A "Beastly, Blood-Sucking Woman": Invocations of a Gothic Monster in Dorothy L. Sayers' *Unnatural Death* (1927)

Katherine Bischoping and Riley Olstead

A Mystery of Four Sapphists

In 1927, Dorothy L. Sayers published her third mystery novel, *Unnatural Death*,[1] in an England reeling from the uncertainties and instabilities of a new modernity. A war of unprecedented brutality had demoralised Europe. In England, there had been six changes of Prime Minister within a decade, as well as an economic slump.[2] Definitions of femininity and of women's social roles were in flux. During World War I, women had gained jobs that had hitherto been held only by men; afterward, women's job options again narrowed. England's two million "surplus women" were newly identified as a social problem, suffragettes were demonstrating, Freud's works were in the bookshops, and hems were on the rise.

The New Woman was also on the rise, and Sayers' character, Mary Whittaker, appears to be a prototype. Possessing "handsome, strongly-marked features and [a] quiet air of authority", she "was of the type that 'does well' in City offices."[3] *Unnatural Death*'s plot centres on various detectives' efforts to establish that Mary had murdered her wealthy and ailing great-aunt Agatha Dawson – a crime that appeared to lack both means and motive. Agatha's demise was imminent and Mary appeared to be her lone relative and obvious heir. The detectives eventually establish that Mary had committed a murder that left no trace by injecting Agatha with a syringe full of air, stopping her heart. In so doing, Mary forestalled the possibility of being disinherited by an obscure amendment that was soon to be made to England's *Inheritance Act.* As she endeavours to cover her tracks, Mary attempts at least five further murders, with would-be victims that include Lord Peter Wimsey, the novel's lead detective; Miss Climpson, one of Wimsey's assistants; and Mr. Trigg, the lawyer whom Mary had consulted about the *Act.* Mary succeeds twice in her attempts, most cruelly in killing

[1] Dorothy L. Sayers, *Unnatural Death* (1927; London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2003).
[2] Robert Kuhn McGregor and Ethan Lewis, *Conundrums for the Long Week-End* (Kent: The Kent State University Press, 2000).
[3] Sayers, *Unnatural*, p.49.

Vera Findlater, the bobbed-haired contemporary who had loved her. Following her eventual arrest, Mary commits suicide.

Even though *Unnatural Death* never depicts women in erotic physical contact, Mary, the lovelorn Vera, Agatha Dawson, and a fourth character – Clara Whittaker, a long-deceased Victorian eccentric who had been Agatha's devoted life partner – have generally been read as lesbians.[4] Scholars have long wondered what to make of this, specifically, what attitude toward lesbianism Sayers intended to convey and what this attitude indicated about her own sexual identity. On one hand, *Unnatural Death* can be understood to follow trends in the literature contemporary with Sayers' career, which generally cast the lesbian as a morally disordered figure. One example is D.H. Lawrence's "The Fox", a 1923 novella in which a vulnerable woman is torn between her growing affection for a man and her existing domestic partnership with a cold and withholding woman.[5] Another example is Clemence Dane's 1917 *The Regiment of Women*, a boarding-school novel in which a new teacher and a fragile student are preyed upon by a lesbian teacher, who comes to a repentant end.[6] In a passage of *Unnatural Death*, it may well be *The Regiment of Women* that Miss Climpson references when she writes to Peter Wimsey, with frenetic emphases, that Vera's "pash" for Mary is "rather *unhealthy* – you may remember Miss Clemence Dane's *very clever book* on the subject?"[7] Some analysts of Sayers' work regard Miss Climpson's views as the most telling of any expressed in *Unnatural Death*. Brunsdale even identifies Miss Climpson's voice with that of Sayers, claiming that "[i]n many important respects such as her High Anglican persuasion, Miss Climpson was Dorothy as she might have been had Mac [Sayers' husband] not come along", particularly her faith that "it is more natural and proper for opposite sexes to attract and cleave to one another."[8]

However, despite Vera's piteous state and Mary's ruthlessness, *Unnatural Death*'s lesbians are not all sad or bad. Substantial passages of *Unnatural Death* show trustworthy

[4] For example: H.E.D. "Review of *The Dawson Pedigree*", *New York Evening Post* (3 March 1928), p.13, cited in Ruth Tanis Youngberg, *Dorothy L. Sayers: A Reference Guide* (Boston: G.K. Hall and Co, 1982), p.4; Dawson Gaillard, *Dorothy L. Sayers* (New York: Frederick L. Ungar 1981); Valerie Pitt, "Dorothy Sayers: The Predicaments of Women", *Literature and History* 14, no. 2 (1988), p.176; Kathleen Gregory Klein, "Dorothy Sayers", in E.F. Bargainnier (ed.), *10 Women of Mystery* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1981).
[5] D.H. Lawrence, *The Fox* (London: Martin Secker, 1923).
[6] Clemence Dane, *Regiment of Women* (London: Heinemann, 1917).
[7] Sayers, *Unnatural,* p.84.
[8] Mitzi Brunsdale, *Dorothy L. Sayers: Solving the Mystery of Wickedness* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1990), p.97. In a similar vein, Durkin agrees with Miss Climpson's view that Vera's love is idolatrous, but dismisses other characters' accounts of Agatha and Clara's harmonious relation as "uninteresting". (Mary Brian Durkin, *Dorothy L. Sayers* (Boston: Twayne, 1980), p.43.)

characters speaking warmly of Clara Whittaker ("'a woman of wonderful judgement'") and Agatha Dawson ("'a very kind, nice lady'"), and touchingly recalling how Agatha was "'that fond of Miss Whittaker and not wanting to let her out of her sight.'"[9] Some scholars have wondered whether Sayers herself might have been a lesbian. In an early biography entitled *Such a Strange Lady*, Janet Hitchman made this a focal question, prefacing her discussion of Sayers' adolescence with, "Many girls, normal girls not in the least inclined to lesbianism, go through a period of hating themselves for being women, and adopt boyish habits to gain attention."[10] Subsequent biographers have made much of even the least cue to Sayers' gendered self-presentation, such as her childhood preference for a dilapidated toy monkey rather than dolls.[11] Today, many of these discussions read as somewhat confused, in that they tend to conflate gender performance with sexual orientation. Still, the consensus has been that Sayers was heterosexual.[12]

We maintain that the strongest indicator of Sayers' beliefs about lesbianism is to be found in a largely overlooked letter that she wrote in late November 1928, in which she asks a medical colleague for advice about "inverts". Although one reviewer carped about Sayers' four Sapphist characters,[13] *Unnatural Death* had received largely positive reviews when it appeared. But in November 1928 came the obscenity trial of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*,[14] a novel with an unrepentant lesbian protagonist who relied on scientific analyses of inversion to account for her deviance.[15] Sayers wrote:

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[9] Sayers, *Unnatural*, pp.136-37.

[10] Janet Hitchman, *Such a Strange Lady: An Introduction to Dorothy L. Sayers (1893-1957)* (London: New English Library, 1975), p.34.

[11] James Brabazon, *Dorothy L. Sayers: A Biography* (New York: Scribners, 1981), p.45.

[12] Throughout her biography of Sayers, Reynolds offers by far the most expansive discussion of Sayers' gender self-presentation, sexuality, and relationships. (Barbara Reynolds, *Dorothy L. Sayers: Her Life and Soul* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997).) Heilbrun's commentary on Brabazon's biography makes a point that can be generalised to many of the works on Sayers: that they excessively focus on the extent of her conformity to "the erotic plot – the script already written by men for women by which women wait for maturity, marriage, motherhood, and, above all, for the chance to find their place in the destiny of a man." (Carolyn Heilbrun, "Dorothy L. Sayers: Biography Between the Lines" in Alzina Stone Dale (ed.), *Dorothy L. Sayers: The Centenary Celebration* (London: Walker and Co., 1993), p.2.)

[13] H.E.D., p.13. Eight reviews of *Unnatural Death* were available to us.

[14] Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness* (Paris: Pegasus, 1928); for the trial judgment, see Sir Chartres Biron, "Judgment", in *Palatable Poison: Critical Perspectives on The Well of Loneliness*, Laura Doan and Jay Prosser (eds.) (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), pp.39-49.

[15] *The Well of Loneliness* contains an introduction by Havelock Ellis (see Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex, Volume II: Sexual Inversion*, 3rd ed., (1927), Project Gutenberg 2004, http://www.gutenberg.org/files/13611/13611-h/13611-h.htm) and refers to the work of Krafft-Ebing (see Richard Freiherr von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886; Burbank: Bloat Books, 1999). Yiannitsaros indicates that Hall's literary work came under more scrutiny than had middlebrow works of the time. See Chris Yiannitsaros, "'I'm Scared to Death She'll Kill Me': *Devoted Ladies*, Feminine Monstrosity, and the (Lesbian) Gothic Romance", *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies* 8 (June 2010), http://irishgothichorrorjournal.homestead.com/DevotedLadies.html.

> [O]ne is so often asked questions, and it is as well to be able 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 […] [T]he normal person often makes the invert creep; I had a friend who was rather that way […] but she won't see, speak, or write to me now I'm married, because marriage revolts her. So there you are.[16]

Although Sayers' references to "creep", "debauchery", and misfortune could hardly be called complimentary, she seems briskly even-handed in suggesting that the sensation of "creep" is experienced just as much by "inverts" as "the normal person". Her position here presages the liberal individualism that she would express in later essays.[17]

Female Sexuality and Social Crisis

Her decisiveness counters McGregor and Lewis' claim that "[t]here seems some ambivalence in Sayers's underlying message [in *Unnatural Death*], as if she cannot make up her own mind on the subject."[18] In our reading, the novel's ambivalence toward lesbianism arises, not because Sayers herself is undecided, but because she has chosen to offer a deliberately polyvocal text whose characters express an array of discourses available in her time.[19]

These discourses were largely negative, reflecting the aforementioned medical and popular literatures that cast the lesbian as, at best, a deviant, and, at worst, a sower of moral disorder. Even though *Unnatural Death* swims against the tide of opinion in depicting Agatha Dawson and Clara Whittaker as beloved and admired, it still depicts their rejection of male partners as a niggling problem, a deviation for which others in their circles offer accounts. For example, a retired stablehand who had worked for Clara mulls over his employer's disinterest in men, likening her to a "'terrier-bitch'" that would not mate with any dog, for "'The Lord makes a few of them that way to suit 'Is own purposes, I suppose. There ain't no

[16] Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Letters of Dorothy Sayers 1899-1936: The Making of a Detective Novelist*, Barbara Reynolds (ed.) (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), p.289.
[17] In "Are Women Human?", for example, Sayers presents a fundamentally liberal individualist position, with feminism as its corollary. She asserts that women seek "to be human individuals, however peculiar and unexpected. It is no good saying: 'You are a little girl and therefore you ought to like dolls'; if the answer is, 'But I don't,' there is no more to be said." See Dorothy L. Sayers, *Unpopular Opinions* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1946), p.112.
[18] McGregor and Lewis, p.69.
[19] Unsurprisingly, later in life Sayers would become a playwright. See Crystal Downing, "Minding the Performance: Sayers's Literary Criticism" in Lawrence J. Trudeau (ed.), *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (Detroit: Gale Cengage Learning, 2010), pp.102-15.

arguing with females.'"[20] In sum, the lesbian was a conventional character who could be expected to embody various threats of deviance, disruption, and social upheaval, reflecting a more general use, both past and present, of women and female sexuality as surfaces onto which modern anxieties about social change are projected.

Pitt, Kenney, Morris, and McGregor and Lewis[21] have already taken up *Unnatural Death* as an examination of how a "shaky world"[22] was altering women's options and statuses. Our analysis has the opposite causal direction. We explore how *Unnatural Death* uses female sexuality to express social crisis, as well as its concomitant modes of truth and power. Our method is to examine Sayers' use of Gothic horror and Sensation-fiction devices from a perspective informed by Foucault's conception of the "abnormal individual", a monstrous figure who crops up "only when confusion comes up against, or overturns, or disturbs civil, canon, or religious law."[23]

We first establish that Sayers had an extensive knowledge of earlier genres on which she could draw to heighten readers' sense of relish and suspense. Second, we show how, in key chapters of *Unnatural Death*, Mary Whittaker masquerades in many guises as she attacks both law and "natural" notions of gender and sexuality, represented by the persons of Mr. Trigg and Peter Wimsey, respectively. In Foucault's terms, she thus monstrously commits "a double transgression, of law and nature."[24] Third, we consider how the Gothic foundering of Agatha Dawson's and Clara Whittaker's lineages, which had culminated in Mary, expresses anxieties surrounding cultural transmission, both in terms of the biological reproduction of society and of the normative passage of property through patriarchal lines, as mediated by inheritance law. Finally, we establish that the character of Mary is a palimpsest of J. Sheridan Le Fanu's 1872 vampire creation, Carmilla[25] – an imagining of legal and medical disorder that relies upon popular memory of the vampire's carnal monstrosity. Yet, we also show how the rendering of Mary parts ways with Gothic depictions, indicating that a new arrangement of knowledge has emerged in which the essence of the monster is no longer to be criminal as much as it is to be an irregular character who violates social norms.

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[20] Sayers, *Unnatural,* p.142.
[21] McGregor and Lewis; Pitt; Virginia B. Morris, "Arsenic and Blue Lace: Sayers' Criminal Women", *Modern Fiction Studies* 29, no. 3; Catherine Kenney, *The Remarkable Case of Dorothy L. Sayers* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1990).
[22] Kenney, p.129.
[23] Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France*, Valerio Marchetti and Antonella Salomoni (eds.) (New York: Picador, 1999), p.63.
[24] Andrew Sharpe, "Structured like a Monster: Understanding Human Difference through a Legal Category", *Law and Critique* 18, no. 2 (2007), p.7.
[25] Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, *In a Glass Darkly* (1872; London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1897).

Dorothy L. Sayers as a Scholar of Horror and Sensation

The troubled Interwar period became known as a "Golden Age of Detective Fiction", for readers were escaping in droves into mysteries' increasingly complicated, emotionally detached puzzle plots.[26] When *Unnatural Death* was underway, Sayers described mystery writing as an "exercise of cunning craftsmanship […] rather like laying a mosaic."[27] But, Oxford-educated, she was beginning to aspire to legitimise the genre as more than simply "popular" and superficial. In 1930, she would found the Detection Club, alongside greats such as Agatha Christie and G.K. Chesterton, and would quickly become known as an analyst of the genre, one to be quoted in *The New York Times* and *The Saturday Review of Literature*.[28] In the introduction to her 1928 edited collection, *Great Short Stories of Detection, Mystery and Horror*, Sayers maintained that readers' increasing demand for tightly plotted puzzles had been causing mystery authors to limit their emotional palettes and characterisations, for "[a] too violent emotion flung into the glittering mechanism of the detective-story jars the movement by disturbing the delicate balance."[29] She suggested that, as the mystery genre developed away from elaborate plotting, it might come to take up moral themes – a possibility that, by the 1930s, Sayers was beginning to implement in her own work.[30]

Sayers also lavished praise on the past century's horror fiction, in which "the reader's blood […] is curdled by some horrible and apparently inexplicable murder or portent."[31] Among the writers whom Sayers particularly lauded are the English Wilkie Collins (1824-1889), Sensation-fiction author of *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*,[32] and the Irish Gothic horror author J. Sheridan Le Fanu (1814-1873). These two subgenres created similar emotional and physical sensations in their readers through spine-tingling suspense and

[26] See Gaillard, pp.5-10, for a further discussion of the Golden Age, as well as McGregor and Lewis, pp.2-6, on the strains of the Interwar period.
[27] Sayers, *Letters*, p.241.
[28] Katharine Fullerton Gerould, "Murder for Pastime", *The Saturday Review of Literature* (3 August 1935), pp.3-4; p.14; Herbert William Horwill, "News and Views of Literary London", *The New York Times* (17 July 1932), p.BR8; Herbert William Horwill, "News and Views of Literary London", *The New York Times* (25 February 1934), p.BR10.
[29] Dorothy L. Sayers, "Introduction", in Dorothy L. Sayers (ed.), *Great Short Stories of Detection, Mystery and Horror Part 1: Detection and Mystery* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1928), p.38.
[30] Ibid, p.44. Also see Durkin, who offers an extended exploration of how Sayers' detective fiction increasingly developed literary themes (Durkin) and Gaillard, whose work maps Sayers' progress toward unifying themes and plots (Gaillard).
[31] Sayers, "Introduction", p.10.
[32] Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White* (1860; London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1910); Wilkie Collins, *The Moonstone* (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1868).

deliciously shocking revelations. They differed chiefly in that Gothic horror embraces settings of melancholy decay and may involve the supernatural, while Sensation fiction sets its lurid secrets – such as "bigamy, illegitimacy, drug abuse, murder, inheritance scandals, and adultery"[33] – squarely within middle-class or aristocratic domesticity.[34] Sayers had begun a biography of Collins in the same notebook as her early version of *Unnatural Death*[35] and particularly admired his plotting and characterisation.[36] However, it was Le Fanu whom she thought possessed "the gift of investing the most mechanical of plots with an atmosphere of almost unbearable horror",[37] and Le Fanu whom her mystery-novelist character, Harriet Vane, would later claim to study as a pretext for investigating a crisis in Oxford.[38] Harriet calls Le Fanu "the master of the uncanny whose mastery comes by nature."[39] Sayers herself was praised for creating a "grandly grewsome"[40] tale in *Unnatural Death*, with elements of horror on which many commentators have remarked,[41] and sensational use of imagery that is "bold, melodramatic, often indelicate."[42]

Mary Whittaker, a Masquerading Monster

Prime examples of how Sayers emulated these earlier genres in *Unnatural Death* are to be found in two of the chapters in which Mary Whittaker assumes different guises in pursuit of her ends. Mary does so with an uncanny deftness reminiscent of Le Fanu's vampire Carmilla, who not only deceives her victims by taking on the anagrammatic names Millarca and Mircalla, but also participates in a magnificent and fantastical masquerade ball.[43] As Conrad-O'Briain points out, Sayers did not use intertextuality arbitrarily or solely as homage.[44] The masquerade is a Gothic trope that suggests that, in carnivalesque spirit, the boundaries of the

[33] Richard Fantina and Kimberly Harrison, "Introduction", in Kimberly Harrison and Richard Fantina (eds.), *Victorian Sensations: Essays on a Scandalous Genre* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006), p.ix.
[34] Tamara S. Wagner, "Sensationalizing Victorian Suburbia: Wilkie Collins's *Basil*" in Harrison and Fantina (eds.), *Victorian Sensations: Essays on a Scandalous Genre*, p.202.
[35] Kenney, p.135.
[36] Sayers, "Introduction", p.25.
[37] Sayers, "Introduction", p.22.
[38] Dorothy L. Sayers, *Gaudy Night* (1935; London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2003).
[39] Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, p.227.
[40] Will Cuppy, "Review of *The Dawson Pedigree*", *New York Herald Tribune Books* (5 January 1928), p.12, cited in Ruth Tanis Youngberg, *Dorothy L. Sayers: A Reference Guide* (Boston: G.K. Hall and Co, 1982), p.4.
[41] For instance: Klein; Kenney; and Helen Conrad-O'Briain, "Providence and Intertextuality: LeFanu, M.R. James, and Dorothy Sayers' *The Nine Tailors*", *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies* 9 (February 2011), http://irishgothichorrorjournal.homestead.com/HConrad-OBriain.html.
[42] Brabazon, p.128.
[43] Le Fanu, pp.437-42; p.403; p.444.
[44] Conrad-O'Briain, n.p.

self can blur, social norms can be transgressed, and ordinary reality itself can come to seem uncertain.[45]

The first of the chapters we examine recounts the experiences of Mr. Trigg, the London lawyer whom Mary consults.[46] His earliest encounter with Mary is in her guise as "Miss Grant", a young woman whose summery, embroidered dress sounds rather different from the "severe fineness of outline"[47] of the clothing that Mary wears in her home village. When he next sees Mary in a London restaurant, she feigns not to recognise him – in other words, donning a new mask that casts doubt on Mr. Trigg's definition of reality. Soon after, adopting a servant-like "'strong Cockney accent,'"[48] Mary telephones Mr. Trigg late at night and lures him to a house on Hampstead Heath, where he is to assist in making an emergency will. Mr. Trigg arrives to find the house dark and empty, but for Mary, unrecognisably wrapped in white bandages and going by the name of "Mrs. Mead". While gasping out a tale of abuse at the hands of her husband, she drugs Mr. Trigg, intent on murdering him (he narrowly escapes). This final encounter evokes the opening of Wilkie Collins' Sensation-fiction masterpiece, *The Woman in White*.[49] Its male protagonist walks near midnight between Hampstead and London, coming upon a forlorn, white-clad woman who turns out to have escaped from a lunatic asylum, having been wrongfully committed by her fiancé. Thus Mary adroitly deploys devices of both Gothic horror and Sensation fiction, in tandem with the stereotype of woman as helpless victim, in order to become author of her own fate.

In an even more remarkable chapter of her masquerade, Mary is planning to drug and then kill *Unnatural Death*'s principal detective, Peter Wimsey. At the chapter's outset, Wimsey had already met Mary in her guise of "Mrs. Forrest", a heavily powdered, perfumed, and painted Londoner whom he suspects to be connected to the case. Now, Mrs. Forrest has invited him to pay an unchaperoned evening call. He finds her dressed for seduction in "an exotic smoking-suit of embroidered tissue, like a young prince out of the Arabian Nights."[50] It is a development that is Sensation-fictional in its adulterous tone, as well as richly and decadently Gothic in its female character's appropriation of both masculine garb and

[45] Terry Castle, *The Female Thermometer: Eighteenth-Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). Gaillard, whose interpretation of *Unnatural Death* does not note its intertextual connection to "Carmilla", instead considers Mary Whittaker's and other characters' guises to convey the evils of the new urban artifice (see Gaillard, pp.33-41).
[46] Sayers, *Unnatural,* pp.205-17.
[47] Sayers, *Unnatural*, p.49.
[48] Sayers, *Unnatural*, p.209.
[49] Collins, *Woman,* pp.13-21.
[50] Sayers, *Unnatural,* p.179.

masculine sexual aggression,[51] the latter amplified by its reliance on the Orientalist coding of an Arabian prince as a splendorous, sensual, sexually-untrammelled figure.[52] Then too, her choice of costume implies that Wimsey should be tantalised by transvestism, with its suggestion of homoeroticism.

For all that, Wimsey is depicted as observing that Mrs. Forrest's attempt conflicts with her demeanour, which he considers "spinsterish" and lacking in "It" – that is, sex appeal. Her actions seem to him to be carried out "clumsily, stupidly, as though in spite of herself."[53] Perplexed and curious, he ultimately kisses Mrs. Forrest, "with a practiced exaggeration of passion."[54] "He knew then", Sayers proceeds, "No one who has ever encountered it can ever again mistake that awful shrinking, that uncontrollable revulsion of the flesh against a caress that is nauseous."[55] The chapter therefore insinuates that Mrs. Forrest is a lesbian.[56] Further, in its climactic lines, Sayers has not simply used a sensational, visceral vocabulary that resonates with that of her letter about how "[t]he normal person often can make inverts creep."[57] She has also subtly shifted the chapter's narrative perspective from the "he" of Wimsey to that of "no one who has ever encountered it", intimating that readers themselves may have revolted others with their caresses.[58] It is arguably *Unnatural Death*'s most subversive passage.

In her attempted sexual manipulation of Peter Wimsey, Mary's masquerade undermines the epistemologies by which sexed and gendered nature had been understood, introducing disorganisation and uncertainty. In Foucauldian terms, it is Mary's joint transgression of law and nature – represented by the attacks on Mr. Trigg and Wimsey, respectively – that makes of her a monster. Prescott and Giorgio have uncovered how Bram Stoker's *Dracula*[59] narrates the politically charged climate of late-Victorian England and the social significance of its changing gender relations through the female characters. In their analysis, although Mina Harker ultimately upholds Victorian norms of femininity, she also

[51] For a related discussion, see William D. Brewer, "Transgendering in William Lewis's *The Monk*", *Gothic Studies* 6, no. 2 (2004).
[52] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978), p.118.
[53] Sayers, *Unnatural*, pp.181-82.
[54] Sayers, *Unnatural*, p.183.
[55] Ibid.
[56] To be sure, the passage allows for the possibility that it was Wimsey, rather than men in general, whom Mary found revolting. However, as Simonds tartly points out, Sayers had characterised Wimsey as so satisfactory a lover of women that she intended Mary's revulsion to be "clear evidence that she was no normal woman". See Katherine Simonds, "Bloodhound into Bridegroom", *Saturday Review of Literature* (3 September 1938), p.14.
[57] Sayers, *Letters*, p.289.
[58] Sayers' critical work demonstrates her interest in the nuances of narrative point of view. See Sayers, "Introduction", pp.34-37.
[59] Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (1897; Mineola: Dover Publications, 2000).

importantly expresses attraction to the "shadowly and only dimly understood threat of lesbian desire"[60] that is represented by her friend (and possible alter ego), Lucy Westenra, who has newly become a vampire. Sayers likewise imports and translates the Gothic to produce a monster befitting the shifting gender relations and radical possibilities being raised by New Women, who were often stereotyped as lesbians.[61]

The Pedigree of a Monster

While the New Woman was associated with a variety of social ills, it was her apparent rejection of traditional motherhood that captured the attention of eugenicists at the time, many of whom argued that New Women threatened the well-being of the British Empire.[62] Without either deploring or celebrating these anxieties, Sayers picks up on them. She employs the foundering of a familial line, a device beloved of Gothic literature and Sensation fiction alike (including *The Castle of Otranto*, "The Fall of the House of Usher", and *Lady Audley's Secret*[63]) to augment the sense of impending doom.[64] By choosing this device, Sayers interestingly locates Mary's deviance and her transgression of the boundaries of law and nature not so much in New Womanhood, as in a pattern that has been forming for generations.

Unnatural Death depicts a once-numerous family so reduced in number by Gothic-style catastrophe that Mary Whittaker's first victim, Agatha Dawson, is the last who can legitimately lay claim to the Dawson name. Agatha's sister had married a James Whittaker, twin siblings had died in infancy, and a fourth sibling had committed murder-suicide upon hearing of his son's death in war. Dawsons of recent generations had a penchant for relationships both literally and figuratively outlandish. Agatha's father had married a Frenchwoman and had been involved in "'wicked'" speculation,[65] while an uncle had fallen into unrequited love with one of the Frenchwoman's sisters, who was "'walled up alive in

[60] Charles Prescott and Grace Giorgio, "Vampiric Affinities: Mina Harker and the Paradox of Femininity in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*", *Victorian Literature and Culture* 33 (2005), p.506.
[61] See Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Sally Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle* (London: Manchester University Press, 1997), p.124.
[62] Ledger, p.18.
[63] Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto* (London: Thomas Lowndes, 1764); Edgar Allan Poe, *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Writings* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1986); Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, Natalie M. Houston (ed.) (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2003).
[64] Conrad-O'Briain similarly examines how Sayers drew on J. Sheridan Le Fanu and Montague Rhodes James in *The Nine Tailors* (Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Nine Tailors: Changes Rung on an Old Theme in Two Short Touches and Two Full Peals* (London: Gollancz, 1934)), to powerfully wed Christian beliefs in Divine Providence to the Gothic fascination with the supernatural. (Conrad-O'Briain, n.p.)
[65] Sayers, *Unnatural*, p.44.

one of them dreadful Romish convents,'"[66] and had then himself "'"gone over" to the Scarlet Woman'"[67] by becoming a monk. Encoded in these choices are the Gothic notions of Catholicism as irrational and perverse, and of France as the enemy of the British Empire.[68] An even more transgressive choice was made by a ne'er-do-well great-uncle who had sailed for the West Indies where he was succeeded by an illegitimate grandson of mixed race.[69] Although Sayers criticised eugenics,[70] the Wimsey family history that she created in a playful correspondence, as well as the biography of Peter Wimsey that she appended to *Unnatural Death*, speak freely of "stock", "types" and "breeding out",[71] with temperament casually deemed an inheritable trait. Thus, by *Unnatural Death*'s logic, that Agatha is the last of the Dawson name is not happenstance, but indicative of the family's lack of temperamental fitness. In the United States, the novel was known as *The Dawson Pedigree* – a title that neatly sums up the centrality of this pedigree to the plot.

Like others in her family, Agatha takes an unconventional path. She forms a domestic partnership with James Whittaker's sister, Clara, described in Miss Climpson's excited correspondence with Peter Wimsey as a woman who "'[i]n her day 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!!!'"[72] Although the couple are devoted, that neither woman marries and bears a child lays ground for suspicion and dispute.

Notions of family pedigree, which imply that deviance and abnormality are genetically transmitted, have their counterpart in the legal problematic of how culture – and specifically property – is transmitted. As one of Sayers' chapter epigraphs puts it, "The power of perpetuating our property in our families is one of the most valuable and interesting circumstances belonging to it."[73] Because the Whittakers disapprove of Clara's horse-breeding venture, an unsatisfactory replacement for human reproduction, Clara leaves her fortune to Agatha. Enmity ensues. According to Miss Climpson, Clara's brother has

[66] Sayers, *Unnatural*, p.144.
[67] Sayers, *Unnatural*, p.148.
[68] Darryl Jones, *Horror: A Thematic History in Fiction and Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).
[69] Anita Raghunath, "Race", in William Hughes, David Punter, and Andrew Smith (eds.), *The Encyclopedia of the Gothic* (New York: Blackwell Publishing, 2013).
[70] Sayers, *Letters*, p.73.
[71] For example, Sayers' biography of Wimsey contains the sentence, "The only sensible thing Peter's father ever did was to ally his exhausted stock with the vigorous French-English strain of the Delagardies." (Sayers, *Unnatural*, p.300.) Scott-Giles quotes correspondence with Sayers in which she described two "Wimsey types", one of them physically strong, stolid, and literal-minded, and the other more fragile, brilliant, and imaginative; the term "breeding out" also appears. (Charles Wilfred Scott-Giles, *The Wimsey Family: A Fragmentary History Compiled from Correspondence with Dorothy L. Sayers* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1977), p.18; p.20.)
[72] Sayers, *Unnatural*, p.85.
[73] Sayers, *Unnatural*, p.140.

"'inherited the *bad, old-fashioned* idea that women *ought not* to be their own mistresses, or make money for themselves, or do what they like with their own!'"[74] Later, Agatha does not trouble to make a will, because she assumes that her proper heir is Mary, her great-niece. Then Agatha's lawyer visits her sickbed to point out that, should Agatha die intestate, the upcoming amendments to the *Inheritance Act* would mean that her estate might well be assigned to the Duchy of Lancaster. Although the lawyer beseeches her to make a will, she refuses, persistently asking, "'Why should the Duchy of Lancaster have any right to [my property]? […] I don't even know the Duke of Lancaster.'"[75]

In sum, tragic flaws within the Dawson and Whittaker families compound to set the stage for Mary Whittaker, grandniece of both Agatha and Clara via the marriage of their siblings, to forestall the prospect of being disinherited – that is, to kill Agatha off. Both Agatha and Clara have resisted patriarchal legal institutions and their norms: Agatha, by wilfully (if understandably) resisting the intrusion of her lawyer, and Clara, by her breach of patriarchal norms regarding women's roles and control of property. Both have also resisted "natural" notions of the function of women and the family: Agatha, through the Dawsons' temperamental proclivity for exoticised liaisons that fail to produce legitimate heirs, and Clara, through an adamant disinterest in men. Mary's murder of Agatha is the monstrous culmination of a pedigree characterised by transgressions of both law and nature.

From Vampire to Abnormal Human

Although Sayers enhances the sense of doom by giving Mary a Gothically troubled pedigree that spans five generations, it is in crafting Mary as a palimpsest of Le Fanu's vampire, Carmilla, that Sayers most effectively contributes to *Unnatural Death*'s horror. The parallels between the two characters are several. While Mary Whittaker causes the demise of the Dawson lineage, Carmilla attacks the last of her own noble line, the Karnsteins, whose remote château lies in ruins. While Mary is capable of a "vicious fury" likened to that of a "cornered cat",[76] Carmilla can alter her form to become a "sooty-black animal that resembled a monstrous cat."[77] Thus, both are monsters who transgress the boundaries of legal and natural life. Both are also murderers who can arouse an eroticised homosexuality in their victims. While Mary is censured as "'a beastly, blood-sucking woman'" for preying on and

[74] Sayers, *Unnatural*, p.86.
[75] Sayers, *Unnatural*, p.196.
[76] Sayers, *Unnatural*, p.77.
[77] Le Fanu, p.411.

charming the naïve Vera Findlater, Carmilla is a vampire whose caresses can induce a "strange tumultuous excitement."[78] These similarities ground both characters in a structure of monstrosity in which sexual, gendered and moral categories are disrupted.

These points are reinforced when we consider how Carmilla and Mary violate law by bringing about "unnatural deaths". Mary injects her victims with a prosthetic – an air-filled syringe – after winning their trust by presenting herself in various idealised feminine guises. Meanwhile, Carmilla uses her own needle-like teeth: as one of her victims reports, "suddenly I felt a stinging pain as if two large needles darted, an inch or two apart, deep into my breast."[79] The materiality of Carmilla's body, and particularly of her erotic body, is central to the ways in which she attacks and kills. Her victim's account of an attack culminates in what sounds very like an orgasm:

> Sometimes there came a sensation as if a hand was drawn softly along my cheek and neck. Sometimes it was as if warm lips kissed me, and longer and longer and more lovingly as they reached my throat, but there the caress fixed itself. My heart beat faster, my breathing rose and fell rapidly and full drawn; a sobbing, that rose into a sense of strangulation, supervened, and turned into a dreadful convulsion.[80]

Both monsters murder by displacing the patriarchy, in that penetration is occasioned via phallic objects wielded by women. Like vampires, women who encourage lesbian attraction infect and convert others to their perceived monstrosity, and, in so doing, transgressively usurp men and their penetrative capacities. They radically eliminate difference and reproduce their own kind.[81] From this perspective, Mary's real crime is to be a "'rapacious female'",[82] who displaces "normals",[83] the "normal" order of things, including the patriarchy – or, as Foucault would say, the juridical order, which is confounded and perplexed by disorders of nature.[84]

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[78] Sayers, *Unnatural*, p.270; Le Fanu, pp.390-91.
[79] Le Fanu, p.411.
[80] Le Fanu., pp.417-18.
[81] See Douglas W. Allen, *Sexuality in Victorian Fiction* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993); Nancy Welter, "Women Alone: Le Fanu's 'Carmilla' and Rossetti's 'Goblin Market'", in Harrison and Fantina (eds.), *Victorian Sensations: Essays on a Scandalous Genre*, pp.138-48.
[82] Sayers, *Unnatural,* p.160.
[83] Sayers, *Letters,* p.289.
[84] Foucault, p.64.

Yet, the differences between Mary Whittaker and Carmilla are also important to note, for each age recreates the monster to its own purposes.[85] Literary analyses have observed that Gothic monstrosity became progressively interiorised in the course of its twentieth-century iterations.[86] Foucauldian research has similarly observed the shift from "monstrosity written on the surface of irregular bodies" to "the abnormal individual's monstrosity [which] is of the invisible kind."[87] Foreshadowing both, Sayers herself had remarked that, "[i]n modern stories of the weird, we may trace the same themes [as the vampire and other supernatural figures], rationalised or semi-rationalised, to suit our altered conception of the relation between flesh and spirit."[88] Throughout Le Fanu's novella, Carmilla's monstrosity is literal, manifest and – despite the guises she assumes – discoverable through her material body. Sayers instead made Mary's abnormality metaphoric, calling into question the authenticity of a selfhood perpetually shrouded in artifice, performance, and masquerade. Mary is a decidedly modern monster, a Foucauldian "abnormal individual", whose deviance signals a cultural shift away from a concern with irregular bodies towards a problematisation of deviant identities.

This shift reflects changes in cultural economies of knowledge, particularly the ascent of scientific discourse, which had begun in the sixteenth century and which had been undermining, yet not entirely supplanting, the superstitions historically associated with the monster.[89] Alongside earlier ways of thinking ran new scientific taxonomies, such as those classifying sexual inverts, bisexuals, transvestites, lesbians who reluctantly adopted "womanliness as masquerade",[90] and other sexual metamorphotics.[91] These taxonomies sought to institutionalise, transform and naturalise the monster as the "abnormal human".[92] The concurrent discourses are manifest in Sayers' polyvocal handling of lesbianism, especially in the different ways in which her characters speak of the two lesbian relationships in their midst. Medical terms are never used to discuss Clara Whittaker and Agatha Dawson's bond, which would have been formed in an era when women's intimacy did not attract

[85] Dani Cavallaro, *The Gothic Vision: Three Centuries of Horror, Terror and Fear* (London: Continuum, 2002), p.179.
[86] For examples, see: Jones; Valérie de Courville-Nicol, *Le soupçon gothique* (Laval: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2004).
[87] Sharpe, p.388.
[88] Sayers, "Introduction", p.45.
[89] Sharpe, p.395.
[90] Joan Rivière, "Womanliness as Masquerade", *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 10 (1929).
[91] Ellis; Krafft-Ebing; Magnus Hirschfeld, "Transvestites: The Erotic Drive to Cross-Dress" in *Sexology Uncensored: The Documents of Sexological Science,* Lucy Bland and Laura Doan (eds.) (1910; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p.104.
[92] Foucault, p.133.

psychiatric scrutiny and classification[93] and when women's sexual desire went unrecognised.[94] However, the detectives of *Unnatural Death* diagnose the young Vera's affections for Mary Whittaker as a lingering immaturity, marked by the persistence of a phase of schoolgirlish *Schwärmerei*,[95] an excessive and not entirely wholesome sentimentality. Like the vulnerable women in Lawrence's "The Fox" and Dane's *The Regiment of Women*, Vera is positioned as a character who could be cured by marriage to a man.

Significantly, even those lesbians depicted in a more negative manner in Sayers' work are not Gothic monsters, whose fanged, grotesque, or eerie bodies and vicious actions decisively indicate their deviance. Instead, the modern monstrousness that Sayers attributes to the lesbian is more accurately a metaphoric expression of her abnormality, marginality, and ambiguity in relation to the emerging discourses of law and medicine. It is the social effect of these characters' reproductive *inaction* that speaks to their monstrousness. Thus, in contrast to one of Clara Whittaker's contemporaries, who proudly reports having had five children, and seventeen grandchildren and great-grandchildren,[96] Clara herself was voluntarily childless. Her involvement in the feminine pursuit of "breeding" consisted of orchestrating the breeding of horses. Vera Findlater appears made for motherhood, as she is first depicted at a sewing party where her hands are "filled with baby-linen."[97] Yet, in a plan similar to that of the women in D.H. Lawrence's "The Fox", Vera aspires to take up chicken farming with Mary Whittaker. She rejects suggestions about "fruitful affection" with "the right man" as old-fashioned talk that "makes one feel dreadful – like a prize cow."[98] In other words, while both Clara and Vera are proximate to normative expectations of women to reproduce, they displace those expectations onto horses and chickens.

Conclusion

We have demonstrated that Sayers invokes the Gothic – and, to a certain extent, Sensation fiction – in *Unnatural Death,* giving her novel touches of delicious horror, suspense, and shock that elevate it beyond the ordinary puzzle-plot mystery of her day. But Sayers achieves more than this. In Mary Whittaker she creates a monster whose systematic transgressions of law and nature come with a five-generation pedigree and hearken even further back to the

[93] Smith-Rosenberg, pp.58-76.
[94] Prescott and Giorgio, pp.492-98.
[95] Sayers, *Unnatural*, p.185.
[96] Sayers, *Unnatural*, p.147.
[97] Sayers, *Unnatural*, p.50.
[98] Sayers, *Unnatural*, p.191.

transgressions of Le Fanu's Carmilla. As revenants, vampires are powerful symbols of the impossibility of closure. Even after Carmilla has been staked, with her head struck off, her corpse burned, and her ashes consigned to a river, she continues to haunt her victim, who fancies that she can yet hear Carmilla's light footsteps at her door.[99] Similarly, even after Mary Whittaker has committed suicide in jail and had her strangled body inspected by the detectives, her uncanny influence lingers: Peter Wimsey, emerging from the jail, is ready to mistake an eclipse for the end of the world.[100]

As shown, Mary's monstrosity differs from that of Carmilla in key ways. The shift in the monster's position reflects what Cavallaro terms "pure culture": an expression of what is culturally significant, meaningful, and feared at any given time and place.[101] As "pure culture", the figure of the monster crystallises, and thus makes more visible, the weighty social and political concerns of the period. Alongside Gothic elements, Sayers takes into account significant social anxieties about the changing roles of women in modern life and their implications for the patriarchy. She also incorporates the modern medical discourses that interiorise monstrosity, reshaping it into the deviant identity of Foucault's abnormal individual. Sayers' effect here is to compound the lack of closure already associated with the vampire by delineating a character-type who is unknowable, shifting, ever masquerading, and persistently destabilising. That modern monstrosity cannot readily "be detected" suggests that other categories of knowledge could also become uncertain and contingent, and that an end to the world as knowable is nigh.

[99] Le Fanu, p.471.
[100] Sayers, *Unnatural,* p.299.
[101] Cavallaro; Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1996); see also Edward Ingebretsen, *At Stake: Monsters and the Rhetoric of Fear in Public Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).