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Portraying Lesbians and Other Happy Single Women without Shocking Her Readers in Dorothy L. Sayers's Detective Fiction

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Abstract

In 1927, Dorothy L. Sayers published, without attracting any unfavourable attention, a novel entitled *Unnatural Death*, in which most of the main characters are single women and some are obviously lesbians. Later, in both *Strong Poison* and *Five Red Herrings*, she depicted independent, artistic women who live either completely or partially together. In these cases, the women's sexuality is not even mentioned, and it is up to the reader to follow the clues and decide if they are lesbians or not. In the context of the suspenseful detective plot, the women's private affairs, and in particular those of the happy couples who live uneventful lives, remain almost unnoticed. Fifty years later, the BBC adaptations of the novels chose different options: one miniseries preserving the ambiguity of the novel while the other depicts an obvious, stereotypical lesbian couple. This chapter examines the author Dorothy L. Sayers's attitude to female homosexuality and how she managed to include clearly or potentially lesbian characters in her fiction without shocking her contemporaries.

Keywords

Single women, lesbians, Dorothy L. Sayers, television adaptations, stereotypes

Analysing crime novels inevitably involves talking about secrets, because every criminal investigation requires the investigators to unearth hidden facts and motives. Criminals, for obvious reasons, feel obliged to keep their identities hidden from both the police and their friends and families. Even if the detective knows very well who is guilty, he may well have no idea why or how they committed the crime. Readers, caught up in the plot and trying to discover all the relevant clues for themselves before the detective reveals them in the last chapter, may easily ignore or skim over other, subtler, aspects of the work; secrets which are irrelevant to the detective plot, but relevant to the author's worldview. For the author knows very well, as T.S. Eliot states in his famous article "Religion and Literature", that: "the literature which we read with the least effort . . . can have the easiest and most insidious influence on us" (398). Dorothy L. Sayers provides a clear example of this phenomenon. She is principally famous for her detective fiction and for her aristocratic hero, Lord Peter Wimsey. However, she frequently included comment on social and moral issues in her fiction. A year before the huge scandal triggered by Radclyffe Hall's portrayal of a lesbian relationship, *The Well of Loneliness* (1927), she managed to publish a novel entitled *Unnatural Death*, where the majority of the main characters are single women, some of whom are clearly lesbians. One balanced, happy couple, one ill-

matched couple, and one intelligent, single professional woman join Lord Peter Wimsey and his policeman friend Charles Parker in a tale of murder, suspense, lies, and a contested will. Despite the fact that *Unnatural Death* "is a book about odd women . . . in the sense of their living outside of society's heterosexual patterns" (Kenney 129), its publication did not give rise to any scandal and triggered very little comment. Although female homosexuality has never been illegal in Britain, it was generally frowned upon in the interwar period, and many, like James Harris, the fifth Earl of Malmesbury, in 1921, considered it "a most disgusting and polluting subject" (Wakefield), while admitting that the practice had been increasing as a result of the war.

Three years after *Unnatural Death*, the first Harriet Vane novel, *Strong Poison*, describes a third female couple who are intelligent, pleasant and prepared to do all they can to support their friend, falsely accused of killing her lover. Then, in 1931, Sayers created two very agreeable independent women artists who live together in the picturesque Scottish community depicted in the novel *Five Red Herrings*. The private lives of these women, which remain ambiguous, are never accentuated, nor even discussed. These female characters have their role to play in the detective plot and the reader, at least when s/he reads the novel for the first time, is much more interested in their role in the investigation than in their sexual orientation, allowing Sayers to portray lifestyles which, in other forms of literature, may well have shocked the average reader at that time. However, the television adaptation of *Strong Poison* (BBC, 1987), produced when British attitudes to homosexuality had become much more relaxed, removes the ambiguity present in the written text and presents a couple of women whose clothing and gestures indicate, to an almost caricatural extent, that they are lesbians. On the other hand, the earlier BBC mini-series of *Five Red Herrings* (1975) appears to stick more closely to the author's intentions in its portrayal of the two lady artists. This chapter will examine how Sayers managed to tackle such a controversial topic without disturbing the public, to work out what she actually thought on the subject, and finally to analyse how at least one of the BBC adaptations, created half a century later, brought to the screen what Sayers had left implicit.

The Author's Point of View: a Well-Guarded Secret

If the vast majority of the critical analysis of these three novels does not mention the sexual orientation of the characters at all, a minority of critics suppose that Dorothy L. Sayers must have been opposed to homosexual relationships, sometimes because they know she was a practising Christian. For Katherine Bischoping and Riley Olstead, she presents lesbians as monsters, "exceeding the boundaries of law and nature" (2). Florence Tamagne only sees a "depraved lesbian . . . upstaged by an old maid full of Victorian prejudices" (140). Nina Auerbach, from a feminist point of

view, even if she is hostile to some aspects of Sayers's female characters and in particular to the Peter/Harriet relationship, is ready to admit that in *Unnatural Death*, "her serpentine lesbian . . ., the poisonous and negative aspect of the Amazon, murders her healthy and affirmative aspect" (60). On the other hand, Alzina Stone Dale, from a more traditional perspective, supposes that the Anglo-Catholic Sayers could not possibly approve of lesbian relationships because they are "unfruitful" and states, inaccurately, that "lesbianism . . . was not a way of life among her circle of friends" (73). Philip Scowcroft, who has analysed all the novels in detail, only sees the unhealthy lesbian couple in *Unnatural Death*, and expresses the opinion that it is "surely no accident that both women having a lesbian relationship come to sticky ends" (17). Scowcroft also explicitly denies that the women in the two other novels have any lesbian tendencies (16).

Sayers's actual opinions and experiences are certainly not so simple. In *Unnatural Death*, when discussing the young and naive Vera Findlater's love for the criminal Mary Whittaker, Miss Climpson, Wimsey's colleague in the investigation, quotes "Miss Clemence Dane's very clever book on the subject" (Sayers, *Death* 84). This novel, *Regiment of Women* (1917), the work which probably incited Radclyffe Hall to write *The Well of Loneliness* (Julien 126), describes a destructive lesbian relationship in a girls' school where the headmistress dominates and manipulates a young teacher. Sayers knew Clemence Dane personally, as they were both members of the Detection Club and were both close to Helen Simpson. However, her admiration for Clemence Dane's book could well have been the result of her own experience of the atmosphere that could sometimes be found in girls' schools at that period. According to her friend and biographer Barbara Reynolds, Sayers had known several "highly charged friendships" (*Letters 1* 15) at the Godolphin School, and the author wrote home with a certain disgust about the feelings of passionate love felt by some of her fellow students for "the wonderful Miss Westlake, the games mistress . . . everybody is so cracked on", deploring in particular the obsessional way some girls "go on about her" (21). Fortunately for Sayers and her friends, the teachers were well aware of the danger and Miss White, the French mistress, had amused Sayers by quoting lines 73 to 78 of Wordsworth's "Laodamia"[1] in a young admirer's autograph book (23).

In any case, we know that Sayers had at least one lesbian friend in her youth because she discussed her with Dr Eustace Barton in November 1928 after the publication of *Unnatural Death* and the scandal surrounding *The Well of Loneliness*. In a previous letter, Sayers had asked him several questions about homosexuality from the medical viewpoint and he had recommended she read a scientific work on the subject,

[1] Be taught, O faithful Consort, to control / Rebellious passion; for the Gods approve / The depth, and not the tumult, of the soul ;/ A fervent, not ungovernable love. / Thy transports moderate, and meekly mourn, / When I depart, for brief is my sojourn.
http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/174795.

probably Havelock Ellis's *Sexual Inversion* as the third edition came out in 1927. Sayers's reply reveals her general attitude to the subject at that period:

> I must get the book you mention about Inversion – not that I am personally much affected by the subject, but because one is so often asked questions and it is well to give a reasonable and scientific answer. People's minds get so confused on these subjects, and they will suppose that if one stands up for these unfortunate people, one is advocating all kinds of debauchery! As a matter of fact, inverts make me creep, but that is no reason why one shouldn't face the facts. Lunatics and imbeciles make me creep too, if it comes to that. Besides, the normal person often makes the invert creep; I had a friend who was rather that way – a very fine person of powerful intellect – but she won't see, speak or write to me now I am married, because marriage revolts her. (289)

Barbara Reynolds identifies the friend as Muriel Jaeger, one of Sayers's closest friends during her studies at Oxford, and the person who encouraged her to write *Whose Body?*, her first detective novel. It is interesting to note that Sayers claims that she defends homosexuals, that she uses the scientific word, invert, instead of the more widespread and pejorative word, pervert, in her letter. Equally, we can see that she describes the physical reaction of repulsion and disgust that she gives her lesbian character Mary Whittaker, who wants to vomit when Lord Peter embraces her (Sayers, *Death* 174). We may however note that the disgust Sayers herself claims to feel when faced with lesbians must have disappeared later on as, in later life, she considered the openly lesbian Norah Lambourne among her closest friends. She was also fully accepting of the lifelong partnership between two other Somerville friends, Muriel St Clair Byrne and Marjorie Barber. This conclusion may also explain the famous little ditty she liked to quote:

> As years come in and years go out
> I totter toward the tomb,
> Still caring less and less about
> Who goes to bed with whom. (B. Reynolds 363)

Unnatural Death: The Happy Couple

Sayers's notes and her first manuscript for *Unnatural Death*, currently at the Marion E. Wade Center at Wheaton College, show that her initial title was *The Singular Case of the Three Spinsters* (Kenney 134). She probably abandoned it when she realised that there were going to be more than three single women in her story. Nevertheless, the title shows that, for Sayers, the three women from the Whittaker/Dawson family, all lesbians, were at the centre of her preoccupations in this novel. The final title, *Unnatural Death*, is, according to Aoife Leahy, "humorous rather than judgemental" (91), not only because the word "death" was already at that time a euphemism for an orgasm,[2] but also because Sayers wanted to show that it was not so much these

[2] Sayers, who spoke fluent French, would have been aware of the French equivalent expression 'la petite mort', used as a euphemism for an orgasm in works of literature by such well-known

women's lives that were unnatural, but their deaths, as the lesbian niece, Mary Whittaker, murders both her lesbian aunt and her own female lover.

The only "happy couple" (Rowland 163) in the story are Clara Whittaker and Agatha Dawson, who meet at school and remain inseparable throughout their lives until Clara's death a few years before the beginning of the action. In their youth, Clara was the more eccentric of the two. During the 1870s, "she was considered very advanced and not quite nice because she refused several good offers, cut her hair SHORT (!!!) and set up in business for herself as a HORSE-BREEDER !!!" (Sayers, *Death* 84). For Ben Cobling, who worked in the stables for Clara for fifty years,

> [a] rare young lady she was in them days. Deary me. Straight as a switch, with a fine, high colour in her cheeks and shiny black hair – just like a beautiful two-year filly she was. And very sperrited. Wonnerful sperrited. There was many a gentleman as would have been glad to hitch up with her, but she was never broken to harness. Like dirt, she treated 'em. Wouldn't look at 'em, except it might be the grooms and stable hands in a matter of 'osses. (137)

In addition, instead of deploring Clara's anti-man attitude, Ben is entirely devoted to her and proud to work for her. Rather than considering Agatha and Clara's life together as in contradiction with his religious values, he believes that "[t]he Lord makes a few of 'em that way to suit 'Is own purposes, I suppose" (138). Ben's "that way", in context, clearly indicates women with a preference for their own sex.

Agatha Dawson, the "domestic partner" (85) of the couple, with her "sweet, smiling face" (133), is "deeply attached to" (84) Clara, to the extent that she does not want to "let her out of her sight" (131). From her adolescence onwards, she refuses to flirt with young men and tells her maid, who loves her very much, that "I mean to be an old maid and so does Miss Clara and we're going to live together and be ever so happy, without any stupid, tiresome gentlemen" (141). Once again, this decision is accepted by her family and friends. Mrs Piggin, the innkeeper's wife, appreciates Agatha and tells Lord Peter Wimsey: "We can't all be alike" (131). Clara and Agatha live together in harmony and, thanks to Clara's talents, make a huge fortune. What is more, their partnership can hardly be considered barren. Not only does Clara's work, breeding and training horses, give life to numerous little colts, but their friendship enables Clara's brother and Agatha's sister to meet, marry and give birth to Mary Whittaker, their mutual niece. In addition, Ben, Clara's devoted groom, marries Betty, Agatha's much-loved maid, and they live happily ever after, producing a family with many children and grandchildren. Everyone who is questioned about Clara and Agatha during the police investigation has only good things to say about them. In fact, as Leahy remarks, "the highly successful union of Agatha and Clara goes unquestioned" (94), because the readers' attention is fixed on their wicked

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authors as Verlaine and Balzac or in René Maran's award-winning 1921 novel *Batouala*. See https://www.lalanguefrancaise.com/dictionnaire/definition/petite-mort.

niece, her crimes and her unhealthy, manipulative relationship with the pretty, blonde Vera Findlater.

Unnatural Death: the Unhealthy Couple

If it is true that Sayers "never questions the validity of the nineteenth-century lesbian relationship" (Leahy 92) between Clara and Agatha, her presentation of the relationship between Mary Whittaker and Vera Findlater is very negative, even if it is clear that the reasons for her disapproval have nothing to do with the fact that the partners are both women. Mary is an attractive woman, of the same style as her Aunt Clara:

> With her handsome, strongly-marked features and quiet air of authority, she was of the type that does well in City offices. She had a pleasant and self-possessed manner, and was beautifully tailored – not mannishly, and yet with a severe fineness of outline that negatived the appeal of a beautiful figure. (Sayers, *Death* 52)

Miss Climpson, who is used to meeting all kinds of single women in the 1920s as a result of the huge number of young men killed in the First World War, notices immediately that Mary is not interested in getting married:

> With her long and melancholy experience of frustrated womanhood, observed in a dreary succession of cheap boarding-houses, Miss Climpson was able to dismiss one theory which had vaguely formed itself in her mind. This was no passionate nature, cramped by association with an old woman and eager to be free to mate before youth should depart. That look she knew very well – and she could diagnose it with dreadful accuracy at the first glance. (52)

She therefore concludes that "Mary Whittaker is not of the marrying sort" (177) and wonders at first if she is not just "a professional woman by nature" (177). However, Mary is a qualified nurse and shows no desire to return to her nursing career after her aunt's death. For Sayers, who wrote a lot about women and work, this was Mary's main problem. Unlike the older women in the novel, Mary has not "found her proper job" (Kenney 130). Life as a nurse "demands too much sympathy – and one is under the authority of the doctors" (177), but instead of turning towards the world of business, Mary decides to buy a chicken farm with Vera Findlater. For Miss Climpson, Mary "prefers to control the lives of chickens" (177) and the reader gets the impression that Vera is just another one of her chicks.

From the beginning, Vera is presented as a petite blonde who is not very bright. Her relationship with Mary is said to resemble the one between Clare and Alwynne in Clemence Dane's *Regiment of Women*, although Alwynne is a little more dynamic than Vera. Vera is "a very gushing and rather silly young woman" (84), a typical victim, "a slight, fair girl with a rather sentimental look – plump and prettyish" (224), the youngest daughter of a pleasant family, loved by all, active in the community. She clearly has "quite a pash" for Mary Whittaker, who dominates her completely. It is obvious to all the other characters that Vera is "the weaker character of the two"

(84). For Miss Climpson, Mary encourages Vera to spend time with her, not because she loves her, but because she "likes to have someone to admire her and to run her errands" (177). What is more, she prefers her admirer to be "a stupid person who will not compete with her" (177). When Mary and Vera live together for a month, we note that Vera spends her time doing unpleasant household tasks, "scrubbing floors, laying fires and things" (179), while Mary only cooks. Vera, who admits that Mary "is so much cleverer" than herself, has fairly extreme ideas about the nature of their relationship. For her: "A great friendship does make demands . . . . It has got to be just everything to one. It's wonderful the way it seems to colour all one's thoughts. Instead of being centred in oneself, one's centred in the other person. That's what Christian love means – one's ready to die for the other person" (181).

In the context of the plot, this passionate declaration provides a clue that Vera would be prepared not only to die for Mary, but also to lie for her, which she does to provide Mary with an alibi. Ironically, she will end up dying for Mary too as Mary kills her out of fear that the younger girl will inadvertently give her away. In any case, for Miss Climpson, and almost certainly for Sayers as well, "that kind of love might become idolatry if one wasn't very careful" (181), and such abject devotion takes away the victim's personal dignity. Sayers would have expected her educated readers to notice that Vera talks about giving her life for just one friend, while the Bible claims that there is no greater love than that of the person who "gives up his life for his friends" in the plural. Towards the end of the novel, Miss Climpson learns that Vera has become aware of her mistake and confessed her idolatry to her parish priest (252).

However, the first-time reader of *Unnatural Death* is unconcerned about the state of the characters' souls and is mainly interested in the murders. In this context, Mary's homosexuality is interesting merely because it will cause her to give herself away when she is pretending to be someone else and thus allow the detectives to uncover her guilt. Mary's second identity, as the glamorous Mrs Forrest, who is separated from her husband, in London, allows her to hide from the police. As she is afraid that Lord Peter has evidence against her, she tries to seduce him, to make him stay at her flat, probably with the intention of drugging and eventually killing him. Pretending to believe in the sincerity of her act, Lord Peter kisses her, and the lesbian's reaction, "that awful shrinking, that uncontrollable revulsion of the flesh against a caress that is nauseous" (174), makes him think that she has never had a sexual relationship with a man and is therefore a liar.

For Philip Scowcroft, it is very unlikely that a lesbian would even try to seduce Lord Peter (17). Julian Symons agrees and finds the situation "coarsely wrong" (114). However, Sayers may well have based Mary's reaction on her own above-mentioned reaction to lesbians at this period of her life or on Muriel Jaeger's reaction to men. In any case, Mary Whittaker, "Sayers's most consistently evil character" (Brown 58),

fits all the most blatant stereotypes of the butch, dominant lesbian. She exploits without pity those who love her and ends her criminal career by trying to murder Miss Climpson, the fulfilled single woman, happy in her work, attacking her in a way that resembles an attack by a vampire, leaving the poor detective unconscious on Mary's bed, "her grizzled hair hung in a dank rope over the pillow and blood on her head and her throat" (273), looking as if she had been bitten in the neck. After such a dramatic scene, the example of Mary's aunts and their harmonious life is liable to be forgotten.

The Ambiguous Couples: *Strong Poison* and *Five Red Herrings*

The majority of Sayers's novels, although not *Unnatural Death*, were adapted for television by the BBC: the early novels in the mid-1970s and the later novels, with Harriet Vane, in the late 1980s. Philip Scowcroft writes in 1988 about the novel *Strong Poison* that "[t]hose with suspicious minds might suspect Harriet Vane's friends[,] . . . Eiluned Price and Sylvia Marriott, of having a lesbian relationship" (16). Even if nothing in the text explicitly states that such a relationship exists, the BBC adaptation, directed by Christopher Hodgson in 1987, twenty years after the decriminalisation of male homosexuality in Britain and fifteen years after the first Gay Pride march in London, chose to show a stereotypical lesbian couple, butch and femme. Sylvia, blonde, feminine and artistic, is paired with a very masculine Eiluned, with very short hair and wearing men's clothes. This decision was based on a specific, unsubtle interpretation of the text and was typical of the later series. As William Reynolds explains: "The 1987 television adaptations . . . reshape Dorothy L. Sayers's characters into stereotypical figures" (31) and remove all ambiguity.

The novel simply says that after splitting up with Philip Boyes, Harriet Vane moves in with Sylvia Marriott while she looks for a suitable flat for herself. Although the text does not state that Eiluned also lives with Sylvia, the reader knows that Sylvia has a house and not a flat (10) and that the two women testify together at Harriet's trial about her state of mind at the time. Later, when Peter Wimsey visits Sylvia, Eiluned opens the door, answers the telephone and serves the drinks, giving the impression that, even if she does not live there, she is completely at home in her friend's house. Eiluned is also presented as being strongly feminist, even "anti-man" (74), as Sylvia explains. She "scorns everything in trousers" (64), although she herself wears them, "disapproves of conventional courtesies between the sexes" (73) and refuses Peter's help when she needs to carry a bucketful of water. As she explains her friend's attitude to men, Sylvia says ironically: "She likes to treat 'em rough" (72), an expression much more frequently used to describe very macho men's attitude to girls. In the same way, she refers to the sculptor Marjorie's male friends as her "male belongings" (72), implying that Marjorie owns them and thus reducing men to the status of objects. She refuses to lend money to men and has

many negative prejudices about them, deploring at the same time their habit of putting sugar in their coffee and their tendency to expect their wives to devote one hundred percent of their time to their interests and comfort. At the end of the novel, when Harriet is finally set free, Sylvia and Eiluned are there, together, to welcome her once again. In spite of her general hostility to men, at that moment Eiluned is finally prepared to approve of Lord Peter as a potential companion for Harriet in the future.

However, despite the "aggressive women's lib stance forty years ahead of its time" (Scowcroft 16) adopted by Eiluned, absolutely nothing may be found in the novel about her sexuality or her relationship with Sylvia. The police, and also the reader, are mainly interested in her testimony about the lives of the protagonists in the murder case. It is possible that Sylvia and Eiluned are a lesbian couple, but it is also possible that only Eiluned is a lesbian, or that neither of them is. It is up to the readers to decide for themselves. For Philip Scowcroft in the 1980s, unlike the BBC, such an idea would be "misconceived" (16), while these days critics and readers tend to assume almost automatically that they are a lesbian couple. For example, a recent blog describes Eiluned and Sylvia as "a hilarious lesbian couple" (Solinas), and Robert Kuhn MacGregor asserts that "Harriet Vane's closest friends and supporters in *Strong Poison* are a lesbian couple" (69).

It may also be noted that in the BBC adaptation, after her trial, Harriet does not return to the solidarity and support of Sylvia's home. She sends Peter away and walks off alone towards an uncertain future. This modified ending for television underlines "Harriet's independence as the governing principle behind all she does" (W. Reynolds 37), but it also creates a distance between the clearly heterosexual heroine, Harriet and, in the series, her openly lesbian friends.

Five Red Herrings is similar to *Strong Poison* in that an ambiguous pair of female artists play a role as witnesses, but they have attracted less attention from critics. Philip Scowcroft declares: "Still less do we suspect the artists Miss Selby and Miss Cochran . . . who share living accommodation in Blue Gate Close near Lord Peter Wimsey" (16) of having lesbian tendencies. Practically all critics and scholars who have written about the novel seem to be of the same opinion. This time, the 1970s BBC adaptation is less stereotypical. Miss Cochran is of medium height, slim and very feminine, while Miss Selby, who is very tall and thin, smokes cigarettes without a holder, sits with her knees apart and speaks very bluntly. However, she wears a long tweed skirt under her man's hat and masculine jacket. Unlike Eiluned Price, the BBC's Miss Selby does not immediately make viewers think that she is a lesbian, but rather invites the viewer to wonder. The ambiguity of the novel is respected.

In the text, the two ladies, both artists, "occupied adjacent cottages and were continually to be found taking tea in each other's living-rooms or bathing together on the sands at the Doon" (65). Every time Lord Peter sees them, they are together and,

while their separate little houses are side by side (although under the same roof), they appear to live more or less together. The reader learns that they also share a vegetable garden where they grow flowers and vegetables which they bring round as presents for Peter (65). In the text, unlike in the BBC adaptation, Miss Cochran is described as "round, cheerful, humorous and grey-haired" (65), while her friend is "tall, dark, rather angular, rather handsome in an uncompromising kind of way and painted rather good, strong, angular and handsome figure-studies in oils" (65). Using the adjectives tall, dark and handsome in the same sentence reminds the reader of the stereotypical ideal man, implying that Miss Selby is a masculine woman, an impression reinforced by her style as an artist. On the other hand, Miss Cochran also has some masculine characteristics. When she wanted to accentuate her argument, "she planted her plump feet squarely on the ground and leaned forward with a hand on each knee, like an argumentative workman in a tram" (68), a distinctly unfeminine posture, especially in the 1930s.

Once again, the two women's happiness comes not only from their domestic life and their friendship, but also from the fact that they have found their vocation. They are successful artists, recognised as such by the artistic community.

Like Eiluned and Sylvia in *Strong Poison*, Miss Selby and Miss Cochran only play a small part in the criminal investigation. They are not suspects and the reader is mainly interested in their testimony, which enables Lord Peter to accuse or clear one or other of the suspected men. Their lifestyle and their sexual preferences are irrelevant and do not concern anyone, either within the novel or among its readers. Everyone is much too preoccupied with finding out which of the six male artists has murdered the obnoxious Sandy Campbell.

The Secret of Unorthodox Women?

Dorothy L. Sayers's detective novels are concerned predominantly with crimes, investigations, guilt and innocence. The main characters, and thus the principal focus of attention, are the detectives. However, the author did try "to broaden and deepen the moral and ethical background of the form" (Panek 75). Among the issues discussed in Sayers's fiction, we could mention the role of women in post-war Britain. Sayers is often mentioned as one of those who used the detective genre to "show women coping with masculine definitions of femininity" (Smith 80). The three novels examined in this study show how the author wished to illustrate, very discreetly, other possible lifestyles for women than those generally approved of in the society she lived in. The eight happy single women she portrays, Clara Whittaker, Agatha Dawson and Miss Climpson in *Unnatural Death*, Sylvia Marriott, Eiluned Price, Marjorie Phelps and again Miss Climpson in *Strong Poison*, as well as Miss Selby and Miss Cochran in *Five Red Herrings* show very clearly, without ever stating explicitly, that marriage to a man is not the only road to happiness for a woman, and that

it is entirely possible for women to live either on their own or together with another woman and be fully integrated into British society and fulfilled in their professional lives. Agatha Dawson's decision to take on a domestic role is presented as positively as Miss Selby's artistic vocation or Clara Whittaker's managing her stables, because it is a deliberate choice. Clara and Agatha are clearly lesbians, Marjorie is clearly not, but all the other women's sexual interests remain ambiguous – not because Sayers does not approve of lesbians, but because she wanted to fight against the idea that single women, whether they had a sex life or not, were "superfluous women" (Kenney 128), a frequently used term at the time which insultingly implied that once every man who wanted to marry had found a wife, society did not need any more adult women. Each of Sayers's happy spinsters has found a lifestyle that suits her and respects others with, as the author explains in her well-known article "Are Women Human?", "interesting occupation, reasonable freedom for their pleasures and a sufficient emotional outlet" (44). The second half of that sentence, "what form the occupation, the pleasures and the emotion may take, depends entirely on the individual", shows that the author considered that women ought to be free to manage their own lives as they saw fit, without interference from her or from anyone else.

For this reason, the unhealthy couple formed by Mary Whittaker and Vera Findlater is clearly not condemned because of the women's sexual preferences, but because of the women's behaviour. Mary Whittaker does not engage in a relationship with another woman out of "sheer exuberance of animal spirits" (Sayers, "Deadly Sins" 86) which, for Sayers, would be easily understood, but out of a desire to gain more money and to dominate another person. Vera submits herself completely to a stronger personality and, despite her good moral and religious education, deliberately lies to the police.

However, the lifestyles and sexual preferences, or lack of them, of all the single women are swallowed up in the fascinating and suspenseful detective plots. The reader actively seeks the clues needed to solve the mystery and accepts the setting and the characters without questioning them. At the time of writing *Unnatural Death*, Sayers was already aware of the need for "cunning craftmanship" (*Letters 1* 241), trying, with some trepidation, to discreetly combine "the appeal to the emotions with the appeal to the intellect" (241), but her controversial themes remain hidden in her plots, where the principal secret is the answer to that famous question: "Whodunnit?"

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