] provide[d] a protection against crime’ in the Newgate stories - the theologically and ideologically cohesive social body that *The Newgate Calendar* presents as necessary to crime control. This decline in collective belief was the result of a growing fragmentation of denominations of the Christian church, in part produced by the shifting demographics of urbanisation. There was an increase in secularism in the nineteenth century, which led to the establishment of movements such as the National Secular Society in 1870, but, as Linda K Hughes argues, ‘this secularism did not necessarily indicate religious apathy’.¹² Instead, it was part of the increasing theistic fragmentation in Victorian Britain, which also gave rise to many Nonconformist sects, as an ‘intense interest in religious doctrine caused a splintering of believers into diverse denominations (Primitive Methodists,

Wesleyans, Presbyterians, Baptists, Roman Catholics etc.)' (p. 41). This was clearly revealed by the 1851 Census of Religious Worship:

Differences of belief were wide and methods of worship various. One March Sunday in 1851, when a census was taken of people attending places of worship in England and Wales, numerous denominations had to be taken into account from Anglicans high and low, to Roman Catholics [...] and to Nonconformists of all kinds, from Unitarians (about 37,000) to Mormons (some 18,000).¹³

Knight argues that it is this change in the 'social model' that creates the right environment for the emergence of the detective in literature and, therefore, detective fiction as a genre. We can see this in the move away from the emphasis on collective 'investigation' or identification of crime by the tight-knit Christian community shown in the early crime-control stories, and towards the placing of this responsibility on to the detective, who functions as an often very detached individual in an anonymous and, if not entirely secular, certainly less theistically cohesive, world.

The image of the nineteenth century city as diverse and anonymous is apparent in the detective fiction of this time. In Poe's 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue', for example, the narrator is nameless and he and Dupin are at pains not to mix with Paris society:

Our seclusion was perfect. We admitted no visitors. Indeed the locality of our retirement had been carefully kept a secret from my own former associates; and it had been many years since Dupin had ceased to know or be known in Paris. We existed within ourselves alone.¹⁴

The non-cohesive nature of the society that is the milieu for the tale is also emphasised by the fact that many of the witnesses in the case are of different nationalities - William Bird, the tailor, is English, Odenheimer, the restaurateur, is Dutch and Alfonzo Garcio,

the undertaker, is Spanish. In addition to an absence of recognisable individuals, there is no cohesion in their attempts to communicate, as each identifies the mysterious second voice that is overheard as a different language. Isidore Muset, the gendarme, for example believes that the second voice that is overheard is Spanish, whilst Henri Duval ‘was convinced by the intonation that the speaker was an Italian’ (p. 200).

Conan Doyle’s ‘Sherlock Holmes’ stories demonstrate a similar absence of a cohesive society. Once again, the detective is detached from the rest of the community, emphasising the isolation of the individual in the city; in ‘The Adventure of a Scandal in Bohemia’, Watson tells us that Holmes ‘who loathed every form of society with his Bohemian soul, remained in our lodgings in Baker Street, buried among his old books and alternating from week to week between cocaine and ambition [...]’.¹⁵ It is not just Holmes who is removed from social interaction in this way; the inhabitants of London, like those of Poe’s Paris, are anonymous, an ‘endless procession of faces which flitted across [the] narrow bars of light – sad faces and glad, haggard and merry. Like all humankind, they flitted from gloom into the light and so back into the gloom once more.’¹⁶

In such communities, even if the ‘guilt’ of the criminal were to manifest itself, that behaviour would go unnoticed, as there is no collective social ‘norm’ with which to conform. Instead, the responsibility for identifying the guilty party falls to another individual, Dupin or Holmes, whose very isolation from the community gives them the vantage point from which to observe it. In addition to this, the solutions arrived at by the detectives are not based on anything as intangible as a manifestation of the individual’s

breaking of unity with God, but instead they are based on the collection and rational analysis of irrefutable facts. The ‘Murders in the Rue Morgue’ places so much emphasis on the significance of rational thought, that it begins with an essay about analysis and reason; as Ian Ousby comments: ‘it hardly sounds like the start to any story at all.’ Instead, it is an essay on the ‘power of the human mind (or rather the mind of the extraordinary individual) to triumph over whatever is mysterious, whatever is puzzling’ (p. 16). Dupin’s investigations are entirely based on the tangible and factual, for example, a ‘tuft of tawny hair’ and the pattern left by the digits of the assailant on Mademoiselle L’Espanaye’s throat, which Dupin applies a logical analysis to in order to find the truth (pp. 216-217). Holmes’ investigations have a similar basis; in *A Study in Scarlet*, he works out the height of a man from the length of his stride, and deduces that he has smoked a Trichinopoly cigar through an analysis of the ash dropped.¹⁷ As Ousby comments, ‘the detective story began as a dream of reason and of the triumphs reason can achieve’ (p. 16).

This emphasis on ‘ratiocination’ and fact in Victorian detective fiction reflects the advances in science and technology in the Victorian era. For example, when Holmes is introduced in *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), Watson, and therefore the reader, sees him for the first time in a laboratory:

This was a lofty chamber, lined and littered with countless bottles. Broad, low tables were scattered about, which bristled with retorts, test-tubes, and little Bunsen lamps with their blue flickering flames. There was only one student in the room, who was bending over a distant table absorbed in his work. At the sound of our steps he glanced round and sprang to his feet with a cry of pleasure. ‘I’ve found

it! I've found it,' he shouted to my companion, running towards us with a test tube in his hand. 'I have found a re-agent which is precipitated by haemoglobin and nothing else' (p. 13).

Holmes' approach to detection is a scientific one, that of 'diagnostic medicine', according to Ousby, who continues: 'Holmes insists on the principal of natural law as resolutely as any post-Darwinian scientist. "From a drop of water," [Holmes] argues, "a logician could infer the possibility of an Atlantic or a Niagara without having seen or heard of one or the other"' (p. 48).

This move towards a more scientifically advanced world inevitably had an impact on religious thinking; if everything, even oceans and waterfalls, could be explained in a logical and factual way, then the propensity for belief in miracles or mysteries was going to be considerable reduced: 'the Victorian era was [...] an age of doubt and seething discontent. [...] The whole fabric of Christianity was called into question. Science, philosophy and history were all called upon to show that the Christian faith no longer had a leg to stand on.'¹⁸ In particular, the theories of Charles Darwin (1809-1882) were a significant challenge to established Christian theism, as his ideas concerning evolution through natural selection undermined beliefs in life as a divine creation. Anthony Harrison argues that the 'unparalleled controversy' that the publication of Darwin's *The Origin of Species* caused, 'was merely an extension of the heated public and private debates about religious values and practices that had preoccupied Victorians since the 1830s':

Charles Lyell's 1,600 page tome *The Principles of Geology* (1833) anticipated the theories of Darwin and inspired many thinking men and women, including Alfred Tennyson, to examine evolution as a

serious challenge to the biblical story of creation and therefore as a threat to religious orthodoxies grounded in a literal acceptance of the Bible. New scientific theories and discoveries, along with the breathtaking velocity of technological advance, appeared to many observers evidence of an increasing cultural emphasis on secular matters that threatened religious belief.¹⁹

This preference for scientific theory is clearly evident in the Sherlock Holmes stories, where there is little room for anything outside the realms of the scientifically probable: ‘Holmes continues to scorn the supernatural, exploding superstitions about spectral hounds or vampires whenever he encounters them’.²⁰ Even religion itself is presented as something that can be broken down into component parts and studied in the light of scientific analysis, as Holmes argues: ‘There is nothing in which deduction is so necessary as religion. [...] It can be built up as an exact science by the reasoner’.²¹ In Victorian detective fiction, ‘mysteries’, even those concerning God, can be solved with the application of logical thought and a consideration of fact.

As mentioned earlier, Knight is not the first critic to link the emergence of detective fiction with the urbanisation of society, the simultaneous advances in science and technology and the changes this created in religious belief and practices. In Dorothy L. Sayers’ 1928 introduction to *Great Short Stories of Detection Mystery and Horror* she considers the world of the nineteenth century as environment for the emergence of the genre of detection fiction, focusing in particular on how it was a time when ‘science reduced seeming miracles to mechanical marvels’ (p. 13). Sayers details briefly some of the previously discussed phenomenon of the Victorian era:

In the nineteenth century the vast, unexplored limits of the world began to shrink at an amazing and unprecedented rate. The electrical telegraph circled the globe; railways brought remote villages into touch with civilisation; photographs made known to the stay-at-homes the marvels of foreign landscapes, customs and animals [...] (p. 13).

As Sayers suggests, with her lexical choice of ‘miracles’ and ‘mechanical marvels’, this advance in science and technology had an impact on religious belief by creating the idea that there could be a rational explanation for the previously unexplained or unknown. The word ‘marvel’ also suggests the excitement felt at scientific discoveries and the enthusiasm for this new world which is evident in the detective fiction of the time. The barriers of communication and travel, that left a considerable amount ‘unknown’, were broken down by the ‘telegraph’ and the ‘railway’, suggesting that there were no limits to the boundaries that humanity could cross or the phenomena that they could find an explanation for. A belief in ‘miracles’ is an unquestioning acceptance of occurrences, an acceptance of things unknown, and the attribution of events to an external, usually divine, force, but the advent of the ‘mechanical’ world, in which the component parts and workings of life can be seen, undermines this perspective.

In Nicholas Blake’s introduction to the first British edition of Haycraft’s *Murder for Pleasure* (1943), he also makes some reference to the emergence of detective fiction and the changing status of religion in society, although rather than just making a link between an increasingly secularised society and the emergence of the genre, Blake’s arguments are more definite, as he sees detective stories as in some way replacing religion. Blake imagines a future in which critics and anthropologists attempt to answer the question of why the ‘detective story attained such remarkable popularity’: ‘we may

imagine some James Frazer of the year 2042 discoursing on “The Detective Novel – the Folk-Myth of the Twentieth Century” (p. xx).²² Blake then goes on to conjecture that this twenty-first century study will ‘connect the rise of crime fiction with the decline of religion at the end of the Victorian era’ (p. xx). Blake’s assertion of religious ‘decline’ is difficult to substantiate, as is his claim that this took place specifically at the end of the Victorian era, and it is more likely that he is referring to the effects of the phenomena discussed earlier: a significant and ongoing shift during the whole of the nineteenth century towards diverse religious worship, including Nonconformity, the rise in secularist movements, and the challenging and tempering of belief by scientific progress. Whatever the causes of the religious ‘decline’ identified by Blake, he relates it directly to the emergence of the detective narrative as the latter takes over the functions of the former:

[...] in more civilised times one function of religion is to take the burden of guilt off the individual’s shoulders through the agency of some Divine or apotheosised Being. When a religion has lost its hold upon men’s hearts, they must have some other outlet for the sense of guilt.

This, our anthropologist of the year 2042 may argue, was provided for us by crime fiction (pp. xx –xxi).

W.H. Auden’s 1948 essay, ‘The Guilty Vicarage’, discussed in detail in the previous chapter, also considers this idea of detective fiction as dealing with human guilt, and Auden sees this as occurring through the cathartic process of reading the stories. However, where Auden sees detective fiction as presenting a religious narrative, or at least, a narrative within a religious context, Blake sees the detective story as a secular narrative which replaces a religious ritual.

The 'pattern of the detective-novel', Blake argues, is:

as highly formalised as a religious ritual, with its initial necessary sin (the murder), its victim, its high priest (the criminal) who must in turn be destroyed by a yet higher power (the detective). [...The anthropologist of 2042] will note a significant parallel between the formalised *Denouement* of the detective novel and the Christian concept of the Day of Judgement when, with a flourish of trumpets, the mystery is made plain and the goats are separated from the sheep (p xxi).

This is a reference to Matthew 25, which describes how, on judgement day:

When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory:

And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats:

And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left.
(Matthew 25. 31-33).

This analogy can be quite easily applied to the end of many detective narratives, when the guilty person is separated out from the innocent, particularly the now highly-familiar, often-parodied, endings to the many more formulaic detective novels when all of the suspects are gathered together at the end to hear the detective reveal the truth. Agatha Christie utilises this device more than once: it features most prominently in her Hercule Poirot stories, such as *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, where all of the suspects gather at Poirot's house: 'all these people to-night are suspects. Amongst them I shall find the person who killed Mr Ackroyd' (p. 225). She also makes use of it in *The ABC Murders* and *Five Little Pigs*, amongst others.²³ Other examples include Edmund

Crispin's *Holy Disorders*, many of Ngaio Marsh's stories including *Overture to Death* and *Death at the Bar*.²⁴ Sayers also makes use of it, once, at the end of *Gaudy Night*, although, typically, she does not entirely adhere to the formula, as it turns out that none of the assembled party are guilty, and the culprit is only brought in later. Once again, where Auden sees this conclusion to the narrative as inherently religious, with the revelation of the guilty party at the end of the story, and a return to innocence for the others concerned, Blake sees it as secular and effectively replacing the religious narrative, with detective in the role of a divinity, 'a higher power', separating the sheep from the goats.

Because the world that the detective story emerges from and exists in is increasingly secular or theologically fragmented, it follows that the detective himself might be a secular, rather than religious, entity, as Reginald Hill comments: 'he confirms that the new myth of law and order has taken over from the old myth of divine providence' (p. 25). This is also argued by Susan Rowland, who says that 'where the detective genre reflects the secularisation of crime in the rise of the police force and recourse to the law (as a human system rather than a direct expression of divine justice) the detective, in turn, becomes the secularised knight on a quest.'²⁵ Blake clearly saw the detective in this light, and having established the emergence of the genre as the result of a decline in religion, and the detective story as a replacement religious narrative, he presents the character of the detective as a replacement for the 'Divine or apotheosised being': 'his magic capabilities only modified to the requirements of a would-be scientific and rational generation' (p. xxi). Blake's description of the detective as a 'yet higher power' in the religious ritual, above the sacrificial victim and the priest clearly equates him with

God. This is emphasised by the idea that the mystery is made plain at the end of the story, as Blake describes it, ‘on the Day of Judgement’ when the sheep are separated from the goats by the detective / deity. Blake goes on to discuss two detectives in particular: ‘Holmes and Wimsey [are] its most celebrated examples – in which human frailty and eccentricity, together with superhuman powers of perception, are carried to a supralogical conclusion’. (p. xxi).

This representation of Holmes as a replacement divinity appears to be justified by the representations of him in Conan Doyle’s stories. To begin with, his flat in Baker Street is on the first floor, and there are repeated images of Holmes looking down on London and its inhabitants from on high: ‘he had risen from his chair, and was standing between the parted blinds, gazing down into the dull, neutral-tinted London street’.²⁶ In addition to his elevation above the other inhabitants of London, Holmes certainly has ‘magic capabilities’, as Watson comments in ‘Scandal in Bohemia’ when Holmes has deduced that he has gone back into practice, has “‘been getting [himself] very wet lately, and that [he] has a most clumsy and careless servant girl’”: “‘my dear Holmes [...] You would certainly have been burned had you lived a few centuries ago’”.²⁷ Holmes readily explains his deductions to Watson, showing how the scored leather on the inside of his left shoe were “‘caused by someone who has very carelessly scraped round the edges of the sole in order to remove crusted mud from it’”, which indicates the careless servant girl (p. 5). However, despite Holmes’ omniscience being the result of logic rather than miracle, there is still something god-like in the presentation of him as a detective, an image which is created in part by his tendency to apotheosise himself. Whilst Watson is often favoured with an explanation of Holmes’ deductions, some of his clients are left in

the dark, and thus believe him to have 'superhuman powers', without realising that they are powers of observation and interpretation and seeing them instead as magical or miraculous, which Holmes allows, as in 'The Adventure of a Case of Identity' when Miss Sutherland asks 'how could you know all that?', to which Holmes replies 'never mind [...] it is my business to know things' (pp. 49-50). In *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1890-1939*, John Carey argues that this logical deduction is part of 'Holmes' redemptive genius as a detective' which 'lies in rescuing individuals from the mass.'²⁸

Characteristically at the start of a story he scrutinizes the nondescript person who has arrived at his Baker street rooms, observes how they dress, whether their hands are calloused, whether their shoe soles are worn, and amazes them by giving them an accurate account, before they have spoken a word, of their jobs, their habits and their individual interests. The appeal of this Holmesian magic, and the reassurance it brings to readers are [...] residually religious, akin to the singling out of the individual soul, redeemed from the mass, that Christianity promises (pp. 8-9).

Again, the parallel is drawn between detective and deity, as he performs the functions of a god in the narrative. Interestingly, Carey gives as evidence for this another example of the biblical 'detective' story, citing 'St John's gospel, Chapter 4, where Christ astounds the woman of Samaria [...] by telling her that she has had five husbands and now lives with a man she is not married to', as 'the first recorded instance of the Holmes method' (p. 9). As with the earlier examples given by Sayers from the apocrypha, though, there is no 'detection' as such, as 'whether [Christ] detects this from her shoe soles, or whatever, is not revealed'; Christ, as part of the divine Trinity, is omniscient and has no need to recourse to deduction. Carey's arguments reinforce the idea that the Victorian detective,

in the anonymous, urban environment, is in some way divine, a replacement for the omniscient God who presides over the earlier, rural, Christian communities.

Homes' self-apotheosising is evident in other ways, particularly in how he sees himself in relation to justice and the law, in particular his assertion in 'The Adventure of the Five Orange Pips': "I am the last court of appeal", implying that there is no higher authority than Sherlock Holmes (p. 87). Reference has already been made to the end of 'The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle' in Chapter Two of this thesis, where Holmes claims that in letting James Ryder go, he is "commuting a felony, but [...] saving a soul", to illustrate the potential presence of a moral dimension to the detective story, through reference to the criminal's 'soul' and the possible associated presence of some divine entity. In this instance it is arguable that Holmes sees himself as that entity, as the capacity to 'save' a soul is a divine one. Another episode that has been referred to is the confession made to Holmes by Mrs. Ronder in 'The Adventure of the Veiled Lodger', which Ian Ousby uses to illustrate his argument that, 'by the end of his career, Holmes can act not just as a policeman or judge but also as ultimate spiritual authority':

[...] when one client speaks of his power to bring 'light into darkness' she plainly has the relief of spiritual distress in main rather than just scientific clarification or just practical help. [...] In 'The Veiled Lodger', among the last stories Conan Doyle ever wrote, Holmes does not even detect anything. He simply hears the murderer's unsolicited confession, counsels her and, implicitly, absolves her. What greater or more Godlike heights of power could a detective aspire to? (p. 55).

Holmes' Godlike power in this episode is emphasised by his words of warning to Mrs. Ronder: "your life is not your own [...] keep your hands off it".²⁹ The implication is

that it is Holmes' decision here whether Mrs. Ronder lives or dies. Watson ends the story by relating that two days later Holmes receives a bottle of prussic acid in the post, with the message, 'I send you my temptation', with the result that Holmes has 'saved' another soul.

However, Blake's inclusion of Wimsey in the same category as Holmes does not seem justified; despite Wimsey's occasional decision to sidestep the human judicial system, as with the previously discussed cases of Penberthy and Tallboy, there is never any sense that he sees himself as a replacement for this or any other 'court of appeal'. In fact, his comments to Tallboy that his alternatives to the police or suicide will not 'save' him, would indicate that Wimsey works with an understanding that there is a justice beyond an earthly one. The representation of a world with a clear sense of divinity in the Wimsey stories could be attributed to the biographical element of Sayers' own faith, which is so clearly evident in all of her work. However, a Christian framework for the detective story is not limited to Sayers. Whilst detective fiction as a genre does seem to have emerged within, and in response to, an increasingly secularised or theistically diverse society, and to a certain extent this is reflected in Victorian detective fiction with its emphasis on rationalised scientific explanations that do not allow for supernatural or spiritual explanations, and its apotheosised detectives such as Holmes, it is not, as Blake would suggest, an entirely secular genre. The theological themes highlighted in the previous chapter are present in all detective fiction, being, as they are, intrinsically part of both the structure and themes of the detective narrative. Even when there is a deliberate move away from the 'miracle' to the 'mechanical marvel' and everything is

afforded a logical explanation, the themes of guilt and innocence, good and evil, crime and punishment and so on, are still present.

There is a significant difference, however, between the subtle religious presences in Victorian detective fiction, raised through the implicit theological themes, and the omnipresence of religion in the stories of the Golden Age, which directs our attention far more explicitly to those themes within the narrative. It is almost impossible to read a substantial amount of Golden-Age detective fiction without becoming conscious of the amount of religious references within this genre, in terms of setting and character, particularly the number of representatives of the Church that are to be found. Sometimes these individuals are a significant protagonist such as Leonard Clement, the vicar-narrator of Agatha Christie's *The Murder at the Vicarage* (1930), who provides the Watsonesque commentary on the investigations of Colonel Melchett and Miss Marple. More often than not, though, they are secondary characters, like Sayers' Boyes, Dawson and Foulis whose presence contributes to the background of the stories in terms of cast or setting, but are not otherwise vital to the detective narrative. Other examples include Archdeacon Cowley and the Vicar of Marchbolt, both fathers of the amateur detectives in Christie's *The Secret Adversary* (1922) and *Why Didn't They Ask Evans?* (1934).³⁰ These incidental references are not limited to members of the clergy; once the search is begun, there are endless examples of vicarages, vicars' wives, churches, church services, bell towers, graveyards, parish halls, family bibles and so on. The degree of their importance to the stories in which they appear can vary, ranging from an incidental mention, such as the 'small church fac[ing] the inn' in Philip Macdonald's brief description of 'Friar's Wick' in his short story 'The-Wood-for-the-Trees' (1947)³¹ to

becoming an intrinsic element of the detective narrative, as are the church, vicarage and parishioners in Sayers' *The Nine Tailors* (1934) or Christie's *Murder at the Vicarage* (1930) where the crimes and the ensuing investigations centre around the ecclesiastical setting and its inhabitants.

In fact, what can be identified in the Golden-Age detective story is almost a return to the 'deeply Christian world with small social units where everybody is known, where hiding is hard and where socialisation tends to be public', that Knight identifies within in *The Newgate Calendar* stories (p. 12). It will be demonstrated in the next chapter that the close-knit, rural community that is represented in the Golden-Age detective story is an example of the same 'strain ideology' that Knight identifies as existing in the Newgate stories: 'an optimistic account selecting and ordering material to provide a consoling fable in the face of disturbing reality' (p. 13). Unlike the Newgate Stories, however, there is a deliberate irony and self-consciousness in the presentation of this consoling fable. This can be seen in the frequent intrusions of the 'real' post-war world into the stories, as well as a conscious acknowledgement of artifice through generic self reference and allusions to game-playing.³² In the Newgate stories, the disturbing reality was the emergence of an urban environment with its anonymous, theistically fragmented population. This soon became an accepted reality, however, and one which was represented, even celebrated, in the representations of scientific progress in the detective fiction of this time and which also provided a reassuring method of crime control of its own, in the figure of the apotheosised detective. This prompts the question of what caused the return to the idealised 'consoling fable' that we see in Golden-Age detective fiction.

As far as the religious element to this fable is concerned, the presentation in many Golden-Age detective novels of Britain as a church-going society that is theistically cohesive in terms of being predominantly high church Church of England is not a realistic one. During and after the war, belief remained in a similar state of fragmentation to that of the Victorian era, and whilst it would be reasonable to expect the First World War to have had some kind of effect on attitudes to religion, this is quite difficult to gauge. In *Women's Fiction of the Second World War: Gender Power and Resistance*, Gill Plain argues that 'it is difficult to establish whether there was an overall growth or decline in religious belief in the immediately postwar years, but it does seem clear that the nature of belief underwent a radical transformation'.³³ This difficulty in establishing the facts is borne out by the widely varying evidence available on this subject and the number of denominations to be considered when analysing statistics. In *War and Progress: Britain 1914-1945*, Peter Dewey states that:

'In the interwar period, the major denominations were more than holding their own. The number of Easter communicants of the Church of England was almost static between 1914 and 1939, at about 2.2 million; the estimated Roman Catholic population of Britain rose from 2.0 million to 3.0 million between 1900 and 1940. A notable feature of the latter's history was the number of adult conversions, which in the interwar period ran at over 10,000 a year in England and Wales alone [...].'³⁴

This would suggest stability and increase in certain sectors, including a possible rise in Catholicism in the post-war years. If other denominations are considered, however, it is easy to create a different picture. In *Britain in the 1930s: The Deceptive Decade*, Andrew Thorpe describes how: 'churchgoing [...] declined, certainly in the case of the

Protestant denominations. Nonconformity was hardest hit [...]. The Anglican church fared better, but attendance still declined slightly' and that 'the Catholics [in terms of increasing numbers] were an exceptional minority.'³⁵ Whilst it is therefore difficult to establish a clear picture of the effects of the war on belief in terms of its growth or decline, there is evidence to substantiate the argument that there were a number of responses to religion generated by the war, and that, for the most part, these seem to have been negative.

In part, these negative responses are based on the perceived inadequacies of the Churches in response to the war: there was 'a widespread feeling that the responses of the Christian churches to the theological and moral problems of the war of 1914-18 had been less than satisfactory'.³⁶ This is addressed by A. Wyatt Tilby in 'The Riddle of After-Life' in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1918, cited by Joanna Bourke, 'The war changed everything. Bewildered people once again sought out spiritual consolation: 'The churches filled again, but they had no new message, and they are often accused of failing in the presentment of the old'.³⁷ This sense of the failure of the Churches was particularly strong amongst soldiers at the front, not least, Bourke argues, because:

Despite valiant attempts by religious hierarchies to fulfill their spiritual duties, there were simply too few of them (there was one chaplain to over 1, 000 servicemen), chaplains wore officers uniforms (which alienated them from the rank and file), and distinctions of class, education and military prowess led many servicemen to regard these 'men of God' as obsequious and immature (p. 231).

More fundamental than this, however, was the challenge to the fighting men's faith by the bloodthirsty and apparently futile nature of the war. According to David Roberts in

Minds at War: Essential Poetry of the First World War in Context: ‘the world became suddenly more uncertain, more out-of-control, more godless than it had ever seemed before [... it] weakened or destroyed faith in religion’.³⁸ In the following anthology, Roberts gives as an example of this two of Siegfried Sassoon’s poems, ‘Vicarious Christ’ and “‘They’”. In ‘Vicarious Christ’, Sassoon demonstrates the sense that the clergy were out of touch with the modern soldier and modern warfare when he describes how ‘The Bishop of Byegumb was an old friend of our General; / In fact he knew him out in the Soudan.’ There is a bitter tone to the poem, which focuses on the empty and unrealistic sermon given by the Bishop:

The Bishop of Byegumb has preached on Victory, I am certain,
 (Though I haven’t seen it mentioned in the Press).
 But when I was his victim, how I wished I could have kicked him,
 For he made me love Religion less and less (p. 153).

This bitterness is even more pronounced in “‘They’”, where ‘The Bishop’ describes how ‘the boys’, ‘have fought / In a just cause: they lead the last attack / On anti-Christ’. The Bishop’s words are rousing, and focus on the platitudes of war as a ‘just cause’, and on ‘honour’. The soldiers’ reply to this, and focus instead on the realities of war, ‘For George lost both his legs; and Bill’s stone blind / Poor Jim’s shot through the lungs and like to die’. The phrase ‘For George’ is ambiguous, with implications of the just cause that the Bishop refers to, that is, ‘king and country’: it is for King George that legs have been lost. The Bishop’s response to these arguments is that, ‘the ways of God are strange!’ (p. 153), emphasising the inability of the church, or faith, to provide an explanation or adequate response to war.

This inadequacy was also felt on the Home Front. Bourke cites another contemporary source as evidence:

Margaret Jarvis's pain was manifest in a letter she penned to a female friend in 1918 after hearing of her son's death: 'I am just all to pieces at present. My boy was all I had in the world, & I honestly did trust that God would keep him safe, [...] all through these horrible six months I trusted ... my poor boy, he was so good, why did God make him suffer so (p. 230).

Much of the bad feeling towards the churches was exacerbated by the role they had played in creating war-propaganda. Trevor Wilson considers the record of events kept by the incumbent of Great Leigh during World War One, the Rev. Andrew Clark, who records how, early in the war, the Bishop of Chelmsford communicated with him on the need to reinforce 'the Church's role as an agent of reconciliation':

But as time went on a more strident note entered the bishop's communications – a stridency directed not against the nation's enemies, but against backsliders within. On 1 June 1915, he wrote to his clergy that there had been a splendid response to the call from king and country, but even now there were numbers of people who did not realize the terrible issues at stake. [...]. This pointed, said the bishop, to the necessity for arousing people in our parishes to a sense of their responsibility: 'I have no hesitation in asking you to urge, all men of a military age, as a religious duty, to take their stand with the brothers at the Front; but above all to keep before men the great moral and spiritual aspects of the struggle now being waged'.³⁹

This call to arms by the Church seems to have been nationwide, and Wilson identifies it amongst both the episcopate and the general clergy, and whilst some of these calls were alarmist and jingoistic, the Rev. Clark limited himself to reiterating the popular theme of

‘sacrifice’ and the message that ‘the fallen, by the manner of their dying, were directly emulating the founder of Christianity, who was the first to rise from the dead’ (p. 179).

The religious presences in Golden-Age detective fiction are not representative of this unrest or of the continuing diversity in denominations of worship. Instead, the considerable number of references to the Established Church of England in inter-war detective stories can be linked to the achievement of a ‘consoling fable’ as identified by Knight in the *Newgate Calendar* stories, and the ‘optimistic account selecting and ordering of material [...] in the face of a disturbing reality’. In the Golden Age, as with the *Newgate* stories, this disturbing reality is linked to social change. This change had begun in the Edwardian era and was furthered irretrievably by the First World War. It will be demonstrated in the next chapter that, in Golden-Age detective fiction, we are presented with a mythologised, innocent and ordered world which is in part a nostalgic and unrealistic recreation of an Edwardian England that had supposedly been destroyed by the war. In terms of both its formulaic structure and style, and its content, detective fiction of this time provided a reassuring order in a disordered world. Part of this reassuring content is the presence of the Established Church, itself representative of an ordered way of life, as Plain argues: ‘in the aftermath of the First World War the intensely structured nature of high church ritual seemed to offer a comforting, perhaps even anaesthetising, framework from which to rebuild shattered lives’.⁴⁰ This may account for the rise in Catholicism presented by historians such as Dewey and Thorpe in terms of the ‘real’ interwar world, but it clearly suggests a reason for the inclusion of the Church in so many detective stories of the time.

¹ Martin Priestman, *Crime Fiction from Poe to the present*, p. 1. See also Dorothy L. Sayers, *Great Short Stories of Detection, Mystery and Horror*, p. 9; Howard Haycraft, *Murder for Pleasure: The Life and Times of the Detective story*, 1st British edn, (London: Windmill Press, 1942), p. 4; George Grella, 'The Formal Detective Novel', in *Detective Fiction: A Collection of Critical Essays* ed. by R. Winks (Woodstock: Foul Play Press, 1980), p. 89 and Ian Ousby, *The Crime and Mystery Book: A Reader's Companion* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), p. 11.

² Sayers, *Great Short Stories*, p. 51.

³ This movement towards secularism will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter. See also Anthony Harrison, '1848' in *A Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture* ed. by Herbert F. Tucker (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999); Linda K Hughes, '1870' in *A Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture*, ed. by Herbert F. Tucker (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999) and Christopher Hibbert, *The English: A Social History 1066-1945* (London: Guild Publishing, 1987).

⁴ Julian Symons, *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel: A History* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), p. 12.

⁵ *Whodunit? A Guide to Crime, Suspense and Spy Fiction*, ed. by H.R.F. Keating (London: Winward, 1982).

⁶ Eugene Francois Vidocq, *Les Memoirs de Vidocq* (London: Hunt and Clarke, 1828-29); William Russell, *The Recollections of a Detective Police-Officer* (London: J. & C. Brown, 1856). See Ousby, *The Crime and Mystery Book*, pp. 20-21.

⁷ Reginald Hill, 'A Prehistory' in *Whodunit? A Guide to Crime, Suspense and Spy Fiction*, ed. by H.R.F. Keating (London: Winward, 1982), p. 20.

⁸ Stephen Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1980); Howard Haycraft, *Murder for Pleasure*, pp. xv- xxvii. 'Nicholas Blake' was the pseudonym under which the poet C. Day Lewis wrote detective fiction, beginning with *A Question of Proof* (London: Collins, 1935), in which he introduced his detective, Nigel Strangeways. Like Sayers, Lewis had a religious upbringing as the son of a Church of Ireland clergyman.

⁹ John Villette, *The Annals of Newgate; or, The Malefactor's Register* (London: 1776). Subsequently published in weekly penny issues and other versions such as *The Newgate Calendar*.

¹⁰ Norman Birkett, ed. *The Newgate Calendar* (London: The Folio Society, 1951) p. 188.

¹¹ Christopher Hibbert, *The English: A Social History 1066-1945*, p. 568.

¹² Linda K Hughes, '1870' in *A Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture*, p. 41.

¹³ Hibbert, *The English: A Social History*, p. 641.

¹⁴ Edgar Allen Poe 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' in *The Fall of The House of Usher and Other Writings*, ed. by David Galloway (London: Penguin, 1986), p. 193 (first publ. in *Graham's Magazine*, 1841).

¹⁵ Arthur Conan Doyle 'The Adventure of a Scandal in Bohemia' in *The Adventures and Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* (New York: Random House, 2002), pp. 3-4 (First publ. in the *Strand Magazine*, 1891).

¹⁶ Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Sign of Four* (London: Spencer Blackett, 1890; repr. Penguin, 1982), p. 25.

¹⁷ Arthur Conan Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet* (London: Ward, Lock, 1887; repr. Penguin, 1981), p. 31.

¹⁸ Colin Brown 'The Ascent of Man' in *The History of Christianity*, ed. by John H.Y Briggs, Robert D. Linder and David F. Wright (Tring: Lion, 1982), p. 538.

¹⁹ Anthony Harrison, '1848' in *A Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture*, p. 26.

²⁰ Ousby, *The Crime and Mystery Book*, p. 55.

²¹ Arthur Conan Doyle, 'The Naval Treaty' in *The Adventures and Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* (New York: Random House, 2002), p. 445 (First publ. in the *Strand Magazine*, 1893).

²² James Frazer (1845-1941). Social anthropologist who wrote *The Golden Bough, a Study in Magic and Religion* (1890).

²³ Agatha Christie, *Five Little Pigs* (London: Collins, 1942; repr. Fontana, 1959); *The ABC Murders* (London: Collins, 1936; repr. Fontana, 1962).

²⁴ Ngaio Marsh *Overture to Death* (London: Collins, 1939; repr. Fontana, 1962); *Death at the Bar* (London: Collins, 1940; repr. HarperCollins, 2000).

²⁵ Susan Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell: British Women Writers in Crime Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 136.

²⁶ 'The Adventure of a Case of Identity' in *The Adventures and Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*, p. 49 (first publ. in the *Strand Magazine*, 1891).

- ²⁷ 'The Adventure of a Scandal in Bohemia' in *The Adventures and Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*, pp. 4-5 (first publ. in the *Strand Magazine*, 1891).
- ²⁸ John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia 1880-1939* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), p. 8.
- ²⁹ 'The Adventure of the Veiled Lodger' in *The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes*, p. 218.
- ³⁰ Agatha Christie, *The Secret Adversary* (London: Lane, 1922; repr. Pan, 1955); *Why Didn't They Ask Evans?* (London: Collins, 1934; repr. Fontana, 1956).
- ³¹ *Country House Murders*, ed. by Thomas Godfrey (London: Headline, 1989), p. 251.
- ³² These features of the Golden-Age detective story are discussed in more detail in Chapter Four, below.
- ³³ Gill Plain, *Women's Fiction of the Second World War: Gender Power and Resistance* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), p. 71.
- ³⁴ Peter Dewey, *War and Progress: Britain 1914-1945* (London: Longman, 1997), p. 188.
- ³⁵ Andrew Thorpe, *Britain in the 1930s: The Deceptive Decade* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 101-102.
- ³⁶ Dewey, *War and Progress*, p. 188.
- ³⁷ Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War* (London: Reaktion Books, 1996), p. 233.
- ³⁸ David Roberts, *Minds at War: Essential Poetry of the First World War in Context* (Burgess Hill: Saxon, 1996), p. 9.
- ³⁹ Trevor Wilson, *The Myriad Faces of War: Britain and the Great War 1914-1918* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), p. 178.
- ⁴⁰ Plain, *Women's Fiction*, p. 71.

Chapter Four

The Golden Age: A Return to Eden

In *Murder for Pleasure: The Life and Times of the Detective Story* (1941) Howard Haycraft was the first critic to apply the term 'Golden Age' to detective fiction, using it specifically to describe the era of writing between 1918 and 1930, which he felt was characterised by three specific developments in the genre: '(1) the vast improvement of the literacy of the detective story; (2) the new insistence on fidelity and plausibility, as opposed to the old school of melodrama and hokum; (3) the increased emphasis, particularly toward the end of the period, on character, with the concurrent wane of the story of mechanical plot alone' (p. 158). This improvement in style and content, identified by Haycraft, made detective fiction at this time, in his opinion, 'the richest single age in the literature [...] In all truth, it was "The Golden Age"' (p. 158). As a writer of the inter-war years, Dorothy L. Sayers can be classified as belonging to this 'Golden Age' or 'classical' era of detective fiction. Indeed, along with Agatha Christie, Margery Allingham, and Ngaio Marsh, she is often cited as one of the 'queens' of this particular period within the genre.¹ It is, perhaps, Christie's detective fiction that most closely adheres to the archetypal conventions of the Golden Age, and consequently she can be used to make a useful comparison to Sayers - illustrating the ways that Sayers goes beyond these conventions when she incorporates within her stories considerations of the potentially more complicated issues arising from detective fiction. Haycraft argues that, 'no author illustrates the trend better than Dorothy Sayers [...], who has been called by some critics the greatest of living writers in the form. Whether or not the

reader agrees with this verdict, he cannot, unless he is both obtuse and ungrateful, dispute her preëminence as one of the most brilliant and prescient artists the genre has yet produced' (p. 135). This opinion of Sayers, however, has not always been so readily accepted, as will be demonstrated later in this chapter.

Haycraft designates the period from 1930 to the time of his writing, 1941, as 'The Moderns', a term which he also applies to the writers of this period, and which he catagorises as entirely separately from 'The Golden Age'. It is in the work of 'The Moderns' that Haycraft identifies the development of the 'novel of detection-cum-character' or the "'literary" detective novel'(p. 183). Since Haycraft's original definition, however, critics have ceased to make a clear distinction between the detective fiction of the Twenties and that of the Thirties. Changes and developments in the form over that time are sometimes identified, but instead of the two distinct eras seen by Haycraft, the term 'Golden Age' has been used to refer to British detective fiction in the period from the end of the First World War (1918) to the beginning of the Second World War (1939). It is in this context that most critics still use it, for example, *The Oxford Companion to Crime and Mystery Writing* suggests that 'the years following World War I and leading to the start of World War II are conveniently labeled (sic) the Golden Age of Detective Fiction'.² The criteria for definition have changed since Haycraft's initial eulogy on stylistic improvements, and tend to focus more on what are perceived as distinctive elements of content and style: 'What the English detective story essentially was can be more easily described than defined. When one thinks of likely or essential ingredients one could name: a country house or rural village; a corpse; a closed circle of suspects; an extended family group [...].'³ It is the 'country house or rural village' that is

the most often cited feature of the Golden-Age story and it is as part of this milieu that the Established Church is present, as an intrinsic element of life in a country village. There are innumerable examples of stories with this particular setting, such as Agatha Christie's *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920), *The Secret of Chimneys* (1925) and *The Hollow* (1946), or Margery Allingham's *Look to the Lady* (1931) and *Dancers in Mourning* (1937), to name but a few.⁴ Sayers makes use of it in several of her novels, including *Clouds of Witness* (1926), in which the setting is the Duke of Denver's appropriately named shooting lodge, 'Riddlesdale Lodge' and *Busman's Honeymoon* (1937), which takes place in 'Talboys', the honeymoon home of Wimsey and Harriet in the country village of Great Pagford. In many of these stories, reference is made to the local church. In *Clouds of Witness*, there is a lengthy discussion as to whether the characters should attend Church after the arrest of Wimsey's brother: "'well, after all,'" said Mrs. Marchbanks, "'as Helen so rightly says, does it matter? Nobody's really got anything to be ashamed of. There has been a stupid mistake of course, but I don't see why anybody who wants to shouldn't go to church'" (p. 38). Their reason for not attending illustrates Knight's model of the closed rural society where anything wrong is immediately apparent to the whole community, as they are afraid that they will be 'conspicuous' and will 'get a bit stared at' (p. 37). In *Busman's Honeymoon*, as will be discussed in Chapter Five, there is considerable focus on the role of the Church and its incumbent in the lives of the parishioners of Great Pagford and the ways in which these are bound up with the detective narrative.

So many writers made use of the country village setting that it became something of a cliché, and the focus of parody and criticism even at the height of its popularity. Writing in the 1920s, Ronald Knox commented that:

We know as we sit down to the book that a foul murder has almost certainly been done at a country house; that the butler will have been in the family for sixteen years; that a young male secretary will have been only recently engaged; that the chauffeur will have gone away for the night to his widowed mother [...] if I walked into the detective story house I believe I should be able to find my way about it perfectly; it is always more or less the same in design.⁵

Although Knox comments on the ‘sameness’ of the country-house formula, his observations are benign, almost suggesting an appealing element to this familiarity. A more severe criticism was given by Raymond Chandler in his 1944 essay, ‘The Simple Art of Murder’, which outlined the limitations of the Golden-Age story, particularly the country house setting:

[...] fundamentally it is the same careful grouping of suspects, the same utterly incomprehensible trick of how somebody stabbed Mrs Pottington Postlethawaite III with the solid platinum poniard just as she flattened on the top note of the “Bell Song” from *La Kimé* in the presence of fifteen ill-assorted guests [...] (p. 12).

This repetition, Chandler argues, leads to the stories being ‘too contrived’, so that ‘they do not come off artistically as fiction’ (p. 12). He focuses directly on Sayers as he enlarges on this point, and his opinions are clearly different from those of Haycraft on the English detective story of the 1920s and its ‘approach to the literary standards of the legitimate novel’ (Haycraft, p. 135). Chandler argues that ‘[Sayers’] kind of detective story was an arid formula which could not even satisfy its own implications. It was second-grade literature because it was not about the things that could make first-grade

literature' (p. 14). The over-use of formulaic elements such as the country house prevented the 'artistic' or literary development of the form. In defense of the genre as a whole it is worth considering Todorov's argument that once detective fiction transcends its genre then it ceases to be detective fiction: 'the masterpiece of popular literature is precisely the book which best fits its genre'(p. 43). In defense of Sayers, it should be said that she was fully aware of the tensions in her work between the formulaic detective narrative and a desire to develop the 'artistic' element to the books.

In 'The Simple Art of Murder', Chandler focuses on these tensions in Sayers' fiction, arguing that, 'Dorothy Sayers' own stories show that she was annoyed by this triteness; the weakest element in them is the part that makes them detective stories, the strongest the part that could be removed without touching the 'problem of logic and deduction' (p. 14). Sayers does acknowledge this problem in her stories, mostly through the character of Harriet Vane, who is a writer of detective fiction, and who has been seen by some critics as a version of Sayers herself. Coombes, for example, describes Harriet as 'a mirror image of Sayers herself' and 'a thinly-disguised autobiographical figure' (p. 9). He argues that *Gaudy Night* is an extension of Sayers' autobiographical writings: 'intriguingly, *Cat o' Mary* and *My Edwardian Childhood*, both written in the early thirties, end as she begins *Gaudy Night*, and the reason is not hard to find: Harriet Vane takes the place of Katherine Lammas, and says all the things that Sayers is bursting to say' (p. 115).⁶ Through Harriet, Sayers presents some of her frustrations about achieving a balance between the detective narrative, with its necessarily formulaic approach, and the more 'literary' element to her writing. In *Gaudy Night* (1935), Harriet is struggling with her novel '*Death 'twixt Wind and Water*' and Wimsey agrees with the concerns that

she outlines, commenting that ‘from a purely constructional point of view [he doesn’t feel that] Wilfred’s behaviour is sufficiently accounted for’, and suggests that she ‘make[s] Wilfred one of those morbidly conscientious people, who have been brought up to think that anything pleasant must be wrong [...] Give him a puritanical father and a hell-fire religion’ (p. 291). This re-creation of ‘Wilfred’ with a psychological dimension would obviously develop Harriet’s book beyond its genre, and would involve writing “‘literature”, not detective fiction”.⁷ Harriet sees this and complains if she rewrites her character, with ‘violent and life-like feelings, he’ll throw the whole book out of balance’, to which Wimsey replies that she would ‘have to abandon the jig-saw kind of story and write a book about human beings for a change’ (p. 291). This reference to the ‘jig-saw kind of story’, re-emphasises the puzzle-like nature of detective fiction, an element of the formula that, whilst not always adhering to it, Sayers was talented at producing, clearly demonstrated by *Five Red Herrings*. This open discussion about the process of writing by two of her characters, however, reveals Sayers’ awareness of the possibilities of going beyond these boundaries, and what this means in terms of her detective stories, a point which will be discussed in more detail later.

Despite its possible over-use, the popularity of the country house with both writers and readers of detective fiction continued. There were variations on the theme, as Ian Ousby points out, ‘the possible variants were apparently endless [...] the school, the hospital, the cathedral cloister, the millionaire’s private island’ (p. 72), but the basic idea behind these variations was the same: an enclosed environment, be it one building or a small community. Each time, the ‘closed’ nature of the setting is carefully emphasised, for example the village of Lymstock in Agatha Christie’s *The Moving Finger* (1943):

'[n]either railways nor roads came near Lymstock. It turned into a little provincial town unimportant and forgotten, with a sweep of moorland rising behind it and placid farms ringing it round.'⁸ The moor and farmland provide an effective barrier to the outside world, and any movement in and out of this environment can be carefully monitored, providing a finite cast of characters, again emphasising the close-knit community where recognition of a stranger, or strange behaviour, is inevitable. This limitation of the number of characters in turn creates a finite number of suspects for the murder, and therefore a finite number of potential solutions, a significant consideration if the reader is to be given a fair chance of 'solving' the mystery for themselves.⁹

This notion of 'fair play' is another particular feature of the Golden Age. The puzzle has always been an essential element to the detective narrative, as part of the interest in the story is in the discovery of a solution to a mystery or problem, such as who (or what) killed Madame and Mademoiselle L'Españaye or what was 'the speckled band'?¹⁰ In these examples, Poe and Doyle narrate how their detective employs super-human powers to solve the mystery, impressing the reader with their ability to arrive at an answer that is beyond the powers of the police, and, indeed, the reader, who is not given access to all the information held by the detective. In Golden-Age stories, this earlier emphasis on showmanship changes, and emphasis is instead placed on the potential for the reader to solve the mystery alongside the detective, having been provided with all the necessary clues by the author. Strict emphasis was placed on this by many writers of the time: part of the initiation ceremony to The Detection Club, for example, was to 'solemnly swear never to conceal a Vital Clue from a reader'¹¹. In 1929, Ronald Knox produced his 'Ten Commandments' of detective fiction, which would ensure 'fair play'

for the reader-detective. Commandment eight, for example, states that, 'The detective is bound to declare any clues upon which he may happen to light.'¹² Not all writers adhered strictly to these rules and those who deviated from them risked the disapproval of critics and public alike in so doing. Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926) caused critical debate when it was first published, as many saw the revelation of the narrator as the murderer as cheating on the author's part, since this couldn't have been worked out by the reader with the information given.¹³ Christie, however, defended this twist, claiming that 'such little lapses of time as there have to be are nicely concealed in an ambiguous sentence, and Dr. Sheppard, in writing it down, took great pleasure himself in writing nothing but the truth, though not the whole truth.'¹⁴

While Knox's 'rules' were presented to some extent tongue-in-cheek, the decalogue demonstrates the general attitude both to and of the Golden-Age detective novel, reinforcing the idea that it is a cerebral pastime for amusement, governed by rules in the way that any other game is. The writers themselves were aware of the puzzle status afforded to their work, and this is often acknowledged in the stories by references to other activities of a similar nature, such as chess, cards and parlour games, such as Christie's novel *Cards on the Table*, in which the murder takes place during a game of bridge, or Marsh's *Hand in Glove*, which revolves around a treasure-hunt party at which the guests must follow a series of clues to the prize.¹⁵ Sayers stresses the parallels between detective fiction and puzzle games throughout her detective stories, for example in *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*, Anne Dorland comments that '... a detective story keeps your brain occupied. Rather like chess' (p. 217). In fact, in some of Sayers' short stories, the game is the focus of the action. In 'Nebuchadnezzar', for example, the

solution to a murder is revealed during the process of a game of charades, and in 'The Fascinating Problem of Uncle Melcager's Will', the whereabouts of the eponymous uncle's hidden fortune can only be discovered through the solution of a crossword.¹⁶ The short story 'The Necklace of Pearls' takes place during a Christmas party at a country house, where the guests participate in games such as 'Charades' and 'Clumps' and 'Animal, Vegetable, Mineral' in the drawing room, concluding these diversions by 'Hide-and-Seek' in the dark all over the house.'¹⁷ During the game, a valuable necklace of pearls is stolen and Lord Peter Wimsey, Sayers' detective, begins another game of hide-and-seeK to recover them.

As has been indicated, however, there is a tension in Sayers' work between this adherence to the rules and her desire to develop her novels beyond formulaic fiction. When she did break the rules and attempt a more literary style, she was criticised by her reading public. Her most formulaic, and possibly her most dull, detective novel, *Five Red Herrings* (1931), was written with the intention of its being, as she put it, a 'pure puzzle story', where her readers could play 'spot the murderer'.¹⁸ This is most apparent with her inclusion of a note to the reader regarding a missing item – a tube of white paint - which is a vital clue: 'here Lord Peter told the Sergeant what he was to look for and why, but as the intelligent reader will readily supply these details for himself, they are omitted from this page' (p. 22). If the reader can work out what is missing, then they have all of the information that they need to solve the murder-mystery with, or before, Wimsey. Sayers outlined this plan in a letter to her publishers, Gollancz, in 1930:

About the penultimate chapter, various members of the police give their opinions – one saying he thinks A is the murderer, another

plumping for B, the third for C, and so on. Wimsey says ‘You are all very plausible, but it was B, and as a matter of fact I *know* this’ – his reason being that he has discovered which of them has the missing object. The reader also will know which of them has it, provided, of course, that he has previously made up his mind what the missing object is (*Letters, Volume One*, p. 309).

This rigid adherence to the pure puzzle story formula with *Five Red Herrings* was in response to both critics’ and readers’ complaints that she had ‘lost [her] grip, because the identity of the murderer was obvious from the start’ of her previous novel, *Strong Poison* (*Her Life and Soul*, pp. 265-266). One possible reason for the change in approach in *Strong Poison*, noted with displeasure by some, was that Sayers had begun to develop her detective fiction into a different kind of novel: one that was not just about the process of detection, but about its implications and consequences. In a letter to Gollancz she says that she feels, ‘it is only when the murderer *is* obvious that the reader can concentrate on the question [...] *How* did he do it?’ (p. 312). This state of affairs in a detective novel also allows the reader to concentrate on a number of other questions such as ‘why’ ‘he’ did it and what the implications and consequences of this action are.

In her introduction to *Great Short Stories of Detection, Mystery and Horror* (1928), Sayers comments on the great popularity of ‘puzzle’ activities in the inter-war years: ‘The pages of every magazine and newspaper swarm with cross-words, mathematical tricks, puzzle-pictures, enigmas, acrostics, detective-stories [...]’ (p. 9). Detective fiction itself can be seen, in part, as an extension of this interest. Douglas Hewitt, in *English Fiction of the Early Modern Period: 1890-1940* (1988), offers several explanations for

the considerable increase in publication of detective fiction during this period, offering as one of the reasons the increase in popularity of ‘puzzle’ pastimes:

The extension of education brought about by the Act of 1870, it has been said, produced a crop of partially educated people whose tastes were catered for by the rise of the popular press and of such magazines as *Tit-bits* and *Answers*. Puzzles of various kinds fitted their tastes; the first crossword puzzle, for instance was produced in the United States in 1913 and in Great Britain in 1924. Puzzle stories – detective fiction – catered for the same interest and, once established, snowballed.¹⁹

This particular sector of the diverse readership for detective fiction: ‘the crop of partially-educated people’ who made up the middle and lower-middle classes is also discussed by John Carey in *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, when he describes George Bernard Shaw’s response to having his novel *Immaturity* ‘turned down by almost every London publisher’:

Looking back on this event, and working out the reasons for it, he realized that a radical change had occurred in the reading public. ‘The Education Act of 1871,’ he explained, ‘was producing readers who had never before bought books, nor could have read them if they had.’ Publishers were finding out that people wanted not George Eliot nor the ‘excessively literary’ Bernard Shaw, but adventure stories like Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (p. 6).

The detective story was part of this phenomenon, as were ‘intellectual’ pastimes such as crosswords, and, in the same way that there are ‘rules’ to govern these pastimes, there are also more literal boundaries: a crossword grid or a game board, limiting the number of moves or length and duration of play, ensuring that there is a definite outcome. In terms of the detective story, this is provided by the closed environment, the limited

setting and cast of characters, which the country house or rural village conveniently provides:

A murder during a gathering at a country house provides enough intertwined characters with enough possible motives to fill a novel, albeit a short one, needing little else to keep it going by way of change of scene or much elaboration of character. A few outside forays apart, the action and *dramatis personae* are as it were frozen in time and place by the murder, as in a snapshot, allowing a picture of a single social group, 'typical' even if in crisis, to develop slowly and with satisfying completeness. (Priestman, p. 19).

It should be acknowledged that not all Golden-Age detective stories have a rural setting. Some stories are placed in an urban environment, and, often, the city-based stories of the Golden-Age writers have plots involving espionage, dealing with scientific intrigue or foreign menaces, such as Agatha Christie's *The Big Four* (1927) or *Partners in Crime* (1929).²⁰ Unlike those with rural settings, the criminals tend to be gangs rather than individuals and the threat is usually to the nation, rather than the individual. These examples are few, though, and more often than not, the urban stories involve moving the 'closed' setting of the country house to an urban equivalent, such as an office or hospital. Sayers does this in both *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*, set in a gentleman's club, Picadilly, and *Murder Must Advertise*, which is set in a London advertising agency. *Gaudy Night* is a more obvious example of the transposing of the rural formula on an urban setting; Sayers' descriptions of the 'closed' environment of Shrewsbury College and the city of Oxford focus closely on the natural world. The college is described, with its 'trim grass plot, with flower beds splashed at angles [and] roofs of Cotswold slate' (p. 7), and at the end of the novel, Sayers describes a view over

the city with: 'all Oxford springing underfoot in living leaf and enduring stone' (p. 434); as Brunsdale observes, 'for her epigraph, Dorothy Sayers used John Donne's view of Oxford as the Garden of Eden' (p. 125).²¹ It is this Eden-like quality of a rural environment that is essential to the 'strain ideology' present in Golden-Age detective fiction, as will be demonstrated later in this chapter, as it not only relies on a lack of 'realism', but it draws attention to the state of innocence that this milieu provides.

Whether rural or urban the settings chosen are seen by many more recent critics as having been drawn from a limited range of possibilities: 'lunatic asylums and prisons, wartime trenches or camps and slum neighbourhoods would have fitted their requirements [...] and none is hard to find in the 'mainstream' novels of the 1920s and 1930s. Yet they do not feature in detective stories' (Ousby, p. 72). Whilst criticism of the country-house setting during the Golden Age tended to focus on its over-use, more recent criticisms have focused on the lack of 'realism', in the way that it fails to respond to or reflect the society of which it was a product:

Country houses and/or upper-middle-class village communities may provide the satisfyingly manageable closed societies demanded by the form; they also purvey a typifying vision of British Society as a whole strikingly at odds with many insistent realities of the inter-war years, from the devastation of the Great War to the mass unemployment and depression of the 1920s and 1930s. (Priestman, p. 21)

This comment by Priestman is representative of criticisms leveled at this element of the Golden-Age stories. Firstly, that they do not acknowledge ‘the Great War’ and consequential social unrest, and, secondly, that they deal mainly with an idealised and unrealistic version of upper-middle-class society.²²

One response to this might be that there is no need for any engagement with the ‘real’ world: detective fiction is a form of ‘fantasy’ literature, concerned with escapism. As Sayers herself said, ‘[...] make no mistake about it, the detective-story is part of the literature of escape, and not of expression’ (*Great Short Stories of Detection, Mystery and Horror*, p. 44). In *Adventure, Mystery and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture*, John Cawelti discusses how ‘[i]n that well-known and controlled landscape of the imagination the tensions, ambiguities, and frustrations of ordinary experience are painted over by magic pigments of adventure, romance and mystery.’²³

This idea of detective fiction as escapist is significant and will be returned to, but to justify the critics’ claims of the absence of realism in Golden-Age stories, one would have to overlook that there are, in fact, plenty of references to the First World War and its consequences, in terms of the creation of setting and characters. In many stories these references tend to be brief, such as in Christie’s first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, in which we learn that Hastings has been ‘invalided home from the front’ (p. 10) and that Hercule Poirot is in England as a Belgian refugee from the war (p. 21). In these references, Christie rarely seems to be making a point about the war, political or personal. Instead, they are there to assist in establishing the background for characters or events. In *The Secret Adversary* (1922), for example, we are given details of the war experience of both the main protagonists, Thomas Beresford and ‘Tuppence’ Cowley.

Thomas has fought in the war: 'I went out to France again, as you know. Then they sent me to Mesopotamia, and I got wounded for the second time, and went into hospital out there [...]', and Tuppence has worked at an officers' hospital in London, as well as a driver to a general. Both are now unemployed, as Thomas comments: '[a]nd, for ten long, weary months I've been job hunting! There aren't any jobs! And, if there were, they wouldn't give 'em to me. What good am I? What do I know about business?'²⁴ Mass unemployment was a significant social factor after the First World War, particularly amongst ex-servicemen. Unemployment had risen from 3.1 per cent in 1920, with many servicemen still not demobbed, to 13.5 percent in 1921 and 13.8 per cent in 1922.²⁵ This generated anger amongst many ex-soldiers, and became a source of political unrest: '[...] both soldiers and ex-soldiers were beginning to see that the promises had been lies. As Luton Town Council's Peace Day procession marched through the streets it passed disabled veterans who raised a banner reading: 'Don't pity us, give us work!'²⁶ There is no apparent implication, however, that Christie is making a political statement through her novel. Instead, Tommy and Tuppence's unemployment is her vehicle for uniting these two protagonists in amateur detection, without much thought as to how they are paying the rent.

In the novels of Sayers, however, there seems to be a more in-depth engagement with various issues connected to the war. Sayers refers to the First World War in some way in all of her novels - in fact, it forms the basis for part of the plot in *The Nine Tailors* and *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*. In the former, a supposedly dead convict, Deacon, has in fact escaped, killed a soldier and taken his uniform, and then been unwittingly posted to the front in war-time France, which enables him to change his

identity and later return to the scene of his initial crime, where he has stashed some stolen emeralds. Part of Wimsey's investigations involve a journey to France to discover this missing part of the narrative, which involves descriptions of the confusion after a battle, that enabled Deacon to avoid remaining with the army: 'milord will remember the retreat over the Marne in July. *Quelle histoire sanglante!* On that occasion the retreating armies were swept back across the Marne pell-mell and passed in disorder through the little village of C-y' (p. 163). In *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*, the war is utilised by Sayers in terms of the plot, as the corpse of General Fentiman is moved during the two minutes silence on Armistice Day, when there will be no witnesses as 'everybody would be either out in the street or upstairs on the big balcony' (p. 124). A further clue as to the time of the General's death is provided by the fact that he is not wearing his Flanders poppy, which proves that he cannot have arrived at the club on the morning of November 11th: 'is it conceivable that, if the old man had been walking in the streets as a free agent on Armistice Day, he would have gone into the club without his Flanders poppy? A patriotic, military, old bird like that? It really was unthinkable' (pp. 117-118). The references to the war are not limited to plot devices in this novel; Sayers, like Christie, deals with the lack of opportunities in a post-war world for ex-servicemen. The invalided George Fentiman, who suffers from both physical and mental ill-effects of the war, complains:

A man goes and fights for his country, gets his insides gassed out, and loses his job, and all they give him is the privilege of marching past the Cenotaph once a year and paying four shillings in the pound income tax [...] It's pretty damnable for a man to have to live on his wife's earnings, isn't it. I can't help it Wimsey. I go sick and have to chuck jobs up. (p. 6)

Fentiman's complaint is more emotive than Tommy's and suggests a more in-depth engagement by Sayers with the realities of the post-war world than Christie. There may also be personal reasons behind Sayers' engagement with this subject. Several biographers identify a parallel between George Fentiman and his wife, Sheila, and Sayers and her husband 'Mac' Fleming.²⁷ 'Mac' suffered stomach problems as a result of being gassed, and, apparently, found it increasingly difficult to accept being supported by his wife, a situation which led to tensions in their marriage: 'Stomach trouble, no money or job, an overworked wife, and the income tax: all these pressures weighed down *Bellona Club's* George Fentiman, just as they were doing to Mac, and Dorothy Sayers incorporated them into a murder case.'²⁸

George Fentiman is not the only character of Sayers' to suffer from a war-related illness; one of Wimsey's most significant characteristics is his neurasthenia, caused by shell shock. To a certain extent, this war-related detail to his character serves a technical function in the same way that similar characterisations do in Christie's novels: on occasion, it can be utilised as part of the investigations, such as in *Whose Body?*, when Wimsey visits the murder suspect, a nerve specialist called Julian Freke. On the whole, though, Sayers' treatment of war is much darker in tone than Christie's. Whilst Wimsey's neurasthenia is in part held at check by his investigations, as they provide him with the distraction of definite action, it can also be triggered by the distressing elements to the cases, such as the responsibility of identifying the guilty party. In *Whose Body?*, for example, after he establishes beyond doubt that the murderer is Freke, he suffers from a severe attack:

‘Hush! No, no – it’s the water,’ said Lord Peter, with chattering teeth; it’s up to their waists down there, poor devils. But listen! Can’t you hear it? Tap, tap, tap – they’re mining us – but I don’t know where – I can’t hear – I can’t. Listen, you! There it is again – we must find it – we must stop it ... Listen! Oh, my God! I can’t hear I can’t hear anything for the noise of the guns. Can’t they stop the guns?’ (p. 132).

In episodes dealing with Wimsey’s neurasthenia, there are attempts to evoke images of trench warfare, such as the following description of the walk to an exhumation:

The vile, raw fog tore your throat and ravaged your eyes. You could not see your feet. You stumbled in your walk over poor man’s graves. The feel of Parker’s old trench-coat beneath your fingers was comforting. You had felt it in worse places. You clung on now for fear you should get separated. The dim people moving in front of you were like Brocken spectres.

‘Take care, gentlemen,’ said a toneless voice out of the yellow darkness, ‘there’s an open grave just hereabouts.’

You bore away to the right and floundered in a mass of freshly turned clay. (*Whose Body?* p. 173).

The shift to the pronoun ‘you’ helps to create the effect of Wimsey’s internal monologue, and even without the specific mention of the ‘trench-coat’, the references to ‘stumbling’ over graves and clay help to evoke images of the trenches, the ‘worse places’ that Wimsey has been. These descriptions are reminiscent of those found in poetry of the First World War, for example, in ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’ in which Wilfred Owen describes how: ‘Bent double, like old beggars under sacks, / Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through the sludge’.²⁹ Sayers’ evocation of darkness with the description of the disembodied voice and the spectres echo similar motifs that run throughout Owen’s poetry. In ‘The Sentry’ he describes listening in the dark to the ‘moans and jumps / and the wild chattering of [the sentry’s] broken teeth’ and his shouts

of 'I see your lights' (p. 139). Connotations of poison gas are to be found also in Sayers' description of the fog that 'tears' at the throat and 'ravages' the eyes.

The consciousness of war in Sayers' writing continues throughout her novels; Wimsey's neurasthenia is often referred to, and there are many characters who are ex soldiers, such as Cathcart in *Clouds of Witness* and Mr. Duckworthy in the short story 'The Image in the Mirror'.³⁰ In Sayers' stories of the 1930s there is a growing awareness of the likelihood of another war, such as in *Gaudy Night* in 1935, when Wimsey has been away in Rome, working for the Foreign Office, he reports to Harriet that:

'I thought – at one point we all thought – something might be going to happen. All the old filthy uproar. I got as far as saying to Bunter one night: "It's coming; it's here; back to the Army again, sergeant. ..."'

But in the end, you know, it made a noise like a hoop and rolled away – for the moment' (p. 268).

This foreshadowing of World War Two in Sayers' work is symptomatic of a wider literary trend; according to Plain: '[...] although the 1930s may be temporally located before the outbreak of war, they cannot be conceptually divorced from the conflict they precede.'³¹ Whilst this is the case in Sayers' detective fiction, the same cannot be said for Christie: brief references to the First World War continue to be present in her books, but there is no ominous threat of another war in her stories of the late Thirties. World War Two is not mentioned at all until 1941, in *N or M?*, in which a middle-aged Tommy and Tuppence, now married, undertake the search for German spies in a seaside boarding house. After this, there are brief references in some books, such as the ARP work of Basil Blake in *The Body in the Library*, or the wounded pilot, Jerry Burton, who narrates *The Moving Finger*.³² For the most part, however, Christie's novels present the

'escapist' world discussed earlier, and, although they do not entirely ignore either war, they dwell very little on their realities or social consequences. Instead, the war references are present for their technical usefulness to the detective narrative, as in the examples above where Blake's war work is used to convince the other characters of his good nature and, therefore, innocence of the crime, and Burton's convalescence is the reason for his presence in the village where the murder takes place.

Sayers' novels are more complicated, and there is a tension between her presentation of the 'unreal' world of the country house, as the escapist response to the inter-war years with their 'perpetual war consciousness' (*Women's Fiction*, p. 36), and her use of images from the First World War and the threat of the second, for much more than just background detail. Plain argues that '[...] the detective novel represents a middle-class fantasy of order, which Sayers paradoxically resists and embraces' (p. 64). This, Plain argues, is typical of Sayers' style:

The threat of war was ubiquitous, and in the fiction of Dorothy L. Sayers, it is manifested through a complex dialectic of fear and resignation, abhorrence and patriotism. Sayers' work articulates both an acceptance of the need for war and a reflection of the nature of war. This contraction, in some respects typical of the Second World War, creates in her work a series of tensions which are not so much resolved as over-ridden by her persistent emphasis upon the importance of individual responsibility.³³

These tensions are particularly apparent in *Gaudy Night*, which sees Wimsey dividing his time between investigations in Oxford, and negotiations in Europe for the Foreign Office, and *Busman's Honeymoon*, in which there is growing concern amongst the

characters, reflected in this entry in Wimsey's mother's diary, with its muddled priorities that are particular to her characterisation:

[...] it's no good saying [Peter's] over age because he has M.I. written all over his conscience and if he was seventy he might still be gassed or bombed in an air-raid. Earnestly hope we shall not have another war with meat-coupons and no sugar and people being killed ridiculous and unnecessary (p. 28).

The rest of the novel, however, is a classic Golden-Age country-house tale, which bears out earlier suggestions that detective fiction provided a means of escape from the realities of post or pre-war society: 'Peter and Harriet are seeking refuge from the storm about to break over Europe and seemingly they find it in the Englishman's symbolic castle – the archetypal home of classical detective fiction – the country house.' (Plain, *Women's Fiction*, p. 62).

This raises a third possible response to the argument that Golden-Age detective fiction never engages with the realities of inter-war society. Just as Harriet and Peter 'seek refuge' in the 'archetypal home of classical detective fiction', which exists within the Eden-like rural setting with the Established Church at its heart, so do their readers. Detective fiction might be seen as a literature of escape, but this presupposes that there must be something that needs to be escaped from and this could be seen to be, 'the tensions, ambiguities and frustrations of ordinary experience', identified by Cawelti. In the instance of Golden-Age detective fiction, it seems plausible to suggest that an escape was being provided from, initially, the memories and consequences of the First World War and, later, the threat of the second. This shadowing of the two decades by war is discussed by Plain where she identifies the 'prelude' to the Second World War as:

[...] the six-year period between Hitler's appointment as chancellor of Germany in January 1933 and the outbreak of war in September 1939; but for many writers, the Second World War has its origins as far back as the 1919 treaty of Versailles (p. 35).

This means, Plain argues, that the Thirties 'was shadowed not only by the threat of a second world war, but also by the omnipresent memory of the first. This perpetual war consciousness had a considerable impact on the literary world' (p. 36).

Not all literature of the time, however, appears to have felt this impact. In *A War Imagined: the First World War in English Culture*, Samuel Hynes identifies two kinds of post-war novel: one which describes 'an Edenic pre-war time, a disvalued and depressed post-war, and in between, the war, a transforming chaos', and another 'in which the war was not a cause of radical change' (p. 329). Hynes gives John Galsworthy's *Forsyte Saga* as his example of the latter, which, he says, is the product of a 'pre-war novelist in the post-war world, looking back to his Edwardian past and refusing to accept its pastness. That view of history made him an anachronism among modernist writers; but it endeared him to the middle-brow middle class [...]' (p. 331).³⁴

In a way, Golden-Age detective fiction, with its 'middle-brow, middle class' readership can be said to be doing exactly this with its country house / rural village settings. The lack of 'realism' identified by critics is the result of the stories projecting a vision of a world popularly perceived to have been lost as a result of war, described by Susan Rowland as: 'an imagined England of whole, sufficient, cultural peace' (p. 70). This world has an idyllic quality, emphasised by the rural setting which has qualities of the 'literary pastoral, the tradition of social imagining through rural landscapes that goes back to the Eden of the Bible and Arcadian Greek myths' (p. 70). Part of this re-created

‘imagined England’ is the theistic cohesion represented by the solid omnipresence of the Established Church, which ignores the diverse and increasingly secular nature of belief before and after the war.

In categorising periods within a genre, it is important to be conscious of a fluidity in the movement from one to the next: one era retains or develops some elements from a previous one, and this is true of much fiction written after the Second World War, which is given the label ‘Golden Age’ or described as ‘classical’. As Ian Ousby comments, ‘the Golden Age was a long time a-dying’, not least because many writers who began writing in the Golden Age continued to write after the Second World War and did so within their preferred formula (p. 64). Agatha Christie’s later novels, for example, despite their references to supermarkets and housing estates, still retain many of the elements of classical detective fiction, such as the ‘puzzle’ narrative and the ‘closed’ setting with its limited cast of suspects.³⁵ However, whilst the fluid movement from era to era can be seen here, there does not seem to have been a similar progression from Edwardian detective fiction to the beginnings of the Golden Age.

Whilst some of the features of Golden-Age writing can be seen in late Victorian and Edwardian detective fiction, and some Edwardian detective fiction authors continued to write after the First World war, there seems to be an unusually clear dividing line between the writing of the Edwardian era and the Golden Age. For example, although G. K. Chesterton’s second collection of detective stories, *The Wisdom of Father Brown* was published in 1914 and the other Father Brown stories fall clearly within the time span of the ‘Golden Age’ *The Incredulity of Father Brown* (1926), *The Secret of Father Brown*

(1927) and *The Scandal of Father Brown* (1935), Chesterton is not categorised as a ‘Golden Age’ writer.³⁶ Most critics agree in distinguishing the distinct features of the period of writing from the end of the nineteenth century up to the beginning of World War One: Howard Haycraft, for example, identifies the period from 1890 to 1914 as ‘The Romantic Era’, and Joseph A. Kestner’s book title clearly defines the period of *The Edwardian Detective 1901-1915*.³⁷ Golden-Age detective fiction, as we have seen, is clearly marked as beginning with the end of the First World War in 1918. This might be taken to indicate that there was no detective fiction written during the four years of war, which is, of course, untrue. What is perhaps being suggested, however, by these distinctions is a sense of the break in history that the war signified, a radical change from one way of life beforehand to another way of life afterwards:

[The war] added a new scale of violence and destruction to what was possible – it changed reality. That change was so vast and so abrupt as to make the years after the war seem discontinuous from the years before, and that discontinuity became part of English imaginations. Men and women after the war looked back at their own pasts as one might look across a great chasm to a remote peaceable place on the other side.³⁸

This ‘chasm’ of war seems to be what prevents the fluid progression of Edwardian detective fiction into the era that follows, as the Golden-Age stories reinvented pre-war England as a ‘remote peaceable place’ that could be escaped into to avoid the realities of a post-war world.

This argument that Golden-Age detective fiction is responding to war by providing escapist literature is reinforced by the fact that the pre-war world it presents is, like the ‘Eden of the Bible and Arcadian Gree[ce]’, a mythical one. Hynes clearly establishes

that this remote and peaceable place never really existed. Before the war, he argues, Britain was already in a state of unrest: 'there were many clouds in the Edwardian skies. Irishmen, women, and workers, for example, were all exerting pressures against established society and its mores. [...] a civil war, a sex war, and a class war: in the spring of 1914 these were all seen in England's immediate future [...] (Hynes pp. 5-7). This myth is reinforced by Golden-Age detective fiction by the use of rural settings that evoke a pastoral idyll. For example, in Christie's *Murder is Easy* she describes how:

The sun was shining when Luke came over the hill and down into the little country town of Wychwood-under-Ashe. He had bought a second-hand Standard Swallow, and he stopped for a moment on the brow of the hill and switched off the engine.

The summer day was warm and sunny. Below him was the village, singularly unspoilt by recent developments. It lay innocently and peacefully in the sunlight – mainly composed of a long straggling street that ran along under overhanging brow of Ashe Ridge.³⁹

The pastoral is particularly evoked by the innocence of the village which Christie describes as 'unspoilt' by the constant presence of urban development which threatens the idyll, another example of the intrusion of the 'real' world which is acknowledged but held at bay by the fantasy of the Golden Age.

This emphasis on the rural in inter-war detective fiction contrasts directly with the predominance of urban milieux in Victorian detective fiction. Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories are filled with references to the city of London: roads, pavements, street names, buildings, bridges, cellars, factories, wharves and warehouses, all of which Holmes knows well:

Sherlock Holmes was never at fault, however, and he muttered the names as the cab rattled through squares and in and out by tortuous by-streets.

‘Rochester Row,’ said he. ‘Now Vincent Square. Now we come out on the Vauxhall Bridge Road. We are making for the Surrey side apparently. Yes, I thought so. Now we are on the bridge. You can catch glimpses of the river.’⁴⁰

This use of the city setting for the stories is, as has been shown, a reflection of the time at which they were written. As discussed in the previous chapter, the city was a place of industry and the Victorian era was characterised by technological and scientific advancement, not just in manufacture, but also in areas such as transport and medicine. This is reflected in Victorian detective fiction and its focus on ‘ratiocination’, logic and reason, where there must always be a logical, factual reason for everything, and any potential ‘supernatural’ occurrences are quickly explained as a phenomenon of science. The city is the centre for the logical, scientific world, and it is the country, with its absence of civilisation and order that provides a potential threat, an idea which Holmes expounds to Watson in ‘The Copper Beeches’ (1892), arguing that the ‘vilest of alleys in London do not present a more dreadful record of sin than does the smiling and beautiful countryside’:

The pressure of public opinion can do in the town what the law cannot accomplish. There is no lane so vile that the scream of a tortured child, or the thud of a drunkard’s blow does not beget sympathy and indignation among the neighbours, and then the whole machinery of justice is ever so close that a word of complaint can set it going, and there is but a step between the crime and the dock. But look at these lonely houses, each in its own fields, filled for the most part with poor ignorant folk who know little of the law. Think of the deeds of hellish

cruelty, the hidden wickedness that may go on, year in, year out, in such places, and none the wiser.⁴¹

The urban setting, and the emphasis on technology, continued into Edwardian detective fiction, with R. Austin Freeman's Dr Thorndyke taking Holmes' scientific approach to new levels. Many detective stories focused on technological advancement, such as the railways, for example, Victor L. Whitechurch's *The Investigations of Godfrey Page, Railwayac* (1903-1904) which became very popular. During this time, however, there is an apparent shift in attitude towards the scientific age and technological advancement, what Joseph A. Kestner identifies as the Edwardian 'apprehension about technology', from 'a concern with technology and the opportunities it presents for criminal abuses' (Kestner, p. 63), to a far more threatening consequence of technology in the form of war. Kestner, like Hynes, identifies the Edwardian period as a time of tension and unrest which is clearly reflected in the detective stories of the time, 'in their focus on such issues as international diplomacy, global espionage, racial deterioration, imperialism, international competition, class, fear of Germany, terrorism, science, urbanism and suburbanism [and] technology [...] (p. 28).

This is the 'real' Edwardian world that the detective fiction of the Golden Age seeks to rewrite through its idealistic rural settings, as a means of escape from the equally troubled post-war world. The anxieties about city, technology and war arguably survive into the Golden Age in the 'urban' stories mentioned earlier, with their focus on science and espionage, and explain why these truly urban settings are few, as, for the most part, we see instead a direct reversal of the associations in setting from the Victorian stories, with the cities as sprawling, threatening centres and the countryside as the home of an

ancient and civilised order. This idealising of the past as pastoral is not uncommon. In *The Country and the City*, Raymond Williams discusses ‘the books of George Sturt, which appeared between 1907 and 1923. In *Change in the Village*, published in 1911, Sturt wrote of the rural England “that is dying out now”. Just back, we can see, over the last hill’:

But then what seemed like an escalator began to move. Sturt traced this ending to two periods: enclosure after 1861 and residential settlement after 1900. Yet this at once takes us into the period of Thomas Hardy’s novels, written between 1871 and 1896 and referring back to rural England since the 1830s. And had not critics insisted that it was here, in Hardy, that we found the record of the great climacteric change in rural life [...] And wasn’t George Eliot, in *Mill on the Floss* (1860) and in *Felix Holt* (1866), looking back, similarly, to the old rural England of the 1820s and early 1830s?

But now the escalator was moving without pause.⁴²

Williams’ ‘escalator’ demonstrates that each age has an ‘Old England’, a rural ideal that it looks back to, but, he argues, ‘Old England, settlement, the rural virtues – all these, in fact, mean different things at different times, and quite different values are being brought to question’ (p. 12). In terms of Golden-Age detective fiction, it could be argued that this looking back to a mythicised pre-war time is a means of escape from the realities of the inter-war years. This attraction to the pastoral in war time is a literary impulse that Williams traces back to Virgil:

Thus the contrast within Virgilian pastoral is between the pleasures of rural settlement and the threat of loss and eviction. This developed, in its turn, into a contrast already familiar from some earlier literature, in times of war and civil disturbance, when the peace of country life

could be contrasted with the disturbance of war and civil war and the political chaos of the cities. (p. 17)

Golden-Age detective stories are, however, very conscious of the artificial world that they portray, and there are constant reminders of this artifice to the reader in the form, partly through the references to games and puzzles discussed earlier, and partly through the self-referential nature of the genre. Golden-Age detective stories are filled with references to other works of crime fiction. In *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, Christie's first detective novel, Hastings confesses that he's 'always had a secret hankering to be a detective', and is then asked whether he'd like to be 'the real thing – Scotland Yard? Or Sherlock Holmes?', clearly establishing that Sherlock Holmes is not 'real', but fictional (p. 11). In Sayers' stories, Wimsey often refers to Harriet Vane as his 'Watson', in part a reference to the detective / 'sidekick' relationship that exists between them, an idea that is also picked up more than once in Christie:

'In the meantime,' said Anthony, 'I am still the amateur assistant?'

'That's it, Mr. Cade.'

'Watson to your Sherlock, in fact?'

'Detective stories are mostly bunkum,' said Battle unemotionally. 'But they amuse people,' he added, as an afterthought. 'And they're useful sometimes.'⁴³

This 'usefulness' that Battle refers to could be taken, within the text, to refer to the way in which the stereotypes of detective stories influence the minds of the people he has to deal with and what they expect from his investigations. In terms of the wider genre, however, we can see their 'usefulness' to the inter-war readership as a comforting and predictable form of escape. Christie's genre-conscious style is most apparent in *Partners*

in Crime, in which Tommy and Tuppence undertake each investigation by their detective agency in the style of a different fictional detective, including Thorndyke, Holmes, and Father Brown.

There are also a number of characters who are presented as readers or writers of detective stories. Examples of the writer-character include Sayers' Harriet Vane and Christie's Ariadne Oliver, and the number of reader-characters is uncountable. In C.P. Snow's *Death Under Sail*, for example, one of the group of suspects is reading Dorothy L. Sayers' *Unnatural Death*.⁴⁴ Self-consciousness is a recognised feature of the Golden-Age tale: 'Twentieth century crime fiction does not *become* self-conscious. Instead, in the golden age writers it always *was* self-referential, right from Christie's early works. Golden age crime novels refer repeatedly to their own genre [...] (Rowland, p. 12). This has the effect of creating the notion that, as opposed to the works of fiction referred to by the characters, the world within the book is 'real life'. This is compounded by the number of references by the characters to what happens in detective novels, for example, in *The ABC Murders* Poirot accuses Hastings of having a 'melodramatic soul' because he would like 'not one murder, but a series of murders' to which Hastings replies that 'a second murder in a book often cheers things up. If the murder happens in the first chapter, and you have to follow up everybody's alibi until the last page but one well, it does get a bit tedious.'⁴⁵ This does achieve a degree of verisimilitude for the milieu of the story, and yet it simultaneously draws the reader's attention to the artifice of the detective story and the mythical / fantastical world it presents.

This acknowledgement of artifice, which, in directing attention to the constructed nature of the stories, focuses the mind on the realities of the world in which they are written and read, and suggests that detective fiction is, in fact, the former of the two types of novel identified by Hynes. Golden Age detective fiction does present an 'Edenic pre-war time', but the idealising of the past is a product of the 'disvalued and depressed post-war world' that Hynes discusses (p. 329). This is evidenced firstly by clear and constant references, however minor, to a setting that is specifically post-war and, secondly, through the constant acknowledgement of the artifice of the form, and therefore the artificial nature of the world that it is portraying.

Part of this idyllic world is the reassuring presence of a social and moral order and emphasis is placed on the fact that one relies on the other and it is here that religious presences become significant. This 'order' is necessary to the technical development of the detective narrative, which centres around the disordering of society by the crime, and the re-ordering of society by the detective solving the crime. This disordering and reordering is both social and moral: society is upset by the presence of an anti-social being, the criminal, and is reordered on their removal. There is also a moral ordering: on one level, detective novels present us with a struggle between good and evil, in which good triumphs and an ordered society is allowed to exist once more. It is not difficult to see how this genre, with its emphasis on solutions and the re-establishment of order appeals in a post-World War One or pre-World War Two society:

[...] the detective novel represents a middle-class fantasy of order [...] This re-establishment of security and stasis in the face of external influences and change can be seen as highly desirable by readers under

the shadow of war. If our fears of social disorder can be vicariously controlled through the resolution of crime fiction, then cannot war, the ultimate violent crime, be similarly reduced to manageable proportions? (*Women's Fiction*, pp. 64-65).

This vicarious control is particularly emphasised by the element of reader involvement in the solving of the puzzle and the reordering of society, rather than just a passive reading of the detective's exploits. Sayers makes reference to this idea in *Claudy Night* when Harriet considers that 'a School of Detective Fiction would [...] have a fair chance of producing a goodly crop of firsts' amongst the students she is talking to, recognising in them, 'a yearning for action and the concrete': 'the [...] post-war exhaustion [was] gone; the desire now was for doing something definite [...]. The detective story, no doubt, was acceptable, because in it something definite was done' (p. 159).

In the world of the classical detective novel, there is a place for everyone, and everyone is in their place. For the most part, the main protagonists are what Grella describes as 'the posh and pedigreed society' that exist in the popular imagination of the mythical pre-war world:

Though basically homogenous, this society does contain variety. Its members, though roughly equal in social standing, are not of the same class, family background or profession. Within a limited range, they comprise an English microcosm. There is always at least one representative of the squirearchy, one professional man – commonly a doctor, but sometimes a lawyer – a cleancut young sporting type, and a military man (never below the rank of major), usually a veteran of colonial service. An English vicar, often a muscular Christian, frequently hovers about, providing a link with the Established Church. (Grella, pp. 94-95).

As has been suggested, these ‘English vicars’ are a significant feature of the Golden-Age detective story and, for the most part, they conform to a stereotype, the ‘representatives’ of the ‘English microcosm’, identified by Grella, who help to conjure up the easily recognised world of the Golden-Age detective story, the solid, parochial, middle-class ordered environment. The ‘muscular Christian’ is rarely in evidence, however, although there is a brief mention of a ‘footballing parson’ in Sayers’ *The Documents in the Case* (p. 49). Instead, the ‘type’ of clergyman to be found in most Golden-Age stories tends to be more elderly and gentle, such as the Reverend Stephen Babbington, the victim in Christie’s *Three Act Tragedy* (1935), ‘[...] a man of sixty odd, with kind faded eyes and a disarming diffident manner’ (p. 22), or the Reverend Charles Buckley in *Peril at End House* (1932), ‘[...] a small man, grey-headed, with a diffident appealing manner’.⁴⁶ These characters help to emphasise the traditional nature of the rural setting: Christie’s vicars, such as the Reverend Dane Calthorp in *The Moving Finger*, have a habit of quoting in Latin, which serves to emphasise the ancient traditions that they represent. In *Busman’s Honeymoon*, Wimsey comments, ‘*quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus*. Nothing ever changes in the English countryside’ (p. 91).⁴⁷ Later in the same episode he specifically links this absence of change to Mr. Goodacre, the vicar, commenting on ‘how these old boys run true to form’ (p. 98). Sayers’ ecclesiastical characters are particularly significant to a discussion of the religious elements of her detective fiction, and will be the focus for the next chapter.

The ‘Established Church’ is a significant element of the social world of the Golden-Age detective story because it is, in part, responsible for creating and sustaining the social and moral order that is so important, and in demonstrating that one is necessary to the

other. These references help to reinforce the omnipresence of the Established Church in the country village setting. In the Golden-Age detective story, the Church provides a fulcrum for the rural community and place names such as 'Friar's Wick' or 'St. Mary Mead' (First described in *The Murder at The Vicarage*), are suggestive of the role of the Church at the basis of these societies. In Agatha Christie's *The Moving Finger* (1943), we are provided with a detailed description of its setting, the village of Lymstock:

To begin with, Lymstock has its roots in the past. Somewhere about the time of the Norman Conquest, Lymstock was a place of importance. That importance was chiefly ecclesiastical [...]

It had a doctor, a firm of solicitors, Messrs. Galbraith, Galbraith and Symmington, a beautiful and unexpectedly large church dating from fourteen hundred and twenty, with some Saxon remains incorporated into it [...] and two pubs (p. 10).

The first point that is established is that Lymstock has an ecclesiastical basis; it was founded by the Church, and the Church still plays a significant part in the Lymstock of the novel, as do the vicar and his wife, not least because it is Mrs. Dane Calthorp who calls in Miss Marple, 'an expert ... who knows a great deal about *wickedness*' (p. 120). Lymstock, at the beginning of the novel, is the mythical, ordered world of the Golden Age and its order is achieved through the careful adherence of its characters to the rules and 'norms' that govern this society.

Central to these is the Church, which provides a focus, literal and metaphorical, for community life. As well as bringing the community together when attending worship, it regulates lives through the calendar of events: Christmas, Easter, Harvest festival, and the ceremonies attached to the main events of human existence, such as Christenings,

marriages and funerals. The Church also provides social institutions such as the Women's Institute and the Boy's Brigade. Attendance at church is a social 'norm', to the extent that deviation from this causes comment, as in *The Nine Tailors*, when Will and Mary Thoday fail to attend Early Service, and the vicar comments on their absence (p. 215). In this instance, their non-attendance at church is a clue to the solution of the puzzle, as it helps Wimsey to deduce that the murdered man is Mary's first husband, believed dead for some twenty years, as it is the Thoday's guilt over their bigamous marriage that prevents them from attending church and receiving Communion. This clearly illustrates the moral, as well as social, order that is created and reinforced by the Church, and also reinforces the ways in which Golden-Age detective fiction can be seen to replicate Knight's model; the Thodays' 'guilt' over their bigamy, and Will's guilt over his involvement in Deacon's death, causes them to act in an unusual way and thus draw attention themselves, which in turn causes social comment, which alerts the thief-taker, Wimsey, to their guilt.

This shows how the Established Church is more than just a representative of order in society and thus in detective fiction; it is there to reinforce the notions of 'order' so necessary to both the reassuring milieu and the technical progression of the story, but its other function is the signposting of the moral and theological themes within the texts. Often, the moral dimension to the crime story is raised through the commentary of the ecclesiastical figures; towards the end of Christie's *Murder at the Vicarage*, Leonard Clement is moved to comment on the moral disorder in his parish, not just the presence of murder, but the state of 'false innocence' revealed by it, including 'the wish, the intention to murder' and any number of 'illicit amours'.⁴⁸ Clement preaches a sermon

based on the text 'I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance' (Matthew 9.13; Mark 2.17; Luke 5.32), which provokes more than one confession, to the police and to himself. The significance of these religious presences in Golden-Age detective fiction, therefore, is two-fold: firstly, they help to establish the reassuringly traditional nature of the rural setting, with its parochial values, and, secondly, they draw attention to the 'moral' dimension of the genre.

The religious references and characters in Sayers' detective fiction perform both of these functions. In her detective stories we can see a stability provided by the presence of the Established Church, a stability Plain argues was 'inherent in the idea of tradition' in Sayers' detective works (*Women's Fiction*, p. 37). The Established Church is most clearly represented in these works by Sayers' ecclesiastical characters, who, as will be discussed in the next chapter, clearly direct the reader's attention to the more theologically significant elements of her narratives.

¹ Susan Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell: British Women Writers in Detective and Crime Fiction*, p. viii. See also Julian Symons, *Bloody Murder*, p. 106.

² *The Oxford Companion to Crime and Mystery Writing*, p. 186. See also Julian Symons, *Bloody Murder*, pp. 101-131; George Grella, 'The Formal Detective Novel', p. 84; Robert Barnard, 'The English Detective Story', in *Whodunit?* ed. by H.R.F. Keating (London: Windward, 1982), p. 30; Ian Ousby, *The Crime and Mystery Book*, p. 62; Martin Priestman, *Crime Fiction from Poe to the present*, p. 19; Gill Plain, *Twentieth Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), p. 4.

³ Barnard, 'The English Detective Story', p. 32.

⁴ Agatha Christie, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (London: Lane, 1920; repr. Triad / Granada, 1978); *The Secret of Chimneys* (London: Lane, 1925; repr. Pan, 1956); *The Hollow* (London: Collins, 1946; repr. Fontana, 1955); Margery Allingham, *Look to the Lady* (London: Jarrolds, 1931; repr. Penguin, 1950); *Dancers in Mourning* (London: Heinemann, 1937; repr. Penguin, 1948).

⁵ Ronald Knox, cited in Ousby, *The Crime and Mystery Book*, p. 77.

⁶ See also Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell*, p. 9 and Reynolds, *Her Life and Soul*, p. 26

⁷ Todorov, 'The Typology of Detective Fiction', p. 43.

⁸ Agatha Christie, *The Moving Finger* (1943; repr. London: Collins, 1966), p. 10.

⁹ See interview with Jill Paton Walsh, Appendix 2, p. 275.

¹⁰ Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue', pp. 189-224; Arthur Conan Doyle, 'The Speckled Band' in *The Adventures and Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* (New York: Random House, 2002), pp. 144-166 (first publ. in the *Strand Magazine*, 1892).

¹¹ *Crime Writers* ed. by H.R.F. Keating (London: BBC, 1978), p. 76.

¹² Ronald A. Knox, *The best detective stories of the year 1928*, eds Ronald A. Knox and H. Harrington (London: Faber & Gwyer, 1929), repr. in Ousby, *the Crime and Mystery Book*, p. 67.

¹³ Indeed, Pierre Bayard puts forward a series of alternative solutions to the mystery, arguing that Dr. Sheppard is innocent of the crime and is instead covering for his sister. (*Who Killed Roger Ackroyd: The Mystery Behind the Agatha Christie Mystery* (London: Fourth Estate, 2000).

¹⁴ Agatha Christie, *Agatha Christie: An Autobiography* (Glasgow: Collins, 1978), p. 353.

¹⁵ Agatha Christie, *Cards on the Table*, (London: Collins, 1936; repr. Fontana, 1957), Ngaio Marsh *Hand in Glove* (London: Collins, 1962; repr. Fontana, 1964).

¹⁶ Dorothy L. Sayers, 'Nebuchadnezzar', in *In the Teeth of the Evidence*, pp. 148 – 158.

Dorothy L. Sayers, 'The Fascinating Problem of Uncle Meleager's Will', in *Lord Peter Views the Body*, pp. 39–59.

¹⁷ Dorothy L. Sayers, 'The Necklace of Pearls', in *Hangman's Holiday* (London: Gollancz, 1933; repr. Hodder and Stoughton, 1978), p. 79.

¹⁸ *The Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers Volume One, 1899-1936*, p. 312.

¹⁹ Douglas Hewitt, *English Fiction of the Early Modern Period: 1890-1940* (London: Longman, 1988), p. 91. See also Charles L. Mowat, *Britain Between the Wars* (London: Methuen, 1968), p. 202 and Thorpe, *Britain in the 1930s: The Deceptive Decade*, p. 105.

²⁰ Agatha Christie, *The Big Four* (London: Collins, 1927; repr. Fontana, 1965).

²¹ Brunsdale also points out that the 'rural' Oxford of Sayers' student experience and later imagination was one that existed before 'William Morris started the Cowley factory of The British Motor Company in 1922, swelling the town's population and altering a good deal of its character' (pp. 26-27).

²² There are lower-class characters in Golden-Age stories, but they tend to be incidental or secondary and are usually servants to the main characters. In a number of Agatha Christie's stories these characters are so insignificant that the solution to the mystery relies on their interchangeability, for example in 'Miss Marple Tells a Story', when Miss Marple explains how the criminal got in and out without being seen: 'You wouldn't see her – not if she were dressed as a chambermaid [...] You were engrossed in your work – out of the tail of your eye you saw a chambermaid go into your wife's room, come back and go out. It was the same dress – but not the same woman. That's what the people having coffee saw. The electrician did the same. I dare say if the chambermaid were very pretty a gentleman might notice her face – human nature being what it is – but if she were just an ordinary middle-aged woman – well – it would be the chambermaid's dress you would see – not the woman herself.' (Agatha Christie, 'Miss Marple Tells a Story' in *Miss Marple's Final Cases* (London: Collins, 1979), p. 116). Christie employs this formula in a number of other stories, for example in *Three Act Tragedy*, where Sir Charles Cartwright uses his skills as an actor to pass himself off as a butler in order to commit murder. (Agatha Christie, *Three Act Tragedy* (London: Collins, 1935; repr. Pan, 1983)). This issue of class is also addressed by George Grella in his essay 'The Formal Detective Novel': 'The detective novels of the Golden Age never mention the tensions and dangers that threatened the precarious stability of the Twenties and Thirties. They say nothing of the Depression, the social, economic, and political unrest of that time, but choose to remain within the genteel luxury of an aristocratic world [...]' (p. 101).

²³ John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1976) p. 1.

²⁴ Agatha Christie, *The Secret Adversary*, pp. 9-10.

²⁵ Arthur Marwick *The Deluge: British Society and the First World War* (London: Bodley Head, 1965), p. 283.

²⁶ Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London: Pimlico, 1992), p. 281.

²⁷ Oswald Atherton Fleming (1881-1950). Married Dorothy L. Sayers in April 1926.

²⁸ Brunsdale, *Solving the Mystery of Wickedness*, p. 100. See also Brabazon, *The Life of a Courageous Woman*, p. 147 and Coombes, *A Careless rage for Life*, p. 106.

²⁹ Wilfred Owen, 'Dulce et Decorum est', in *Up the Line to Death: The War Poets 1914-1918*, ed. by Brian Gardner (London: Methuen, 1976), p. 141.

³⁰ Dorothy L. Sayers 'The Image in the Mirror' in *Hangman's Holiday*, pp. 9-32.

³¹ Plain, *Women's Fiction of the Second World War*, p. 35.

³² Agatha Christie, *The Body in the Library* (London: Collins, 1942; repr. 1979).

³³ Plain, *Women's Fiction of the Second World War*, p. 45.

³⁴ John Galsworthy, *The Man of Property* (London: Heinemann, 1906), *In Chancery* (London: Heinemann, 1920), and *To Let* (London: Heinemann, 1922). Published as *The Forsyte Saga* in 1922 (London: Heinemann, 1922).

³⁵ See, for example, Agatha Christie, *The Mirror Crack'd From Side to Side* (London: Collins, 1962; repr. 1965), p. 9.

³⁶ G.K. Chesterton, *The Wisdom of Father Brown* (London: Cassell, 1914); *The Incredulity of Father Brown* (London: Cassell, 1926); *The Secret of Father Brown* (London: Cassell, 1927); *The Scandal of Father Brown* (London: Cassell, 1935).

³⁷ Haycraft, *Murder for Pleasure*, p. xi; Joseph A. Kestner, *The Edwardian Detective 1901-1915* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000).

³⁸ Hynes, *A War Imagined*, p. ix.

³⁹ Agatha Christie, *Murder is Easy* (London: Collins, 1939; repr. Fontana, 1960), p. 23.

⁴⁰ Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Sign of Four*, p. 27.

⁴¹ Arthur Conan Doyle, 'The Copper Beeches' in *The Adventures and Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* (New York: Random House, 2002), p. 238 (first publ. in the *Strand Magazine*, 1892).

⁴² Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1973), pp. 9-10.

⁴³ Agatha Christie, *The Secret of Chimneys*, p. 152.

⁴⁴ C.P. Snow, *Death Under Sail* (London: Heinemann, 1932; repr. Penguin, 1963), p. 137; Dorothy L. Sayers, *Unnatural Death* (London: Benn, 1927; repr. Hodder and Stoughton, 1976).

⁴⁵ Agatha Christie, *The ABC Murders*, p. 21.

⁴⁶ Agatha Christie, *Peril at End House* (London: Collins, 1932; repr. Pan, 1966), p. 133.

⁴⁷ 'What always, what everywhere, what by all men [is believed]'. From the *Commonitorium* ii of St. Vincent of Lerins. See *The Lord Peter Wimsey Companion*, ed. by Stephan P. Clarke (Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 2002), p. 498.

⁴⁸ Auden, 'The Guilty Vicarage', p. 20.

Chapter Five

Sayers' Ecclesiastical Characters

Aside from the biblical references and quotations discussed in Chapter One, the most obvious religious presence in Sayers' detective fiction is the significant number of ecclesiastical characters. These characters fulfill both of the functions of religious presences in the detective story as outlined in the previous chapter: firstly, they help to reinforce the presentation of a world with a clear moral and social order; secondly, they perform the function of signposting the moral and theological themes that can be identified within the stories. In Sayers' detective stories, however, these ecclesiastical characters also have a third function, which is the promotion of a positive image of the Established Church and its incumbents, and the valid and positive role that have to play within society. This is not to say that Sayers uses her stories as Christian 'propaganda', or that this is her main agenda in the presentation of these characters. But there are elements within her construction of them that direct the reader towards a sympathetic viewpoint of the clergy in terms of their job and lifestyle. Through Sayers' presentation of these characters we can also clearly see the combination of pragmatism and enthusiastic lyricism that characterises her written style. All of the characters begin as relative stereotypes - such as those identified at the end of the last chapter as part of the 'English microcosm' - and Sayers' pragmatic style is evident in this presentation; the characters fulfill their functions within the detective narrative in helping to construct the social milieu, or providing a significant piece of the puzzle. However, when we consider them in their other two roles - the positive presentation of the clergy or, in particular, the signposting of the moral and theological themes - then Sayers' writing shows evidence

of the more poetic, 'literary' style that has been identified - and that some critics, such as Chandler, see as responsible for - inevitable tensions in her work.

With the exception of Theodore Venables in *The Nine Tailors*, Mr. Perry in *The Documents in the Case*, or Simon Goodacre in *Busman's Honeymoon*, Sayers' ecclesiastical characters are of relatively minor importance in terms of textual presence and for many of them, their vocation seems incidental to the plot. The Reverend Arthur Boyes in *Strong Poison*, for example - why is it necessary for Philip Boyes' father to be a vicar? Another example might be the Reverend Hallelujah Dawson in *Unnatural Death*. Why is the long-lost cousin of the murderer presented as a missionary preacher? The fact that their vocation is extraneous to the detective narrative would suggest that Sayers has other functions in mind for them, such as the signposting of themes, and a positive portrayal of the clergy. Regardless of their significance within the texts, there are similarities to be found in the presentation of all of the characters. On one level at least, they tend to conform to a stereotype, a popular conception of a vicar: gentle, scholarly, unworldly and quite poor. In the case of some of these characters, there is an element of humour in their presentation, but Sayers is often concerned with presenting her ecclesiastical characters in a positive light, with a sympathetic presentation of their lack of money, and the hard work that their profession entails, emphasising the point that the clergy have an important role to play in society. There may have been a personal motivation behind this portrayal: Sayers' drew on her father and her experiences of growing up in a Fen vicarage in her texts, especially in *The Nine Tailors*. In her biography of Sayers, Barbara Reynolds describes the Reverend Henry Sayers as having many of the characteristics found in Sayers' clerical characters, to the point that he

becomes almost a stereotype himself: he is 'benign and gentle' (p. 14), 'scholarly' (p. 15), 'old-fashioned' (p. 21) and 'far from wealthy' (p.79). She later asserts a direct connection between Henry Sayers and the Reverend Venables in *The Nine Tailors*: 'Six years after [Henry Sayers'] death, his unworldly and self-effacing personality was to be tenderly evoked in *The Nine Tailors* in the loveable character of the Reverend Theodore Venables, rector of Fenchurch St. Paul' (p.238). Whilst the 'tender' portrayal and the 'loveable' nature of Venables might be open to debate, the essentially positive representation of the country vicar, coupled with this biographical source do help to reinforce the idea that Sayers might be using her detective fiction as a vehicle to enhance popular opinion of the clergy, and to promote the idea of their value to society.

This can be seen in a number of characters who have only a limited role or brief appearance in the detective narratives in which they appear. In the chronological output of her detective fiction, the first ecclesiastical character presented by Sayers is the Reverend Nathaniel Foulis in *Clouds of Witness*. He is mentioned only in passing and is not presented directly to the reader in action or speech, but through a newspaper report. He is shown, like his counterparts in the later texts, to be benevolent and hard-working, demonstrating the positive viewpoint that Sayers wishes to promote, as she describes how, 'he had been sent for in great haste at 4 a.m. to administer the Sacrament to a dying parishioner six miles away' (p. 66). His innocent nature is also implied, as he is 'thunderstruck' at the theft of his motorcycle's number plates. Foulis is innocent and an unwitting victim of crime but his ownership of the motorbike renders him a temporary suspect, like Simon Goodacre in *Busman's Honeymoon* and the Reverend Hallelujah Dawson in *Unnatural Death*. Hallelujah Dawson, another minor character, conforms to

a great many of the stereotypical characteristics: humour is provided by his 'Christian' name, but overall, he is a figure of pity; his innocence and poverty are emphasised by Sayers, who uses the stereotype again, provoking a sympathetic response. He is old, his steps are 'shuffling' and he is described as 'humble and inoffensive ... he stood blinking nervously at [Wimsey and Parker] from behind a pair of steel rimmed spectacles, the frames of which had at one time been broken and bound with wire' (p. 130). This description of his glasses emphasises his poverty, as does his 'threadbare clerical coat' (p. 130).

Until this point, Dawson has been unseen and cast in the potential role of murderer, but it now becomes clear, both to Wimsey and the reader that 'anything less murderous could scarcely be imagined' (p. 130). He is not the only cleric to be cast in the role of possible murderer in Sayers' stories: in *Busman's Honeymoon* the Rev. Simon Goodacre is briefly and quite light-heartedly considered by Wimsey as the murderer of Noakes, but again it is made clear to the reader that this is impossible (pp. 234-236). Clerical murderers seem to be fairly rare in detective fiction: the most famous is probably the Reverend Bohun in G. K. Chesterton's 'The Hammer of God', who is alluded to by Wimsey and Harriet Vane as they consider Mr. Goodacre in the role of murderer, suggesting that he 'ends up with a brain-storm and imagines he's the hammer of God, like the parson in Chesterton's story' (p. 235).¹ This example of generic self-reference reveals how 'unreal' they consider their hypothesis to be, as does their comical theory as to his motive for the murder: 'a strange, covetous longing' for Mr. Noakes' cactus plants (p. 235). There is a serious reason for this rejection of clerical murderers: for a representative of the church to commit murder would undermine the functions that these

characters perform in Sayers' novels and in the Golden-Age detective genre as a whole. If the Church is included as a symbol of the moral and social order in the comforting fable of the rural village, and as a signifier of the serious moral and theological themes within texts, then its moral authority cannot be undermined. Its representatives, therefore, must be seen as a benchmark by which the judgement of the reader can be calibrated and to which the thoughts and actions of the other characters can be compared.

The Reverend Dawson is the least worldly and most innocent of all Sayers' clerical characters, something initially illustrated in his ready acceptance of Wimsey and Parker's fabrication that they are 'preparin' a work on County families' and need to know about his genealogical background (p. 131). He cannot believe that people would deliberately do wrong: Mary Whittaker has ignored his request for an allowance promised him by their mutual relative, of whom she is the sole beneficiary, but he says that '[he is] loath to believe that she has hardened her heart against the unfortunate', and feels that 'no doubt there is some explanation' (p. 134). This unwillingness to believe wrong of people is demonstrated by other clergymen in Sayers' novels, but most of them seem to be aware of the potential for evil in humanity and are distressed, but not necessarily surprised, when it surfaces. Dawson appears to be the only one who maintains his wholly innocent outlook. In him, therefore, we see a perpetuation of the popular stereotype mentioned previously: a poor, gentle clergyman with little or no understanding of worldly matters or the capacity of others for wrongdoing.

Several parallels can be drawn between Dawson and the Reverend Arthur Boyes, who is the father of the murder victim in *Strong Poison*. As with Hallelujah Dawson, Sayers gives a physical description of Boyes, focusing on his clothes, and several similarities between the two presentations can be seen. Boyes is described as ‘a tall faded man, with lines of worry deeply engraved upon his face, and mild blue eyes a little bewildered by the disappointing difficulty of things in general.’ His mildness and bewilderment evoke sympathy in the reader, as does his obvious poverty: he describes his family as ‘quite the proverbial Church mice’ (p. 58). This sympathy is compounded by a description of his clothing of which two items in particular are described: his coat and his glasses, the same two items presented in Sayers’ description of Dawson, and with the same function, that is, to emphasise his poor and pathetic nature. His coat is described: ‘his black coat was old and hung in depressed folds from his stooping narrow shoulders.’ Like Dawson, his clothes are an extension of his personality. His glasses are ‘a pair of pince-nez’, which are balanced ‘crookedly’ on his nose, an image which could be perceived as humorous, but which when taken in conjunction with the rest of the description, becomes pathetic (p. 54).²

Another characteristic that Boyes shares with Dawson is his lack of, not so much awareness, but understanding of the immoral elements of human nature. The attraction that crime holds for the general public, generating copious newspaper copy, is clearly something of which he is unaware; he does not recognise Wimsey’s name in terms of his celebrity as a detective: ‘his name evidently aroused no associations in the mind of this gentle and unworldly parson’ (p. 54). This ‘unworldliness’ extends to a bewilderment over the morals and behaviour of his son and the post-war generation of which he is a

part: '[he] knew of course that [his] unhappy son had formed an illicit connection with a young woman, but [he] could not bring [him]self to see her ... [he] could not approve ... of ideas so opposed to religion and morality' (pp. 55-56). While he has no interest in crimes in a legal sense, therefore, he is fully aware of the 'crimes' or sins that come under his jurisdiction. In the light of the consequences of Boyes and Vane's 'immoral' living, it seems that the Reverend Boyes' opinions and arguments might, after all, carry some weight, and that there is reason behind the seemingly 'old fashioned' teachings of the Church. The association of sin and crime by society, and the suggestion that one can lead to the other is a theme identified in the trial of Harriet, where she seems to stand accused as much for her immorality as for murder. As also discussed in Chapter One, something similar is seen in *Clouds of Witness*, as, had the Duke of Denver not been having an affair with Mrs. Grimethorpe, he would not have been in a situation to be suspected of the murder of Cathcart. This is not to say that Sayers herself makes the connection between immoral and illegal actions, rather that she is demonstrating a tendency by society to do so. Even if the idea that someone who is capable of sinning is therefore likely to undertake criminal activity is unfounded, there is certainly a sense that the trial of these two characters is perceived by some of the characters, Freddy Arbuthnot for example, as being in some way a 'punishment' for their immoral behaviour. The issues raised in these two examples raise, once again, a consideration of Sayers' own beliefs on the subject of sin and punishment. It is interesting that the potentially autobiographical character Harriet Vane, whilst not actually conceiving and bearing an illegitimate child, is guilty of the same sin as Sayers herself: 'Harriet Vane, who had taken her First in English and gone to London to write mystery fiction, to live with a man who was not married to her [...] (*Gaudy Night*, p. 8).³ As discussed in

Chapter One, this was a sin for which Sayers saw herself as being ‘bitterly punished’ by her pregnancy.

All of the characters dealt with so far, Foulis, Dawson and Boyes, are minor characters in terms of their textual presence and in relation to the progress of the novels. Two ecclesiastical characters with a more significant presence in the texts in which they appear are the Rev. Goodacre in *Busman's Honeymoon* and the Rev. Venables in *The Nine Tailors*.⁴ Both texts are set within small country communities: Great Pagford and Fenchurch St Paul, respectively, where the Church, and therefore the vicar, are of some social significance. There are similarities in their presentation, and although Venables is of more interest in terms of exploring the functions of Sayers' clerical figures, both help to illustrate the arguments posited so far. Both characters, to some extent, conform to the established stereotype; when Wimsey first sees Goodacre walking up the garden path he comments, ‘this is magnificent [...] I collect vicars’ (p. 90). This humorous comment reinforces the ideas of these vicars as a ‘type’ that can be grouped together as well as drawing attention to their preponderance in Sayers' fiction. Wimsey then gives a description of Goodacre to Harriet, which once again fulfills the ecclesiastical stereotype:

‘This is a very well-grown specimen, six foot four or thereabouts, shortsighted, a great gardener, musical, smokes a pipe’ [...] ‘- untidy, with a wife who does her best on a small stipend; a product of one of our older seats of learning – 1890 vintage – Oxford at a guess, but not, I fancy, Keble, though as high in his views as the parish allows him to be’ (p. 90).⁵

Overall, this is a humorous presentation of the stereotype, but there is a serious note in the reference to his 'small stipend', which is repeated in the description we receive from Sayers as narrator further in the same episode as she describes 'the left knee of his trousers displaying a large three-cornered tear, carefully darned ...' (p. 92).

Throughout the text, Goodacre's role is seldom developed beyond this stereotype and he is generally presented as having a slightly comic element to his character - for example his description of the state of the church organ: 'We sadly need new bellows. The old ones are past mending ... the Hallelujah Chorus exposed our weaknesses sadly. In fact the wind gave out altogether' (p. 96). This faintly 'slapstick' humour is also present when he attempts to help Mr. Puffet, the chimney sweep, to clear the Chimneys at Talboys by means of a shotgun, which results in him being covered in soot and wound in a 'clerical cocoon' of dustsheets (p. 103). Mr. Goodacre's outlook on life seems to be one of gentle innocence: Sayers uses the word 'childlike' at one point to describe his pleasure at Wimsey's donation to the organ fund (p. 97). He is deeply shocked at the murder of Mr. Noakes, declaring it to be 'impossible' and steadfastly refusing to believe in the possible involvement of any of his parishioners: "'Tom Puffet!'" exclaimed the vicar, "Oh, I should not like to think that Puffet -'" (p. 348). During the course of the investigation, he discusses with the Wimseys and his wife the general character of Frank Crutchley, one of his choirmen and the gardener at Talboys. His wife suggests that Crutchley is 'going a little too far' with a local girl, Polly Mason, and urges her husband to find out 'what [Frank's] intentions are.' The vicar replies that he 'should be sorry to think ill of Frank Crutchley...' (p. 266). This trust is misplaced, hence perhaps the reference to the Goodacre's shortsightedness in the first reference to him, as Crutchley is

eventually revealed as the murderer, which raises once again the association between sin and crime; Crutchley's moral guilt prepares the reader for his legal culpability. Mr. Goodacre's response to this is one of shock and, even in the face of the evidence, incredulity: '... that is a dreadful conclusion to come to! Frank Crutchley – one of my own choirmen!' (p. 353).

As has already been mentioned, the vicar himself is temporarily viewed as a suspect by Wimsey and Harriet. However, they dismiss this as rapidly as the police, who not only reject the idea of Goodacre's involvement with the crime, but also that he can even tell them anything useful to help solve it: '... after all, what could ... this short-sighted old gentleman ... notice?' (p. 161) although, ironically, it is Goodacre who notices the mildew on the cactus at the end, and thus provides a valuable clue as to how the murder was committed (pp. 339-340). Goodacre's innocent nature is reinforced during his interview with the police. He is clearly distressed by the whole episode: 'blink[ing] nervously when confronted by the two officers and his speech becomes even more disjointed and hesitant: 'Dear me! Well. Yes. I came back to see if you wanted me for anything. As you suggested, you know, as you suggested. And to tell Miss Twitterton – but I can see she is not here – Well only that I had seen Lugg about the – er, dear me, the coffin' (p. 159). The interview is punctuated by a series of exclamations of 'dear me!' and 'oh dear' from the vicar and a 'bless my soul!' when the police question about an alibi for the time of the murder. He leaves 'blunder[ing] vaguely out, ... muttering a series of agitated 'good afternoons' (p. 161). This is generally representative of the portrayal of Mr. Goodacre throughout the text: a gently humorous portrayal of an innocent and often bewildered man.

Although he is not really invested with any qualities that challenge the initial stereotype, Sayers does still provide a positive element to Goodacre's characterisation which serves one of her ends for ecclesiastical characters outside of the main detective narrative, which is the presentation of their roles within his parish and the hard work that goes into this. Whenever Goodacre is present in the text he is shown to be going about church business: organising a concert in aid of the Church Music Fund, for example or visiting parishioners and going to choir practice. Whatever other characteristics he might have, he is also always represented as kindly and supportive toward his parishioners: Miss Twitterton, the niece of the murdered man, for example, is gently encouraged by the vicar to begin normal life again: '... you mustn't allow yourself to brood, you know. In fact, I'm going to ask you to be very brave and very sensible and come and play the organ for us on Sunday...' (p. 338).

There are several similarities in the presentation of Mr. Goodacre and Mr. Venables in *The Nine Tailors*, possibly because of the similar nature of their positions as vicars of country parishes. It is arguable, however, that although the presentation of Mr. Venables involves a similar stereotyping to Mr. Goodacre and others, it is in his character that the stereotype is challenged to the greatest extent and in which the most is done to present the clergy in a positive light. The degree of development of Venables' character in comparison with that of Goodacre can be attributed in part to the nature of the plot. As will be discussed in Chapter Eight, *The Nine Tailors* is arguably the most pertinent text for any discussion of the religious presences in Sayers' detective fiction. Venables also has a greater significance purely in terms of narrative structure: in *Busman's*

Honeymoon, the Wimseys' house is the focal setting, whereas in *The Nine Tailors* it is the church and the vicarage that provide the location for the action of the text. Because of this, we are shown more of the vicar's life and his interaction with other characters. Mr. Venables is introduced quite early in the text and already a point is made about the work that he does within his parish, as he is out, despite the 'frozen desolation' of the fen winter evening, attending to a sick parishioner. There is no extensive physical description of Venables, the reader is just told that he is 'elderly', 'gentle and scholarly' and that, like other of the ecclesiastical characters already discussed, he wears glasses (p. 9). Wimsey introduces himself, handing Venables his card, and Sayers uses the vicar's response to establish the familiar stereotype, with an element of humour: 'The Rector fumbled for his glasses, which, after disentangling the cord, he perched very much askew on his long nose, in order to peer at Wimsey's card' (p. 10).

Often, Venables is presented like Goodacre: through a humorous stereotype. He is shown to be disorganised, constantly misplacing his possessions and needing his wife's help to locate them: 'Now where did I put my hat? Agnes, my dear! Agnes! I can't find my hat ... When did I have that key last?' (p. 24). There is also an element in his presentation which, like that of Goodacre, verges on the slapstick, for example when he is described talking about his favourite subject, campanology: 'soaring away happily to the heights of the belfry, and waving his muffin in the air, so that the butter ran down his cuff' (pp.14-15). Also, like Goodacre, there is an element of innocence to his character and parallels can be drawn in the language used to describe this in the two texts: Goodacre's face is described as 'light[ing] up with childlike pleasure' (p. 97) when

Wimsey makes the donation to the organ fund and Venables 'mouth drop[s] like the mouth of a hurt child' when he is chastised by his wife (p. 18). This image is reinforced later on in the same episode when Mrs. Venables accuses Wimsey of 'indulging' her husband. Venables, like Goodacre is unwilling to believe ill of people, which can be seen in his response to the suggestion that the church painters might have found and taken the stolen emeralds: 'Oh, I hope not. I really think not. They are most honest men'(p. 225). An even closer parallel with Goodacre can be found when Venables is 'horribly distressed' that one of his choirmen might be a murderer and exclaims 'surely, nobody belonging to the choir -', echoing Goodacre's exclamation about Frank Crutchley (p. 196).

Another trait that is shared by the two characters, but considerably more developed in Venables, is the role played within the parish and the level of commitment and degree of hard work that goes into fulfilling this role. It is here that Venables truly challenges the stereotype of the ineffectual cleric, both in his actions and attitude: he is represented throughout the novel as hard-working and caring towards his parishioners, assisting them with both their spiritual and practical needs. One difference between Venables and the other ecclesiastical characters is that he does seem to have a slightly bigger income and is therefore also able to offer his parishioners monetary assistance, for example advancing them the money to pay their tithes, although this is amusingly self-defeating, as the tithes are intended for him (p. 180). One episode that illustrates this other side to Venables takes place after the all night bell ringing to see in the New Year. The tiring nature of this work is emphasised through Wimsey's exhaustion: 'the effort of keeping alert for so many hours had produced an almost intolerable desire to tumble down in a

corner and go to sleep' (p. 37). As the bell-ringers go to the vicarage for breakfast, a messenger comes to tell Venables that he is needed to give a dying parishioner the Sacrament. Mrs. Venables tries to intervene but: 'Mr. Venables put[s] the interruption aside with an unexpected quiet authority' (p. 39). In both his action and his manner, therefore, we see a movement away from easy stereotype towards a character that can command the reader's respect.

This perspective on the vicar is reinforced by the observations of other characters, for example Mrs. Venables, when she thinks that: 'the rector never took holidays at the greater festivals, and scarcely at any other time, and she could not quite see that there was any necessity for the rest of the world to do so' (p. 60). Earlier on in the text, Mrs. Venables reports to Wimsey that Mr. Venables has: '... been sent for in a hurry to take a sick woman off to hospital, right away on the other side of the Thirty-foot, across Thorpe's Bridge. He rushed off almost before he'd finished his breakfast.' Wimsey gives no verbal response to this, but the reader is shown his thoughts, which are 'and they say ... that Church of England parsons do nothing for their money' (p. 51). Sayers uses the character of Mr. Venables to refute this suggestion and this comment by Wimsey adds weight to the argument, coming as it does from the main protagonist, in whose opinions the reader is interested. This movement towards a more serious, rounded character is compounded by Sayers' references to Venables' intelligence. Like Boyes, Venables does not recognise Wimsey in his capacity as a detective, but he has heard of him in another context: 'The name seems familiar. Have I not heard of it in connection with – oh! I have it! *Notes on the Collection of Incunabula*, of course. A very scholarly little monograph' (pp. 10-11). Venables' scholarly nature is a point of his character that

is reinforced during the course of the novel: despite the disorganised and often comical side to his character, he shows himself to have considerable learning and intelligence. This intelligence is one of the characteristics in which Venables differs from Goodacre. Having invited Wimsey to detect, Venables observes Wimsey's investigations throughout the book with understanding and interest. In contrast, at the end of *Busman's Honeymoon*, when the method of the murder is becoming obvious to both Wimsey and the reader, Mr. Goodacre is still bewildered: 'This is all very mysterious ... I'm afraid I'm being very stupid' (p. 345). A biographical reason for Venables being endowed with this intelligence could be posited: it has already been mentioned that Sayers drew on her own father in her characterisation and, as has been suggested, the Reverend Henry Sayers was a 'scholarly' man.

The point of the text at which the reader must undertake the most thorough-going re-evaluation of the traditional stereotype of the country vicar is at the end, when the parish of Fenchurch St. Paul floods, an event which has clear Biblical connotations that will be discussed in detail in Chapter Seven. Mr. Venables has prepared for such an event, having 'devoted much prayer and thought to the situation', with a result that his parishioners find sanctuary in the church as part of the emergency plan: 'men's sleeping quarters on the cantoris side, women and children on the decani side' (p. 288). The Rector's vital position within his parish is clearly emphasised, particularly in the following description: 'In the church, the Rector, with the electoral roll-call of the parish in his hand, was numbering his flock. He was robed and stoled, and his anxious old face had taken on a look of great pastoral dignity and serenity' (p. 292). The traditional metaphor of the shepherd is used to good effect and a contrast must be made between

the initial presentation of Venables and the 'dignity' which characterises him at the end of the novel. With this shift in characterisation we can also see the contrasts in Sayers' style referred to earlier. As the character, and the text, move away from the formulaic detective narrative, into an episode which highlights the serious element to Venables' character, but also the potential theological themes of sin and punishment that are raised by the analogy of the flood, Sayers' style becomes more elevated and lyrical:

[...] the churchyard resounded with the forlorn lowing of cattle and the terrified bleating of sheep. Sides of bacon were being carried in, and thirty wagon-loads of hay and corn were ranged under the church wall. In the only clear space amid the confusion the Rector stood behind the rails of the Sanctuary. And over all, the bells tumbled and wrangled, shouting their alarm across the country. Gaude, Sabaoth, John, Jericho, Jubilee, Dimity, Batty Thomas and Tailor Paul awake! make haste! Save yourselves! The deep waters have gone over us! (p. 291.)

Both elements of Sayers' style are visible here, with the pragmatic references to the 'sides of bacon' and the 'thirty wagon-loads of hay' giving way to the image of the Rector in the 'Sanctuary', with the ecclesiastical terminology emphasising the safety and order offered by the Church in times of danger and disorder to society. The onomatopoeic description of the bells 'tumbling' and 'wrangling', combined with the metered listing of their names is a good example of the passionate lyricism that characterises Sayers' more descriptive passages.

It can be argued, therefore, that in her presentation of Venables, and the other clergymen discussed so far, Sayers draws on her own background and utilises these characters to present a positive image of the clergy in terms of their social role. There is another

function, however, that Sayers puts these characters to, and this is in raising or highlighting a second set of more abstract religious presences in her detective fiction - the exploration of issues of morality and theology with which she deals explicitly and directly in her later theological works. Several of the ecclesiastical characters discussed so far fulfill this function to some extent. In Wimsey's conversation with Boyes, for example, Boyes expresses his concern about whether Harriet Vane is really guilty, and if she is, whether she should be executed, questioning whether anyone has the right to judge and punish his fellow man: 'whatever we do, we cannot bring the dead back to life, and one would infinitely prefer to leave all vengeance in the hand of Ilm to whom it belongs. Certainly, nothing could be more terrible than to take the life of an innocent person' (p. 55). Here, Boyes is raising the point of man's fallibility in comparison to the omniscience of God. The episode is brief, and Sayers does not dwell on it, but, tellingly, if briefly, the detective narrative has touched on a central theological concern. A similar moment can be identified in *Busman's Honeymoon*, when Frank Crutchley is arrested and the vicar excuses himself from the assembled company, saying: 'My duty is with that unhappy young man' (p. 356). This highlights the fact that the role of Goodacre, and the clergy in general, goes beyond that of providing practical support to parishioners: they have a spiritual duty as well. The police will take responsibility for arresting Crutchley and hearing his confession of the crime, but Goodacre is responsible for his soul, and will hope for a different 'confession'. This highlights the difference between the legal 'guilt' of Crutchley, that is, his technical culpability for the crime, and his theological 'guilt'. Once again, the issue is not engaged with any further at this point in the text, but Sayers has made use of the ecclesiastical character to highlight a theologically significant moment within the detective narrative.

This function can be seen more clearly in the character of Venables. As has been shown, Sayers develops his character beyond that of the humorous or pathetic stereotype and invests him with more serious qualities. In part, this is in keeping with her portrayal of the clergy in a more positive light, but it also gives weight to his character and therefore to the position that he represents at the end of the text. When it becomes clear that it was the New Year peal that killed Deacon, questions are inevitably raised in the reader's mind; Deacon is a thief and a murderer and therefore, by human or divine law, requires punishment. The hands that killed him, however, were those of Wimsey and Venables amongst others, and the instruments of execution the bells of the church. In terms of detective fiction, this is complicated, because the detective is the 'good' character: he brings 'evil' to justice, he should not be involved in the crime in any way. Theologically, it is also problematic: the vicar has killed someone and an intrinsic part of his church is, in effect, 'the murder weapon.' Venables provides a solution to this, which, even if it does not answer the reader's questions, will at least provoke what Sayers might have considered to be profitable thought. Venables argues that the events of the New Year were the will of God, that 'perhaps God speaks through the mouths of inarticulate metal. He is a righteous judge, strong and patient, and is provoked every day' (p. 298). Whatever the reader may make of this argument, it ensures that the end of the text transcends the generic boundaries of 'a detective story' and maybe fulfills another of Sayers' functions for her ecclesiastical characters: the provocation of theological thought in her readers, and an illustration of the complicated nature of the moral dimension of the stories.

Through Sayers' ecclesiastical characters we begin to see that the moral order necessary in detective fiction is not as simple as 'good versus evil'. As discussed in Chapter Two not all victims are innocent, not all murderers are without attractive qualities or motives with which we can empathise. The issues of guilt and innocence, crime and punishment, individual responsibility and the concepts of good and evil are complicated by the intrusion of personal, problematic elements to the stories, and this in turn raises interesting questions about the process of detection and the role of the detective. This is another of the moral questions addressed by Sayers' presentation of her ecclesiastical characters, in particular Mr. Tredgold in *Unnatural Death*. In Tredgold, we can see some of the initial stereotyping in as much as he is humorously presented as absent-minded: 'he drew out his handkerchief again and made another mnemonic knot as a reminder against his next confession that he had fallen into the sin of inquisitiveness' (p. 195). The use of stereotype in the presentation of Tredgold, is, however, kept to a minimum. There is a side to his character both in terms of presentation and function, which Sayers intends the reader to view in a more serious light. She once again shows us an alternative to the stereotype, a more 'three-dimensional' character, who, as well as provoking the reader into thoughts of a potentially philosophical or theological nature, serves to illustrate the 'moral' function that the ecclesiastical characters perform in reminding the reader of the concepts of right and wrong, both in terms of the law and of the church. In addition to this, his conversation with Wimsey helps to develop the reader's understanding of Wimsey's own moral code and the difficulties of conscience that he encounters in his investigations.

In *Unnatural Death*, Wimsey has been questioning whether it is right of him to investigate the death of Mrs. Dawson, firstly, because she was terminally ill and he is unsure of whether it is so very bad to 'hurry matters on' and secondly, because his investigation has seemingly prompted the murderer to act again and he now feels responsible for the second death (p. 193). He goes to the church to look for Miss Climpson - his assistant in several investigations - and here meets Mr. Tredgold, and after some hesitation asks him if he gives advice on 'moral problems'. This emphasises the role of the ecclesiastical character as a moral touchstone within Sayers' texts: here, at least, he is in a position to comment on morality in a way that other characters are not. The police, for example, are prevented from so doing by the nature of their work, which is to enforce the law, rather than to make moral or sociological judgements. Wimsey himself cannot always provide these judgements because as this conversation with Tredgold shows, he is capable of questioning conventional morality and because as Tredgold observes to himself at the end of the episode, 'it is hard for him [Wimsey] to disentangle his own motives' (p. 195). That is, as will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter, there is a question over what Wimsey's motives for involving himself in the investigation are; there is no financial impetus or institutional affiliation that account for a police investigation of crime, nor is there the inherent sense of theological right or wrong that might drive the priest-detective. Wimsey's motivations, as will be demonstrated, are various and personal and it is this latter quality that causes him problems whilst he is investigating.

Wimsey outlines his first concern to the priest - whether giving a terminally ill person 'a little push off' is such 'a dreadful crime?' (p. 193). Mr. Tredgold's first response is to

mention the law, but Wimsey makes it clear that he is not concerned with the legal viewpoint, saying that ‘the law says it’s a crime, fast enough ... you’d call it a sin, but why is it so very dreadful? It doesn’t do the person any harm, does it?’ Here, Wimsey is making a distinction between moral codes and legal ones, a significant point when looking at detective fiction in general. Right and wrong are not always so easily decided and often one may have more sympathy with the murderer than their victim.⁶ It is easy to argue that detective fiction is, as Wimsey himself says in *Strong Poison* a ‘pure’ literature, because ‘virtue is always triumphant’, but detective stories can also illustrate the complexity of making the decision, socially and individually, of what is ‘pure’, that is to say, what is right and wrong (p. 114).

Tredgold’s further response to Wimsey’s question involves the omniscience of God, which, he argues, man has no right to question or interfere with:

We can’t answer that ... without knowing the ways of God with the soul. In those last weeks or hours of pain and unconsciousness, the soul may be undergoing some necessary part of its pilgrimage on earth. It isn’t our business to cut it short. Who are we to take life and death into our own hands? (p. 193)

Several other of Sayers’ ecclesiastical characters makes this argument of the need not to question providence; Arthur Boyes’ consideration that judgement and punishment should be left in the hands of God, for example (p. 56). The idea is expressed also by Venables in *The Nine Tailors*, when Wimsey asks him, as he asks Tredgold, whether ‘some things may be better left alone.’ Venables’ advice is to trust in providence: ‘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’ (p. 232). Earlier in the text he comments

more simply, on the death of a parishioner, that, ‘we mustn’t question the ways of Providence’ (p. 71). These references to providence raise an interesting dimension to Sayers’ stories in which providential power becomes an active, participating force in the detective narrative.

Wimsey argues that ‘juries – soldiers – doctors’ question or interfere with providence every day, in as much as they can pronounce on matters of life and death, but that he feels that ‘it isn’t a right thing in this case’. Having conceded that, however, he expresses his concern that ‘by interfering – finding things out and so on – one may do far worse harm’ (p. 193). Tredgold is quick to point out that the reason that Wimsey feels that the interference with providence is wrong in this case is that ‘the killing is to the killer’s own advantage’. Therefore it seems it is not so much the taking of life and death into one’s own hands that is the crime, but the motivation for doing so. As Tredgold puts it, ‘sin is in the intention not the deed’ (p. 194). This is a clear example of Sayers dealing implicitly in her detective fiction with themes that she addresses directly in her later theological works, as it foreshadows the words of the Recorder in *The Just Vengeance*, discussed in chapter one: ‘What matters here is not so much what you did / As why you did it: the choice behind the action’ (p. 24). It is interesting that when Sayers deals directly with the theme, with a more didactic intention, that it is expressed with her careful pragmatism. Tredgold continues, and explains that this difference between thought and deed in humanity ‘is the difference between divine law and human law’; human law can punish the deed, but has no jurisdiction over thought – divine law is concerned with both. He then argues the viewpoint that, ‘the sin ... the damage to Society, the wrongness of the thing lies much more in the harm it does to the killer than

in anything it can do to the person who is killed' (p. 193). Human law sees the crime in the taking of another's life: a physical act that results in the death of another human being, punishable because of the consequences in terms of the victim. Church law, Tredgold seems to argue, is more concerned with the wrongness of the act in terms of the moral consequences for the killer, because, he argues, 'it is bad for a human being to get to feel that he has any right whatever to dispose of another person's life to his own advantage. It leads him on to think himself above all laws' (p. 194), raising the theme of humanity aspiring to divinity, also discussed earlier. In response to Wimsey's concerns about his right to become involved, Tredgold responds that he should 'do what [he] think[s] is right, according to the laws which we have been brought up to respect. Leave the consequences to God.' He urges Wimsey to 'bring the offender to justice', by which he seems to mean God's justice for he adds 'but remember that if we all got justice, you and I wouldn't escape either' (p. 194). Again, there is a distinction between human and Divine law, and ultimately between human and Divine justice. Human law is followed by human justice, to which Wimsey must bring the criminal, but Divine law has no earthly justice, only Divine justice.

This is something in which Sayers herself seems to have believed, and ultimately it is this that gives her books an extra dimension, as the actions of the criminals have greater impact because they are crimes against both human and Divine law. In detective fiction with a less overt Divine presence, the judgement meted out to the criminal is human, and whilst this is perhaps awful enough in terms of the death penalty, it is not so awful as the final justice that Sayers, and her detective, sees her criminals as facing. Perhaps this also goes some way to explaining Wimsey's problems of conscience, and the responsibility

he seems to feel. In all of the novels he is troubled by the idea that he is responsible for getting someone hanged, but at the end of the last novel, *Busman's Honeymoon* he asks 'if there is a God or a judgement – what next? What have we done?', implying that he is more concerned with the final court, beyond the human one, on to which he has sent the criminal (p. 395). To a certain extent, Sayers answers part of Wimsey's question within the novel, as she implies that there certainly is a God and a judgement. The 'what next' is, of course, unanswerable by man. Her description of Harriet's wait for Wimsey to return from visiting the condemned man to 'ask for his forgiveness' (p. 392) is presented in very spiritual terms, with clear biblical references, such as the passage that describes how: 'the old house was Harriet's companion in her vigil. It waited with her, its evil spirit cast out, itself swept and garnished, ready for the visit of devil or angel' (p. 392). The word 'vigil' emphasises the nature of Harriet's wait, and the 'swept and garnished house' is a reference to the parable presented in Matthew 12. 44 and Luke 11. 25.⁷ In terms of the detective narrative, the parable has a dual function; on an obvious level it is used as a reminder that the house has been redecorated and refurbished since the murder, and that the 'evil spirit' of Noakes has been cast out, but it also reinforces the wait for the devil – the rejection of Peter's request by Crutchley - or the angel, that is, his acceptance, which will make all the difference to how they feel about their home from that point on. Sayers represents this response as vital to the relationship of Harriet and Wimsey, as when his request is inevitably rejected, the 'devil' can still be cast out by his turning to Harriet for support. There is a period of waiting after his return to the house, and the reader's suspense and also the religious dimension to the episode are heightened by the creation of the sense of time passing. This is achieved through references to the striking of the church clock, emphasising its constant presence and measuring of rural

lives: ‘everything was silent, except the church clock chiming out the quarters [...] it was four by the church clock when she heard the sound she had been waiting for: the door at the bottom of the stair creaked’ (pp. 393-394). Finally, Wimsey turns to Harriet, and this triumphant moment is recorded by Sayers in the line, ‘*And the trumpets sounded for her on the other side*’, a quotation from John Bunyon’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678). If we consider the motif of the trumpet in the light that it is used in Sayers’ poetry, that is as a celebratory reminder of God’s omnipresence, it could be seen to answer Wimsey’s question and confirm the existence of a heavenly dimension. The celebratory nature of the trumpets echoes the lines from Sayers’ poem ‘ΠΑΝΤΑΣ ΕΛΚΥΣΩΕ’, from *Catholic Tales* in which she describes how ‘I hear Thy trumpets in the breaking morn / I hear them restless in the resonant night / Or sounding down the long winds over the corn’, illustrating, firstly, the sustained themes that run through all of her works, and, secondly, the poetic nature of her description when her detective fiction emphasizes its more theological dimension.⁸

Beyond his direct purpose within the detective narrative, therefore, Tredgold’s functions are twofold. Firstly, in direct contrast with Hallelujah Dawson, the other cleric presented in *Unnatural Death*, he is used by Sayers to challenge the stereotype of the benevolent but unworldly priest, by instead presenting an intelligent man, with an understanding of theology, but also the ‘real’ world, to which he must apply his theological understanding. It is arguable that the reader is inclined to regard Tredgold as a more ‘realistic’ character than Dawson, who is almost too ‘storybook’. Tredgold’s speech is intelligent and reasoned and therefore we must see his character in the same light. His second function outside of the detective narrative is to provide the reader with thought-

provoking material: whilst following his conversation with Wimsey, the reader is forced to consider the issues raised. The provocation for the reader to engage with the ideas is greater because of the way that Sayers presents the arguments to us: rather than a monologue or sermon, there is an almost Socratic dialogue between the two characters, Sayers recognising that arguments have more weight if the recipient works through them with you.

The ecclesiastical characters, as an obvious textual presence in Sayers' detective fiction, are there to highlight the absence of simplicity in the detective narrative, and in the process of reading it. As has been suggested, the detective narrative can present us with an investigation of a series of more subtle and complicated questions than 'whodunit', which in turn reveal a second, more subtle set of religious presences in Sayers' detective stories. These presences are an exploration of the theological ideas that occupied Sayers, and that were the specific focus of her later theological works. Her novels can be read simply as detective fiction with what might be seen as an excess of religious presences, or their narratives can be seen as a starting point for the stimulation amongst readers of thoughtful debate on the moral and theological issues that were an intrinsic part of her other writings. Tredgold's dialogue with Wimsey has the added function of illustrating elements of Sayers' characterisation of her detective and of raising some of the key issues that the process of detection highlights in terms of the moral and theological themes within the texts, such as his motivation and 'right' to investigate, the moral difficulties that he encounters once the investigation is underway, and the consequences of his discovery of the truth. As the next chapter will illustrate, the character of the detective is highly significant to a discussion of detective fiction and religion, and, in

terms of Sayers' stories, it is the process of Wimsey's detection that reveals the more intangible religious elements present in these narratives: the theological themes of providence, Divine judgement and punishment and the significance of 'truth'.

¹ G.K. Chesterton, 'The Hammer of God', in *The Innocence of Father Brown* (London: Cassell, 1911, repr. Penguin, 1950), pp. 173-192.

² It is interesting to note the prevalence of glasses amongst Sayers' clerical characters. On one level their ill-sightedness is clearly part of the stereotype, on another it alerts the reader to the different kinds of sight and insight involved in the detective narrative. See p. 157 below.

³ Sayers actually took a first in Modern Languages.

⁴ The names Sayers chooses to give her ecclesiastical characters could be considered significant. 'Venables' is derived from the Latin for to revere or worship, and Goodacre has connotations of the vicar's goodness, and the concern he has for his 'acre', his parish. The vicar in *Unnatural Death* 'Tredgold', who will be discussed later in this chapter, could be seen as a reference to choosing or treading a path of light / goodness, or a mutation of 'threadgold,' in relation to the understanding he endeavors to impart into Wimsey's confused mind.

⁵ Keble is a College at Oxford University, founded in 1870 as a memorial to John Keble (1792-1866). The College was founded with the intention of making provision for a university education with a Church of England foundation. See Geoffrey Rowell, "'Training in Simple and Religious Habits": Keble and its First Warden' in *The History of the University of Oxford, Volume vii, Nineteenth-Century Oxford, Part 2*, ed. by M.G. Brock and M.C. Curthoys (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), pp. 171-191.

⁶ As in the previously discussed example of *Murder Must Advertise*, in which Dean, the victim, is a blackmailer, and a very unattractive character. At the end of this novel, Mr. Tallboy, the murderer, says that 'if [he] hadn't been found out, [he] shouldn't care now', to which Wimsey replies 'I can sympathise with that' (p. 279). See Chapter Two, p. 61.

⁷ The parable in question is used by Jesus to illustrate the wickedness and weakness of the 'evil and adulterous' generation that he is addressing (Matthew 12. 39), by showing the potential of man, when he is rid of the 'unclean spirit', and thus becoming a swept and garnished house (12. 43), to allow the evil spirit, or others more wicked to inhabit him again.

⁸ *Poetry of Dorothy L. Sayers*, ed by E. Hone, p. 85.

Chapter Six

Religion, Detection and Lord Peter Wimsey

The rise of detective fiction as a secular genre was considered in Chapter Three, as was the role of the detective as a secularised figure, or, as Blake argues, a replacement 'Divine or apothoised Being'. This representation of the detective in the nineteenth century can be seen in the character of Sherlock Holmes, who represents the 'magic' of ratiocination and the power of logic as opposed to *faith in miracles*; his god-like knowledge is the result of deduction rather than divine inspiration.¹ It becomes clear, however, that with the return to the Christian framework for the detective story in the Golden Age, this model of the detective as a replacement divinity is no longer pertinent. Instead of replacing God with an *übermensch*, the detective becomes a representative of a divine force, as Rowland argues: '[...] it is unsurprising that the self-conscious artifice of the golden age genre [...] should construct the detective as a metaphysical figure whose potency for restoring social order is reinforced by the trappings of neo-divine power.' Rowland's chapter on 'The Spirits of Detection' is a valuable critical approach to the relationship between the detective and Divinity, in particular her insights into 'the relationship to conceptions of divine justice' of the detectives created by Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers.

Rowland begins with a discussion of the most 'godly' detective created in the Golden Age, Christie's Harley Quin: 'who appears spookily to collaborate with a Mr Satterthwaite [who...] becomes, through Harley Quin, an actor in dramas designed to achieve justice' (p. 139). Many of these dramas involve situations where there is no

hope of justice being achieved through any human agency. The first story in the collection is 'The Coming of Mr Quin', where the significantly named Harley Quin arrives late one night at a country-house party as a stranger whose car has broken down.² He is invited in to join the party of assembled guests, one of whom is Mr. Satterthwaite, and during the course of the conversation, manages to direct Satterthwaite towards the solution of the suicide of the previous owner of the house, Derek Capel. The discovery that Capel is guilty of murder proves the innocence of his victim's wife, herself a guest at the party, and under the constant suspicion of her second husband. Throughout the text, Mr. Quin is presented as elusive, with brief moments of description by Christie which suggest his supernatural identity; Satterthwaite notices how the stained glass window makes him appear as if he is 'dressed in every colour of the rainbow' and how 'some effect of the firelight threw a bar of shadow across his face which almost gave the impression of a mask' (p. 16). In this, the first story, a more explicit reference is also made to Quin's true identity, as he asks Satterthwaite if he is interested in 'the drama': 'I must recommend the Harlequinade to your attention [...] its symbolism is a little difficult to follow – but the immortals are always immortal, you know' (p. 27). Rowland suggests that, at this point:

Not only does the self-referentiality of the genre take on its familiar theatrical metaphor, but the presence of Harley Quin defines it explicitly as a *sacred* drama of divine justice. Harley Quin is not a *deus ex machina* utilising supernatural methods. He embodies a greater knowledge than the merely human characters together with a divine purpose, yet functions by prompting Satterthwaite's human investigations. In effect, Harley Quin and Satterthwaite represent a division of divine and earthly justice that Christie incarnates into the single figures of Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple (p. 139).

This representation of Quin as the 'divine' element to the justice provide by himself and Satterthwaite is clearly established in all of the stories. In 'The Man from the Sea', Satterthwaite asks a man contemplating suicide: 'can you dare to ignore that you are taking part in a gigantic drama under the orders of a divine producer?'"³ Mr Quin is clearly an emissary, if not an embodiment, of this 'divine producer'; his extra-human powers are often mentioned in the text, such as at the end of 'The Man from the Sea', where he walks off of the cliff into nothing (p. 125), and his Providential appearance in each story in exactly the place where each 'drama' is occurring.

As Rowland comments, in the examples of Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot this divine element is not represented as a separate entity that works along side them, but is, instead, an intrinsic part of them. In both cases, this element to their character is quite clearly shown within the texts and is without ambiguity. Poirot's assertion that 'Le Bon Dieu created [him] to interfere'⁴ is a definite assertion of the divine element to his powers of detection, as is Miss Marple's self-styling of herself as 'Nemesis': 'It's me,' said Miss Marple, for once ungrammatical, 'though I should have put it a little more strongly than that. The Greeks, I believe, had a word for it. Nemesis, if I am not wrong.'⁵ As Nemesis, Rowland argues, 'Miss Marple [...] is a vehicle of divine fury' (p. 139). This is clearly demonstrated in the sequel to *A Caribbean Mystery*, where she first describes herself in these avenging terms, the novel actually titled *Nemesis*, in which she fulfills a request by a dead man, Mr. Rafiel, to discover the truth behind the death of a girl that his son has been convicted of murdering. What is significant is that Rafiel wants the truth, regardless of whether this does actually involve his son's guilt or not, and with truth, justice. This is shown in his letter to Miss Marple, which he ends with a quotation from

Amos 5. 24: 'let justice roll down as waters and righteousness like an everlasting stream', a verse Miss Marple reiterates when she has solved the case, emphasising her role as the embodiment of 'justice'.⁶ This association of justice with 'righteousness' emphasises the morally unambiguous terms of Christie's detective stories, mentioned briefly in Chapter Two. Christie largely represents 'Good' and 'Evil' as two simple and opposing forces, and both Miss Marple and Poirot have a gift for identifying this evil, which is represented as almost palpable within the narratives. In *Peril at End House*, for example, Poirot agrees with the maid, Ellen, that there is an atmosphere of evil in the house, and reassures that parents of the dead girl that, 'Evil never goes unpunished' (p. 108 and p. 134). In Christie's stories, the righteous 'Good' always triumphs in the end, as Rowland comments 'Poirot's investigations almost always combine the justice of God with the justice of the social law in an unproblematical manner' (p. 139).⁷

This lack of ambiguity in the Golden-Age narrative formula, which is not limited to Christie, can be seen as part of the wish-fulfillment element of the genre, and a part of the reassuring 'strain ideology' identified by Knight. Sayers demonstrates her awareness of this in *Strong Poison*, when Wimsey comments that 'in detective stories virtue is always triumphant . They're the purest literature we have' (p. 114).⁸ This theme is picked up and reproduced by Paton Walsh in her continuation of Sayers' *Thrones, Dominations*, in a conversation between Wimsey and Harriet, when Harriet comments that the world that her stories present is not true, to which Wimsey replies 'a vision does not have to be true' and argues that this absence of reality is:

'Not falsehood, Harriet, idealism. Detective stories keep alive a view of the world which ought to be true. Of course people read them for

fun, for diversion, as they do crossword puzzles. But underneath they feel a hunger for justice, and heaven help us if ordinary people cease to feel that.'

'You mean perhaps they work as fairy tales work, to caution stepmothers against being wicked, and to comfort Cinderellas everywhere?' (p. 151)

This identifies a formulaic element of the detective narrative that Sayers both utilises and develops, which can be seen through her complex exploration of the process of detection and the far more ambiguous detective that she presents in Lord Peter Wimsey. As Rowland observes, Wimsey is far less easily defined in terms of his relationship with or embodiment of divinity and the opposing forces of good and evil than any of Christies' detectives: 'Sayers's Lord Peter Wimsey is far more self conscious about the metaphysical implications of his role'(p. 139). She continues: 'Wimsey's self-doubt about the morality of his use of his social privilege to pursue murderers represents generically the tension within the detective function between metaphysical fantasy and secular realism'. Wimsey's 'social privilege' is certainly an intrinsic part of his investigations as it is, simultaneously, one of his motivations for his involvement and the reason for his squeamishness about the consequences - as Tredgold observes of the aristocracy at the end his exchange with Wimsey in *Unnatural Death*: 'Dear, dear, [...] how nice they are. So kindly and scrupulous and so vague outside their public-school code. And much more nervous and sensitive than people think' (p. 195). However, it could be argued that these self doubts are not the result of a secular realism in Wimsey's characterisation, but a dimension to his presentation that is created by Sayers' theological beliefs. His doubts are not a secular intrusion into the fantasy of the divine detective, but the result of Sayers utilising her detective to explore her beliefs regarding

guilt, innocence and personal responsibility. Wimsey is aware of the complex and ambiguous nature of guilt, the subjectivity of judgement and the doubts regarding the human right to interfere in the process of crime and punishment, complex as it is, emphasised by his question at the end of *Busman's Honeymoon*: 'if there is a God or a judgement, what next? What have we done?' (p. 395). The tension that is created within the fantasy by Sayers is due to an arguably theological rather than secular realism.

On initial encounters, however, Wimsey is not presented in explicitly religious terms. Indeed, at the end of *Gaudy Night*, he tells Harriet Vane that he has 'nothing much in the way of religion, or even morality, but [he does] recognise a code of behaviour of sorts' (p. 436). In the short story, 'The Incredible Elopement of Lord Peter Wimsey', he likewise says that his 'religious beliefs are a little ill-defined'.⁹ Despite this lack of clarity over 'religion' in general, in all of the novels in which he appears he demonstrates a 'working knowledge' of Christianity. This can be seen in the way he makes frequent, pertinent biblical allusion, demonstrates a thorough knowledge of the Bible. For example in *The Nine Tailors*, when Bunter writes on the card accompanying a funeral wreath, 'St. Luke xii-6' which is 'Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings, and not one of them is forgotten before God?', which alludes to the fact that, although Deacon is an anonymous corpse to the villagers, his identity is known to God. This in turn raises interesting issues regarding the role of providence within the novel, that will be discussed in Chapter Seven. Despite Bunter only putting the reference rather than the full verse, Wimsey 'identif[ies] the text after a little thought (for he had been carefully brought up)' (p. 111).

It is this upbringing and background that Sayers attributes to her detective that accounts for the outward appearances of Christianity in his character and also for the 'code' that he works by. Wimsey is given a traditional, aristocratic family and part of this tradition is religion. At the end of *Busman's Honeymoon*, the church at Duke's Denver, Wimsey's family home, is described in detail, showing the historical presence of the Wimseys: '[...] the family pews had crouching cats in place of the ordinary poppy heads, in compliment no doubt to the Wimsey crest. There was a chantry at the east end of the south aisle, with canopied tombs. Wimseys again [...]' (p. 382). Wimsey attends several church services during the course of his detection: in *The Nine Tailors* three services are described in some detail, as they provide comment and elucidation of the investigation in hand. In *Gaudy Night*, Harriet meets him unexpectedly after they have both attended the university sermon (p. 264). In *Busman's Honeymoon*, he reads the lesson in the village church, an event that is clearly not a one-off, as his cousin comments that he 'can always hear everything that [Wimsey] says' (p. 283). In both of these examples, Wimsey's appearance in church has to do with his 'code': he is there principally out of social obligation. Sometimes, however, Wimsey's presence in church serves only to meet his detective ends, and even when this is not the case he is not always focussed on devotion. In *Clouds of Witness*, he escapes into York Cathedral and pretends to pray in order to escape from a newspaper reporter (p. 176). and more than once in *The Nine Tailors*, his concentration is focussed on the case rather than on the service that he is attending, such as when 'The problem of the rope [...] took such possession of Wimsey that he forgot to join in the Lord's Prayer [...]' (p. 103). Neither the biblical knowledge nor the church-going can be taken as evidence of any conviction or faith, arising as they appear to out of status, education and upbringing. They are instead evidence of his

‘type’, fulfilling the role created by Sayers for her detective. Yet it is the process of Wimsey’s detection and the difficulties in this, created in part by the same ‘code’, that reveal the more intangible religious element in Sayers’ detective novels, the presence of theological ideas such as the existence of providence, divine judgement and punishment, and the significance of truth as a concept.

Wimsey’s two co-detectives, particularly Miss Climpson, who appears in *Unnatural Death* and *Strong Poison*, are certainly attributed with more religious conviction than he is, in particular Miss Climpson. Miss Climpson’s religious beliefs are a fundamental part of her characterisation to the extent that they influence her activities as a detective in a number of ways. In *Unnatural Death*, she makes it clear that she cannot engage in any activities that are contrary to her beliefs, as she tells Wimsey that she cannot ‘do violence to [her] religious beliefs [...] Even in [his] interests’ (p. 35).¹⁰ Often, her beliefs are used to create a comical element to her character, particularly when she finds herself torn between her loyalty to her beliefs and her loyalty to Wimsey, for example when she finds Vera Findlater’s notes for Confession in the church in *Unnatural Death*:

And here it was – the tale that should have been told to none but God – lying open on Mrs. Budge’s round mahogany table under the eye of a fellow mortal.

[...]

For a full half-hour Miss Climpson sat alone, struggling with her conscience. Her natural inquisitiveness said “Read”; her religious training said, “You must not read” [...] (p. 217).

Here, Sayers is utilising the figure of the divinely-inspired detective, who functions as an emissary of heavenly justice, but pointing out the limitations of such a character through

an intrusive, but comical, human element. This is particularly emphasised when Miss Climpson prays for divine inspiration for her detective exploits - as in *Strong Poison*, when 'She breathed what she thought was a prayer for guidance, but the only answer was a small whisper in her ear, 'Oh, jolly good work, Miss Climpson!' and the voice was the voice of Peter Wimsey' (p. 161). Her fervour is undeniably used to create humour, especially in her vaguely blasphemous idolatry of Wimsey.

The fundamentally religious element to Miss Climpson's personality is continued in *Strong Poison* where she is described as 'a tough, thin, elderly woman with a sound digestion and a militant High-Church conscience of remarkable staying-power' (p. 36). In this instance, Miss Climpson appears on the jury that is trying Harriet Vane and, as dictated to by her High-Church conscience, refuses to vote for the majority and ensures Harriet a re-trial, as Sir Impey comments 'a person who believes all the articles of the Christian faith is not going to boggle over a trifle of adverse evidence' (pp. 36-37). This reinforces Sayers' gently humorous portrayal of Miss Climpson, but it also reminds the reader that she brings her religious perspective to all of her investigations. In this particular novel her faith is tested to its full as she must pretend to be a follower of spiritualism in order to gain the information that Wimsey needs:

'Though what excuse I can find in my *conscience* for the *methods* I have used, I *don't* know! But I believe the Church takes into account the necessity of a *deception* in certain *professions*, such as that of a *police-detective* or a SPY in time of WARFARE, and I *trust* that my *subterfuges* may be allowed to come under that *category*' (p. 190).¹¹

Once again, she squares her conscience with her faith. The significant point about Miss Climpson, despite the humorous portrayal, is that her investigations are justified and

regulated by her faith, that is, religion informs her detection. The same can also be said to some extent, of Parker, Wimsey's other co-investigator, as will be demonstrated. But, when Wimsey is considered in comparison to these two characters, the movement is not from religion to detection, but detection to religion.

Chief Inspector Parker, Wimsey's police friend and brother-in-law is clearly defined in terms of his religious beliefs in the novels: he is described in *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* as, 'cautious, solid, painstaking [with] his mind a blank to art and literature, and exercising itself in spare moments, with evangelical theology' (p. 78).

Parker is represented as morally upright and consequently inflexible on points of the law even when his personal feelings are involved, for example, at the end of *Clouds of Witness*, when he takes Lady Mary's confession of murder despite the fact that he is in love with her. Wimsey sums up Parker's attitude to the law by describing him as a 'Sadducee' (p. 45), which is a fitting theological stance for a policeman bound by the laws of the institution that he works for, as the Sadducees insisted that only the written law was obligatory. Parker's inflexibility contrasts with Wimsey's more open-minded interpretation of the laws governing human behaviour. This includes matters of justice, which Wimsey occasionally takes into his own hands, for example, in *Unnatural Death*

Parker and Wimsey are interviewing a suspect when:

A curious intent look came into her eyes. Parker could not place it, but Wimsey recognised it instantly. He had seen it last on the face of a great financier as he took up his pen to sign a contract. Wimsey had been called to witness the signature and had refused. It was a contract that ruined thousands of people. Incidentally, the financier had been murdered soon after and Wimsey had declined to investigate the

matter, with a sentence from Dumas: “Let pass the justice of God.” (p. 71).

This clearly distinguishes Wimsey’s position in terms of Divinity and detection, particularly when compared to Holmes’ self-apotheosising statement that he is ‘the last court of appeal’.¹² A distinction is made here between Parker and Wimsey’s abilities to allow instinct to dictate their processes of detection. It also illustrates that Wimsey may pick and choose what he investigates, which Parker may not, being bound by his profession. In this instance, Wimsey declines to investigate the death of the financier on the grounds that he appears to have got his just deserts, and thus Wimsey becomes his judge and jury, a point emphasised by Sayers’ pun on the word ‘sentence’.

Parker recognises that Wimsey’s morality is different to his own, that Wimsey functions under a different code. In *Unnatural Death*, Sayers describes how Parker:

[...] conducted his own life with an earnest middle-class morality which he owed to his birth and upbringing, and, while theoretically recognising that Lord Peter’s world acknowledged different standards he had never contemplated being personally faced with any result of their application in practice (p. 25).

It is this code of Wimsey’s that is his reason for investigating and, simultaneously, what makes his investigations so difficult. Wimsey’s code of behaviour comes about, in part, because of his aristocratic background and to some extent he conforms to the ‘detection with honour’ school popular from the beginning of the genre with gentleman detectives such as Poe’s Dupin and Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes, or even the royal sleuth hinted at in Margery Allingham’s ‘Campion’ stories. Sayers acknowledges the influence of his literary counterparts on Wimsey’s character. For example, in her first detective novel,

Whose Body, she describes how, '[Wimsey's] mind had been warped in its young growth by 'Raffles' and 'Sherlock Holmes' or the sentiments for which they stand. He belonged to a family that had never shot a fox' (p. 164). This parallel with Holmes is sustained in Sayers' other novels through repeated allusion, such as when Wimsey refers to Harriet Vane as his 'Watson'. This generic self-consciousness is, as has been shown, not unusual in detective fiction, functioning either to give verisimilitude to the text or to create a humorous irony and Sayers uses it for both of these reasons. A third reason for her use of such allusions, however, might be to provoke contrast between Wimsey and other literary detectives illustrating the difference in his characterisation in terms of the presence of another dimension to his personality, one that emphasises the moral and theological themes within the texts.

One distinction that must be made between Parker and Wimsey is that Wimsey is an amateur detective, he is not paid for his detecting and therefore by definition it becomes a pastime, rather than a profession which, in some senses, places him on an equal footing with the reader. This is in keeping with popular notions of detective fiction as a game or hobby and is perpetuated by Sayers in her role as narrator.¹³ The notion of detection as a hobby is also reinforced through the attitudes of Sayers' other characters. The Duke of Denver, Wimsey's brother, accuses him of 'play[ing] Sherlock Holmes' (p. 175), and Miss Barton in *Gaudy Night* demands to know 'whether this dilettante gentleman does anything, outside of his hobbies of detecting crimes and collecting books and I believe playing cricket in his off time' (p. 36).

This is all in keeping with the Golden-Age presentation of detective fiction as a game of some description, but, as Wimsey explains to Parker, in the first novel *Whose Body?* ‘It is a game to me, to begin with and I go on cheerfully, and then I suddenly see that someone is going to be hurt, and I want to get out of it.’ (p. 123). This statement, coming so early on in the chronology of her works, demonstrates that Sayers was already confronting the extra dimensions to the genre and writing beyond the pure puzzle story. Wimsey’s questioning of his role and the popular representation of it is a rejection of generic conventions and the point at which Sayers begins to engage with the morally and theologically complicated nuances inherent within her presentation of the detective. All of Wimsey’s investigations involve this problem of his realisation that ‘someone is going to get hurt’. He enters into the ‘game’ of detection: he encounters difficulties: he wishes to get out, but can’t. Many of the difficulties he encounters are to do with the personalities of the criminals or the victims, sometimes these problems are a result of his knowing the parties involved, such as in *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*, where the main suspect is a close friend: ‘George Fentiman. I must be getting emotional in my old age, Charles, for I have an unconquerable dislike to examine the question of George Fentiman’s opportunities’ (p. 147). A similar situation arises in *Clouds of Witness*, when it seems for a time that the murderer must either be his brother or his sister and that he is therefore duty bound to send one or other of them to the dock.

As discussed in Chapter Two, these problems often arise because the criminal is not always ‘evil’, nor is their victim always pure of character. Clear examples of this can be found in *Five Red Herrings* and *Murder Must Advertise*, where Wimsey finds sympathy with the criminals, Ferguson and Tallboy, and discovers that the victims are less than

innocent, morally or legally, themselves. The problem is not always to do with the personally redeeming features of the criminal. Sir Julian Freke in *Whose Body?* is clearly a criminal – he has no characteristics that draw Wimsey or the reader to him personally, and he has, moreover, murdered a relatively harmless man for reasons of personal pride. However, Wimsey still suffers a crisis of conscience, as, although Freke has no personally redeeming features, he is of vital social importance as an eminent nerve specialist who does significant good in the treatment of neurasthenia sufferers, such as Wimsey himself. This is shown in the novel when Wimsey goes to call on Freke, to confirm his suspicions, but also to possibly alert him to the knowledge of his guilt and provide him, as he does with Tallboy and Penberthy, with the opportunity to take the ‘gentleman’s’ way out. In the waiting room at Freke’s surgery, Wimsey falls into conversation with the mother of a young child who is being treated there, who describes Freke as ‘un saint qui opère des miracles! [...] and he does it all, cet homme illustre, for nothing at all’ (p. 165). Despite being a murderer, Freke is something of a philanthropist, and Wimsey’s bringing him to justice will mean that society loses his expertise, as another doctor comments: ‘heavens, Lord Peter, you don’t know what a blow you have struck at the profession – the whole civilised world’ (p. 177). Thus, in benefiting society through the reinforcement of justice and the restoration of order, Wimsey is simultaneously removing a character capable of significant social good, a problem that clearly highlights the ethical difficulties he faces as a detective.

Parker’s response to Wimsey’s problem is to tell him to get ‘this playing-fields-of-Eton complex out of [his] system once and for all’:

‘You want to hunt down a murderer for the sport of the thing and then shake hands with him and say, “Well played – hard luck – you shall have your revenge tomorrow!” Well, you can’t do it like that. Life’s not a football match. You want to be a sportsman. You can’t be a sportsman. You’re a responsible person’ (p. 123).

The key issue in Parker’s response to Wimsey is the absence of choice that Wimsey has. In *Busman’s Honeymoon*, Harriet asks him why he must investigate the murder that has occurred in their new home, because ‘It’s such a beastly little crime – sordid and horrible.’ Wimsey’s response is that he cannot pick and choose:

‘I can’t wash my hands of a thing, merely because it’s inconvenient to my lordship, as Bunter says of the sweep. I hate violence! I loathe wars and slaughter, and men quarrelling and fighting like beasts! Don’t say it isn’t my business. It’s everybody’s business’ (p. 128).

There are two points of note in this passage. The first is that Wimsey describes the process of bringing criminals to justice as ‘everybody’s business’. This is not an advocacy for everyone becoming a detective, but instead a reminder of every individual’s social duties: the emphasis on individual responsibility that features in all of Sayers’ writings.

The second point of significance is Wimsey’s implied reference to Pilate, when he says that he cannot wash his hands of the investigation. Pilate absolved himself of both the responsibilities and consequences of trying Christ: ‘When Pilate saw that he could prevail nothing, but *that* rather a tumult was made, he took water, and washed *his* hands before the multitude, saying, I am innocent of the blood of this first person: see ye *to it*. (Matthew 27. 24). Wimsey sees that he cannot do this. For various reasons, he has a duty to investigate. The complicated and often unpleasant nature of the process of

detection is highlighted in Sayers' novels by the repeated paralleling of the detective with two Biblical figures: Pontius Pilate and Judas Iscariot. In *Gaudy Night*, the following exchange takes place between Harriet Vane and Wimsey:

“Peter – I feel exactly like Judas.”

“Feeling like Judas is part of the job. No job for a gentleman, I'm afraid. Shall we wash our hands like Pilate and be thoroughly respectable?” (p. 319).

The allusion to Judas is prompted by the fact that Harriet feels that she is betraying her friends and colleagues by placing them under scrutiny and suspicion. Similar comments are made by Wimsey in other novels, such as in *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*, when he says that he will not part with his thoughts to Parker for ‘thirty pieces of silver’ (p. 200). This is because he is concerned that George Fentiman, may be the criminal. This is the purpose of the comparisons to Judas: they illustrate that detection is undertaken at great personal and to some extent moral cost, that sometimes the truth can only be achieved through the betrayal of friendship.

Neither of these Biblical figures present an attractive or positive impression of detection and firmly establish that it is not an emotionally simple activity. The ‘Pilate’ analogy is made more than once in the novels, for example, in *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*, when Wimsey's investigations raise difficulties, he decides that he will ‘wash [his] hands of this case’, but Sayers adds: ‘Wimsey might wash his hands, but like Pontius Pilate, he found society irritatingly determined to connect him with an irritating and unsatisfactory case’ (p. 181). In this instance, the case is ‘unsatisfactory’ because Wimsey is a personal friend of the main suspect and finds himself in the same quandary regarding the consequences of his investigations as he did in *Unnatural Death*, that

prompted the conversation with Mr Tredgold discussed in Chapter Five. He finds himself making the same argument: ‘What he deuce did it matter if old Fentiman was pushed painlessly off a bit before his time? He was simply indecently ancient.’ (p. 181).

Another biblical reference made a number of times is the parallel between detection and the process of setting traps for people. In *Gaudy Night*, the Dean asks Harriet if Wimsey will ‘lay traps all evening for [them] to walk into’ (p. 318), and the reference is made even more explicitly in *Busman’s Honeymoon*, when Wimsey, having literally ‘trapped’ the criminal, Frank Crutchley in the mechanics of his own murderous arrangement, then suffers his usual crisis of conscience about this. He finds himself giving the reading in church:

‘For among my people they found wicked men; they lay wait, as he that setteth snares; as they set a trap, they catch men....’

Harriet looked up. Had she fancied that slight check in the voice?

Peter’s eyes were steadily fixed on the page (p. 382).

This reference to Jeremiah 6. 26, emphasizes the dual nature of the ‘trap’ in *Busman’s Honeymoon*; the verse in question deals with the traps set by sinners, and so calls to mind Crutchley’s trap for Noakes, particularly as this involves a length of fishing wire, set into a ‘snare’. Wimsey’s response to the verse, however, emphasises that he, too, has been responsible for setting a trap for Crutchley; the falling into the literal recreation of the trap he set for Noakes ensnares Crutchley and proves his guilt, and the imagery is reinforced by the description of Crutchley as a wild animal, with ‘the face of a beast [...] panting and snarling’ (p. 355). Wimsey is upset by the associated imagery of setting traps, because it is not sportsmanlike, and cannot be considered ‘playing the game’ and it reminds him of the consequences of his investigations.¹⁴ Given the difficult nature of

detection, the question arises as to why Wimsey carries on the investigations – after all, he is not obliged to do so by profession, or for monetary gain. One reason is that Wimsey detects through a sense of noblesse oblige or there is the possibility that he is driven by a sense of responsibility as a human being, because, as he says ‘it is everybody’s business’. This accounts for his activities in part, but more significant and fundamental to his motivations appears to be his desire for the truth. Detection is about locating the truth at whatever cost, even if that cost is personal, and this is an idea that Sayers often returns to in her novels. In *Gaudy Night*, Wimsey says that he must have the truth ‘at all hazards’ (p. 394), and in *Busman’s Honeymoon* he emphatically states that ‘Whoever suffers, we *must* have the truth. Nothing else matters a damn’ (p. 301). Once again we return to the idea that detection, the gaining of truth, is a process that involves human suffering: either the detective’s, the innocent suspect’s, or that of society as a whole. ‘Truth’ is, of course, a concept of considerable significance in the Bible. In the old testament, the ‘truth’ of God refers to the reliability of his word, for example Isaiah states ‘that he who blesseth himself in the earth shall bless himself in the God of truth [...]’ (65. 16). The gospel of John in the New Testament is ‘an exposition of the truth of God which is revealed by Christ’¹⁵: ‘He that hath received his testimony hath set to his seal that God is true.’ (John 3. 33.) Truth here is not simply an awareness of the ‘facts’, but of an inherent understanding of the word of God.

The process of detection in Sayers’ novels therefore, if we define it in terms of a quest for the truth, becomes inevitably interwoven with her exploration of theological themes in these texts. The Bible makes it clear that the process of bringing truth is terrible but vital and one which will have human cost both to the bringer and to those that hear it.

This is emphasised at the end of *Gaudy Night*, in a conversation with the appropriately named Miss de Vine, in which Wimsey discusses the personal cost to himself of the detective process, as it has potentially destroyed his relationship with Harriet Vane. Wimsey says, ‘I don’t claim, you know, [...] to be a Christian or anything of that kind. But there’s one thing in the Bible that seems to me to be a mere statement of brutal fact – I mean, about bringing not peace but a sword’ (p. 430). The ‘thing in the Bible’ that Wimsey refers to is Matthew chapter 10 verse 34, where Christ instructs his disciples about carrying the Word of God to the world and which emphasises that the bringing of truth is not a simple process, and that it can create personal and social difficulty:

For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law.

And a man’s foes *shall be* they of his own household. (Matthew 10. 34-35)

This seems a particularly good analogy for the detective story, particularly those set in the closed setting of the country ‘household’, and the problems that arise with the revelation of the false innocence of many of the protagonists. However, in order for the individual and society to exist in harmony the truth must be understood and acknowledged, just as the truth at the end of a detective novel is necessary before the restoration of order to the characters and environment of the story.

We can, if we wish, enjoy Sayers as a pure puzzle writer and as a classic author of the popular genre of detective fiction. But it could be argued that she cannot be read without some provocation of thought in the reader about the serious nature of detection as an activity, particularly its consequences in relation to the judgement and punishment of a criminal, especially when we consider the presence of a divine justice. Sayers

deliberately uses her detective stories as a vehicle for the exploration of several theological issues, which she clearly signposts through the Biblical parallels she provides for detection, and her presentation of Wimsey's troubled conscience in the far from simple process of detection. In so doing she ceases to just purely entertain us with a cosy mystery story and instead brings to the reader's mind 'not peace, but a sword.'

¹ Although, as shown in Chapter Three, the role of Holmes as a detective is not that simple

² Agatha Christie, 'The Coming of Mr Quin' in *The Mysterious Mr Quin* (London: Collins, 1930, repr. Penguin, 1953).

³ Agatha Christie, 'The Man from the Sea' in *The Mysterious Mr Quin*, p. 124.

⁴ Christie, *Peril at End house*, p. 106.

⁵ Agatha Christie, *A Caribbean Mystery* (London: Collins, 1964; repr. Fontana, 1966), p. 146 and p. 189.

⁶ Agatha Christie, *Nemesis* (London: Collins, 1971; repr. Fontana, 1974), p. 24.

⁷ It is worth noting that in *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991), Alison Light places far less significance on this unambiguous presentation of good and evil in Christie's works: 'the language of good and evil in the fiction feels 'trumped up' and reads like a mere reflex, the echoes of a more proselytising religiosity heard faintly through a mild Anglicanism'. (p. 101).

⁸ There is, of course, a play on the term 'pure' here, referring as it does to moral as well as generic purity.

⁹ Dorothy L. Sayers, 'The Incredible Elopement of Lord Peter Wimsey' in *Hangman's Holiday*, p. 55

¹⁰ Sayers' italics.

¹¹ This reference to spiritualism is pertinent to the inter-war context of *Strong Poison* as many people turned to it as an alternative to the established faiths after World War One, as Bourke observes, 'for many bereaved men and women, disparate religious beliefs could be assembled together by spiritualism' (p. 233). Many books were written on the subject such as Sir Oliver Lodge's *Raymond, Or life and death with examples of the evidence for survival of memory and affection after death*, which details Sir Oliver's attempts to contact his dead son, killed in the war, through spiritualistic means. (Oliver Lodge, *Raymond, Or life and death with examples of the evidence for survival of memory and affection after death* [London: Methuen, 1916]). Another interesting believer in spiritualism was Conan Doyle; despite the rejection of the supernatural in his Victorian detective fiction, Doyle became a member of the Society for Psychical Research, a conversion that was linked to the fact that his son, brother and brother-in-law had been killed the war. Like many others bereaved in the First World War, Conan Doyle found that the spiritualism revival of the 1920s offered comfort in the face of death and incomprehensible loss.

¹² 'The Adventure of the Five Orange Pips' in *The Adventures and Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*, p. 87.

¹³ At the beginning of *Whose Body* for example, she refers to Wimsey's 'hobby of criminal investigation' (p. 11), and in the biographical details provided in each book, 'criminology' is listed as one of Wimsey's 'recreations'.

¹⁴ Images of entrapment are used in several of Sayers' other novels. See the references to this in Chapter Seven, p. 214 and Chapter Eight, p. 241.

¹⁵ WRF Browning, ed. *Oxford Dictionary of the Bible* (Oxford: OUP, 1997) p. 380

Chapter Seven

The Documents in the Case

The Documents in the Case differs from Sayers' other detective novels in a number of ways, and the most significant of these is the shift in setting; in direct contrast to the closed rural setting of several of her novels, Sayers gives this narrative an urban, or specifically, suburban, milieu. That is not to say that Sayers dispenses entirely with all the elements of the traditional Golden-Age story: there is still a limited cast of characters and to a certain extent they are contained within a closed space, an old house, a 'mid-Victorian skyscraper' which has been divided into flats (p. 19). This in itself, however, indicates a removal from the traditional format and a move away from the reassuring Golden-Age reconstruction of the past: the dividing of the house and its fluctuating, flat-dwelling, tenancy indicates an unsettled post-war world. As in the more traditional formula, this tenancy provides a recognisable 'cast' of characters, but they are not the traditional stereotypes of the 'English microcosm'. Instead, Sayers provides us with a set of 'types' more suited to inter-war suburbia. Firstly, there is the Harrison household which occupies the ground floor flat, and which comprises George Harrison, who 'has a decentish post of some kind with a firm of civil engineers' and who 'goes in for dabbling in water colours', and his much-younger second wife, Margaret who is 'a sort of suburban vamp, an ex-typist or something and entirely wrapped [...] in her own attractions' (p. 20). In addition to this is Mrs. Harrison's live-in lady-help, Agatha Milsom, who is a sexually frustrated spinster with hypochondria and a habit of visiting quack doctors and psychiatrists, which she details in letters to her sister:

Dr Trevor says that rest-cures only ‘turn you in upon yourself’, and that makes things worse. He says I must get right away from myself and my feelings, so as to ‘sublimate’ all these repressed urges and turn them into some other sort of energy. He says it was quite all right to start with to have my dreams and subconscious betrayals analysed, so as to know exactly what was the matter with me, but that *now* the time has come when I must learn to throw all these bottled-up desires *outwards*, and give them something to do (p. 9).

In addition to the Harrison household, the flat above is rented by an artist, Lathom, the murderer and a writer, Munting, who is one of the main narrators, and who becomes a reluctant detective. This collection of disparate and incompatible characters that are grouped together in the one building reinforces the absence of a cohesive hierarchy that can be found in the more traditional rural Golden-Age detective story.

The obsession of Miss Milsom with amateur psychology is symptomatic of a wider phenomenon in the inter-war years of ‘dabbling’ in the arts and sciences by the ‘crop of partially educated people’ who were ‘brought about by the [Education] Act of 1870’, identified by Hewitt (p. 91) and who were discussed in Chapter Four. It was these expanding middle-classes who largely populated suburbia, and both were the subjects of more ‘highbrow’ literature, according to John Carey:

The imaginative project of rewriting the masses, which intellectuals undertook, was coloured by various historical factors. Prominent among these were the growth of suburbs and the enormous increase in the numbers of white-collar workers, collectively designated clerks. The two factors were linked, since it was in the suburbs that the clerks lived. (p. 46)

Harrison and his wife both belong to this category of 'white-collar workers'. As established in Chapter Four, and commented on by Hewitt, the intellectual tastes of these people 'were catered for by the rise of the popular press and of such magazines as *Tit-Bits* and *Answers*', and also by activities such as the crossword puzzle and the detective story (p. 91). Carey discusses how this provision of an 'alternative culture' for those who 'were hardly equipped to appreciate high culture': 'annoyed intellectuals partly because it was flippant and philistine and trivialised serious subjects' (pp. 58-59). This annoyance, argues Carey, led the intellectuals to ridicule the expanding middle-classes - the clerks - in their writing: 'the supposed low quality of life encouraged by suburban conditions became a favourite theme for intellectual ridicule or censure' (pp. 50-51). He then goes on to cite Q.D. Leavis in *Fiction and the Reading Public* who reports that life for the suburban dweller is 'a series of frivolous stimuli' (p. 51).¹

This popularising of academic subject matter for consumption by the suburban middle-classes is focused on by Sayers in *The Documents in the Case*: the Harrisons invite Lathom and Munting to a number of 'soirees' and Munting clearly demonstrates his intellectual snobbery as he describes their 'appalling sitting room, all arty stuff from Tottenham Court Road, with blue and mauve cushions and everything ghastly about it' (p. 20). He then goes on to detail the pseudo-intellectual conversation that takes place between himself and Margaret Harrison:

No sooner had I got there than I was swept into a discussion about this 'wonderful man Einstein.' Extraordinarily interesting, wasn't it, and what did I make of it? Displaying all my social charm, I said I thought it was a delightful idea [...]

'But you do think there's something in it don't you?' [...]

I said guardedly that I believed the theory was now generally accepted by mathematicians, though with very many reserves.

‘It really is, is it? Really true that nothing actually exists as we see it? I do hope so, because I have always felt so strongly that materialism is all wrong. There is something so deadening about materialism, isn’t there? I do so wish I knew what life means and what we really are. But I can’t understand these things, and you know, I should so like to, if only I had someone to explain them to me.’ (p. 28).

In this conversation, Margaret Harrison shows very little understanding of the subjects that she discusses with Munting, using the conversation instead to show off her ‘fashionable’ ideas and her interest in topical issues, of which she has a limited knowledge gleaned from the Sunday papers and popular-press versions of events. Munting mocks these sources in a letter to his fiancé, also a writer, when he discusses the prevalence of articles such as: ‘What does the Unconscious mean to me?’ – ‘Is Monogamy Doomed?’ – ‘Can Women tell the truth?’ – ‘Should Wives Produce Books or Babies?’ – ‘What is wrong with the Modern Aunt?’ – and ‘Glands or God – Which?’ (p. 71). There is a certain irony in Sayers’ satirical presentation of the ‘intellectual middle-classes’ and their approach to academic subjects, as she is, in effect, mocking the very demographic that her detective novels are aimed at. This once more points to the potential tensions in these texts, as she is acknowledging the difficulties inherent in the desire to write ‘literature’ and the need to write books that will sell – as Munting comments of the Harrisons: ‘These are the people who read the books, Bungie. And what are we to do about it, you and I, if we want to live by bread?’ (p. 35).

The reference to ‘God or Glands’ in Munting’s list of Sunday-supplement titles becomes a summary for the focus of this entire text; the tensions between science and the

teachings of the Church are a key theme in *The Documents in the Case*. The ‘scientific’ element to the book accounts, in part, for the differences between this text and Sayers’ other detective novels; the suburban setting seems a more likely place for a discussion that involves scientific development.² As in Victorian detective fiction, however, the urban environment is seen as the centre for scientific and technological advancement, although it is presented with less unequivocal enthusiasm. In addition to this, *The Documents in the Case* is not a standard linear narrative, it is instead made up of a series of these ‘documents’, letters and statements by the various protagonists, which gives the text an air of scientific authenticity in its differences from a standard fictional narrative. Thirdly, it is the only one of Sayers’ detective novels that does not include Lord Peter Wimsey as a detective. In a letter to Dr. Robert Eustace Barton (1868-1943), the ‘Robert Eustace’ who co-wrote *The Documents*, and who provided the scientific input that it required, Sayers says that she ‘think[s] it would be better to invent a new detective for any tales [they] do together.’:

It would simplify matters to have somebody with more scientific surroundings don’t you think? Lord Peter isn’t supposed to know a lot about chemistry and that sort of thing, and it would mean inventing a doctor or somebody to help him out, also I am looking forward to getting a rest from him, because his everlastingly breeziness does become a bit of a tax at times! The job is to invent a scientific character of a new type.³

In the end, Sayers did not invent an entirely new detective for this novel, that is, a character who can be specifically labeled as ‘the detective’; instead, the investigation into George Harrison’s death is instigated by his son from his first marriage, Paul, and the bulk of the task of assembling the material and forming deductions falls to him and

Munting. Munting is a very reluctant detective, as will be discussed later, but it is he who uncovers the 'truth' at the end of the novel. Whilst he is writer and not a scientist, Munting initially provides the 'scientific character' that Sayers mentions or, at least a scientific perspective, as the novel becomes more than just an investigation of the case into the death of Harrison, but a dialectic between science and faith. The key characters in presenting this dialectic are Munting, who takes an agnostic stance, but cannot find a satisfactory alternative to religion and so turns to scientific explanations, and the parson, Perry, who presents the theistic viewpoint, but one which is shown to be reasoned and informed, rather than blindly evangelical.

The Documents in the Case is the detective narrative in which Sayers engages most explicitly with theology, presenting as she does a sustained debate between the Church and science. Throughout the text, Munting is very concerned with the origins of life and with scientific progress. The subject initially arises in a letter to his fiancé, Elizabeth Drake or 'Bungie', when he mentions that he has bought 'Nicholson's book on *The Development of English Biography...*' which argues for the 'scientific biography...' with 'nothing but studies of heredity and indoctrine (sic) secretions' (p. 23). Each letter contains some kind of reference to science or religion; Munting is working on a book called *The Life* and he comments in his second letter in the collection of documents, that he is 'stuck at present over the chapter on 'Religious Convictions'. He then goes on to discuss at length the Victorian attitude to faith and science, focusing on their 'pathetic belief that it could all be set right by machinery' and how 'their having lost their belief in anthropomorphism' made them become 'more and more humanitarian' (p. 26). It is interesting that this phenomenon that, in part, created the right sociological environment

for the rise of the detective story should find itself the subject of discussion within the genre. What Munting is searching for in his explorations of Victorian faith, and his comparison with then contemporary beliefs which, he says, are no different 'except we have lost the saving belief in machinery', is an answer to what is, essentially, 'the meaning of life'. All of Munting's letters are focused towards his need for an explanation of the origins of life, whether this is provided by faith or by science. Indeed, there seems to be more discussion of this in the text than there is focus on the detective narrative. In fact, until the end of the novel when the solution to the murder comes down to a difference between a naturally occurring - and therefore, within the framework of Christian belief, divinely created - chemical substance and the man-made laboratory replica of this, it is quite difficult to see the relevance of the theological and scientific arguments that pervade the text.

These arguments revolve around the tensions between science and religion and the threats that scientific advancement poses to faith and to the teachings of the Church. This subject was as pertinent in the inter-war years as in Victorian times, as is suggested in the *Unity of Faith and Science* (1924) by J. George Adami where he argues that 'today, if a man begins to think for himself upon matters of religion, his first great stumbling block is apt to be the apparent antagonism between science and faith'.⁴ The scientific and technological advances of Victorian times, discussed in Chapters Two and Three focused mainly on mechanics and engineering, and to some extent, chemistry, whereas the scientific advances addressed in this novel revolve around medicine, chemistry and physics and their relation to the origins of life, the focus of much debate since the splitting of the atom in 1919. This, in turn, raises questions about man's ability

to create and control human existence, effectively to 'play God'. Munting focuses on this issue in one of his letters after visiting a scientist friend who is working on 'synthetic gland-extracts', which causes Munting to contemplate where this will lead:

Synthetic vitamins next, I suppose, and synthetic beef and cabbages and after that, synthetic babies. So far, however they don't seem to have been able to make synthetic life – the nearest they have got is stimulating frog-spawn into life with needles. But what of the years to come? *If*, as the bio-chemists say, life is only a complicated chemical process, will the difference between life and death be first expressible in a formula and then prisonable in a bottle? (p. 73-74).

Munting's anxieties regarding 'Life' are apparent here, as he considers whether life is a chemical process. Despite taking a relatively pro-science perspective, at least at the beginning of the novel, Munting seems concerned here about the consequences of scientists playing God and controlling life. Yet, he often takes a deliberately scientific stance on the origins of existence, arguing in one letter: 'Damn sunshine. If it hadn't gone joggling up the perfectly good and placid atoms in the primeval ooze, they would never have sweltered up in this unsatisfactory world of life and bothersomeness', a significantly Darwinian rather than theological approach (p. 46).

The religious perspective, and the theistic 'case' for the origins of life, are provided in the novel by Perry, the vicar. Perry's voice is never presented directly in the book, instead he is presented through the eyes of the other characters, either Miss Milsom, who coyly contemplates his 'unmarried state', thus reinforcing her stereotypical presentation, or Munting. Given Munting's deliberate and fervent expressions of agnosticism it is not surprising that Munting is initially dismissive of Perry, as shown in his brief description

of him as ‘... an earnest and cultivated middle-aged spike from Keble’ (p. 29). This is all we are given in terms of description; Sayers does not present the reader with her traditional ‘vicar’ stereotype. Like Tredgold in *Unnatural Death*, Perry is given a more serious characterisation, in keeping with the role he plays in the text. Munting’s initial attitude is shown in his attempt to mock Perry; he reports that he asks him ‘by way of a leg-pull ... what he thought of relativity.’ Perry’s response surprises Munting and neatly parries his attempts at mockery: ““why, I’m rather grateful to it,”” said he, ““it makes my job much easier. We’ll have a chat some day and go into it. I must be going now”” (p. 30). This exchange creates a positive characterisation of the vicar, who deals neatly with the antagonistic Munting and his preconceived ideas. As the text progresses, Munting begins to revise his opinions about Perry:

My parson turns out to be rather an enlightened person. It appears that he took a mathematical tripos among other things, which is one up to him. He has also read Eddington, and, moreover, took it for granted that I had read Jeans and Japp and one or two other fantastic scientists whose names I had never heard of, which was two up to him (p. 35).

This demonstrates to the reader the open-mindedness of Perry, which presents him, and therefore his arguments, in a positive light. Munting’s change in attitude is not sudden and absolute: this would not be realistic. Instead, he and Perry continue to debate ‘the origin of life’ during the course of the text. At one stage Munting comments that, ‘you can’t make life synthetically in a laboratory – therefore [Perry] deduces that it came by a divine interference! Rather an assumption’. However, although he dismisses Perry’s viewpoint, he does not demonstrate total conviction in science, showing perhaps his changing attitude as he continues by saying that ‘[Perry] is little worse than the men of science’ in his inability to provide Munting with the answer that he desires:

‘In some way or other, life came’, they say. ‘Sometime, somehow, we may learn to make it.’ But even if one could learn to make it, that doesn’t account for it having arrived spontaneously in the first place. The biologist can push it back to the original protist, and the chemist can push it back to the crystal, but none of them touch the real question of why or how things began at all (p. 56).

The voice behind this argument is plausibly Sayers’ own. It seems so detached from the text in terms of style and relevance to the detective narrative, even in the light of the revelations regarding the difference between synthetic and naturally-occurring muscarine that provide the solution at the end of the novel, and yet it is a very emphatic argument and the reader is forced to consider the issues it raises. This is probably the clearest example, in all of Sayers’ detective fiction, of her using the text as a vehicle for theological questions. At this point, Munting seems to be leaning away from the scientific perspective; it cannot provide any satisfying answers with regard to ‘how’ life came about or even as to ‘why’. This latter point seems to take Munting’s questioning into a more theological than scientific realm, and echoes some of the more complicated questions of theology raised by the ‘why’ question of motive in detective fiction. ‘How’ is something factual, and can probably be established, but ‘why’ is a subjective question that can be the focus of endless debate. A movement away from science as a basis of belief might suggest a movement towards religion, but Munting is still keen to present a deliberately agnostic stance, ending his letter with: ‘Praise God (or whatever it is) from (if any direction exists) whom (if personality exists) all blessings (if that word corresponds to any percept of objective reality) flow (if Hericlitus and Bergson and Einstein are correct in stating that everything is more or less flowing about)’ (p. 57).

The focus on medicine and science versus faith is referred to in two other of Sayers' detective stories: *Whose Body?* and *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*. The references are comparatively brief and do not carry as much textual weight, although they are more immediately pertinent to the detective narratives in which they appear, focusing as they do on the role of the Church and medicine specifically in response to crime. As an idea, physiological explanations for crime were not new to the inter-war period, having first emerged in the nineteenth century, when 'scientific' explanations of human behaviour were popular. The major work of this time was Cesare Lombroso's *L'Uomo Delinquente* (1876)⁵ which put forward the argument that there were a number of physiological characteristics that denoted criminal tendency, such as large jaws and ears and high cheekbones. Although Lombroso's theories were discredited, the idea of physiological causes of crime seems to have been popular again between the wars, when considerable medical work was being done on the function of the glands. In *Whose Body?*, one of the main protagonists, Sir Julian Freke, is an eminent brain-specialist. Wimsey acquires a copy of his book *Physiological Bases of the Conscience*, in which Freke asserts that: 'This knowledge of good and evil is an observed phenomenon, attendant upon a certain condition of the brain cells, which is removable.' Freke asserts that:

Conscience in man may, in fact, be compared to the sting of a hive-bee which, so far from conducing to the welfare of its possessor cannot function, even in a single instance, without occasioning its death. The survival-value in each case is thus purely social; and if humanity ever passes from its present phase of social development into that of a higher individualism, as some of our philosophers have venture to speculate, we may suppose that this interesting mental phenomenon

may gradually cease to appear; just as the nerves and muscles which once controlled the movements of our ears and scalps have, in all save the few backward individuals, become atrophied and of interest only to the physiologist (p. 129).

Freke's theory seems to suggest that conscience is a physiological feature of man and that the invocation of one's conscience is only due to a desire to survive, but that evolution is slowly removing this in some cases. If this is the case, Freke argues, then some individuals are incapable of distinguishing the 'right' and 'wrong' of their actions in terms of their effect on society as a whole, and, as Wimsey responds: 'That's an ideal doctrine for the criminal' (p. 129).

A similar argument to that of Freke is put forward by Dr. Penberthy in *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*. During the course of his investigations, Wimsey goes, with a view to observing one of his suspects, to a soiree thrown by a society hostess, Mrs. Rushworth, who goes in for 'science and improving the submerged tenth and things like that' (p. 102). This is another example of the pseudo-intellectual pursuits of the suburban middle-classes; in Mrs. Rushworth Sayers presents a satirical characterisation of a silly, ill-informed woman, who demonstrates her limited understanding of the subject under discussion at her party. The speaker at this improving gathering is Penberthy, who is giving a paper on his theories about criminal behaviour resulting from a physiological defect of the glands, rather than deliberate intent, ignorance, or rejection of the concepts of right or wrong. As Mrs. Rushworth puts it,

'And just to think that we have been quite wrong about [young criminals] all these thousands of years. Flogging and bread and water, you know, and Holy Communion when what they really needed was a

little bit of rabbit gland or something to make them just as good as gold' (p. 154).

This comment reflects Mrs. Rushworth's ignorance, but it is her reference to Holy Communion that is particularly interesting, as it raises the issue of the Church as an alternative source of explanation and treatment for crime or sin. The argument of the Church is that the propensity towards sin is inherent in man. It is worth considering again Sayers' definition of 'sin' put forward in *The Mind of the Maker* (pp. 2-7). In order to define sin, she argues, we need to understand the difference between moral law and moral codes. Firstly the 'universal moral law' consists of 'statements of fact about the nature of man;' and that 'by behaving in conformity with which, man enjoys his true freedom. This is what the Christian Church calls "the natural law"'. This law is discovered to man by experience. Once man has experienced, discovered and understood these moral laws, he creates the moral codes 'to direct human behaviour and prevent men, as far as possible from doing violence to their own nature.' Sayers argues that the more closely these man-made codes correspond to the natural law 'the more it makes for freedom in human behaviour.' When codes depart from natural law, they 'tend to enslave mankind and produce catastrophes called "judgements of God"'. Sayers claims however, that man has a propensity to contradict or be tempted to contradict the moral law and that it is this propensity to contradiction that is called 'sinfulness' by the Church.

Given, then, that sin is inherent within man, the Church cannot 'cure' people of it. Instead, the representative of the Church must attempt to prevent man contradicting the moral law through the reinforcement of the Church's teachings, such as the Ten

Commandments. There are a number of examples of this in detective fiction, for example the vicar in *Murder at the Vicarage*, advises Lawrence Reading to end his affair with Mrs. Protheroe and leave St. Mary Mead, as ‘by remaining there he could only bring greater unhappiness’ (p. 25). Reading does not heed the vicar’s request and continues to transgress the natural laws to the extent that he kills Colonel Protheroe in order to be with his lover. Whilst the Church cannot effect a cure for sin, then, it can attempt to prevent it or, if it fails in this, offer to alleviate the results of sinning on the individual through confession and absolution. This process of confession is cathartic, a cleansing of the contaminated soul. The priest can attempt to prevent the malady of crime and alleviate the symptoms once it has occurred, but he cannot cure that which is an inevitable part of the human condition.

Penberthy is effectively claiming that science can, in fact, effect this cure, and the ‘science versus religion’ debate is further explored in this episode, as one of the guests there to hear the talk is a Father Whittington. Like Perry, Whittington differs from Sayers’ other ecclesiastical characters as discussed in Chapter Five, as he has an urban, rather than rural, parish. Whittington’s textual appearance is brief, covering only three pages. As with Perry, Sayers dispenses with the stereotype, giving us instead a short, but very positive, description of the character: ‘a tall, lean man, with a handsome, humorous face [...] a well known slum padre.’ (p. 156). This positive portrayal is important in terms of the function he eventually performs: we react more favorably to the priest in this episode than we do to Penberthy. Whittington is presented as a knowledgeable and open-minded man who jokes that he has come to hear Penberthy ‘make mincemeat of original sin’, but Penberthy is hostile towards him and the Church in general referring to

'parsons and the other old women' and responding to the priest's humour with 'a strained smile'. Whittington, however, is keen to hear Penberthy's ideas and says he shall 'only too pleased' if Penberthy 'can cure sin with an injection' (pp. 156-157).

At this point in *the Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*, it would appear that there is no answer to the question of who is right, the Church or science, although Whittington comes off slightly better in the exchange as he expresses humility and a willingness to learn. He says that there should be no antagonism between science and the Church because they are both 'searching for the Truth', and describes both himself and Penberthy as 'beggars in a good cause' (p. 157). At the conclusion of *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*, however, it emerges that Penberthy is not a beggar, but a murderer for his cause, as is Freke in *Whose Body?*. In both cases, these doctors' theories have been merely a justification of, or rejection of responsibility for their own actions, and their actions a nullification of their own conviction in their theories. But if they are wrong, then who are we to look to for an explanation? In *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*, Father Whittington seems initially to be included to present the other side of Penberthy's argument with a view to facilitating theological discussion within the text and to contrast with and emphasise the character of Penberthy. At the end of the novel, however, one side of the argument is broken down, directing the reader towards the other. Science is proved fallible and so our attention is drawn instead to the arguments of the Church, that man cannot be cured of sinfulness, only guided towards managing the individual responsibility of free will.

In *The Documents in the Case*, the dialectic between science and religion has far more textual presence than either of these two examples: as has been demonstrated, it takes up a considerable proportion of the eponymous documents, particularly Munting's letters, to the point that it detracts from the detective narrative. In contrast to *Whose Body?* and *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*, it seems to have far less relevance to the plot, as at least in these two examples, the tensions between science and religion are related to crime, and therefore become pertinent to the detective narrative. Paton Walsh comments on how the reader would be potentially 'baffled' by the excess of scientific matter in *The Documents in the Case*, when 'actually what we opened the book for was a good story', commenting that 'it's a failure as a novel, it doesn't have any fictional zap at all'.⁶ This would suggest that, sometimes, Sayers' attempts to develop her detective stories beyond the requirements of the genre are not always successful, and that this is an example of a book that is neither successful detective fiction nor a satisfying 'literary' work, as the ideas Sayers wishes to present are hampered by the restraints of the genre, and their presence in the text prevents the creation of a satisfying 'whodunit'. Indeed, the significance of the scientific and theological wrangling in *The Documents in the Case* in terms of the detective narrative, does not become entirely pertinent until the end of the novel, when we are presented with the resolution to the 'mystery' of Harrison's death, and also, to some degree, the mystery of whether scientists can synthesise naturally-occurring, or divinely created, life.⁷

Paul Harrison and Munting's investigations into George Harrison's death take them eventually to the laboratory of Leader, where it seems that Lathom has been showing an interest in poisons, asking 'such a lot of questions about the right dose'. Leader

describes how Lathom was 'so struck with our synthetic stuff. Didn't seem to be able to get over the fact that you couldn't distinguish artificial muscarine from the natural product by chemical analysis'. Munting, once again, directs the conversation around to what Paul Harrison describes as his 'usual hobby-horse', complaining that he is 'cracked about the origin of life' (pp. 199-200). Munting argues that even though scientists can synthesise the chemical components of life, 'they can't make [it] walk and talk', something that Leader admits, leaving Munting no closer to his quest to an answer with regard to creation. What does seem clear, however is that Lathom has murdered Harrison with synthetic muscarine, although, if Leader is correct, and there is no difference between this and the naturally-occurring substance, they will never be able to prove it. From this point on, the 'detection' falls solely to Munting, as he narrates the final events of the story. Initially, he is pleased that they cannot prove or disprove Lathom's guilt: 'I took a kind of hysterical pleasure in pointing out that we had no proof of the murder. I didn't want proof. I didn't want to know' (p. 202). Like Wimsey, he experiences a certain squeamishness about his involvement in the investigation, not least because Lathom is his friend, and 'squeezing a damaging admission out of [him]' makes Munting 'feel like a worm and get put off [his] dinner' (p. 202). Sayers also uses a set of Biblical images to present Munting's difficulties with detection as she does Wimsey's. Like Wimsey, Munting compares his activities in investigating his friends and those who trust him to the behaviour of Judas, describing his last encounter with Lathom in the following terms: 'he held out his hand. In the state things were in, I could not take it. [...] I was being a perfect Judas Iscariot, in which case I hadn't the face to give him my hand [...]' (p. 191-192). The biblical image of setting traps is also alluded to at the end, when it is becoming clear to Munting that Lathom's guilt can be proved: 'I could only

see Lathom, with his hair rumpled and his teeth set, painting with his usual careless brilliance. I got the idea that God or Nature or Science or some other sinister and powerful thing had set a trap for him, and that I was pushing him into it. (pp. 214-215). The emphasis on Lathom's artistic brilliance is important, as with Freke in *Whose Body?*, the loss of the criminal will have a detrimental effect on society in some way, making the detective's decisions more complicated.

There is no doubt at the end of the novel, however, that Lathom is guilty, and so, once again, the trap could be said to be of his own making, he is 'sunk down in the pit that he made' (Psalms 9. 14). The dialectic between innocence and guilt, however, is raised by the character of Margaret Harrison, who is complicit in the crime, in as much that she has encouraged Lathom to murder her husband so that they can be together. There is no evidence to suggest that she ever directly tells or asks Lathom to do this, although her letters are full of implication. Whilst she has no legal culpability, therefore, she is still 'guilty', as Paul Harrison argues: 'that she instigated and inspired [the crime] is to my mind certain' (p. 223). This clear distinction between legal and moral guilt, and the sin of action and the sin of intention, is emphasised when Mrs. Cutts, Lathom's cleaning lady, hands over Margaret Harrison's letters to Lathom. Paul Harrison argues that the absence of direct evidence of incitement to murder in them lessens their value: 'These letters are evidence of sad immorality, no doubt, Mrs Cutts, but it's one thing to wish a person dead and another to kill him.' Mrs. Cutts' response is that: "'there ain't seech a great difference [...] it says in the Bible -- " 'E that 'ateth 'is brother is a murderer'". This reference to 1 John 3. 15, emphasises the theme that Sayers returns to a number of times

in all of her work, that it is not what you did, but why you did it; intention is as significant as action.

Another interesting feature of Margaret Harrison as a 'criminal' is her attempts to explain and justify the events of her life in a religious context. Her perspective is either very simple or self-deluding; whether things are going well or badly she sees it as some kind of divine occurrence. For example, she sees the opportunities that arise to continue her affair with Lathom as divinely given: 'we had been given that great hour - a little bit of eternity just for you and me. God must be sorry for us' (p. 109). Equally, however, when it seems she may be pregnant by Lathom, although this is potentially part of the scheme to incite him to murder, she writes: 'how cruel God is! He must be on the conventional people's side after all' (p. 111). She has actually already been given an answer to this conundrum that she perceives, in a sermon by Perry, which she reports to Lathom without seeming to understand it, describing it as 'such a funny sermon':

[...] about the Law and the Gospel. He said, if we wouldn't do as the Gospel said, and keep good for the love of God, then we should be punished by the Law. And he said that he didn't mean that God was vindictive, only that the laws of nature had their way, and worked out the punishment quite impartially, just as fire burns you as you touch it, not to punish you, but because that is the natural law of fire (p. 110).

The language used here, with the simple analogy of fire to explain the concept of the consequences of contradicting the 'natural laws' is very close to the argument that Sayers presents in the first chapter of *The Mind of The Maker* in which she outlines the propensity for sinfulness in man, or rather, his propensity for contradicting natural law, underlining the fact that Sayers sustained these themes in all of her writings throughout

her career and not just in her specifically theological works. The way to avoid 'being burnt', Sayers argues, is to avoid contradicting these laws in the first place, exercising control over one's free will. Margaret Harrison's sin, therefore, is opting out of the personal responsibility for her actions, that Sayers believed was so important. The reader of *The Documents in the Case* is therefore presented with a legal criminal, in the character of Lathom, and a moral criminal in the character of Margaret Harrison. In terms of Lathom, and the detective narrative, closure is achieved as we see that he is punished by law, but Margaret escapes any kind of human justice, and there is no convenient suicide or accident to give the reader satisfactory closure on her guilt. This 'open' ending to this element of the novel draws attention to its wider theological themes – in order to achieve closure on her 'crime' we must trust that Perry and Sayers are right, and that the cause and effect rule of the law of nature will somehow work on Margaret Harrison, or that she will be judged in a 'higher court' in the hereafter.

The closure on Lathom's crime and the final proof that he killed Harrison is achieved by Munting. The denouement of the novel begins at a supper-party given by Perry, at which there is a working through of the information needed to close both the detective narrative, and also the questions regarding science and faith that have been the focus of the novel. The supper party comprised of people who might potentially provide answers to Munting's agnostic stance, and his need to know about the origins of life. Sayers presents us with Hoskyns, who is a physicist; Matthews or 'Stingo', who is a biologist; and Waters, the chemist. In addition to this there is Perry, representing the Church, and Munting, representing the arts in his capacity as a writer. The function of the conversation between these characters, with regard to the detective narrative, is to reach

a point where it becomes clear to Munting that there can be a difference between naturally synthesised muscarine and a version of the chemical created in a laboratory, if the synthetic muscarine is in its 'racemic' form, which would mean that Lathom can be proved guilty of murder. The conversation that Sayers presents between the characters to reach this point is exceptionally long, overly-technical, and as Paton Walsh comments, 'doesn't have any fictional zap at all'. Several issues are dealt with that are pertinent to the wider themes of this novel, and Sayers' other detective novels, but they are developed to the point where perhaps Sayers, to borrow Todorov's argument 'transcends' the popular narrative and, for once, cannot keep her development of the genre within its boundaries. This is also commented on in Reynolds' biography:

[The] discussion between Munting's parson friend and his scientific cronies [...], results in the flash of understanding as to how the murder can be proved. Here Dorothy L. Sayers rises to the height demanded by the theme. Her intellect and her imagination are fused and the writing is brilliant. But so light-weight and at times jaunty is the handling of the rest of the work that this profoundly interesting section seems almost an intrusion (p. 253).

It has to be said that there is a lot of discussion, which is perhaps only 'profoundly interesting' to a few readers, compared to the one, brief 'flash' that relates directly to the detective story. The discussion, however, does contain a number of ideas that are pertinent to this thesis.

The conversation begins with an exchange that is particularly interesting in the light of the issues raised in Chapter Three, that is, the effect of the First World War on the Christian faith. Matthews comments to Perry, 'I never thought you'd stick to it, Perry.

Which has made your job the hardest – the War or people like us?', meaning scientists, and referring to the antagonism between the Church and science, and the challenge to Established beliefs that science creates. Perry immediately replies. 'the war [...] it has taken the heart out of people'. Matthews assumes that Perry means that the war 'made it hard to believe in anything', but Perry corrects him:

'No,' replied the priest. 'Made it easy to believe and difficult not to believe – in anything. Just anything. They believe in everything in a languid sort of way – in you, in me, in Waters, in Hoskyns, in mascots, in spiritualism, in education, in the daily papers – why not?' (p. 204)

This reinforces the argument that the popularity of detective fiction after the First World War was created in part by the desire of the public for something that provided definite, concrete answers. The reference to the daily papers raises once more the issue of the popularising of intellectual and academic ideas for the edification of the general public, thus giving them some much sought-after answers, as Hoskyns argues: 'all these get-clever-quick articles and sixpenny text-books [...] they'd believe anything. The elixir of life – that's what they really want to get hold of' (pp. 204-205). This leads to further discussion about the answers that the Church and scientists can give to these questions. Perry, like Whittington in *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*, does not see that there needs to be any antagonism between the two institutions, regarding them as giving similar responses to people's needs, but in different contexts:

'Look at Stingo here. He tells them that if two unfit people marry, their unfitness will be visited on their children unto the third and fourth generation, after which they will probably die out through mere degeneration. We've been telling them that for three or four thousand years, and Matthews has only just caught up to us' (p. 205).

Perry is referring to Leviticus 18 and 20 here which warns against procreation by closely related people: 'none of you shall approach any that is near of kin to him, to uncover their nakedness' (Leviticus, 18. 6). Matthews' response to this, however, is that where the Church provides only instructions, science can provide people with 'reasons': 'show me a germ and I'll tell you how to get rid of plague or cholera. Call it Heaven's judgement for sin, and all you can do is sit down under it' (p. 205).

As with the conversation between Tredgold and Wimsey in *Unnatural Death*, we can see a working through of theological ideas in a question-and-answer form that the reader can follow. What is lacking for the reader in this instance, however, is a clear sense of how this discussion relates to the detective narrative, until, eventually, the course of the conversation prompts Munting to ask two significant questions. The first question, 'how does life begin?' prompts a discussion about the 'difference between the Organic and the Inorganic' and the nature of Matter, until Munting asks 'What is Life?' (pp. 207-208). The return to the detective narrative is signalled here, to the reader who is aware of the ongoing associations Sayers makes between the detective and various Biblical figures, as Waters immediate response to this is, 'Well, Pontius', referring to Pilate's question 'What is truth?' (John 18. 38). This emphasises the progression towards the end of the detective narrative, and the location of the truth behind Lathom's guilt, but also Munting's potential role in bringing Lathom to trial and to justice. The discussion continues, and Munting sees the conversation heading towards a question that he does not want to ask: 'a horrid sinking feeling in the solar plexus warned me that in a very few minutes I should have to ask a question. Why need I do it?' (p. 211). Like Pilate, he wishes to absolve himself of the responsibility of the power to either 'crucify' or

'release' Lathom (John 19. 10), but, like Wimsey, he rejects this course of action and he realises that he 'has to ask [his] question': 'I burst in violently, inappropriately, on this theological discussion: "You mean to tell me," I said, "that it is possible to differentiate a substance produced synthetically in the laboratory from one produced by living tissue?"' (p. 212). Munting's description of his intrusion into the conversation as 'inappropriate' emphasises the discordance between the detective narrative and the theological subject matter at this point, and whereas Reynolds and others see the theological debate as an intrusion on the detective story, it seems here as though the necessity to focus on the detective narrative intrudes on the theology. Waters reply of 'certainly' takes the narrative back to the detective focus, and Munting, and the reader, are aware that if this can be proved, Lathom will be caught.

Munting is still uncomfortable about his role in this revelation of the truth, however, and he debates with himself as to whether he should act on it: 'there was no reason at all why I should interfere. I relapsed into silence [...] In a minute he would be gone and the opportunity lost. I had only to sit still' (p. 212). In the end, though, he tells Waters about the situation and they head to Lubbock's laboratory where the experiment is carried out that proves Lathom's guilt. One of the most interesting elements to the experiment is that it involves shining a light on the substances in question, and that the results are determined through resulting light or darkness, which can be seen in metaphorical terms for truth and revelation. The metaphor is twisted slightly, however, as by shining a light on the subject, they will find a solution, but the revelation of the truth lies in the result being darkness:

‘Now, if when the analyser is thus turned to darkness, I place the solution of an optically active substance between the two slices of tourmaline the light will – ‘[...]’

‘Come through!’ said I triumphantly. [...]

‘But if, ‘ went on Waters [...] ‘if the substance should be optically inactive – if, for example, it should turn out to be a synthetic product, prepared from inorganic substances in the laboratory – then it will not rotate the beam of polarised light. The darkness will persist. [...] If we get darkness – then it’s a pretty dark business Mr. Munting.’

The result is darkness, and, consequently, ‘darkness’ for Lathom, as he faces judgement, punishment and execution. The conclusion to the text, therefore, suggests that there is a difference between ‘life’ in its natural or divinely-created form, and man’s attempts to synthesise it in a laboratory, which goes some way to answering Munting’s questions about the origins of life. The arguments within *The Documents in the Case* suggest an extra-human force of some kind functioning outside of, and imposing upon, human existence and life in all its various forms.

In terms of the theological arguments presented in this, and other detective narratives by Sayers, the ending to *The Documents in the Case* is not intended as a conclusive argument for the existence of God, as the conclusion reached by the experiment is only that ‘life’ is a force external to human influence; science proves that there is more to existence than chemistry. It does, however, provoke thought in the reader who follows the arguments at the end of the text regarding the nature of life and its creation; if they are aware of Sayers’ personal faith and its influence of her writing, or even if they have become aware solely of the theological framework to this individual text, then they are aware of the possibility that this external force is a divine one. It is, perhaps, the one

novel where Sayers chooses to engage with theological issues beyond those directly related to the detective genre – guilt, innocence, crime, punishment, good and evil and so on - although she does still implicitly address these themes elsewhere. Instead of moving from the detective narrative to its implied theological content, she makes the theology, in the form of a dialectic between science and faith, the impetus for the narrative, which is not an entirely successful formula. It does, however, create an interesting and vital text for study when considering Sayers as a theologian who wrote detective novels, and one whose interest in theology, whilst never an overriding, evangelical force in these stories, is nonetheless an intrinsic element to them. A more successful synthesis of theological themes and the requirements of the detective narrative is achieved by Sayers in a later novel, *The Nine Tailors*, which is the focus of Chapter Eight.

¹ Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1932) p. 181, 210-211.

² Compare the setting of *The Nine Tailors*, discussed in Chapter Eight. As Brabazon suggests, the closed rural environment, unlike the suburban hinterland, is isolated from the 'intellectual excitements of the age' (p. 10), and its very value to the Golden-Age detective narrative is its traditional and unchanging nature.

³ *Letters: Volume One*, p. 274.

⁴ J. George Adami, *The Unity of Faith and Science* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1924), p. 3.

⁵ Cesare Lombroso *L'Uomo Delinquente* (Milan, 1876).

⁶ See interview with Jill Paton Walsh, Appendix Two, p. 284.

⁷ It should be noted that the scientific solution given at the end of the novel, despite Dr. Barton's investigations, is not entirely accurate. See Reynolds, *Her Life and Soul*, p. 255.

Chapter Eight

The Nine Tailors

In terms of its setting, *The Nine Tailors* presents the ‘closed’ rural village that we expect to find in the Golden-Age detective story; Sayers sets the action in the village of Fenchurch St Paul, deep in the East-Anglian Fens. Its isolation from the outside world is emphasised from the beginning of the novel in Sayers’ descriptions of the bleak landscape in which Wimsey and Bunter find themselves stranded, after a car-crash: ‘Bunter turned his torch upon the signpost and read upon the single arm: “Fenchurch St Paul”. There was no other direction; ahead, road and dyke marched on side by side into an eternity of winter.’ (p. 9). As with other classical Golden-Age stories, this closed environment contains the recognisable cast of characters of the ‘English microcosm’ (Grella, p. 94). There is the aristocracy, provided by Sir Henry Thorpe, his wife and daughter, living in ‘the Red House’; there is the doctor, Dr. Baines; the vicar, the Reverend Venables; and a host of other ‘types’ from pub landlord to farmworkers. This hierarchy is recognised by its inhabitants, and, as in Knight’s previously discussed model, any stranger or strange behaviour is quickly identified; Wimsey is the object of curiosity when he first arrives, and the vicar has to admonish his congregation about their curiosity over ‘the presence of the passing stranger – “please do not turn round to stare at him; that would be neither courteous nor reverent”’ (p. 32). Likewise, the thief Cranton, disguised as ‘Steven Driver’ is clearly marked as different: ‘there was nothing of the countryman about the stranger’s manner or appearance’ (p. 54). The initially formulaic milieu of the novel is emphasised by the presence within the text of the novel of a map of the village and its surrounding area (p. 48), emphasising, firstly, its isolation, and, secondly, like the map of Marsh’s ‘Swevenings’ in *Scales of Justice* discussed in Chapter 2, the ordered and unchanging nature of the setting.

As with many other examples of Golden-Age detective fiction, the church is central to the village, in this instance literally as well as metaphorically, and, as will be demonstrated, it is also central to the unfolding of the detective narrative. From the outset of the novel, the church building is shown to have a huge, physical presence, dominating the Fen landscape in which it is set: 'The church itself, with the surrounding glebe, stands on a little mound rising some ten or twelve feet above the level of the village – an elevation which, for the Fens, is considerable [...]' (p. 47). The size of the church is referred to a number of times: Wimsey describes it as a 'young cathedral' (p. 11) and we are told that the congregation is 'lost' in its 'vast spaces' (p. 30). These references serve to reinforce its dominance of the landscape, but also to emphasise the metaphorical significance of the church to the village. As well as the building's physical domination of the parish, the Church is involved in, and often dictates, the calendar at every stage of the lives of its inhabitants: 'the Rector carried on with his marryings, churching and baptisms, and Tailor Paul tolled out a knoll or two' (p. 279). The Church oversees the span of man's existence, from birth to death, and the bells of the church are rung for all of these events: '5,040, Grandsire Triples', for example, were rung for Sir Henry's wedding. It is Tailor Paul, however, that is the most significant bell, giving the title to the novel; the 'nine tailors' being the nine strokes rung to mark the passing of a man: 'Tailor Paul tolled the mysterious stranger out with nine strokes, and fifty and a hundred more' (p. 78). The nine tailors are also rung for the passing of the year: 'Toll-toll-toll; and a pause; toll-toll-toll; and a pause; toll-toll-toll; the nine tailors, or teller-strokes, that marks the passing of a man. The year is dead; toll him out with twelve strokes more, one for every passing month' (p. 32). This demonstrates the Church's involvement in the ordering of the village year and the way in which it helps to structure the calendar of events: Christmas, New Year, Easter, Harvest Festival, and so on. The novel's title, therefore, focuses on death, which is fitting for a detective novel, but it also focuses on

the bells which come to have a manifold significance in the detective narrative, as well as functioning to draw attention to the theological themes in the text.

The Church's involvement with the village calendar demonstrates the significance of its involvement in village life and this representation of its role may also be a comment by Sayers on the continuing value of the church in society - thus performing a similar function to the portrayal of ecclesiastical characters, as discussed in Chapter Five. The Church is the centre for village life; not just the progression of events, but also to some extent the reinforcement of social and moral 'order'.¹ There is a clear sense of its 'laws' controlling the inhabitants and we return again to the historical inextricability of Church and Law as mentioned in Chapter Two. We are also reminded, however, that the Church and the law have their separate jurisdictions; when the body is discovered in the churchyard and the sexton's son asks if he should go for the police, he is told that 'Tis Church ground and we better tell Rector' (p. 75). The obvious presence of 'foul play' on the corpse, however, means that the Rector must send for the policeman, who is ironically named Jack 'Priest'. Sayers' playing with her characters' names in this way to some extent blurs the boundaries between Church and Law, and helps to illustrate the absence of clarity that is so significant in the representation of religion in this novel, something which will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

As with previously discussed examples from the Golden-Age, the presence of the Church helps to reinforce the sense of moral and social order necessary to the milieu of the detective narrative and it also fulfils the function of signposting the usual themes of the subjectivity of 'guilt' and 'innocence', crime and punishment, the dialectic of 'good' and 'evil', the presence of an extra-human force within the narrative and the role of the detective in relation to all of these. This is especially pertinent to *The Nine Tailors* in which the church is so intrinsically bound to the detective story. The generic

requirements of the narrative, such as the crime – in this instance an apparent murder – the murder weapon, the body and the clues, are all located within the physical space of the church or churchyard. The ‘word’ of the Church is also intrinsic to the detective narrative: the various services that are recounted prompt associations with the investigation and provide Wimsey and the reader with ‘clues’ to the solution, as do several Biblical quotations throughout the text. Finally, the ‘cast’ of the detective narrative also draws upon the church, as the clergy and congregation are involved in both the crime and the process of detection.

It soon becomes apparent, however, that whilst working within the formulaic nature of the genre, Sayers is, once again, simultaneously developing it beyond these boundaries. The description of the rural village, for example, is more realistic and less idealised than many other examples in the Golden-Age era. Sayers draws attention to the harshness of the Fen existence, emphasised by the descriptions of the winter landscape at the beginning of the novel, which are far removed from the pastoral ideals of the previously discussed ‘Swevenings’, ‘Lymstock’ and ‘St. Mary Mead’, situated as they are in an eternal English summer. Instead, we are shown the hostile landscape of the Fens and its ‘frozen desolation’, ‘shrouded’ in snow: ‘to [Wimsey and Bunter’s] right was the broken line of the sunk hedge, with, here and there a group of poplars or willows [...]. At the end of the solitary mile the gaunt shape of a windmill loomed up upon the farther bank of the drain, but no bridge led to it and no light showed’ (pp. 8-9). Sayers also comments on some of the negative aspects of isolated country life in which there is little interaction with the outside world, not least the problem of inbreeding, which is commented on by the vicar’s wife: ‘everybody is, in this village, related to somebody or other, I mean. It comes of being such a small place, though now that they all have motor-bicycles and the buses running twice a week it isn’t so bad, and there won’t be so many unfortunate creatures like Potty Peake’ (p. 207).

In part, Sayers is able to give a more realistic representation of village life in the Fens, as she had personal experience of it, having lived from the age of four in Bluntisham-cum-Earith. In *The Life of A Courageous Woman*, James Brabazon comments on this autobiographical element to Sayers' presentation of Fenchurch St Paul:

This was Dorothy's England, traditional, ordered, conventional, untouched by – indeed resentful of – the social disturbances of the industrial revolution and the intellectual excitements of the age; for East Anglia was then, as it still is, one of the last bastions of feudal conservatism in the British Isles (p. 10).

In *The Nine Tailors*, then, the country village, whilst conforming to the requirements of the milieu for a classical Golden-Age detective narrative, is presented in slightly less idealised terms, and is less of a fantastical creation, reflecting as it does a part of the world where the isolated rural village still existed, and to a certain extent, presenting a more realistic perspective on such a place. The more 'realistic' or serious dimension to the presentation of the formulaic elements such as setting allows Sayers to explore the theological themes that she raises in her detective fiction in greater depth, without losing focus on the requirements of the detective story and without creating tensions between the two elements of the novel. There seems to be less contention between Sayers' need to adhere to the generic formulae of the detective narrative, and the pragmatic style that this can often produce, and her propensity to develop more abstract moral and theological themes in a more literary style.

Part of this development of the novel, in terms of creating a more 'literary' narrative is the more complicated perspective that Sayers provides on religion and the role of the Church in the closed rural community. Sayers explores the close relationship between the church and the land, which is so fundamental to the farming community of Fenchurch St Paul, initially in terms of the physical building and the surrounding natural world. Initial

impressions of the natural landscape are of a harsh and forbidding environment, described at one point as an ‘eternity of winter’ (p. 9). The land seems almost sentient at times: ‘To the left of them, the drain ran straight as a rule could make it, black and sullen, with a steep bank shelving down to its slow, unforgiving waters’ (p. 8). The ‘sullen and ‘unforgiving’ nature of the waters of the drain emphasises this sentience and raises the complex issue of the Fenland as an active force within the novel; either providential or secular, which shall be discussed more fully later. Either way, the effect is threatening and powerful. In contrast to this initial presentation of a hostile landscape, the church seems to represent a sanctuary; a literal and metaphorical relief from the harshness of nature. Even when not physically visible, the sound of the bells reinforces its presence: when Wimsey and Bunter are lost on the Fens at the beginning of the novel they are alerted to the proximity of the village by the sound of the bells: ““Thank God!” said Wimsey. “Where there is a church, there is civilisation”” (p. 8). It is significant that the first indication of ‘civilisation’ is the bells, as they are fundamentally important to the whole novel in terms of both the detective narrative and the theological issues, and it is also ironic, for the events that take place in and around the church are far from ‘civilised’.

Against the bleakness and chaos of the landscape, however, the church must appear as civilised relief. As seen earlier, the land is described in terms of darkness and the ‘broken’ line of the hedge, the random placing of the trees and the absence of the bridge reinforce the disorder and discordance of the natural landscape. In contrast, the church is architectural and ordered, beautiful, and, significantly, described in terms of light:

[Wimsey’s] gaze [...] followed [...] the light, wide arches that carried the clerestory. And there, mounting to the steep pitch of the roof, his eyes were held entranced with wonder and delight. Incredibly aloof, flinging back the light in a dusty shimmer of bright hair and gilded outspread wings, soared the angels (p. 31).

Sayers' poetic style is easily recognisable in this extract, with the enthusiastic, expansive diction of 'flinging' 'out-spread' and 'soared' and the oxymoronic 'dusty shimmer'. The association of the church with light is not an unusual metaphor, but it is one that is maintained throughout the novel. As with all of the other opposites within the text, light is defined through its relation to darkness and vice versa. Darkness represents mystery and uncertainty, and light represents truth and clarity: images which can apply to both the detective narrative and matters of faith and spirituality. The sustained metaphor of light and dark in terms of the detective narrative can be seen through the progression of the novel. Wimsey arrives in Fenchurch St. Paul on New Year's Eve as it is growing dark, and this darkness is representative of the confusion of events that surround the night of Deacon's death. The dark impedes Wimsey's initial judgement of Fenchurch: he finds it difficult to 'tell in [the] darkness' the height of the church, for example. The 'darkness' represents the difficulty in truly judging the events of the night (p. 12). When Wimsey steps outside the church on New Year's Eve, 'all was darkness, except for a dim stationary light which might have been shining from a cottage window' (p. 35). This literal light later becomes a metaphorical one, in the sense of shedding 'light' on Wimsey's investigations when he discovers that the cottage belongs to the Thodays and thus they were up and about at the time of the crime. The metaphor of light for faith is used again at the end of this episode, as the parishioners leave the service: 'The congregation streamed out from the porch, their lanterns and torches flitting away into the whirling storm like sparks tossed from a bonfire' (p. 34). Fire is a sustained metaphor for the word of God in the Bible: "'is not my word like as fire?" saith the LORD;' (Jeremiah 23. 29) and this word is represented as bringing enlightenment to areas of darkness, that is, places of misery, ignorance and ungodliness: 'And the light shineth in darkness' (John 1. 5).

Despite this initial presentation - which seems to suggest that the Church and the land are separate, opposing, entities - Sayers develops the relationship between the two and, as will be shown, creates a sense of a symbiotic relationship which emphasises the importance of the Church to the land and its people, and vice versa. What Sayers achieves through this presentation of the close relationship between Church and people is the sense that the order provided by this religious presence is not just an escapist creation: it is more than an order imposed by the needs of the detective narrative or a reader desirous of reassurance or a fantastical milieu. Instead, Sayers demonstrates that the Church is not imposed upon, but integral to, the more realistic version of the Golden-Age world that she presents. This 'realism' is added to, in part, by the awareness within the novel of much older, pre-Christian forms of worship, related to the land, that have been absorbed into the Christian Church, which, as they are based on the land and its yield, reinforce the relationship between faith and the natural world in the text. The image of the bonfire, for example, has older, pagan, connotations as well as the Christian ones already discussed and Sayers' description is reminiscent of Thomas Hardy's presentations of the literal fires on Egdon Heath in *The Return of Native* (1878), and 'the great sparks which rose with and sailed away into darkness.'² The community in Hardy's novel is similar, though earlier than that in *The Nine Tailors*: a rural farming community in a bleak, harsh landscape, where pre-Christian ritual survives. Hardy describes how: 'festival fires to Thor and Woden had followed on the same ground and duly had their day. Indeed it is pretty well known that such blazes as this the heathmen were enjoying are rather the lineal descendants from jumbled Druidical rites and Saxon ceremonies [...]' (p. 67). There are several, more specific references to pagan worship in *The Nine Tailors* and, whilst these are difficult to account for, but they are unmistakably present in the text. Various possible reasons include the movement towards a more realistic presentation of faith; Sayers did not want to just produce the convenient stereotype of the Established church so often present in the Golden-Age detective narrative, but instead to present a

more rounded, realistic representation of belief in the rural village. The pre-Christian references can also have a function in highlighting various pertinent theological ideas; key elements to these older forms of worship, such as their focus on sacrifice and retribution, serve to highlight some of the themes approached through a Christian theism in the detective story. What does seem significant is that these beliefs are not presented as antagonistic to Christian theology in the text; they are utilised to add another, interesting dimension to Sayers' already complicated engagement with religion in *The Nine Tailors*.

Sayers presents the beliefs of the villagers as tempered with obvious vestiges of pre-Christian belief and superstition. Many of these arise from the fact that Fenchurch is a farming community where ancient rituals concerning the land in terms of fertility and yield would have been fundamental to community worship. As Anne Ross asserts, these would not necessarily 'end with the establishment of the Christian faith': [...] for even in the twentieth century [...] echoes of the old pagan world can be detected and beliefs, furtive and uneasy, but nevertheless strong [...] persist.³ The relationship between Christian and pre-Christian beliefs is explored throughout *The Nine Tailors*, through the symbiotic and complicated relationships presented as existing between the water, the land, man and the Church. The fen landscape exists through man's control of the relationship between land and water, involving the drainage and direction of water through the land. *The constant threat of flooding, realised at the end of The Nine Tailors, brings a respect for the environment, and pre-Christian rituals relating to fertility and safe harvest would have had a strong presence in its communities since it was first drained and inhabited. According to N. J. G. Pounds, these rituals would have included those 'whose intent was to induce the dormant vegetation to assume a new growth.'*⁴ They were 'matters of general social concern, such as the sequence of the seasons, the quality of the harvest [...] indeed the perpetuation of the community itself' and whole community participation was required in such rituals 'for to abstain was to weaken the magic of the event' (pp.

384-385), a point which reinforces the sense of social and theistic cohesion in rural communities that is necessary to the detective narrative.

Many of these rituals of pre-Christian worship in Britain have been absorbed into the Christian church over a long period of time. Pounds states that:

One can [...] detect in the iconography of the Middle Ages a gradual waning of pre-Christian concepts and motifs as they became overlaid or transformed by the doctrines of the church [...] Pagan or pre-Christian aspects of culture have survived until the present in slow process of transformation, attenuation or boulderisation (p. 264).

This survival of older beliefs is reflected in the calendar of the Church, with events like harvest festival, which will be discussed in more detail later, and also the physical features of its buildings. Sayers shows her awareness of this in her description of the font in Fenchurch St. Paul, ‘whose carvings were certainly curious and, to [Wimsey’s] mind, suggestive of a symbolism neither altogether Christian or innocent’ (p. 51). The worship of the land in terms of its yield in pre-Christian faiths is demonstrated in rituals such as maypole dancing and the Celtic ceremony of the Green Man, still re-enacted in parts of Britain today described by Ann Woodward:

The traditional ceremony of the Green Man involved a man whose head and shoulders were covered by a wicker cage thickly woven with leaves and in Europe wicker giants were filled sometimes with live animals. This immediately recalls the wicker figures filled with victims that were described so graphically by Caesar.⁵

The Green Man survives in the Christian Church through carved decoration in some of its buildings, which Sayers incorporates into her descriptions of the architecture of the church. What is significant in terms of the novel is the notion of sacrifice to the land, as the deaths of both Deacon and Thoday have connotations of sacrifice for communal good, an idea that will be discussed later in this chapter. Whilst Deacon’s body is placed in the earth, Thoday’s is consumed by the flood, emphasising the two vital binary elements to the Fen landscape. Water, like land, has focuses in both Christian and pre-Christian

belief. In biblical terms, water is analogous with purification and life itself; the process of baptism involves a metaphorical cleansing in water. In pre-Christian terms:

Springs, wells and rivers are of first and enduring importance as a focal point of Celtic cult practice and ritual [...] This is due, no doubt, to their own obvious connection with fertility which, in the popular mind, could be likened to the life-giving powers of water which could be witnessed by man himself.⁶

The presence of water in the symbolism of Christian and pagan beliefs is acknowledged in *The Nine Tailors* with the flooding of the land at the end of the novel and the ambiguous circumstances surrounding Thoday's death.

Sayers reinforces the relationship between the land and the Church through her descriptive writing, using a set of natural images in regard to the church which lessen its stark contrast to the surrounding land, and suggest a closer relationship between the two. As well as images of light, the church is described in terms of nature: the shafting springs 'fountain-like' toward the column heads, which are 'foliated', for example (p. 31). The 'foliated' tracery in the Church has links with pagan decorative art, such as The Tree of Life, or the Green Man, discussed earlier, who is also referred to as the 'foliate' head, as he is always represented in the style of a head with leaves, usually oak, growing from him. According to Basford: 'It would be used to form a centre for a discrete leaf cluster or a source from which long sprays of foliate might flow out as water from the head of a fountain.'⁷ Even in instances where the head is not present, the foliate carving carries connotations of 'at least one Green Man characteristic, namely, his power of revival and regeneration' (p. 7). All of this has, again, pre-Christian connotations. What is significant in terms of the current discussion, is that in using natural imagery to describe the church, the land and the building cease to appear as entirely separate entities, but more as co-existees, a state summarised in Sayers' oxymoronic description of the church tower as a 'stalk of stone' which 'rocked like a windblown tree' (p. 34).

Just as the natural world impinges on the church, ecclesiastical imagery is used to describe the landscape, as when Sayers describes ‘the yellow catkins danc[ing] like little bell-rope sallies.’ (p. 58). This exchange of similes between the church and the land emphasises the closeness of the relationship between them. The natural world is employed in the description and architecture of the church, and it is also used in its decoration, as at Easter, when Mrs Venables decorates the church with daffodils. The ritual decoration of the church for Easter is illustrative of the way in which the Church is a focus for the village in terms of its calendar, emphasised in the text through descriptions of various events such as New Year, Christmas and Harvest Festival: “‘The yellow looks so bright,’” thought Mrs. Venables, as she tried to persuade the blossoms to stand upright among the glossy green of periwinkle and St John’s Wort, “‘though it really seems a shame to sacrifice them’” (p. 58). Again, the pre-Christian connotations of a ‘sacrifice’ cannot be ignored, with its resonances of older festivals held at that time of year, thanking god(s) for the return of the sun and the fertility of the land, and the decoration of the church is resonant of foliate decorations in older fertility rituals, a point particularly emphasised by Mrs. Venables as she describes how they have tried to curb the more excessive decoration of the Church at Harvest Festival by the villagers, who ‘used to drive spikes into the pillars to hold up wreaths of evergreens’ (p. 59). Harvest Festival is a good example of the ‘adoption’ of the pagan by the Christian, as it is a festival based around older ceremonies of the land, and absorbed into the calendar of the church in the Victorian era. Pounds observes that ‘rituals [that] surround the transport of the last load from the fields’, such as the:

‘corn dolly’, a figure remotely human in shape [...] plaited from straw at the end of the harvest [which] served as a fertility figure to ensure a harvest next year [...] disappeared in the nineteenth century, to be replaced, under the auspices of the church, by an altogether blander celebration, Harvest Festival (p. 181).

In *The Nine Tailors*, Hilary Thorpe comments that she hates Harvest Festival because the carvings of the church become hidden with 'spiky bits of corn and vegetable marrows' Mrs Venables explains that: '[...] the village people like it, you know. Harvest Festival is *their* festival, Theodore always says. I suppose it's wrong that it should mean so much more to them than the Church seasons, but it's natural' (p. 59). Ironically, during the course of the conversation, Mrs Venables follows a statement with the comment 'touch wood' and then 'perform[s] this ancient pagan rite placidly on the oak of the screen.' This humorous episode reinforces the idea of conscious and subconscious absorption of older beliefs into modern ones.

The tempering of the villagers' beliefs with these older, pre-Christian ideas and superstitions, to do with the worship of the land and water, are natural enough in a community constantly at odds with, and reliant on, the natural surroundings. The villagers' older beliefs are most clearly demonstrated in their attitude towards the bells, which are one of the most significant features of the text, in terms of both the detective narrative and the theological issues that it gives rise to. The attitude of the villagers to the bells is an odd mixture of sacred reverence and superstitious fear. The bells are interesting in as much that they are church artefacts, but have clear links with the land which may explain the duality of their presentation in the novel. The bells are linked to the land in their creation:

Beyond the churchyard wall lay a green field, and in the middle of the field there was a slight hollow...It had been there now for over three hundred years. Time had made it shallower, and in three hundred years more it might disappear altogether, but there it still was - the mark left by the great pit dug for the founding of Tailor Paul (p. 67).

This emphasises that the bells, particularly Tailor Paul, belong in some way to both the landscape and the church. Throughout the novel, the bells are given human qualities by various characters and occasionally this attitude is reinforced by the authorial voice. Each

bell is named and the villagers give them all characteristics, 'Batty Thomas' for example, is 'a bell that has her fancies' and who 'has killed two men' (p. 64). There is an air of mystery attached to the bells, created by their sustained presentation as sentient beings who watch and act. The 'patient watchfulness of the bells' is felt by Wimsey, and James Thoday, who, when describing his role in the disposal of Deacon's body, says: 'And those bells! I was expecting all the time to hear them speak. I never have liked the sound of bells. There's something – you'd think they were alive, sometimes, and could talk' (p. 272). Often, their sentience seems malevolent, and, like James Thoday, people are alarmed, rather than comforted by the watchfulness of the bells. Their 'hooded silence' oppresses Wimsey when he goes to view them, and the echoing notes that respond to his voice is 'remote and menacing' (p. 197). This fear of the bells demonstrates the more secular element to their presentation: the superstitious attribution of power to inanimate objects. However, as with much else in the novel, there is a counterbalance; the sentience of the bells is also represented in a providential light, and if they do 'act', then they are judicious in their actions, or are utilised by God in some way - a theory put forward by Hezekiah Lavender⁸, who pulls Tailor Paul:

"They bells du know well who's a-haulin' of 'un. Wunnerful understandin' they is. They can't abide a wicked man. They lays in wait to overthrow 'un [...] Make righteousness your course bell, my lord, an' keep a-follerin' on her an' she'll see you right through your changes till Death calls you to stand. Yew ain't got no call to be afeared o' the bells if so be as yew follows righteousness" (p. 234).

The faith of the villagers is presented as practical and simple, compared to the intellectual approach shown in Wimsey's application and knowledge of the Bible, and also in contrast to the moments of evangelical poeticism indulged in by Sayers at various points during the narrative. This is nicely illustrated in an episode involving a 'cantankerous and venomous-tongued old lady', who replies to the Rector's comment that 'We mustn't question the ways of Providence' with 'a remarkable piece of theology': 'Don't you talk to me about Providence. I've had enough o' Providence. First he took my husband, and

then he took my 'taters, but there's One about as'll teach him to mend his manners if he don't looks out' (pp. 70-71). Hezekiah Lavender's argument regarding the providential nature of the bells is, to some extent, borne out by the events of the detective narrative, as will be demonstrated later. The complexity of the presentation of the bells is symptomatic of the presentation of religion throughout the novel, the complex nature of which is carried into the detective story and creates and sustains the theological and moral themes within the text.

The complexity of the detective narrative of *The Nine Tailors* is created by the presence of a dual plot – a detective story within a detective story. In 'The Typology of Detective Fiction', Todorov discusses how, 'at the base of the whodunit we find a duality [...] the novel contains not one but two stories: the story of the crime and the story of the investigation' (p. 44). What Sayers presents us with in *The Nine Tailors* is two dual narratives: two crimes and two investigations that are inextricably linked together, once more demonstrating her capacity to extend the genre within its formula. The action of *The Nine Tailors* the main detective story actually begins twenty years prior to the action within the novel, with a story that is clearly of the classic Golden Age genre. This tale-within-a-tale is narrated to Wimsey in the early stages of the text and we are immediately aware its standard generic features. Firstly, the setting is the ubiquitous country house, with the cast of assembled suspects: 'fine visitors...down for the wedding' of Sir Henry Thorpe, including a lady with 'an emerald necklace – worth thousands and thousands of pounds' (p. 41). The emeralds are stolen, and, with a clear sense of popular expectations it emerges that the butler did it. Sayers once again acknowledges the genre within which she is writing, and through presenting easily recognisable features in a simple narrative style, shows its limitations. When considered in terms of the novel as a whole, it serves as a point of comparison, emphasising the complexity of *The Nine Tailors* in terms of narrative structure. One shared narrative feature of the two detective stories, however, is

the absence of a tidy and satisfying closure. The end of *The Nine Tailors* reveals that the murder wasn't actually a murder and that the cause of death was not brought about by the actions or intentions of one individual. Further than this, as will be discussed later, there are unanswered questions about the nature of providence. In comparison to this, the closure of the 'Wilbraham Emeralds Mystery' is relatively simple as the criminals are caught and punished. However, total closure is not achieved: the emeralds are never found, and remain in their hiding place in the church for the next twenty years and one of the thieves, Deacon, kills a warder and escapes from prison, generating a new crime and escaping earthly attempts at justice. The two narratives become linked, as the return of the criminals, Jeff Deacon and Nobby Cranton, to retrieve the emeralds, is the basis for the action of *The Nine Tailors*. Because the emeralds are in the church, the action of the detective narrative centres in and around the church also. As has already been established, the church is the centre of the village and therefore the disruption of the Church creates disturbing consequences for the whole community.

It is a significant point that neither of the criminals comes from the village. Their coming in from the outside upsets the balance of the community. One of the thieves, Cranton, is from London, a distant and threatening 'other' of anonymity and corruption to the contained, ordered and close society of the village. Deacon, the butler, is described as working the 'inside' part of the job, clearly establishing the sense of the closed circle of the village. Despite this, he is not originally from Fenchurch St. Paul; we are told that, 'he was a Kentish man by birth. Sir Charles brought him down from London' (p. 44). He, too, is tainted by association with the capital. Their first 'invasion', of the village, when the emeralds are stolen, has repercussions for the inhabitants of the Red House. Sir Henry Thorpe pays the owner of the necklace the value of it, considerably reducing his family's fortune and consequently affecting his daughter's future. The housemaid's life is also affected: Mary Russell is married to Deacon and consequently

suspected of being an accessory. She is acquitted of this, but shame drives her away from the village. After Deacon's apparent death, William Thoday 'went after her and married her and brought her back' (p. 45). This marriage to a local man means that Mary can return to the secure fold of the village community. The social repercussions of the theft are limited to the inhabitants of the Red House. In the detective narrative of *The Nine Tailors*, however, the crime is now moved to the setting of the church, and once again the environment is affected by the presence of crime within it. The church, whilst literally a contained space, however, is metaphorically the centre of the much wider environment of the village and so the repercussions of the crime permeate the whole community. This time, a third 'outsider', Wimsey, enters the village. He is, however, different from Cranton and Deacon, because although he does not come from Fenchurch St. Paul, his background is a similar East Anglian village, Duke's Denver. Wimsey is familiar with the mores and hierarchy of the environment into which he goes and the sense of his 'belonging' is emphasised by his return just after the death of Sir Henry Thorpe, which leaves the role of 'Lord of the Manor' open for him to fill. Wimsey is, unwittingly, part of the disordering of the community in his initial visit, but his return is different. Firstly, he is invited, and secondly, he is there to restore order from the disruption caused by Cranton and Deacon.

The physical space of the church is an intrinsic element of the detective narrative. Deacon is the first of the criminals to return to the village for the emeralds and is caught by Will Thoday in the vestry. Thoday then proceeds to tie him up with a bell rope and leave him in the belfry. The nine-hour New Year peal is rung, and Deacon dies as a result of this. James Thoday then finds the corpse and, believing Will to have murdered Deacon, buries it in the fresh grave of Lady Thorpe. When Sir Henry dies, the grave is reopened and, when Deacon's body is discovered and, again, murder is implied, the hunt begins for the culprit. This brief summary demonstrates the significance of the church building to the

detective narrative: the 'crime', the 'murder weapons', the disposal and discovery of the corpse, all take place within the physical space of the church and its grounds. The detective narrative is bound more closely to the church than this, however: it is not just part of the crime, but fundamental to the solution. This is true firstly on a literal level: various clues that help Wimsey to solve the problem are found in the church, the beer bottle in the belfry, for example, or are specific church artefacts such as the bell ropes used to bind Deacon. The bells also provide clues; firstly, Deacon tells Cranton to look for Paul Taylor and Batty Thomas, which Cranton takes to be the names of men, and therefore, ironically, the bells, in the human guise of Paul Taylor, are suspects for the murder, which helps to emphasise the sentient quality they are given in the novel. Secondly, the cipher which details the whereabouts of the emeralds is encoded in a bell-peal. Finally, and more importantly, they are responsible for Wimsey's final epiphany in the bell tower and provide the solution to Deacon's death, which comes about when he goes into the bell chamber as the bells are being rung: 'through the brazen crash and clatter there went one high note, shrill and sustained that was like a sword in the brain [...] It was not noise – it was brute pain, a grinding, bludgeoning ran-dan, crazy intolerable torment' (p. 293). The sustained 'high note' which is described as 'like a sword', a clear association with justice and reminiscent of the 'trumpets' that Sayers uses to characterise moments of heavenly communication, suggest again the bells as some kind of instrument of retribution.

This demonstrates that the church facilitates the solution on more than just the level of providing physical clues. More intangible clues are also contained within the liturgy of the Church. Three services are described in the novel, and in each of these, the words of the service are relevant to the action of the text or provide clues to the solution of the crime. The first service that Sayers details is the New Year service, given prior to the all-night peal during which Deacon is killed. At the beginning of the service, Wimsey is

moved by the beauty of the church and whispers to himself: 'He rode upon the cherubims and did fly; He came flying upon wings of the wind' (2 Samuel 22. 11). The relevance of this quotation is twofold: firstly, the reference to the cherubims is a clue to the location of the emeralds, and secondly, because the reference to 2 Samuel 22 has a wider significance in terms of the novel as a whole. The Chapter in question is concerned with God saving David from violence and delivering him from his enemy. David calls to God: 'In my distress I called upon the Lord' (22. 7) and God hears David because he has 'kept the ways of the Lord and [has] not wickedly departed from [his] God' (22. 22). The message is 'with the merciful thou wilt show thyself merciful, *and* with the upright man though will show thyself upright' (22. 26). This idea of God as a righteous judge is returned to often in *The Nine Tailors*. As has been previously mentioned, Hezekiah claims that there is no need to fear the bells if you are a righteous person, and the bells are seen, potentially, as the voice of God. It could be argued that God does not hear or respond to Deacon because he is not an upright or merciful man; Wimsey survives the 'torment' of the bells, Deacon does not. Later, at the end of the novel, Wimsey emphasises the potentially divine nature of this noise when he compares it to the 'trumpet that laid flat the walls of Jericho' (p. 298). The fact that Wimsey survives this bears out the notion of a process of judgement: he is a righteous man and 'ain't got no call to be affeared o' the bells.' This idea is reinforced by the inscription on the plaque commemorating the ringing of the bells for the New Year, which reads 'Our Mouths shall shew forth Thy Praise', from Psalms 9. 14. Psalm Nine concentrates on judgement: the salvation of those who put their trust in God and the destruction of those who do not, placing emphasis on how these people are instrumental in their own downfall. Verse 15 then warns that 'The heathen are sunk down in the pit that they made: in the same net which they hid prively, is their foot taken.' This echoes the images of entrapment discussed in Chapter Six, where Wimsey sees himself as someone who "'setteth snares'". Being the one who traps the criminals, he feels guilty, and yet this psalm gives a

response to this: the traps are of the criminals' own making. Deacon returns to the church to retrieve the emeralds, which he 'hid prively', and this greed is his downfall.

The second service that we are presented with in the chronology of the text is Deacon's funeral, and, once again, the liturgical content is significant to the detective narrative. The funeral is presented through Wimsey's inner monologue which contains biblical allusion in the form of extracts from the service. Once again, there is reference to God's omniscient and judicial nature; "'Thou knowest, Lord, the secrets of our hearts'" (Psalms 44. 21). Hymn 373 is sung: 'God moves in a mysterious way / his wonders to perform', which neatly emphasises both the 'mystery' at that point in the detective narrative, as Deacon is as yet unidentified, but also the theological mysteries that *The Nine Tailors* presents. The train of thought set in place by the service leads Wimsey nearer to the solution of the crime: 'Our dear brother departed...*brother*...we're all dear when we're dead, even if beforehand somebody hated us enough to tie us up and...Great Scott, yes! What about that rope?' (p. 103). The revelation to Wimsey of a significant clue during the church service is repeated again in the third service described, when he works out where the emeralds are concealed. Wimsey has, at this point, solved the cipher which says 'he siteth between the cherubims. The isles may be glad thereof. As the rivers in the south.' (Psalms 991, 971 and 1265, respectively). He easily identifies these psalms, but their relevance in terms of the mystery is lost on him until he is in church and looks up at the nave and aisle which are 'thick with cherubim': 'between the cherubims in the south aisle – what could be clearer than that? In his excitement he nearly shot out of his seat' (p. 216).

The solution to the cipher is actually discovered by the vicar, Mr Venables, who notes the similarity between its layout in eight columns and a bell peal on paper. In this way and in various others in the novel the rector sometimes becomes a co-investigator with Wimsey.

emphasising once more the position Wimsey occupies between the Church and the Law, particularly as his chief co-investigator is Superintendent Blundell. Blundell represents the secular approach to detection, saying as he does 'Religion's a bit out of my line, except on Sundays' (p. 123), reinforcing the difference between the social observance of the religious calendar and a deeply felt personal belief. This representation of Blundell as secular is demonstrated in his attitude to the suggestion of providence at the end of the novel when the vicar is told of how Deacon died. Venables' explanation is that 'Perhaps God speaks through those mouths of inarticulate metal. He is a righteous judge, strong and patient, and is provoked every day.' Blundell's response to this is that he 'Don't all together understand about these bells [...] matter of periods of vibration I suppose' (p. 298). It is possible that this is one reason that Blundell cannot find a solution to the case; on a practical level the solution is bound up with an understanding of religious matters, but more intangibly, perhaps, his rejection of the providential means that he will not be providentially assisted. Existing as he does between the two institutions, Wimsey has a wider perspective on matters and therefore finds it easier to move towards and accept the solution of the bells.

The detective narrative of *The Nine Tailors* is complicated and, as has been indicated, problematic and it is in the identification and consideration of these problems that the moral and theological themes of detective fiction become apparent. The first 'problem' is the presence of providence within the novel, one example of this is Wimsey's being in Fenchurch St. Paul in the first place on New Year's Eve. A great number of detective narratives rely on coincidence in some form for the progression of the plot towards the solution.⁹ The greatest coincidence is usually the presence of the detective in the vicinity of the crime in the first place. Sometimes they are called in after the events, as Wimsey is when he arrives in Fenchurch for the second time, but often they have what Ian Ousby describes as 'a fortuitous knack of being around when murders are committed' (p. 76).

This is the case in Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* where Dr. Sheppard's crime would have gone undetected, had Hercule Poirot not 'retired from work' and moved next door 'to grow vegetable marrows' (p. 250). Sayers once again acknowledges this feature of her genre through self-conscious, humorous, reference, for example in *Gaudy Night*. Wimsey comments that 'its scandalous the way corpses pursue [him] about' (p. 278).

In *The Nine Tailors*, however, an alternative explanation for these coincidences is put forward by Mr Venables, the rector, who sees Wimsey as there through divine intervention. His car crashes, he is rescued by Venables, and this escape is presented in a providential light: it seems as if Wimsey has in some way been deliberately spared injury and delivered to the village. Mrs Venables comments that it is, 'Quite a mercy [he] didn't go into the thirty foot drain' and that 'It's most fortunate that [his] accident landed [him] comparatively close to the village' (p. 13). The vicar clearly states that he considers Wimsey's arrival to be providential as without him the New Year peal cannot be rung: 'Is it not really Providential? That just at this moment we should be sent a guest who is actually a ringer [...]?' (p. 17) He continues: 'Positively, I cannot get over the amazing coincidence of your arrival. It shows the wonderful way in which Heaven provides even for our pleasures, if they be innocent' (p. 18). This is, of course, ironic, given the consequences of the bell ringing. The use of the word 'sent' clearly signifies the idea of an active external force, and this would suggest that, if his arrival is providential, then Wimsey is there as some kind of instrument of justice, and not, as the rector thinks, as a kindly gesture on the part of the Divinity. The reader may or may not accept this explanation of his presence, but the solution of the mystery does seem to require us to accept an external or non-human influence within the narrative.

Another issue arising from the detective narrative, which has already been dealt with in some detail in Chapter Six is Wimsey's ongoing problems with the consequences of detection. In *The Nine Tailors*, he again questions his right to become involved:

‘I rather wish I hadn't come buttin' into this. Some things may be better left alone, don't you think? 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 embarassin'’ (p. 233).

The problem that Wimsey encounters, that makes his job so difficult, is to do once again with the identities of the victim and the criminal. Once again, ‘the innocent victim’ and ‘evil killer’ stereotypes are done away with and Sayers rejects the simplistic formula of much Golden Age detective fiction where evil disrupts society, the detective avenges the innocent and restores order and achieves satisfactory closure. As has been shown in previous chapters, Sayers often challenges this: our sympathies lie with the killer and their motives or we feel that the victim perhaps deserved what he got. Wimsey also has to face the consequences of the removal of the criminal from society and their potential punishment. The repercussions of this weigh heavily on his mind, as he says to Mr Venables: ‘I've got that silly modern squeamishness that doesn't like watchin' people suffer’ (p. 233).

In the case of *The Nine Tailors* this is once again the situation and it is further complicated by the fact that there is not exactly a murder. Deacon, the victim, is a criminal himself. He is a thief and a murderer who has so far escaped human justice, and the general opinion is that in being killed he has received retribution for his crimes. Wimsey says, ‘Curse the man! He's a public nuisance, dead or alive, and whoever killed him was a public benefactor. I wish I'd killed him myself. Perhaps I did. Perhaps the rector did. Perhaps Hezekiah Lavender did’, an ironic statement in the light of the final solution (p. 256). This attitude is problematic, however when it seems that William

Thoday has killed Deacon, although Wimsey feels that Thoday might have been justified in his actions:

‘If ever a fellow deserved a sticky death, it’s this Deacon brute. If the law had found him the law would have hanged him, with loud applause from all good citizens. Why should we hang a perfectly decent chap for anticipating the law and doing our dirty work for us?’ (p. 256).

This emphasises once more Wimsey’s uneasy relationship with the police and the legal system, as Superintendent Blundell responds, ‘Well, it *is* the law my lord [...] and it’s not my place to argue about it’ (p. 256). Wimsey can walk away at this point or he could, as he has in the past, find an alternative solution, retribution outside of the law, such as the formulaic, ‘pistols for two in the library’ suggested by Harriet Vane in *Gaudy Night* (p. 325). As discussed in chapter six, however, Wimsey is bound by his personal sense of duty to the truth and it is this that makes him stay. Aside from Wimsey’s sympathies with Thoday’s motive, he can also see the repercussions that naming him as the criminal will have for Thoday and his family and the society of Fenchurch St. Paul: ‘Wimsey felt depressed. So far as he could see, his interference had done no good to anybody and only made extra trouble’ (p. 258).

In the end, when it becomes clear that Thoday is only indirectly responsible for Deacon’s death, as are in fact Wimsey, the vicar and the rest of the bell ringers, there is no need for legal redress for his part in the killing. And yet, at the end of the novel, Thoday dies in what is clearly some form of atonement for his actions. In part, this is because of the need for closure in the detective narrative: Thoday carries the ‘most’ guilt for Deacon’s death, in the moral rather than the legal sense, and has committed subsequent crimes, such as concealing evidence, which have gone unpunished by the law and by society. We know that he feels guilty about this: when the news of his drowning is broken to his wife, she cries: ‘Will! Oh, Will! He didn’t want to live!’ (p. 293). This could be taken to

imply suicide, as though Thoday has taken his punishment into his own hands, but his death also signifies his redemption as he dies trying to save another man. What does seem clear is that his death is an atonement of some sort and once again there is ambiguity as to the identity of the force behind his actions. On one hand, there is a suggestion of his death being a pre-Christian sacrifice for the return of the land from the all encompassing waters of the flood, this is emphasised by Sayers when she describes how 'the broken bodies of Will Thoday and his mate drifted and tumbled with the wreckage of farm and field' and concludes 'the fen had reclaimed its own' (p. 295).

An alternative and more feasible explanation is put forward through the biblical nature of the flood, a parallel that is consciously made by Sayers. The heading of part IV of the novel is 'Of clean beasts, and of beasts that are not clean, and of fowls, and of everything that creepeth upon the earth there went in two and two unto Noah into the ark' (Genesis 7. 8-9). The final episode in the text in which Fenchurch St. Paul floods has obvious links to the story of Noah. The church is paralleled with the ark, with the parishioners and their livestock finding sanctuary there. This link is acknowledged several times by Sayers, for example through Wimsey's singing 'The animals went in two by two [...] the elephant and the kangaroo' (p. 290) and his returning with 'a handful of laurels from somebody's garden, as the nearest substitute for an olive-branch' as the flood abates (p. 297).¹⁰ The purpose of the biblical flood was the removal of sin from the world and Thoday's death could be seen in this light as he is swept away by the cleansing waters, a point perhaps emphasised by Sayers, as she elects to call the man Thoday drowns with 'Cross'. The Christian concept of atonement was of particular interest to Sayers, as shown in Chapter One, with the discussion of her lecture, 'The Meaning of Purgatory', presented in Reynolds' biography (pp. 167-168). The acknowledgement of guilt is not enough, there must be more than 'penitence and confession' there must also be 'contrition and atonement', and atonement must involve an act of compensation, a purging of the

'reatus' which shows true penitence. Thoday's attempt to save Cross, in the near-certainty that he will die, is his action of atonement to God for his sins, which places emphasis on Sayers' beliefs in man taking individual responsibility for his actions.

The same ambiguities exist in relation to Deacon, both in terms of the secular and Christian interpretations that can be placed on his death, and the issues of retribution and responsibility. Like Thoday's, his death can be seen in a sacrificial light. He is killed in mid-winter and his body is placed in the ground, in a seeming sacrifice, emphasised by the regeneration of the fens in the spring, when his body is dug up again, 'the floods withdrew from the pastures; the wheat lifted its pale green spears more sturdily from the black soil' (p. 58). The juxtaposition of the pale green against the black emphasises the sense of life coming from death, which is the function of sacrifice. Deacon's body re-emerges at Easter, a time in Church calendar for remembering the death and resurrection of Christ, arguably another sacrifice and burial in order that life will continue. The significance of Deacon's body being found at Easter raises parallels with the resurrection, particularly in the light of his having been believed dead and then having been discovered to be alive by Will Thoday. Given Deacon's nature, however, it becomes almost an impure, blasphemous resurrection, an idea emphasised later in the novel in Thoday's description of his reaction to finding that Deacon is alive 'I said here's that devil come out of his grave to trouble us again', (p. 252) and how he felt on the finding of the body, 'when he came up out o'that grave, like Judgement Day.' (p. 265).

Deacon's death must be viewed as punishment for his previous crimes, in the same way that Thoday's death is a retribution for his role in Deacon's. Whereas Thoday's death is at his own hands, however, as he recognises that he must atone for his sins, Deacon has no such recognition and must therefore be dealt with by some form of justice. The inexact nature of his death, and the impossibility of putting it at the hands of one

individual, however, makes it difficult to assess who is responsible for this justice in the novel. One potential answer is the bells, acting as a sentient force of their own free will, as it has been suggested that they have done in the past. The problem with this is that they are manipulated by human hands and therefore the responsibility must lie with the bell ringers, who can be seen as a hierarchical representation of society: nobleman, vicar, labourer and so on, presenting the killing as a collective execution for the good of the community. A third potential answer is that the ringers, like the bells, are instruments of God and he punishes Deacon through them. The end of the novel is not concerned with the solution of the detective narrative, we know how Deacon died, and that 'mystery' is solved. Instead, the final pages dwell on the death of Deacon and these moral and theological mysteries that surround it. The rector presents the argument for providential intervention, saying, 'Perhaps God speaks through those mouths of inarticulate metal. He is a righteous judge, strong and patient, and is provoked every day.' Superintendent Blundell's response to this strikes 'a note of cheerful commonplace', as he rejects any mysterious forces and puts it all down to the scientific probability of 'a matter of periods of vibration.' (p. 298). No resolution is offered in the narrative, but it could be considered significant that the last voice heard in the text is that of the bells, 'Gaude, Sabaoth, John, Jericho, Jubilee, Dimity, Batty Thomas and Tailor Paul. Nine Tailors Make a Man' (p. 299), and, although this seems deliberately ambiguous given the sacred and secular natures of the bells throughout the novel, it is interesting that the text ends with the liturgical listing of the bells' names, and the final words of closure are 'a man' or 'amen'.

¹ Consider, for example, the revelation of the Thoday's bigamous marriage which prevents their attendance at church, discussed in Chapter Four, p. 146.

² Thomas Hardy, *The Return of the Native* (London: Penguin, 1978), p. 68 (first publ. in *Belgravia*, January to December 1878).

³ Anne Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), p. 5.

⁴ N.G.J. Pounds, *The Culture of the English People: Iron Age to the Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 385.

⁵ Ann Woodward, *The English Heritage Book of Shrines and Sacrifice* (London: B.T. Batsford / English Heritage, 1992), p. 125.

⁶ Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain* p. 20

⁷ Kathleen Basford, *The Green Man* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1978), p. 7

⁸ It is worth noting the significance of this name, representing as it does the co-existence of the Christian Church in his biblical first name, and the land in his surname as lavender is a traditional East Anglian crop.

⁹ A chance overhearing, for example, such as in Agatha Christie's *At Bertram's Hotel*, when both the murderer, Elvira Blake, and the detective, Miss Marple, overhear the conversation between Bess Sedgwick and Mick Gorman. In this instance, the coincidental overhearing leads to both the murder and the solution. (Agatha Christie *At Bertram's Hotel* (London: Collins, 1965; repr. 1968) pp. 42-45)

¹⁰ Wimsey's cheerful song is typical of Sayers' movement between the tongue-in cheek and more lyrical registers.

Conclusion

Golden-Age detective fiction presents a Christian world and a Christian ideology, which is reinforced by the presence of innumerable references to the Bible, churches, congregations, vicars, vicarages, vergers, services, and sermons. One function of these references, indeed, of the whole Christian milieu, is to act as a touchstone of an ultimately benevolently ordered universe, a comforting 'strain ideology' for its inter-war readership. This is particularly evident in the detective novels of Agatha Christie, with her repeated use of a rural idyll as her setting for her stories, and her morally unambiguous endings, where 'Good' has been pitted against 'Evil' and 'Good' has won through the agents of the divine wrath of Nemesis, Miss Marple, or the work of God's appointed interferer, Hercule Poirot. The second function of this constant presence of the Church in Golden-Age detective stories is to direct our attention to the theological themes of guilt and innocence, good and evil, crime, punishment and justice that are inherent within all detective fiction, but that seem to be particularly clearly signposted in this era, perhaps, again, with a view to providing a representation of a moral and spiritually reassuring world to its readership.

Both of these functions can be attributed to the number of religious presences in the detective fiction of Dorothy L. Sayers; she is, after all, very much of her time, and utilises many of the traditional generic features of the Golden Age. Her presentation of the moral and theological themes raised by the genre is not, however, as simple as that of her contemporaries. This is demonstrated in her presentation of more 'open',

ambiguous endings which, unlike those provided by Christie, do not present 'Good' and 'Evil' as morally simple terms that can be pitted against one another in a formulaic way. Instead, she constantly draws attention to the relativity of the term 'guilt' and the differences between the legal and the moral meanings of the word, through her villainous victims and sympathetic murderers. It can also be seen in the more complicated relationship that her detective has with the Divine force that is behind Golden-Age justice, shown in his discomfort with the consequences of his detection and his essential humanity which is contrasted with, and often unequal to, the 'righteous' and assured Divine justice that features so often in the Golden-Age narrative. This humanity means that Sayers' detective exhibits a sense of conscience and free will, seen by her as essential features of humanity, and bound inextricably with the concepts of guilt and innocence. This has the effect of placing the detective in the position of being neither directly opposed to, or morally 'above' the criminal, but viewed alongside him or her, through his position as a human being, and this in turn complicates the detective narrative by creating the potential for personal relationships between the detective and those whose crimes he is investigating.

It is this capacity in Sayers to bring her theological understanding to all of her writing that gives her detective fiction an extra quality not found in that of her contemporaries. This is not to say that she utilises her detective stories for the promotion of her own beliefs or as Christian propaganda. Instead, as many other writers do, she recognises the theological themes implicit within the genre, but she approaches them with her own unique theological understanding and explores these ideas as a matter of course, regarding them as an inherent part of the detective narrative. It is this presentation of the

theological themes as a fundamental generic element that makes Sayers so interesting as a writer of detective fiction, as she simultaneously works within and challenges generic limitations, developing a 'popular' genre into a more literary form.

Appendix 1

“‘Not peace but a sword’”:

Religious aspects of Dorothy L. Sayers’ Detective Fiction¹

Most people are aware of Dorothy L. Sayers as a writer of detective fiction, but many of her reading public are unaware that this only accounts for around sixteen years of her writing life. In the late 1930s, Sayers ceased to write detective fiction and concentrated on a variety of theological texts including her thesis, *The Mind of the Maker*, various essays and papers, and a number of religious dramas for stage and radio. Whilst some critics and biographers acknowledge and explore the links between the two areas of her writing it seems to be a common practice to draw a distinct line between them. In *Dorothy L. Sayers: Solving the Mystery of Wickedness*, Mitzi Brundale provides an anecdote that demonstrates Sayers’ own awareness of this tendency, by relating how she would joke about the schoolboy who had written that ‘Miss Dorothy Sayers [...] turned from a life of crime to join the Church Of England.’²

To some degree the separation of the two phases of her work seems reasonable: after all, popular fiction has little in common with academic theses or theological dramas, but we must remember that all of these texts were written by the same woman. In her biography of Sayers, Barbara Reynolds asserts that ‘[...] all [Sayers’] writings – novels, plays, poems, theological articles, translations and literary criticism – are deeply and consistently personal.’³ It stands to reason, therefore, that there will be elements common to both areas of Sayers’ writing, generated by the ‘consistently personal’ nature of their creation. One of these elements must be the fundamental characteristic of her

interest in theology and her personal faith. These motivated her theological works, and so, similarly, they may have influenced her detective fiction.

The religious presences in Sayers' detective fiction also, arguably, have a shared intended function with her theological writings: the presentation of theological arguments and Christian messages in a way which is accessible and interesting to a wider, non academic, audience. An example of this intention can be found in Sayers' insistence that her radio play, *The Man Born to be King*, intended for an audience of children, 'must be in modern speech'⁴ and that:

[...] nobody, not even Jesus, must be allowed to "talk Bible" [...] we shall get a good many complaints that I have not preserved the beauty and elegance of the authorised version, and that Jesus has been made to say things which don't appear in the sacred original. It seems to me frightfully important that the thing should be made to appear as real as possible, and above all, that Jesus should be presented as a human being. [...]⁵

This accessibility of style is also evident in Sayers' thesis *The Mind of the Maker* in which she combines a layman's vocabulary, domestic analogies and humour to convey complicated theological arguments. For example, in Chapter II 'The Image of God', Sayers explains how there are several analogies, based on our experience, that man repeatedly uses to interpret God. The two most frequently used, according to Sayers, are those of God as a king and God as a father. In seeking to explore these metaphors, Sayers wishes to show their limitations. She argues that when we use these expressions:

we know perfectly well that they are metaphors and analogies; what is more, we know perfectly well where the metaphor begins and ends.

We do not suppose for one moment that God procreates children in the same manner as a human father...still less, that *all* the activities of a human father may be attributed to God, such as earning money for the support of the family, or demanding first use of the bathroom in the morning.⁶

This clearly demonstrates Sayers' ability to convey quite complicated theological notions in a way that makes them clear and interesting to those without a theological or academic background, or as Susan Howatch puts it in her introduction to the 1994 edition of the thesis, Sayers 'had the talent to bring Christianity to a huge audience among the unchurched masses.'⁷ The aim of this paper, however, is to explore the idea that Sayers had already begun to bring Christian messages to a wider readership through a very accessible vehicle, with an indisputably huge audience, that is, the detective novel.

Detective fiction, Sayers' or anyone else's, is not really an unlikely genre to look to in terms of religious presences. The Bible is, in part, about the rules humanity must adhere to, to achieve personal and social order, but it is also about the penalties for transgressing those rules. Detective fiction is about the loss of order through the violation of law, and the restoration of order brought about after the apprehension of the criminal, an order which is achieved in part by the judging and punishment of this person. The Ten Commandments are a set of laws that arguably form the basis of the modern laws governing us today and the Bible clearly demonstrates the consequences of breaking these laws. I give as an example the fate of the first murderer, Cain, who is punished by becoming 'a fugitive and a vagabond [...] in the earth'.⁸ The punishment

for transgressing the laws of a society is effectively to be expelled from it. It could be argued, therefore, that the fundamentals of British detective fiction reflect some of the fundamentals of Christian belief. Detective fiction seems to stem from a desire to replicate a religious sense of the world, one in which '[...] the triumph of the wicked is short'⁹

The religious presences in Sayers' detective fiction can be divided, for the purposes of discussion, into the tangible and intangible. By tangible, I mean the literal presences within the text: Sayers' use of Biblical quotations, the frequency of references to churches and church services and also the number of clergymen that make an appearance. Another 'tangible' presence is the use Sayers makes of religion in the process of characterisation. Many of her characters, her detectives in particular, are defined in part in terms of their faith. This can be seen in the description of Charles Parker in *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*, where he is described as 'cautious, solid, painstaking [with] his mind a blank to art and literature, and exercising itself in spare moments, with evangelical theology.'¹⁰ Parker is represented as morally upright and consequently inflexible on points of the law even when his personal feelings are involved. For example, at the end of *Clouds of Witness*, when he takes Lady Mary's confession of murder despite the fact that he is in love with her. Wimsey sums up Parker's attitude to the law by describing him as a Sadducee¹¹, a fitting theological stance for a policeman, as the Sadducees insisted that only the written law was obligatory.

The use of religion to characterise is even more significant in Sayers' presentation of Miss Climpson, who is fervent in her beliefs and often struggles to reconcile them with her role of investigator, for example when she finds Vera Findlater's notes for Confession in the church in *Unnatural Death*:

And here it was – the tale that should have been told to none but God lying open on Mrs. Budge's round mahogany table under the eye of a fellow mortal.

[...]

For a full half-hour Miss Climpson sat alone, struggling with her conscience. Her natural inquisitiveness said "Read"; her religious training said, "You must not read" [...]¹²

Miss Climpson often uses her beliefs as justification for her actions, and often seeks divine guidance, as in *Strong Poison*, when:

She breathed what she thought was a prayer for guidance, but the only answer was a small whisper in her ear. 'Oh, jolly good work, Miss Climpson!' and the voice was the voice of Peter Wimsey.¹³

Her fervour is undeniably used to create humour, especially in her vaguely blasphemous idolatry of Wimsey, but the interesting point about both Miss Climpson and Parker is that religion informs their detection, particularly in the case of Miss Climpson, whose investigations are justified and regulated by her faith.

Wimsey is, however, different. He does demonstrate a knowledge of, and social conformity to, Christianity, in all of the novels in which he appears. This can be seen in the way he makes frequent, pertinent biblical allusion and shows a thorough knowledge of the Bible, for example in *The Nine Tailors* when Bunter writes on the card

accompanying a funeral wreath 'St. Luke xii-6' and Wimsey 'identif[ies] the text after a little thought (for he had been carefully brought up)' ¹⁴ Wimsey attends several church services during the course of his detection: in *The Nine Tailors* three services are described in some detail, as they provide comment and elucidation to the investigation in hand. In *Gaudy Night*, Harriet meets him unexpectedly after they have both attended the university sermon.¹⁵ In *Busman's Honeymoon*, he reads the lesson in the village church, an event that is clearly not a one-off, as his cousin comments that he 'can always hear everything that [Wimsey] says.'¹⁶

Despite all of this, however, Wimsey never expresses or is never really described in terms of his faith. In fact, he clearly states to Harriet Vane that he has "'nothing much in the way of religion.'" ¹⁷ Yet it is the process of Wimsey's detection that reveals the more intangible religious element in Sayers' detective novels, the presence of theological ideas such as the existence of Providence, Divine judgement and punishment and the significance of Truth as a concept. Thus, unlike in the instance of Miss Climpson and Parker, the movement is not from religion to detection, but detection to religion.

I should like to take the rest of this paper to illustrate this idea, and to show how the process of detection arguably acquires the status of religious analogy in Sayer's novels. A suggestion that is often made in these texts is that detection is not a comfortable process. Wimsey repeatedly has troubles with his conscience over his role as detective, as he explains to Parker in *Whose Body?':* "'It is a game to me, to begin with and I go on cheerfully, and then I suddenly see that someone is going to be hurt, and I want to get

out of it.”¹⁸ This point is also made by Munting, the narrator turned reluctant detective in *The Documents in the Case*, when he complains that:

People write books about murders, and the nice young men and women in them enjoy the job of detecting. It is a good game and I like reading the books. But the emotions of the nice young people are so well-regulated, or so perfunctory, or something. They don't feel like worms and get put off their dinners when they have succeeded in squeezing a damaging admission out of a friend.¹⁹

So troubled is Wimsey by the potential consequences of his investigations, that he consults a member of the clergy for guidance. Finding himself in St Onesimus, searching for Miss Climpson, he meets the vicar, Tredgold and after some hesitation asks him if he gives advice on ‘moral problems’.

Wimsey has been questioning whether it is right of him to investigate the death of Mrs Dawson, firstly, because she was terminally ill and he is unsure of whether it is so very bad to ‘hurry matters on’²⁰ and secondly, because his investigation has seemingly prompted the murderer to act again and now he feels responsible for the second death. He outlines his first concern to the priest as to whether giving a terminally ill person ‘a little push off’ is such ‘a dreadful crime?’²¹ Mr Tredgold's first response is to mention the law, but Wimsey makes it clear that he is not concerned with the legal viewpoint, saying that ‘the law says it's a crime, fast enough ... you'd call it a sin, but why is it so very dreadful? It doesn't do the person any harm, does it?’ Here Wimsey is making a distinction between moral codes and legal ones, a significant point when looking at detective fiction in general. Right and wrong are not always so easily decided and often

one may have more sympathy with the murderer than their victim, but ultimately we, as readers of detective fiction, or as 'moral' beings, must accept that the murderer is, to over-simplify, 'more' wrong than his victim. It is easy to argue that detective fiction is, as Wimsey himself says, a 'pure' literature, because 'virtue is always triumphant', but Sayers' detective novels also illustrate the complexity of making the decision, socially and individually, of what is 'pure', that is to say, what is right and wrong.

Tredgold's response to Wimsey's initial question involves the omniscience of God, which, he argues, man has no right to question or interfere with:

We can't answer that ... without knowing the ways of God with the soul. In those last weeks or hours of pain and unconsciousness, the soul may be undergoing some necessary part of its pilgrimage on earth. It isn't our business to cut it short. Who are we to take life and death into our own hands?²²

Wimsey argues that 'juries – soldiers – doctors' question or interfere with Providence everyday, in as much that they can dictate on matters of life and death, but that he feels that 'it isn't a right thing in this case'. Having conceded that, though, he expresses his concern that 'by [his] interfering – finding things out and so on – one may do far worse harm.'²³ Tredgold is quick to point out that the reason Wimsey feels it is wrong in this case is that 'the killing is to the killer's own advantage.' Therefore it seems it is not so much the taking of life and death into one's own hands that is the crime, but the motivation for doing so, as Tredgold puts it, 'sin is in the intention not the deed'²⁴ As Tredgold himself argues 'this is the difference between divine law and human law'. He argues the viewpoint that, 'the sin ... the damage to Society, the wrongness of the thing

lies much more in the harm it does to the killer than in anything it can do to the person who is killed.²⁵ Human law sees the crime in the taking of another's life: a physical act that results in the death of another human being, punishable because of the consequences in terms of the victim. Church law, Tredgold seems to argue, is more concerned with the wrongness of the act in terms of the moral consequences for the killer, because, he argues, 'it is bad for a human being to get to feel that he has any right whatever to dispose of another person's life to his own advantage. It leads him on to think himself above all laws.'²⁶

In response to Wimsey's concerns about his own right to become involved, Tredgold responds that he should 'do what [he] think[s] is right, according to the laws which we have been brought up to respect. Leave the consequences to God.' Again there is a distinction between human and Divine law, and ultimately between human and Divine justice. Human law is followed by human justice, to which Wimsey must bring the criminal, but Divine law has no earthly justice, only, accepting for argument's sake that it exists, Divine justice.

The conversation with Tredgold illustrates the difficulties that Wimsey faces and clearly places the issues surrounding detection in a religious context, an idea which is reinforced by the repeated paralleling of the detective with two Biblical figures. In *Gaudy Night*, the following exchange takes place between Harriet Vane and Wimsey:

"Peter – I feel exactly like Judas."

“Feeling like Judas is part of the job. No job for a gentleman, I’m afraid. Shall we wash our hands like Pilate and be thoroughly respectable?”²⁷

The allusion to Judas is prompted by the fact that Harriet feels that she is betraying her friends and colleagues by placing them under scrutiny and suspicion. Similar comments are made by Wimsey in other novels, such as in *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*, when he says that he will not part with his thoughts to Parker for “thirty pieces of silver”²⁸. This is because he is concerned that a friend, George Fentiman, may be the criminal. This is one of the purposes of the comparisons to Judas: they illustrate that detection is undertaken at great personal cost, that sometimes the truth can only be achieved through the betrayal of friendship.

The allusion to Pilate also occurs frequently. In *Busman’s Honeymoon*, Harriet asks him why he must investigate the murder that has occurred in their new home, because “It’s such a beastly little crime – sordid and horrible.” Wimsey’s response is that he cannot pick and choose:

“I can’t wash my hands of a thing, merely because it’s inconvenient to my lordship, as Bunter says of the sweep. I hate violence! I loathe wars and slaughter, and men quarrelling and fighting like beasts! Don’t say it isn’t my business. It’s everybody’s business.”²⁹

Here, Wimsey rejects the potential parallel: Pilate absolved himself of both the responsibilities and consequences of trying Christ:

When Pilate saw that he could prevail nothing, but *that* rather a tumult was made, he took water, and washed *his* hands before the multitude, saying, I am innocent of the blood of this first person: see ye *to it*.³⁰

Wimsey sees that he cannot do this. For various possible reasons, he has a duty to investigate. Neither of these Biblical figures present an attractive or positive impression of detection and firmly establish that it is not an emotionally simple activity.

Once again, we find ourselves asking why, given that this is so, Wimsey carries on. In the case of detectives such as Poirot or Marlow or any of the number of police detectives that have become more popular in recent years the answer to this could be simplified to the fact that it is their employment, they detect for monetary gain. In the case of Wimsey, this is different, he is not paid as a detective. One reason that might be offered is that he detects through a sense of noblesse oblige. This accounts for his activities in part, but more significant and fundamental to his motivations appears to be his desire for the truth. Detection is about locating the truth at whatever cost, even if that cost is personal, and this is an idea that Sayers often returns to in her novels. In *Gaudy Night*, Wimsey says that he must have the truth “at all hazards”³¹ and in *Busman’s Honeymoon* he emphatically states that “Whoever suffers, we *must* have the truth. Nothing else matters a damn”.³² Once again we return to the idea that detection, the gaining of truth, is a process that involves human suffering: either the detective’s, the innocent suspect’s, or society as a whole.

‘Truth’ as a concept is of considerable Biblical significance. In the old testament, the ‘truth’ of God refers to the reliability of his word, for example Isaiah states ‘that he who

blesseth himself in the earth shall bless himself in the God of truth [...]’ (65. 16). The gospel of John in the New Testament is ‘an exposition of the truth of God which is revealed by Christ’³³: ‘He that hath received his testimony hath set to his seal that God is true.’ (John 3. 33.)

The process of detection, therefore, if we define it in terms of a quest for the truth, could potentially become a religious analogy: Dorothy L. Sayers parallels the process of detection with the process of bringing truth, or the Word of God, to the world. The Bible makes it clear that this process is terrible but vital and one which will have human cost both to the bringer and to those that hear it. Wimsey/Sayers acknowledge this parallel at the end of *Gaudy Night*. After a particularly traumatic revelation of the truth, which prompts a conversation with the significantly named Miss de Vine, Wimsey says, “‘I don’t claim, you know, [...] to be a Christian or anything of that kind. But there’s one thing in the Bible that seems to me to be a mere statement of brutal fact – I mean, about bringing not peace but a sword.’” (Matthew 10. 34.)³⁴ The ‘thing in the Bible’ that Wimsey refers to is Matthew, chapter 10 verse 34, in which Christ instructs his disciples about carrying the Word of God to the world. The essential message of this chapter seems to be that the bringing of truth is not a simple process, and that it can create personal and social difficulty:

For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law.

And a man’s foes *shall be* they of his own household.³⁵

However, in order for the individual and society to exist in harmony the truth must be understood and acknowledged, just as the truth at the end of a detective novel is necessary before the restoration of order to the characters and environment of the story.

We can, if we wish, enjoy Sayers as a pure puzzle writer and as a classic author of the popular genre of detective fiction. But I would argue that she cannot be read without some provocation of thought in the reader about the serious nature of detection as an activity, particularly its consequences in the judgement and punishment of a criminal, especially when we consider the presence of a divine justice. Sayers deliberately uses her detective stories as a vehicle for the exploration of several theological issues, and in doing so she ceases to just purely entertain us with a cosy mystery story and instead brings to the reader's mind 'not peace, but a sword.'

¹ This paper was given at a conference 'Sayers in the 21st Century: Readers, Writers and Critics on Dorothy L. Sayers' held by the Dorothy L. Sayers Society and the University of London Institute of English Studies on 5 October 2002 and subsequently published in 'Occasional Papers Number 3' (Hurstpierpont: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, August 2003), pp. 45-51.

² Mitzi Brundale *Dorothy L. Sayers: Solving the Mystery of Wickedness* (Oxford: Berg, 1990), p. 12.

³ Barbara Reynolds, *Dorothy L. Sayers: Her Life and Soul* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1998), p. 167.

⁴ J.W. Welch, foreword to *The Man born to be King* by Dorothy L. Sayers (London: Gollancz, 1943) p. 9

⁵ Barbara Reynolds ed. *The Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers Volume Two, 1937-1943: from novelist to playwright* (London: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society 1997) p. 282

⁶ Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (London: Methuen, 1941), rev. edn ed. by Susan Howatch (Mowbray, 1994).

⁷ *The Mind of the Maker* p. viii.

⁸ Genesis 4. 12.

⁹ Job 20. 5.

¹⁰ Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* (London: Benn, 1928; repr. Hodder and Stoughton, 1977), p. 78.

¹¹ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Clouds of Witness* (London: Unwin, 1926; repr. Hodder and Stoughton, 1976), p.45.

¹² Dorothy L. Sayers, *Unnatural Death* (London: Benn, 1927; repr. Hodder and Stoughton, 1976), p. 217.

¹³ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Strong Poison* (London: Gollancz, 1930; repr. Hodder and Stoughton, 1977), p. 161.

¹⁴ Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Nine Tailors* (London: Gollancz, 1934; repr. Hodder and Stoughton, 1959), p. 111.

¹⁵ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Gaudy Night* (London: Gollancz, 1935; repr. Hodder and Stoughton, 1970), p.264.

¹⁶ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Busman's Honeymoon* (London: Gollancz, 1937; repr. Hodder and Stoughton, 1977), p. 283.

¹⁷ *Gaudy Night*, p. 436.

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- ¹⁸ Dorothy L. Sayers *Whose Body?* (London: Unwin, 1923; repr. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977), p. 123.
- ¹⁹ Dorothy L. Sayers *The Documents in the Case* (London: Benn, 1930; repr. Hodder and Stoughton, 1978), p. 202.
- ²⁰ *Unnatural Death*, p. 193.
- ²¹ *Unnatural Death*, p. 193.
- ²² *Unnatural Death*, p. 193.
- ²³ *Unnatural Death*, p. 193.
- ²⁴ *Unnatural Death*, p. 194.
- ²⁵ *Unnatural Death*, p. 193.
- ²⁶ *Unnatural Death*, p. 194.
- ²⁷ *Gaudy Night*, p. 319.
- ²⁸ *Unpleasantness*, p. 200.
- ²⁹ *Busman's Honeymoon* p. 128.
- ³⁰ Matthew 27. 24.
- ³¹ *Gaudy Night* p. 394.
- ³² *Busman's Honeymoon* p. 301.
- ³³ WRF Browning, ed. *Oxford Dictionary of the Bible* (Oxford: OUP, 1997), p. 380.
- ³⁴ *Gaudy Night*, p. 430.
- ³⁵ Matthew 10. 34-35.

Appendix 2

Interview with Jill Paton Walsh

The following interview took place on 14 March, 2003 at the home of Jill Paton Walsh. Paton Walsh is the author of twenty-two books for children, including *The Emperor's Winding-Sheet* which was awarded the Whitbread Prize in 1974 and *A Parcel of Patterns* which won the 1984 Universe Prize.¹ She has written two detective novels in her own right, *The Wyndham Case* and *A Piece of Justice*.²

In 1998 she published *Thrones, Dominations*, a completion of a detective novel for which Sayers left notes, which deals with Wimsey and Harriet's life after their marriage. She has also used the 'Wimsey Papers', a series of letters concerning the Wimsey family in the Second World War, which appeared in *The Spectator* from November 1939 to January 1940, as the basis for a second 'collaboration' with Sayers, *A Presumption of Death* (2002).

The interview began with some general questions about the process of writing narratives and characters already begun by another author and a general discussion of some of the characteristics of Sayers as an individual and a writer. It then progressed to a more specific focus on some of the issues raised within this thesis, such as the presence of a non-human entity, divine or fatal in Sayers' detective fiction, the moral functions of the detective narrative and Sayers' use of these narratives in the presentation of her beliefs.

Any natural pauses and/or hesitations in conversation are indicated by ellipsis. Where the recording is of poor quality and or subsequent additions have been made, these are indicated by placing them in brackets.

EM How difficult did you find it to recreate Sayers' written style in *Thrones, Dominations* and *A Presumption of Death*?

JPW What I said to the trustees when I was asked if I thought I could do it, was that I thought I could achieve the style. I thought I could extend the characters in conformity with their known and, indeed, develop them a bit. I thought I could complete the plot, but no power on earth could reconstruct the audience for which she was then writing. So the problem now, is not to write what she would have written then, nor to write what she would write now, it is to write something which strikes people now as the kind of thing she would have written then - and this cannot stay 'right' - I mean, Sayers as seen from the point of view of our immediate time is one thing, give us another, say twenty five years and obviously the world will have moved around and different aspects of Sayers will come to the top and it will be impossible to mistake [what] 'I've 'fudged up' now for Sayers, because everything will have changed in the meantime.

I mean, if you look at those famous exhibitions from 10-12 years ago, fake Rembrandts, and you look at it now and you think 'how can anyone conceivably have thought that that was a Rembrandt?' It's ludicrously wrong, but at the time it appeared convincing to people, because when they looked at Rembrandt they saw something different, so the forgery is exposed as the mind set of the time changes....and so what I'm doing, is doing it for now, I can't really be doing what she would have done. I can't really be doing that, but what I'm trying to do is something which strikes the contemporary reader as more Sayers. It's an

elaborate deception.

EM One of the things I felt when I was reading *A Presumption of Death* was that it did strike me as more modern, it was more of ‘now’ looking back to another time. As you said, because you are trying to reconstruct it in a sense of ‘now’, how we perceive ‘then’ as opposed to writing from then.

JPW I’d already started it and written the opening passages, about the opening third, when the Twin Towers were blown up and since then there’s been this uncanny replay of fear of war and gloom and tension which has made it much more apposite than it was when I started to write it. When I started to write it, it was an historical novel about a period in the past to which we all knew the outcome and then it turned itself from being historical in that sense, to being quite uncomfortably close to what we were living through. That’s what I mean about the way it strikes you. It’s not only about ... I mean, there aren’t any novels that aren’t contemporary novels, there are no historical novels; all novels are written from the viewpoint of the time at which they were written, however elaborately disguised that is. It contains itself its own contemporary date-stamping, whatever you do, this time it was rather astonishing, rather uncanny.

EM One thing that I wondered might have been a more modern construction was the ‘mixing’ of the classes – Harriet’s discomfort with the class she finds herself in, and the way in which she deliberately befriends ‘Hope Fanshaw’, Bunter’s fiancée, or whether this was a deliberate identification of the changing times. You set it at the death of the king [...]

JPW I didn’t set it at the death of the king, Dorothy did, and Dorothy wrote the

discomfiture of Harriet in Peter's social class too, a simple extension in stuff laid down. I mean, there's actually a moment in Busman's Honeymoon when he says, 'you would have married me much sooner if I'd been a yokel', and she says 'yes'. So, in fact, I don't regard that as my invention at all, but that's what I mean ... you know, here is this broken off strut in the architecture and all I've done is built something on it, I haven't invented the foothold there at all.

EM The Second World War seems to be a point ...

JPW The Second World War did indeed mix everybody up, like in air-raid shelters, which is where this begins. It was hugely corrosive of social class and it lasts. That atmosphere of 'we're all in it together, we must all look after each other', was forged in the agonies of the war and it lasted until sometime in the second Heath administration. I remember feeling it dissolve around me at the miner's strike and suddenly we were in a different social world.

EM It would be interesting to see whether it would become reconstructed again under circumstances we find ourselves in at the moment.

JPW My bet is that it would I think it would. I think people in extremes often behave extraordinarily well. Do you remember the miners in Pennsylvania last year? Perhaps you don't. Do you remember there were nine of them and they all survived because they all huddled together and changed places so that they [...] That's a sort of stunning archetype, we can all survive if we all help each other, but not otherwise and I think the fact that they clocked that and behaved accordingly... a very interesting testimony, really, to something.

EM Right.

JPW I don't know, I think very ordinary people often behave extraordinarily well under stress and, indeed, I must have written 8, 10 novels about that by now, most of them on the children's list, but it comes from my own memories of the war. I mean, I do remember the air raid shelters. I was very small, but what happens when you are very small makes a deep impression on you. So, yes, I think Dorothy herself was mixing social classes. I mean, she was Harriet's class not Peter's

EM Yes. Yes that's true.

JPW She didn't know a thing about how dukes give dinner parties for example.

EM No. But did she know very much about the other end of the scale as well? Servants, for example?

JPW I think not, really. I don't think she wasn't interested, but when she depicts them it's like a needle dropping into a groove. She does drop into burlesque when she depicts them, and she had a duff ear, 'a cloth-ear', for accent.

EM Yes.

JPW So this really is a limitation in Dorothy which I don't quite know what one would now do about it. I mean, it was... This vanished world that she was depicting was much more sorted out than ours and yet there was always a weakness in the structure. I mean, everybody that I remember for example, who had a char-lady was a friend of their char-lady's. I don't remember class hostility in the 'upstairs-downstairs' fashion. It might have happened in big houses, [but] in ordinary middle-class families that fact that women worked for each other and knew each other was one of the big ways in which this sort of

thing was mitigated.

EM Do you think that that's a gender issue?

JPW There was a male version of it, they were down the pub, they all followed the hunt in a country place, for example, everybody from top to bottom in society, they talked to each other about that, they drank together in pubs. There were things which have dropped out of sight in the very Marxist analysis which is with us now about what it was like then. I'm 66, I can remember some of what it was like then. I think if you wanted the whole truth, you would have to remember the other things - the women cooperating with each other - and you know, the mesh was much more complex than it seems in retrospect to have been. Nevertheless it wasn't a good idea to have all that that discrimination - it wasn't. I'm not defending it exactly, I'm glad to see the back of it, but from this point of view I can't see the back of it, I've got to be where she was then.

EM Yes, absolutely. It's one of the criticisms that's levelled against her, is that people mistake, I think what you I think describe as her 'poor ear for accents', as a terrible social snobbery. I don't think that she's mocking the characters I just think that perhaps they're not terribly well constructed...terribly well written, I don't think she's deliberately stereotyping or dismissing as a kind of type.

JPW No, I do agree with you, but I think the problem with this is that this is where an artistic failure and a moral failure make it very hard to distinguish.

EM Yes. Could you expand on that?

JPW I mean, if she had mixed more with ordinary people she might have known more

what they sound like when they speak. I don't want to criticise her for this, she was of her time and it's incredibly easy to criticise people in the past for not being people in the present. People in the present can't see what it is they will later be accused of themselves and so they feel very self-righteous. But I don't think she was good at working classes and there are occasions like the bailiffs in *Busman's Honeymoon* one of whom's a Jew, remember? Where the coarse - and by coarse I don't mean vulgar I mean too broad brush - picturing of him is quite damaging. It really does look like anti-Semitism now

EM Yes.

JPW But then that's easy to say after the war. [pause] I think she was anti-Semitic.

EM Yes.

JPW For very curious reasons, purely theological reasons. She had a Jewish lover, a Jewish agent, a Jewish publisher, a Jewish friend but she thought they had refused Christ theologically, so she was, she wasn't anti-Semitic in the way people think, she wasn't shrinking from social contact with Jews, she just had a Christian argument in her head.

EM Yes, and that seems to have driven so much about her...

JPW Christianity did, didn't it?

EM Yes, this is part of the basis for my thesis [outline basis of thesis]. I think religion played a much bigger part in society, not necessarily theism, like belief and theology and working for a faith but just religion as sort social organisational focus.

JPW Yes. Have you been watching the programme about the 'Country Parish', the

young priest?

EM Yes, I've seen some of it.

JPW Well that seems to be me to be about 30 years out of date you know, but the world was like that.

EM Absolutely, and so the presences are there because of the setting for the books, they are particularly Golden-Aged closed-setting communities.

JPW Yes, of course for a murder you partly do need a closed community because you want a not infinitely extendable list of suspects, so you go for small contexts with closure round them and that lands you into these type communities in which, as you say, the church and vicar is likely to be a central figure.

EM It's quite interesting that even in Sayers' urban and suburban novels, as opposed to the ones that have that clear country house and rural Golden-Age setting, there is still a vicar present, Whittington in *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* and Perry in *The Documents in the Case*.

JPW I'm not familiar with that one, I've read it but it's not on my [axis?] obviously.

EM Even in those urban environments that vicar is still there, but he seems to have different challenges to fulfill, a different role than he does in the rural setting. So part of that is that the religion is necessary for the setting of Golden-Age detective fiction, or not necessary an intrinsic part of, and the second part was that it struck me that detective fiction as a genre and religion or theology have sort of issues which cross over. And the idea of law is where I began with obviously the legal, which is what detective fiction is all about and sort of breaking of laws and the need to be detected and the criminal needing to be

punished. But lots of the laws that are broken are also moral and social laws which is what the church, and the Bible is effectively a handbook, a set of rules for living, and obviously you've got the origins of the legal law, the court in the church and church law and ecclesiastical law, so there was an overlap there. But, sort of more wider ideas, the idea of transgressing rules and sin and punishment and it suddenly occurred to me that you could read detective fiction within two sets of frameworks: you could have an atheistic reading where you just look at legal law and policeman and crime and punishment from that perspective, or there's a theistic perspective which, I think, makes it more interesting when you start dealing with good and evil.

JPW I think that you need to consider also superstition in the past - witchcraft beliefs and things like that - for example the ghost that walks, and it walks because its will, the will behind the picture is not being carried out, or the ghost of the moral walks because the orphan child is not being properly treated and so on, or the crime is discovered because of somebody gets a withered arm [...]. You know - you didn't get away from them because a spiritual vengeance would appear to put the balance right.

EM Yes.

JPW And this amounts to a threat: do not ignore Uncle Ebenezer's will because his ghost will walk, do not abuse the stepchild, because the dead mother will walk. And that, I think, that idea that you can't get away with it because there's a spiritual force that will appear, very like the idea that you can't get away with it because you will have left a clue that some very intelligent person will be able to

collect. It's an idea of the kind of pivotal force of justice which will catch up with you and that's a very old idea and it's nothing to do with detection, it's an old moral idea, it's not even really to do with religion. I think it's more to do with superstition and fear and it makes people self-disciplined, better do what old Ebenezer wanted in case Lord Peter or Sherlock Holmes can find what really happened, we think we've covered our tracks, but you know, you don't know. It's an immensely satisfying idea for the non-criminal classes [laughs]

EM Yes,

JPW [...] that there is this sort of in-built possibility of retribution and correction and revenge.

EM And Sayers, to a certain extent, I mean, you could say, and you're quite right, it doesn't necessarily have anything to do with religion or Christianity, but you can see that exterior force, that knows and, as you were saying, will find you out, as providential or divine, that there's [...]

JPW I think people used to think of it as providential or divine, when we get into the age of detective stories there's the sense that brains and science will do the trick, and that's a big shift in the causality, you still might get found out, but this time it's because it's a very clever man, or there's someone who's categorised fingerprints or discovered toxicology in this or that or the other, and I think that this is why I think a lot of very clever people love detective stories because they celebrate the triumph of the brain over wickedness. It's the sheer brainpower of the little grey cells and all that that's going to conquer evil.

EM Do you think Sayers, in her novels, carries out, bears that argument out, or do

you think she pits science against this exterior entity, whether we're going to call it the Ghost of Uncle Ebenezer or God. In *The Documents in the Case* she quite clearly sets up science against religion and one or other of them is going to be responsible for the truth at the end. And in *The Nine Tailors* as well there's the matter of a period of vibration, which is the scientific explanation of Deacon's death, but doesn't really answer the question and you get the impression that Blundell doesn't really think it answers it either, he sort of says 'I'll put it to the superintendent' as if he's not sure.

JPW You've thought about this more deeply than I have actually.

EM Yes, sorry ...

JPW I'm not sure about this [...]

EM I mean, I think what you've said is absolutely true of a lot of detective fiction outside of Sayers. One of the reasons she interests me is that there don't seem to be these clear cut lines and she uses her detective fiction to explore this idea of 'is it providence, is it?' [...] because she doesn't dispense with the supernatural, there's a ghost in *Busman's Honeymoon*, isn't there? That we're meant to just accept as 'real', as there.

JPW Yes, the ghost in *Busman's Honeymoon* is a bit of a family joke. I don't think you're supposed to take that seriously, you know, any self-respecting aristocratic family has got a ghost, so the Denvers have got a ghost. I think she's a funny writer a lot of the time, she's very light-hearted about some of this. Don't pin her down too earnestly. But I think the whole premise of a detective story is that it's right that the murderer is caught and punished, I mean you get modern writers

who write stories in which the murderer gets away with it and I think that would have struck the Golden-Age writers and the whole social setting as an outrage. That's not at all a happy ending - it may be truthful in the sense that it might describe a real situation in real life, but it's an outrage, what is required absolutely when there has been a death, is another death and never forget the death penalty.

EM That's one of the things that I think adds emphasis to Golden-Age detective fiction because the punishment is so much more awful than in modern detective fiction.

JPW The punishment is so much more proportional to the crime.

EM Yes, but even then, I mean, when we're talking about the punishment, sometimes there is a death for a death, but it isn't a death that's been forced by the legal system, like at the end of *Murder Must Advertise*, Talbot effectively commits suicide, as does Penberthy at the end of *The Bellona Club*.

JPW Yes, well that has a fictional bonus which is that it gives a quick end, whereas in reality you'd have to have a trial and evidence and appeals and delays and so on and she sometimes does that, she does that at the end of *Busman's Honeymoon*. But, of course, if the murderer will just jump off a high building or ingest some poison it clears it all up much more quickly.

EM Convenient. But does it set the detective up, as Holmes says 'I am the last court of appeal'?

JPW Peter worries about that, that's in an early one, when he wanders into a church and talks to a vicar and he worries about whether he as an amateur is entitled to

interfere.

EM Treadgold in *Unnatural Death*.

JPW That's it, yes. And in fact, that's a very interesting idea, because that worry, I think, is unique - I don't remember any other detective having the slightest concern about whether they're meddling in other people's business or not.

EM No, and lots of detectives are quite justified, quite righteous about it. I always think of Miss Marple who has said at the end quite often, 'well it anybody deserved to hang, it was him!' and she just has no compunction at all about and she doesn't concern herself about, she even describes herself a 'nemesis'.

JPW Again, I find it really difficult to talk seriously about Agatha Christie because all the characters are made of cardboard and so I'm not bothered about them at all. I don't care who hangs or who found them out, it's just like a crossword puzzle. John next door, my partner, he always says with Agatha Christie you're lined up in a room and you're given a solution, you're given three false solutions and a true one and they could have been in any order, I mean, any of the solutions could have been the right one, she's just playing cards. I think moral discussion of that is taking it rather more seriously than it deserves. But Sayers is a different kind of writer altogether, isn't she?

EM Yes.

JPW Completely.

EM I think this is what I'm trying to argue that you move from religion being sort of, sometimes necessary to read detective fiction or, you know, a sense of good and evil, to sort of detectives working within that framework because of the society

they write in. Like Agatha Christie, because there are vicars and villages and Hercule Poirot is constantly going on about the presence of evil with a big E, but then for Sayers, and this is one of the things that I think makes her really interesting, detective fiction becomes theodicy, the working through of the detective story is almost like a working through of this problem of the existence of evil, who is evil.

JPW Yes, I think that she would have liked to have been writing like Wilkie Collins or Dickens and so she has a very different view of reality from these others who are just fooling about and she is, I think, trying to make it real. To some extent, it is real and what of course isn't real is the idea that the people necessarily get caught and that's why I think detective fiction is a branch of wish fulfillment.

EM Yes, but that's one of the things you talk about with the Cinderella in here [*Thrones, Dominations*], 'You mean perhaps they work as fairy tales work, to caution stepmothers against being wicked, and to comfort Cinderellas everywhere?'

JPW Yes, that's straight out of Marina Warner, who is the great interpreter of folk tale [...] I think that's *From The Beast to The Blonde* and the idea is that the reason why stepmothers feature is greatly is not that they were really rampant all over the place, but that this was a warning. The stories were an admonishment to people not to abuse their power against the weak.

EM Do you think detective fiction, it's fair to say, has that moral function?

JPW Yes, it does have that morality function, yes. Don't do it, you won't get away with it. You will have left a footprint in the flowerbed. I think that's correct, yes.

EM Good - it's one of the things I'm arguing.

JPW When I say it's not realistic, I think I am saying that the closure has come to a solution, the setting to right of the scales of justice is a fairytale. That is not very likely to happen all the time and in a way it's described, wildly unlikely to happen.

EM Do you think it is fair to say that Sayers is absolutely aware of this moral function, of this wish fulfillment element to it? An appreciation that it is unreal, but somehow it is still necessary?

JPW Now, I honestly don't know whether she would have thought it was unreal.

EM Could you say more?

JPW I honestly don't know. I mean, she followed crime cases in the papers and they were often triumphantly detected and people were hanged and they were much less likely than we are now to worry about whether it was the right person or not.

EM There is a didactic sort of motive to her writing. Do you think she set out to subconsciously or consciously to put forward an idea or a message or a moral?

JPW I think you should be careful here, because I think she was a very combative, argumentative, dogmatic lady, but on the whole she kept that out of her detective stories and that I think is interesting. I mean, she wrote for money. She wrote the detective stories for money and for fun, she liked doing it. I don't think she was intentionally dogmatic in them at all and in a way there is a sort of built-in filter in writing fiction. Take for example her anti-Semitism, one would know about that from her letters and her attitude to the Committee of Jews, British Jewry [?] in the war and so on, one would not, I think, know it from her novels.

EM No.

JPW Not from the detective novels, one really wouldn't know it from that, even the bailiff we just mentioned you see, well, I would say he's more of a caricature rather than an attack on his race. I think when you're writing fiction there is a need to portray the world convincingly and to convince others you have to be reasonably fair.

EM Yes.

JPW And so that filters out a certain sort of twisted, skewed and weighted argument. An unfair view of your character will destroy the character, it will destroy the credibility of the character. If you set up a character just as a butt of mockery or hatred, the first thing that will happen is that the readers will not believe this for a minute. And so, in fact, there's a discipline here which prevents people from using fiction to propound their most - to write propaganda for their own views. People often think you could obviously do that, you could, but as a matter of fact you can't. The requirement that readers shall be convinced and interested entails the requirement that character should be seen in daylight, reasonably rounded, reasonably, justly portrayed.

EM Do you think that's perhaps why a novel like *The Documents in the Case* is less popular with the reading public, because there does seem to me to be something quite dogmatic in that?

JPW Well, she was trying to write that with a collaborator who was a goof [laughs] and she was interested in the scientific situation. Frankly, I think it's a failure as a novel, it doesn't have any fictional zap at all.

EM The vast bulk of the text seems to be taken up with what seems to be theological debate about the origins of life.

JPW And actually what we opened the book for was a good story, so we are sort of baffled by that one. I think she wrote two appallingly bad books, that's one and the other one is *Five Red Herrings*, I mean, nobody is as interested in train timetables as that, [laughs] it's ridiculous!

EM That's a 'pure puzzle story' isn't it?

JPW Yes it is, and she wrote it because she wanted to please Mac I think, by using a setting he knew and liked.

EM Someone suggested she wrote it in response to criticism of *Strong Poison*, that that was too much the other way, it was not a 'puzzle story'.

JPW She might have done. She still at this stage has a living to earn - that's to say in each case she's got to write something. Now, when she got stuck on *The Nine Tailors* because the research about campanology took too long, she dashed off *Murder Must Advertise* to keep her contract. Her contract bound her to write a book a year. I admire that immensely, the practical craft, I mean in a way, you know, she had practical craft rather like Shakespeare's stagecraft, she wasn't airy-fairy about it, but the fact is, she was under a contract to write fast and to write one every year and you can't expect them all to be absolutely inspirational and perfect in that situation. It's not easy to combine. A lesser writer would have finished *The Nine Tailors* somehow, anyhow, and would have botched it. And that's her masterpiece, isn't it? I mean *Murder Must Advertise* is spectacularly silly, she just shot it off, but it's lovely, it's lots of fun.

¹ Jill Paton Walsh, *The Emperor's Winding Sheet*, (London: Macmillan, 1974); *A Parcel of Patterns* (London: Viking Kestrel, 1984).

² Jill Paton Walsh, *The Wyndham Case*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1993); *A Piece of Justice* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1995).

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