Suspicion Study Guide

Suspicion by Dorothy L. Sayers

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Introduction

In mystery fiction, Dorothy L. Sayers believed that the writer must play fair with the reader. The solution to the problem must be fathomable to the thoughtful reader. Sayers firmly adhered to this standard both in her novels and her short stories. The detective short story, however, presented challenges, most notably the brevity of the form, which required the writer to propose an interesting complication, an engaging detective, and a believable resolution in a very limited span of pages. Despite these restrictions, Sayers published forty-three short stories between 1925 and 1939.

Sayers cautioned that the detective story must put "all its eggs in one basket; it can turn one trick and one trick only; its detective-interest cannot involve a long investigation—it must be summed up in a single surprise." In her story "Suspicion," Sayers admirably achieves this goal. "Suspicion" was one of the stories in 1939's *In the Teeth of the Evidence* that featured neither of Sayers' stock detectives, Lord Peter Wimsey or Montague Egg. Instead, the main character is the hapless Mr. Mummery, who is convinced that the new cook is out to poison him and his wife. The story seems to be heading toward a solution so obvious that it becomes somewhat unbelievable. Sayers, however, has her "trick" lying in wait, one that turns the entire story around. Because Sayers has so compellingly drawn the reader into Mr. Mummery's web of confusion and suspicion, most readers will likely feel the effect of the dawning of the truth as keenly as Mr. Mummery does.

Author Biography

Dorothy Sayers was born in Oxford, England, in 1893. Until the age of fifteen, she was tutored at home, and she had a mastery of Latin, French, and German by the time she left home to attend Godolphin School. She was ill at ease among her classmates, but she did participate in debating and in dramatic presentations. She also discovered an interest in and talent for writing while at Godolphin. Her poetry and nonfiction were published in the school magazine.

Sayers won a scholarship to Somerville College, one of the two women's colleges at Oxford University. She earned both bachelor's and master's degrees in 1920, when she graduated among the first group of women to be granted Oxford degrees.

After leaving Oxford, Sayers worked as a teacher and a reader for a publishing house. She also published her own poetry with the house. She worked at a school in Normandy, France, for a year. In 1922, Sayers went to work for a London advertising firm as a copywriter, a job that she held for nine years.

Also that year, Sayers began to write her first detective novel, introducing the recurring character Lord Peter Wimsey. *Whose Body?* was published in 1923 and was followed by several other novels.

In 1928, along with the writer Anthony Berkeley, Sayers founded the London Detection Club, of which she later became president. Members of the club participated in the writing of communal novels, such as *The Floating Admiral*.

By 1931, the financial success of her detective novels allowed her to quit her job and become a fulltime writer. She continued work on the Wimsey novels and assorted short stories, edited several mystery anthologies, and introduced a new detective, Montague Egg. She also began experimenting with other types of fiction, most notably the novel of manners—such as the 1935 murderless mystery *Gaudy Night*—and drama.

In 1937, Sayers turned to religious verse drama, which marked the virtual end of her career as a mystery writer. She published one more mystery work, 1939's collection of short stories *In the Teeth of the Evidence*, and several of these stories had previously appeared in magazines. "Suspicion" was among the stories included in *In the Teeth of the Evidence*. Her writing until her death consisted of plays and essays, as well as translations of Dante's poetry. She also gave numerous talks.

Sayers remained well known until her death of a stroke in 1957. She was awarded an honorary doctorate of letters from the University of Durham, and she became a churchwarden at St. Thomas' church in London, where one of her religious dramas was produced.

Plot Summary

"Suspicion" opens with Mr. Mummery, who, on his way to work, increasingly feels a stomachache. He tries to ignore it and continues to browse the paper, reading about, among other items, a cook who poisoned a nearby family. At the office, he works with his partner, Mr. Brookes. At one point, Mr. Brookes asks if Mr. Mummery's wife knows of a good cook. Mr. Mummery says no, in fact, they have just found a new cook themselves. The conversation turns to the arsenic poisoning case, for the still-at-large woman, Mrs. Andrews, may be seeking a situation as a cook.

By the end of the day, Mr. Mummery feels better. When he gets home, Mrs. Sutton, the new cook, tells him that his wife Ethel is not feeling well herself. Mr. Mummery visits her in the bedroom and decides that he will send her supper up. If she doesn't take care of herself, he says, she will not be allowed to go to the Drama Club meetings, and the Welbecks had been asking for her there.

Over the next few days, Mr. Mummery feels better himself, which he ascribes to his home cure of drinking orange juice. One night, however, he gets so violently ill that Ethel calls the doctor, who says his stomach problem is a result of combining orange juice and pork. He is not able to leave his bed for several days. On his first day up again, he must attend to the household accounts. After speaking with his wife, they decide to keep on Mrs. Sutton, who has only been with them a month and came without references.

The next day, Mr. Mummery feels fine. He decides to do some gardening. In the potting shed he finds a tin of weed-killer and notes with some excitement that the brand he uses is the same one that Mrs. Andrews used. He also notices that the stopper has been put in quite loosely. When he goes back inside, he finds that Mrs. Welbeck and her son, young Welbeck, have come for a visit. He takes Mrs. Welbeck to the garden to get some cuttings, leaving his wife alone with Welbeck. In the kitchen, where he goes to get newspaper to wrap up the cuttings, he makes another surprising discovery: every mention or picture of Mrs. Andrews and the poisoning case has been cut out of the paper. Mr. Mummery begins to review the past month. He realizes that he has been feeling poorly since Mrs. Sutton came to work for them and that her appearance coincides with the disappearance of Mrs. Andrews. He suspects that Mrs. Sutton may be Mrs. Andrews, but he determines that he must sort this out on his own, without scaring Ethel.

Over the next few days, nothing out of the ordinary occurs, and Mr. Mummery begins to feel foolish for his suspicions. On Thursday evening, he goes out with some men after work, and when he gets home, he finds some cocoa Mrs. Sutton has prepared waiting for him. He takes a sip but the cocoa tastes strange. He pours the cocoa into a medicine bottle. Then he goes out to the potting shed and pulls out the tin of weed-killer. He finds that the stopper is loose again, but he clearly remembers that he had tightened it the last time

The next morning he brings the cocoa to a chemist friend and explains what he wants it analyzed for and why. At the end of the day, he picks up the sample. The chemist tells him that the cocoa had been laced with a strong dose of arsenic, a main ingredient in the weed-killer. Mr. Mummery rushes to catch the train home, afraid for Ethel, and asks the chemist to call the police. Approaching his house, Mr. Mummery fears he is too late, for he sees a car parked by the door and thinks it must be a doctor. He is quite relieved when a man comes out of the house, followed by Ethel, and drives off. He makes himself calm down and goes in the house, where Ethel is surprised to see him. He asks about the visitor and learns it was young Welbeck come to discuss the Drama Society.

Mr. Mummery tells Ethel he has something unpleasant to tell her. He is about to begin when Mrs. Sutton comes into the room. Among the other news she has to report is that Mrs. Andrews, the poisoner, has been caught. Mr. Mummery feels immediate relief. It had all been a mistake! But then he thinks about the cocoa. If Mrs. Sutton had not poisoned it, who had? He looks at Ethel and notes "in her eyes . . . something he had never seen before . . ."

Summary

"Suspicion" is a short story by Dorothy L. Sayers in which a man named Mr. Mummery suspects that the household cook has plans to poison both his wife and himself. He is surprised to find at the end that his suspicion has been inaccurately placed.

Mr. Mummery fights back a nagging sense of indigestion as he makes his way to work. It is not his breakfast that is the offensive element, as it was his usual meal and the one that the health experts recommend. Their new cook, Mrs. Sutton, who had been with his wife Ethel and himself just a short while, knows how to prepare his meals perfectly.

Mr. Mummery is grateful that they found Mrs. Sutton after the abrupt departure of their last cook because Ethel experienced a nervous breakdown last summer and could not stand any more disruption to their lives. On the morning train, Mr. Mummery takes a digestive tablet and begins to read the morning paper, where there is another article about a cook who is believed to have poisoned a family not far away.

By the time Mr. Mummery reaches his office, he is fighting back a severe case of nausea. Still, he manages to discuss business with his partner, Mr. Brookes. During the course of the morning, Mr. Brookes asks Mr. Mummery if Ethel knows of any good cooks because the daughter of a family friend is to be married soon and requires some domestic help. Unfortunately, Mr. Mummery can offer no solutions since he and Ethel had a difficult time securing Mrs. Sutton.

The conversation turns to the local poisoning story. The woman, named Mrs. Andrews, is said to be looking for another position as a cook in another household. Mr. Mummery looks at the photo of Mrs. Andrews in the local paper and thinks that she does not look like a murderer at all, but Mr. Brooks declares that the woman has a bad looking mouth, which is the indication of a bad character.

Mr. Mummery's digestive distress eases as the day progresses, and by the time he reaches home, he finds Mrs. Sutton looking at the newspaper in the kitchen. Ethel has gone to bed with another headache, and Mr. Mummery visits her room and suggests that she have supper brought up to her tonight. Mr. Mummery reminds Ethel that she needs to improve so that she can attend the Drama Club meetings of which she is so fond.

For the next few days, Mr. Mummery experiences no more digestive distress, and he attributes his improved condition to the consumption of a glass of orange juice every day. Unfortunately, he takes a turn for the worse a few nights later, and the doctor is summoned. The physician attributes the stomach pain to Mr. Mummery's combining orange juice and pork in the same day.

After a few days of bed rest, Mr. Mummery is able to arise and attend to some household business that includes paying Mrs. Sutton, who has arrived at the end of her month's trial. After discussing the situation with Ethel, Mr. Mummery decides that Mrs.

Sutton may stay in their employ despite the fact that she arrived with no references and that the Mummerys were too desperate to challenge her background.

The next day, Mr. Mummery is feeling so much better that he decides to do a little gardening. While looking through his gardening tools, Mr. Mummery finds a bottle of arsenic used for killing weeds. He is perplexed that the stopper is loose and the contents are half-gone, when he knows that he secured the bottle the last time he used it and that it had been almost full.

Mr. Mummery returns to the house and is annoyed to find that Ethel's friend, Mrs. Welbeck, is visiting with her son. Mrs. Welbeck is intently talking about the arsenic poisoning deaths in the area, and Mr. Mummery, realizing that the topic is upsetting his wife, whisks Mrs. Welbeck out to the garden so that she may choose some cuttings to take home.

Mr. Mummery retrieves some newspapers from the kitchen so that he can wrap the cuttings for Mrs. Welbeck, and the two re-enter the sitting room just as Mrs. Welbeck's son kisses Ethel's hand goodbye. Mr. Mummery then returns to the kitchen to inspect the newspapers that he saw a few moments ago, and he confirms that each article and picture related to the arsenic murders has been clipped from the pages.

Mr. Mummery's mind races as he processes the events that have occurred since Mrs. Sutton's arrival at the residence. It seems to him that he began to feel sick at the same time that she came. Her arrival also coincided with the news about the arsenic murders. Mr. Mummery cannot exactly recall the image of Mrs. Andrews from the newspaper but recalls Mr. Brooks saying that she had a motherly face.

Mr. Mummery begins to realize that Mrs. Sutton may very well be Mrs. Andrews. He must gather some information before he can proceed any further, and he must be careful not to alarm Ethel. The next day's newspaper contains no news about the capture of Mrs. Andrews, as Mr. Mummery had hoped it would. This further validates in his mind that his concerns about Mrs. Sutton are well founded. The next few days pass uneventfully, but when Mr. Mummery returns late from a bachelor party one evening, he finds a cup of cocoa that Mrs. Sutton has left out for him.

Sipping the cocoa, Mr. Mummery immediately senses a metallic taste and is able to spit out the drink without ingesting any. Mr. Mummery then pours the balance of the cocoa drink into a jar, places it in his pocket and makes a new cup of cocoa to leave in place of the old one. Mr. Mummery tiptoes out to the gardening shed and discovers that the stopper on the bottle of arsenic is once again loosened.

Mr. Mummery returns to the dark house, and Ethel inquires about whether or not Mr. Mummery has drunk the cocoa that Mrs. Sutton left out. He replies that he is not thirsty. Determined to take the cocoa to the chemist tomorrow, Mr. Mummery holds his wife close to him, vowing to keep her safe and to eliminate the threat of Mrs. Sutton as soon as possible.

The next morning, Mr. Mummery takes the bottle of cocoa to his friend Mr. Dimthorpe, who is a chemist and will be able to analyze the sample for arsenic. Mr. Mummery passes the day in a distracted mode, anxious to find out if the cocoa contains any arsenic. At the end of the day, Mr. Dimthorpe confirms that Mr. Mummery's suspicions were true. The cocoa contains arsenic. Mr. Dimthorpe offers to call the police, as Mr. Mummery rushes to catch the train home in the hopes that he is not too late to rescue Ethel from what could be a deadly situation.

As Mr. Mummery approaches the house, he thinks that he is too late, since he sees a strange car outside. He breathes a sigh of relief when he sees a man emerge from the house followed by Ethel. Ethel is surprised to see her husband, who has arrived home earlier than usual. She tells him that her visitor was Mrs. Welbeck's son, who came to discuss the Drama Club.

Just as Mr. Mummery is preparing to tell Ethel about finding the arsenic in the cocoa, Mrs. Sutton enters the room and announces that the police have caught Mrs. Andrews. Relief washes over Mr. Mummery that his suspicions about Mrs. Sutton were incorrect, but then he remembers the arsenic-laced cocoa. Mr. Mummery glances toward his wife and sees something in her eyes that he has never seen there before.

Analysis

The story is told from the third person point of view, which means that the reader is provided with the unfolding story along with the protagonist, in this case, Mr. Mummery. This perspective also allows the reader to understand the main character's thoughts and feelings throughout the piece.

The author uses the technique of foreshadowing at the beginning of the story when Mr. Brookes comments on Ethel's stellar performance with the young Mr. Welbeck in a performance of a play entitled *Romance* last year. By the end of the story, it becomes clear that Ethel and Welbeck have been having an affair, which is the impetus for Ethel's attempts to poison her husband.

A strong element of irony exists in the story with the initial positioning of Ethel as weakened from a nervous breakdown, when in actuality she is the strong one plotting her husband's demise. The most important technique that the author uses is the element of surprise, which comes in the very last sentence of the story. "He glanced around at his wife, and in her eyes he saw something that he had never seen before..." It is not until this moment that Mr. Mummery realizes the huge betrayal by his wife and that she was the one who tried to poison him. The reader is left to wonder how Mr. Mummery will react to this realization, and this is a very effective technique of a mystery or detective story, for which the author is well known.

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Characters

Ethel Mummery

Ethel Mummery is Mr. Mummery's wife. She is younger than her husband, and her actions make her seem childlike and incapable of taking care of herself. In reality, she is manipulative and deceitful, both in her affair with Welbeck and in poisoning her husband. Mr. Mummery, however, treats her as a delicate, fragile creature who must be protected. After having a nervous breakdown the previous summer, she spends most of her time lying down and relaxing. The year before, however, she had participated in the Drama Society, and she intends to do so again. Like her husband, Ethel has not been feeling well lately, but her illness manifests itself through headaches and her general feeling of tiredness. The only time she demonstrates any energy or excitement is with Welbeck.

Harold Mummery

Mr. Mummery is the protagonist of the story. According to the narrator, he has a rather uninteresting life. His hobbies include gardening. He also enjoys reading about the murders committed by Mrs. Andrews, because they give him "an agreeable thrill of vicarious adventure." Mr. Mummery is devoted to his wife, but he treats her less like a wife than a child. When in her presence, he refers to himself in the third person, and he handles all the household affairs. Mr. Mummery's rather dim intellect is challenged when he comes to believe that Mrs. Sutton is poisoning him and his wife. He examines the clues, but instead of informing the police, he decides to investigate the matter himself. He actually takes no action until the cocoa is heavily dosed with arsenic. Although Mr. Mummery eventually "solves" the crime, he does so more through fortunate occurrence than by clever detection.

Mrs. Sutton

Mrs. Sutton is the Mummerys' new cook. She has only been working for them for a month. She came to them without references, for she had previously been caring for her elderly mother. Mr. Mummery comes to suspect that she is poisoning him and his wife.

Welbeck

Welbeck is the son of the Mummerys' neighbor, Mrs. Welbeck. He participates in the Drama Society along with Ethel. He and Ethel have been having an affair.

Themes

Appearances and Reality

The difference between appearances and reality is an important theme in "Suspicion." Mr. Mummery and his wife both have not been feeling well lately. He has been suffering from stomach problems, and she is often tired and sluggish. When Mr. Mummery finds certain suspicious clues, he begins to wonder if their new cook is poisoning them. He finds a can of weed-killer with arsenic in the garage. It is the exact same brand that another cook, Mrs. Andrews, used to poison a family, and it has been opened though he knows he left it capped. He realizes that every article and picture referring to the Andrews poisoning case has been cut out of the newspaper. In addition to the circumstantial evidence against the Mummerys' new cook, Mrs. Sutton, the sequence of events seems to suggest her guilt. The police have been looking for Mrs. Andrews for about a month, and that is how long Mrs. Sutton has been with the Mummerys. Mrs. Sutton also appears to be acting suspicious and guilty.

Mr. Mummery is on the verge of breaking the frightening news to his wife when Mrs. Sutton announces that Mrs. Andrews has been captured. Mr. Mummery wonders who could have put arsenic in the cocoa. Despite the evidence, which now clearly points to his wife, Mr. Mummery does not suspect her until he turns and sees in Ethel's eyes "something that he had never seen before." This sentence underscores the truth that there is a difference between what something looks like and what it really *is*.

The trick ending also immediately reveals that Ethel Mummery has been having an affair with Welbeck. They have been concealing their affair under the guise of friendship, which is yet another example of the confusion, deliberate or otherwise, of appearances and reality.

Deception and Betrayal

By the end of the story, Mr. Mummery is on the brink of the realization that he has been deceived and betrayed. He dearly loves his wife. All this time, however, she has been carrying on an affair with Welbeck. The clues to her affair were available to Mr. Mummery, but he never noticed them. For instance, when the Welbecks come to visit he sees "a relieved glance pass between Ethel and young Welbeck." He ascribes this glance to their mutual understanding of his contrivance to get Mrs. Welbeck to stop talking about the murders in front of Ethel. But in truth, Ethel and Welbeck are pleased because he is going outside with Mrs. Welbeck and leaving them alone. Similarly, when he returns from the garden with Mrs. Welbeck, he finds his wife and young Welbeck holding hands, but he simply makes the assumption that "their approach to the house had evidently been from the sitting-room window" and that Welbeck and his wife are "saying goodbye." More importantly, Ethel has been deceiving her husband in her plot to kill him, presumably to free herself to be with Welbeck.

Crime

Mrs. Andrews' crime, which has no actual relation to the events at the Mummery household, nevertheless is very important. The story suggests that reading about the crime may have given Ethel an idea of how she might kill her husband, while throwing suspicion on another party, Mrs. Sutton. There is a strong indication that the poisoning began only with the arrival of Mrs. Sutton, which coincided with the news about the Andrews case.

Mr. Mummery's reaction to the crime is also telling. He gets a "thrill" from reading about the Andrews murders, and he worries excessively about discussion of the crimes upsetting his wife. Yet when he suspects that Mrs. Andrews may be in their home masquerading as Mrs. Sutton, he takes no direct action, even when he fears Mrs. Sutton may murder Ethel. He chooses instead to watch carefully how the food is handled, all the while acknowledging that there was little use "supervising breakfast, when he had to be out of the house every day between half-past nine and six." Even though he admits he is "chary of investigating" his suspicions, he does so, but not very thoroughly. Instead of reporting his suspicions to the police, he "must cope with this monstrous suspicion on his own. . . . And he must be sure of his ground. To dismiss the only decent cook they ever had out of sheer unfounded panic would be wanton cruelty."

Style

Narration and Point of View

The narration of the story is straightforward. It is told chronologically and easily moves in sequence from one event to the next. It does not rely on flashbacks or any other literary devices to add necessary details to the story or to flesh out the characters.

The story is told from a third-person point of view. This means that readers see and hear only what one character sees and hears, and that readers are also privy to that character's thoughts, in this case Mr. Mummery. Because the point of view is so strongly with Mr. Mummery, most readers will only *think* what he thinks. Although an inquisitive reader may question whether Mrs. Sutton is the poisoner— where then is the mystery? —Mr. Mummery's absolute trust in his wife is so complete that many will not even question Ethel's role. Thus, the point of view works extremely well with the story, for it hinges on the reader's—and Mr. Mummery's— utter surprise at the discovery of Ethel's treachery.

Irony

Irony is the use of words to express something other than or, especially, the opposite of the literal meaning. The story contains many instances of irony, which the reader may only fully appreciate *after* the ending is revealed. For instance, the year before, Ethel and Welbeck starred in a Drama Society production of a play called *Romance*. In another example of irony, after Mr. Mummery comes to suspect Mrs. Sutton, he makes it a habit to waken early in the morning and go "prowling about the kitchen," which "made Ethel nervous, but Mrs. Sutton offered no remark." Despite their reactions, Mr. Mummery believes that Mrs. Sutton is watching "tolerantly," even with some "amusement." Even Ethel's seemingly innocent statement, "Did Mrs. Sutton leave something hot for you? She said she would," takes on ironic significance: she is directing him to the cocoa that has been laced with an extremely heavy does of arsenic.

Mr. Mummery's interpretation of his wife's reaction to talk of the Andrews' murders is another example of irony. He describes her as "quite white and tremulous," which he ascribes to the violence of the topic, when really her loss of composure is caused by her own guilt in poisoning her husband. Later that afternoon, she becomes almost hysterical when Mr. Mummery brings up the topic again.

The final instance of irony in the story occurs when Mr. Mummery arrives home after learning conclusively that his cocoa has been poisoned with arsenic. He sees a car by his house and assumes that it belongs to a doctor. "It had happened already. . . . Fool, murderer that he was to have left things so late." The irony here stems from the fact that Mr. Mummery calls himself a murderer, believing that his handling of the poisoning has led to the death of his wife, while in reality his wife is attempting to murder him.

Conclusion

The surprise ending is crucial to the story. It comes at the extreme end of the story, with the story turning drastically and quickly. Mr. Mummery's suspicions transfer to his wife in one brief, openended sentence: "He glanced around at his wife, and in her eyes he saw something that he had never seen before. . ." All the clues point to Mrs. Sutton as the poisoner, so a reader, in the act of reading, may very well question where the actual mystery is. The clues, observed through Mr. Mummery, all point to Mrs. Sutton as the guilty party, but they all could just as accurately point to Ethel. Because the plot could just as easily lead in one direction as the other, the ending of the story is a surprise and not a trick ending.

Historical Context

The British Economy

The Great Depression devastated the United Kingdom along with the rest of the industrialized world. In the 1930s, Britain's traditional industrial base began to decline. Coal, shipping, and cotton production were all down significantly from pre- World War I levels. Throughout the inter-war period, unemployment never fell below one million, or one worker in ten. In 1932, unemployment hit a record high of 20 percent of the working population. In that year, more than one third of all miners were unemployed, as were 43 percent of cotton workers, 48 percent of iron and steel workers, and 62 percent of shipyard workers.

Overall, Britain's economy was in a state of change. Despite the mass unemployment, those who had work saw their wages and salaries rise in proportion to the rise in the national product, which averaged 2.1 percent each year between 1920 and 1938. Gross domestic product rose by 2.3 percent between 1924 and 1937, which was a more rapid growth than that of the Victorian era. Also, new economic sectors were emerging, such as electric and electronics manufacturing, the motor vehicles industry, and the production of household equipment. Although England's industrial production in 1938 only accounted for 9 percent of the world's total, that same year, England's share of world trade was 19 percent.

Britain and the World

Great Britain joined the League of Nations after World War I. This organization had set up a system of collective security to stop international aggression. In the 1930s, however, the League of Nations took virtually no action to do so. Japan seized Manchuria, a province in China, in 1931. Within a year, Japan proclaimed Manchuria to be independent and installed a Japanese-controlled government. China appealed to the League of Nations for help, but no member was willing to commit its military forces.

In 1935, Italian forces invaded Ethiopia, Africa's only independent kingdom. Ethiopia, also a member of the League, turned to the organization for help, but the League voted only to condemn the invasion and to impose trade penalties against Italy. By May 1936, Ethiopia had fallen, and its ruler had fled to Britain. In June, Haile Selassie met with the League's Council to reconsider its policy. Despite his pleas, Britain and France, the leading powers, declined to use force in Ethiopia.

Britain and World War II

By the early 1930s, Adolf Hitler ruled Germany with dictatorial powers. In 1936, while Britain and France were occupied with the Ethiopian crisis, Hitler violated the Treaty of Versailles and moved German troops back into the Rhineland. In 1938, Germany

annexed Austria and demanded that Czechoslovakia turn over the Sudetenland, a region in the northwest part of the country. Germany's demand threatened war, and the British prime minister, along with the leader of France, met with Hitler and agreed to the annexation of the Sudetenland in return for Hitler's promise to claim no more territory in Europe. In March 1939, however, Germany reneged, taking over most of the rest of Czechoslovakia and then attacking Poland in September. Britain and France demanded an immediate German withdrawal. When Hitler ignored these demands, Britain and France jointly declared war on Germany, beginning World War II.

Critical Overview

Sayers and other members of the Detection Club vowed "to keep the detective story up to the highest standard that its nature permits, and to free it from the bad legacy of sensationalism, clap-trap and jargon with which it was unhappily burdened in the past." As such, Sayers vowed that the solution to her mysteries would always rely on solid clues and deductive reasoning. In essence, the writer must play fair with the reader. She maintained this literary integrity in both her detective novels and her short stories.

Sayers began to write detective fiction in the 1920s, both novels and short stories. At the time, short stories were the more popular length for the genre. Between 1925 and 1939, Sayers published forty-three short stories, about half of which featured her star detective Lord Peter Wimsey. Another ten featured Montague Egg, and the twelve remaining stories were dubbed by Dawson Gaillard, in his study *Dorothy L. Sayers*, "miscellaneous pieces." Of those, Gaillard writes, "few can prop erly be called detection stories." "Suspicion" is among these twelve.

In the Teeth of the Evidence, which included "Suspicion," was Sayers' last work of mystery fiction published during her lifetime, in 1939. (One short story was published posthumously.) Reviewers responses to the collection were mixed. Ralph Partridge, writing in the *New Statesman and Nation*, found Sayers to be "supremely competent in everything she touches" and called the stories "lively" and "well-written." Isaac Anderson, a reviewer for the *New York Times*, called the stories "truly remarkable," believing they would "add much to the already great reputation of Dorothy Sayers." Many reviewers also commented on the eagerness that Sayers' fans had for more work by the author. The reviewer for the *Times Literary Supplement* only wanted Sayers' stories to be longer. "The publication of Miss Dorothy Sayers of a collection of her short stories causes one to reflect that many of the best detective stories in the English language are not full-length novels at all. . . . The only complaint to make. . . . is that her tales are a little too short. Nevertheless—and for this we must be deeply grateful— Miss Sayers does make her characters live."

Some reviewers, however, expressed disappointment. The *Saturday Review of Literature* found that the stories, while "clever enough," were "somehow empty." The reviewer for the *Springfield Republican* felt that the stories did not demonstrate enough of Sayers' "intelligent perception" and "vivacity of observation," and that in *In the Teeth of the Evidence* Sayers was "more nearly dependent on mere story telling." Rupert Hart-Davis, writing in *The Spectator*, was extremely negative. He found almost all of the new stories to be "unsatisfying."

Ten of the seventeen stories in the collection fall into the category of Sayers' "miscellaneous pieces." They do not feature either of Sayers' wellestablished detectives, or, in fact, any detective at all. The reviewer for the *Times Literary Supplement* found that "some of the best stories [of the collection] belong to [this] group, notably 'Suspicion.'" Will Cuppy of the *New York Herald Tribune Books* also mentioned "Suspicion" for "high honors."

In speaking of these "miscellaneous" stories, Hart-Davis noted that they "have little twists in their tails, but one can almost always anticipate them." Indeed, enjoyment of "Suspicion" depends upon the surprise ending. As Sayers wrote, short detective fiction must put "all its eggs in one basket; it can turn one trick and one trick only; its detective-interest cannot involve a long investigation— it must be summed up in a single surprise." Several critics, however, did find the ending of "Suspicion" a surprise. Among them is Mary Brian Durkin, who wrote in her book-length study, *Dorothy L. Sayers*, that although Mr. Mummery's "fears deepen into terror, until the last sentence, readers will not guess his horrifying discovery."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, she discusses how the clues and details in "Suspicion" can point to Ethel Mummery's guilt as well as Mrs. Sutton's.

In her introduction to the *The Floating Admiral*, which Dorothy L. Sayers and other members of the Detection Club wrote collaboratively, Sayers set out the rules that the mystery writers were bound to follow:

Put briefly, it amounts to this: that the author pledges himself to play the game with the public . . . His detectives must detect by their wits, without the help of accident or coincidence; he must not invent impossible death-rays and poisons to produce solutions which no living person could expect; he must write as good English as he can.

Sayers abided by these rules in her own detective fiction as well. Her short story "*Suspicion,*" collected in the last volume of mystery writing the author ever published, shows her own dedication to playing the game and playing it fairly.

In "*Suspicion,*" the main character, Mr. Mummery, grows to fear that the new cook, Mrs. Sutton, is really Mrs. Andrews, a murderess on the run now trying to poison him and his wife, Ethel. After a bit of bumbling, Mr. Mummery brings a cocoa sample to a chemist and soon finds out that the drink is laced with a heavy dose of arsenic. At the very moment Mr. Mummery is about to share the bad news with his wife, Mrs. Sutton announces that the real Mrs. Andrews has been caught. Mr. Mummery's immediate relief is followed up by a more vexing question: "But there had been the cocoa. . . . Who, then—?"

The story, while exceedingly simple and lacking in-depth detection, shows Sayers at her finest. Mr. Mummery indeed uses his wits, even if he seems rather witless from time to time. His discovery of the solution is believable, especially as he is forced to the realization of his wife's deceit only by default. Perhaps most interestingly, Sayers' ending is a surprise but never a trick: every clue pointing to Ethel as the poisoner is made clearly available in the text. The story's point of view, however, is so firmly grounded in Mr. Mummery that most readers will likely follow him along in his pursuit of an answer, despite his bumbling, timidity, and general ineffectiveness.

Sayers' writing is carefully crafted to build the story to its crescendo while leading the reader to the same conclusion as Mr. Mummery. The latter is a remarkable achievement, for any mystery reader will surely question how Mrs. Sutton can be the murderess given that all the clues so definitely point to her. Again, Sayers' success is grounded in her convincing narration, which is so clearly defined by Mr. Mummery that the reader can hardly entertain an idea that he is not also entertaining. The other major reason for the success of the story is Sayers' layering of detail upon detail in a seemingly innocent fashion. Such a technique makes the clues integral parts of the

story; once the reader has come to believe that they point to Mrs. Sutton's guilt, the reader is almost bound to stick with that presumption, for diverting from it would be like tearing the very fabric of the story apart.

The story starts out on the train. Mr. Mummery is experiencing stomach pains, which he ascribes to his breakfast not agreeing with him. The narrator then introduces Mr. Mummery's cook, but the careful choice of words—"coffee made as only Mrs. Sutton knew how to make it"—implies that Mrs. Sutton had been with the Mummerys for some time. As the reader gradually learns, however, Mrs. Sutton has only been in their employ for one month— exactly the same amount of time Mrs. Andrews has been on the loose. Her arrival also coincides exactly with the onset of Mr. Mummery's stomach problems. Still later, the reader discovers that Mrs. Sutton came seeking employment without references, a situation that had initially made Mr. Mum Mummery "uneasy." Yet these significant details are revealed slowly, so their effect is one of a gradual build-up. The reader is almost compelled to accept these clues as proof of Mrs. Sutton's guilt, much as Mr. Mummery does.

Sayers' prose also makes Mr. Mummery's suspicions seem utterly natural. In the first scene, Mr. Mummery reads the newspaper, which is how the reader is introduced to the Andrews case: "The police were still looking for the woman who was supposed to have poisoned a family in Lincoln." This tidbit is buried amidst a series of articles on topics including a factory fire and government typewriters. Again, Sayers employs the technique of building detail upon detail to fix the larger picture. Only in a later conversation does the reader learn that, in her last escapade, Mrs. Andrews had been employed as a cook for a husband and wife, and that now police think she may seek another position as a cook. The fate of these last victims of Mrs. Andrews—the husband dies and the wife becomes seriously ill—takes on chilling signifi- cance after the story has reached its surprising conclusion.

Sayers' introduction of Mrs. Sutton and Ethel also inflame the reader's suspicions. At first glimpse Mrs. Sutton "was sitting at the table with her back to him [Mr. Mummery], and started up almost *guiltily* as he approached" [italics mine]. When Mr. Mummery immediately asks about his wife, the reader finds out that she is "feeling bad again." She has "a bit of headache," so Mrs. Sutton has given her a cup of tea. The juxtaposition of these ideas— Ethel's illness and the tea made by Mrs. Sutton—in subsequent sentences implies a causality that does not actually exist.

After it is revealed that Mrs. Sutton is not Mrs. Andrews—and thus unlikely to be the person who placed arsenic in Mr. Mummery's cocoa—the reader, along with Mr. Mummery, realizes that his poisoner must have been Ethel. A review of the clues shows that Ethel's guilt has been suggested all along, for the clues as easily point to her as they did to Mrs. Sutton. For instance, when Mr. Mummery is sick in bed for several days, his food is "skillfully prepared by Mrs. Sutton and brought to his bedside by Ethel." This detail emphasizes that Ethel has access to all the food that Mr. Mummery eats and could easily poison it. When Mr. Mummery comes home the evening in which a potentially fatal dose of arsenic has been placed in his cocoa, the beverage was made by Mrs. Sutton, but at the instigation of Ethel, who makes a point of asking Mr.

Mummery if he drank the cocoa: "Did Mrs. Sutton leave something hot for you? She said she would." Clearly, Ethel wants to know if Mr. Mummery ingested the arsenic.

The clues also suggest Ethel's affair with young Welbeck. The first reference to him comes, innocently enough, from Mr. Mummery's partner, who asks after Ethel's health.

'Can't do without her in the drama society, you know,' Mr. Brookes says . . . 'I shan't forget her acting last year in *Romance*. She and young Welbeck positively brought the house down, didn't they? The Welbecks were asking after her only yesterday.'

In re-evaluating this passage, the reader can see the connection between Ethel and Welbeck in a play so aptly titled. But it is also apparent how easily overlooked such a connection might be. The visit they pay to the Mummerys' home shows that Ethel and Welbeck use the acquaintance between the families to disguise their relationship. Further, the Welbecks' visit is revealing: Ethel becomes "quite white and tremulous" as Mrs. Welbeck talks on about the poisoning case, which Mr. Mummery ascribes to Ethel's delicate nature. Mr. Mummery spies significant glances between Welbeck and Ethel and even catches them with clasped hands, but again, he has a plausible and natural explanation. Ethel grows animated when she finds out that the Welbecks had asked about her, and she speaks with subdued excitement when she reports that young Welbeck had visited to talk about the Drama Society— an excitement both Mummery and the reader could easily attribute to her interest in returning to the stage.

An underlying theme of the story is that things are not always what they appear—nor are people, which is yet another clue to Ethel's treachery. After Mr. Mummery first discovers the loose stopper on the arsenic weed-killer he rams the top in forcefully. "After that he washed his hands carefully at the scullery tap, for he did not believe in taking risks." This statement is blatantly untrue, for even when he suspects Mrs. Sutton of poisoning him and his wife, he takes no action whatsoever with the exception of coming into the kitchen while Mrs. Sutton *and Ethel* are preparing breakfast. He knows, however, that even this precaution is ineffectual, for "what was the use of supervising the breakfast, when he had to be out of the house every day between half-past nine and six?" Instead of reporting his suspicions to the police, Mr. Mummery relies on calling home frequently, which would do very little to save Ethel should she be poisoned. In essence, in taking no action, Mr. Mummery is risking his own life and that of his wife.

Mr. Brooke's words, however, which close the opening section of the story, perhaps best demonstrate that a person can live with another person and yet never really know them. "She's got a bad mouth," pronounces Mr. Brookes while looking at a newspaper photograph of Mrs. Andrews. "He had a theory that character showed in the mouth. 'I wouldn't trust that woman an inch.'" For Mr. Mummery, however, he has all along been trusting the wrong woman without any suspicion whatsoever.

Source: Rena Korb, Critical Essay on "Suspicion," in *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Perkins is an Associate Professor of English at Prince George's Community College in Maryland. In the following essay she analyzes Sayers' technique in "Suspicion."

Michele Slung, in her overview of Dorothy Sayers' work for *St. James Guide to Crime & Mystery Writers*, notes that in a 1939 essay entitled "Other People's Great Detectives," Sayers compares fictional detectives to their real-life counterparts and determines there is an important difference. Fictional detectives, she claims, are not remembered for their display of "unusual talent and ingenuity" in their methods of detection, nor for their "conspicuous success in bringing criminals to justice." These qualities form the reputation of real-life detectives; however, fictional sleuths are measured by their author's "presentation of the character." Sayers' intricate plotting, nevertheless, keeps the reader guessing about whether or not Mummery is being poisoned and by whom.

Sayers' most famous and celebrated detective is Oxford-educated Lord Peter Wimsey, an amateur sleuth who appears in eleven novels and twenty-one short stories. In his article on Sayers for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Bernard Benstock notes that Sayers created Lord Peter to be "a fascinating if somewhat eccentric charmer, following the Conan Doyle tradition that the character of the detective took precedence over all other facets of the detective fiction."

In the works where Wimsey is absent, Sayers creates other central characters who may not be as charming or as unconventional, yet Sayers' characterizations of them bring them to vivid life. As a result, readers are caught up in the twists and turns of her stories. In "Suspicion," Harold Mummery becomes a reluctant detective after he discovers someone has been trying to poison him. While the story has little thematic import, Sayers' intricate plotting and subtle characterizations of Mummery and his wife make the story memorable.

Mummery is a mild-mannered estate agent who enlivens his dull life by reading about murders in the newspaper, "for, naturally, they were matters quite remote from daily life in the outskirts of Hull." When he notices his weed-killer is the same brand used by Mrs. Andrews, a cook who poisoned the family who employed her, "he was rather pleased about it. It gave him a sensation of being remotely but definitely in touch with important events."

His routine life is governed by a strict attention to decorum, as seen when he becomes upset with Mrs. Welbeck for raising the topic of the poisonings, "a most unsuitable subject for the tea-table." He washes his hands carefully after handling the weedkiller, "for he did not believe in taking risks." His rigid nature allows him only one indulgence—a whisky and soda in the evening—and prompts him to ask his wife to inform their cook, "if she must read the morning paper before I come down, I should be obliged if she would fold it neatly afterwards." The narrator notes, "it was important that the morning paper should come to him fresh and prim, like a virgin." This analogy also suggests his conservative attitude toward women, which emerges in his relationship with his wife.

On the surface, the Mummerys appear to have a happy marriage. Ethel continually asks her husband about his health and speaks to him in terms of endearment. Mummery's devotion is evident in his genuine concern for her health. When he comes home, he brings her flowers to cheer her up, and one evening in bed he clutches her tightly, "as though defying death and hell to take her from him." He admits without hesitation that he "would cheerfully have laid down his rather uninteresting little life to spare Ethel a moment's uneasiness."

Yet a closer look reveals Mummery's extreme paternalistic treatment of his wife. He calls her pet names like "poor child" when she is sick, which suggest his inability to view her as an equal. One afternoon, she looks to him "very small and fragile in the big double bed." He does not trust her with the details of his own ill health because they would, he feels, worry her "terribly." He exercises control over her behavior when he insists she stay in bed and allow the cook to bring her dinner. When she tries to protest, "he was firm with her. If she didn't take care of herself, she wouldn't be allowed to go to the Drama Society meetings." Her doctors forbade her to continue her theatre work after her nervous breakdown the previous summer, insisting "she mustn't over do it," even though each time the subject of the theatre comes up, it cheers her.

One afternoon when their cook tells Mr. Mummery that his wife is not feeling well and concludes that Ethel did too much that day, she notes that Ethel gets restless and "can't bear to be doing nothing." Mummery fails to notice that since he allows his wife little to occupy her time she becomes bored, which Sayers subtly suggests may be one of her motives for trying to poison him.

In much of Sayers' work, she stresses the importance of equality for women, and of men's and women's engagement in meaningful work. She felt that women could often find fulfillment through employment. Sayers criticized society for its treatment of women as almost a separate species from men. This focus becomes evident in "Suspicion," as Sayers implies that if Ethel had been allowed a more active life and had been treated more as an equal, she might have been satisfied with her marriage.

Sayers' intricate plotting, however, keeps the reader guessing about whether or not Mummery is being poisoned and by whom. Since she does not overtly point the finger at Ethel, most readers will be surprised as Mummery solves the mystery. However, subtle hints about who may be trying to kill him become clearer during a second read.

The story opens immediately with its central problem: Mummery's stomach discomfort caused, unbeknownst to him, by his wife's dousing his food with arsenic. His main focus at work is the poisoning case that has been closely followed by the press. Sayers adds a clever touch of ironic foreshadowing when her narrator explains that Mummery takes some pleasure in reading about the murders, since "they gave him an agreeable thrill of vicarious adventure."

Mummery's partner Brookes provides the first clue to the true cause of Mummery's discomfort and to the poisoner's motive when he asks about his wife. He tells Mummery, "I shan't forget her acting last year in *Romance*. She and young Welbeck positively

brought the house down." Yet when the two men discuss the Andrews poisoning case, they determine that the perpetrator must be an "arsenic- maniac" and as "cunning as [a] weasel," a description that does not fit Ethel. Mummery reveals his inability to spot a criminal when as he looks at a picture of Mrs. Andrews and determines her to be "a nice, motherly-looking kind of woman."

Immediately, suspicion is thrown on the Mummery's cook, who might be Mrs. Andrews in disguise and who, in Mummery's opinion, "started up almost guiltily as he approached." Ethel adds to this suspicion when she reminds her husband that the cook came without references.

Mummery misses the most important clues, blinded by his feelings toward his wife. When he asks Mrs. Welbeck to come to the garden with him to get some cuttings after she had been discussing the poison case, he sees "a relieved glance pass between Ethel and young Welbeck." Thinking that Ethel was upset by the mention of such gruesome topics, he concludes that "evidently the boy understood the situation and was chafing at his mother's tactlessness." Later, he again misdiagnoses the interaction between his wife and Welbeck when he returns to the house and discovers them holding hands. He decides that "their approach to the house had evidently been seen from the sitting-room window, for when they entered young Welbeck was already on his feet and holding Ethel's hand in the act of saying goodbye."

Sayers suggests that Mummery may subconsciously suspect his wife but suppresses his feel ings. When he discovers that every picture of Mrs. Andrews and every word about the poisoning has been cut out of the paper, "a curious cold lump of something at the pit of his stomach" forms, "something that he was chary of investigating." As a result, he becomes "suddenly very lonely and tired," but reasons that "his illness had taken it out of him." Later he admits to feeling "weak and confused."

When the test on the cocoa comes back positive for arsenic, Mummery rushes home, still convinced his cook is the murderer. One more visit from Welbeck, ostensibly to discuss "arrangements for the Drama Society," does not arouse Mummery's suspicions, even though his wife speaks about their meeting "with an undertone of excitement." It isn't until he discovers that Mrs. Andrews has been caught, and therefore could not have been his cook, that he takes a hard look at his wife and decides that "in her eyes he saw something that he had never seen before. . ."

Sayers's clever plots and well-drawn characters have earned her much critical and popular acclaim. Her skillful technique in "Suspicion" has helped to reinforce her reputation as one of the world's finest writers of detective fiction.

Source: Wendy Perkins, Critical Essay on "Suspicion," in *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #3

Moran is a teacher of English and American literature. In this essay he examines the ways in which Sayers' story toys with the suspicions of the reader.

Suspicion is not less an enemy to virtue than to happiness; he that is already corrupt is naturally suspicious, and he that becomes suspicious will quickly become corrupt.—Joseph Addison

All reading is partially motivated by the suspicion of the reader. Anyone reading a work of fiction for the first time automatically raises his or her mental eyebrow when confronted with what seems to be an irregularity or odd occurrence in the fictional world that he or she has entered. In *Hamlet*, for example, the appearance of the Ghost puts the first-time reader in the same predicament as Horatio and the palace guards: Why has "this thing appeared again?" Does it "bode some strange eruption" to the state? Will it speak to them, or Hamlet, or anyone? When Horatio begs the Ghost for guidance, he is trying to satisfy his own curiosity but also working as a stand-in for the reader. "Speak!" he cries, and his pleas are ones which we expect to be answered, since the unfolding of any plot is a process by which our suspicions are provoked, manipulated, and eventually answered. Thus, a reader knows that the Ghost must reveal *something*, but this as-yet-unknown information must be somewhat of a surprise, for if the reader's suspicions are *fully* in line with what is revealed, the plot offers no revelation, the story falls flat and the reader stops turning the pages.

Mystery stories (of which *Hamlet* is, in one sense, an example) rely on this phenomenon more, perhaps, than other kinds of fiction. A reader who begins an Agatha Christie or Dashiell Hammett novel knows that his or her suspicions will be excited and (if the plot is any good) met in unexpected ways. If "the butler did it," the story will be a disappointment; this is why the endings of such books as *Murder on the Orient Express* (where the reader learns that there are actually many killers instead of one) and *The Maltese Falcon* (where the object of the chase turns out to be a fake) are so delightful and memorable. The reader's radar is running at full speed and his or her suspicions are *still* proven to be misguided. If the reader isn't fooled, the writer has failed in one of his or her primary tasks.

"Suspicion" is a story that explores this very process by which the reader's suspicions are deliberately aroused and then exploded at the conclusion. The story can be read not only as a model of the game that is always played between a mystery writers and their readers, but as a dramatization of the mental gymnastics that all readers of fiction perform as they question a character's actions—and the reasons why the writer has revealed them. "Suspicion" is thus both a satisfying mystery with the obligatory twist and a model of the ways that all storytellers rely on their readers' suspicions to keep them interested in the events that they, as writers, unfold.

Consider the story's deceptively simple title as the first tool used by Sayers deliberately to evoke the friendly distrust of her reader. She could have named the story "The New

Cook" or "A Touch of Dyspepsia" or "A Chill on the Liver"—all of them decent enough, as far as titles are concerned. However, calling her story "Suspicion" immediately urges the reader to take out his or her magnifying glass. The reader automatically becomes a blood hound, second-guessing the truth about all kinds of details. The opening sentence —

As the atmosphere of the railway carriage thickened with tobacco-smoke, Mr. Mummery became increasingly aware that his breakfast had not agreed with him.

—becomes less innocuous than it would in a story with a different title. As the "atmosphere" in Mummery's railway carriage thickens with smoke, so will the reader's mind become clouded in an atmosphere of doubt. Mummery's stomachache becomes an occasion to suspect Sayers herself, whose motives for telling the reader this fact are immediately questioned. Characters in naturalistic and other kinds of fiction get all kinds of illnesses, but a stomachache in a Dorothy Sayers story—and one named "Suspicion" at that—piques her readers' curiosity. "Why am I being told this?" they ask, and as the story proceeds, readers form a suspicion about Mummery's ailment, only to discover (along with Mummery himself) that that suspicion was off the mark.

In this sense, the reader is much like Mummery, who functions as the reader's representative in the world of the story. Although mystery readers are immediately suspicious of everything they are told, while Mummery is not, Mummery eventually becomes as paranoid as they are until, just like his counterpart in the real world, he is forced to confront the fact that his suspicions are well-founded (he *is* being poisoned) yet totally wrong (Mrs. Sutton is *not* the poisoner). He is introduced as an innocent "fuss box" (as his wife later describes him), unaware of the many suspicious details that the reader sees all around him. When he reads the newspaper in the opening scene, for example, the story of the Lincoln poisoning case stands out among the others, and when Mummery examines the photograph of Mrs. Andrews, all he sees is a "harmless enough" and "nice, motherly-looking kind of woman." Like Herman Melville's Billy Budd, Mummery is, initially, incapable of suspecting the ominous details that seem to surround him. When Brookes tells Mummery that Mrs. Andrews has "got a bad mouth" and that he "wouldn't trust that woman an inch," Brookes' suspicion seems empirically ludicrous (there is no such thing as a "bad mouth") yet understandable: he knows that appearances are deceptive, while Mummery does not. The story then proceeds with Mummery's innocence becoming gradually corrupted as his suspicions about the arsenic are confirmed.

Mummery's assumption that one's appearance is indicative of one's inner self is what allows his wife to poison him without his knowledge. He is not suspicious of her because he regards her physical health as representative of her character. Until the very end of the story, Mummery—along with the reader—considers Ethel a "poor child," a "small and fragile" woman who "mustn't overdo it," a "precious" and "fastidious" victim of nerves who is "not a business woman" capable of understanding household finances. She is a delicate woman who must be spared "any shock or anxiety" and one who cannot even hear of things as "hateful" and "unsuitable" as a poisoning case. "She had never been a great meat-eater," Mummery thinks at one point, as if even the thought of

a dead animal is too much for her to bear. When she asks him why he needs to have the newspaper neatly folded before he reads it, Mummery sighs and thinks, "Women did not feel these things," as if they are too innocent and childlike to understand the importance of the world being ordered in a decorous fashion. When he brings Ethel the chrysanthemums, the reader sees in this gesture what Mummery assumes about her (and women in general): they are weak creatures who need only a bouquet of flowers to be made happy.

This is not to say that Mummery is uncaring or even willfully condescending, for Sayers points out in the opening of the story that Mummery "would cheerfully have laid down his rather uninteresting little life to spare Ethel a moment's uneasiness." What is important to note here is that Mummery's inability to suspect his wife of any wrongdoing (until the end) is a function of his provincial thinking. He enjoys reading about murders in the news paper because "naturally, they were matters quite remote from daily life in the outskirts of Hull." Ironically, Mummery—not his wife—is the frail and innocent soul who cannot understand the devious and subtle ways in which seemingly innocent people behave. At the end of the story, Mummery and the reader move from the world of innocence to that of experience—where Ethel has been dwelling for some time.

If Mummery is the stand-in for the reader, growing increasingly suspicious as the story progresses, then Ethel is the representative of Sayers herself. The reader is reminded more than once that Ethel is an invaluable member of the local Drama Society, which suits a character so adept at acting that even her husband is completely fooled. (Also note that the name "Mummery" suggests "mummer," an actor.) She continually speaks to Mummery with language appropriate to a naive ingénue, calling him "Tiddley-winks," a "sentimental old thing," and her "old Hubby." She feigns concern over her husband's "tummy-aches" and, at one point, becomes so "alarmed" about his health that she insists on calling a doctor. Like her creator, Ethel must divert Mummery's (and the reader's) suspicions away from the truth, and both women's ability to offer a false, unsuspicious version of reality is what allows them to succeed. As Ethel deceives Mummery, so Sayers dupes the reader. Granted, a reader *might* suspect Ethel of her crime as the story proceeds, but this is only because Ethel is a character in a mystery story, where convention almost demands that some sort of twist occur at the conclusion. Sayers's (and Ethel's) skill lies in the fact that despite the reader's suspicion, only a second examination of the facts reveals the truth: the seemingly innocent Mrs. Mummery is poisoning her husband so that she can carry on her affair with young Welbeck—the man who was her costar in *Romance*, and who Mummery sees leaving his house, and whose presence gives Ethel's speech "an undertone of excitement."

At the conclusion of any plot (again, *Hamlet* included), the reader's suspicions must be con- firmed or upset, as they are here. However, Sayers cannot resist toying with the reader's suspicions one last time, as seen in the story's final sentences:

Mr. Mummery clutched the arm of his chair. It had all been a mistake then. He wanted to shout or cry. He wanted to apologize to this foolish, pleasant, excited woman. All a mistake.

But there had been the cocoa. Mr. Dimthorpe. Marsh's test. Five grains of arsenic. Who, then—?

He glanced around at his wife, and in her eyes he saw something that he had never seen before . . .

This is Mummery's epiphany, where his desperate attempts to remain in an innocent world free from suspicion prove as futile and weak as he once assumed his wife to be. Sayers does not offer the next scene because what happens next in the Mummery's home is secondary to her artistic concern of dramatizing the moment where a man's previous and off-the-mark suspicions hit the bull's-eye of truth. While readers do not know what Mummery will say (or do) to his wife, they do know that suspicion has affected Mummery to the point where he will never be able to think of Ethel as a "poor child" again. Unlike Mummery, however, readers are delighted at Sayers's manipulation of their suspicions, and it is this delight in being manipulated that writers of all genres attempt to elicit in their work.

Source: Daniel Moran, Critical Essay on "Suspicion," in *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2001.

Topics for Further Study

Do you think many readers would have suspected Ethel Mummery of the poisoning? Why or why not?

Does life in the 1930s seem to you to differ greatly from contemporary life? In what ways is it different? In what ways is it alike?

Read a short story by Agatha Christie, one of Sayers's contemporaries. How does it compare to "Suspicion"? How do the authors' writing styles compare?

What, if any, generalizations can you make about England in the 1930s from this story?

Do you agree with the assessment that Sayers plays fair with her reader in "Suspicion"? Why or why not?

Propose an alternate explanation to the strange events in the Mummery household. Write a paragraph or two explaining your theory.

Compare and Contrast

1930s: The average British household consists of 3.7 persons. For couples married between 1930 and 1934, the average number of children is 2.08.

1990s: The average British household has less than 2 children.

1930s: The death rate is around 12 people per 1,000.

1990s: The death rate is 10.7 people per 1,000.

1930s: Britain and France declare war on Germany, which starts World War II.

1990s: Britain, as a part of the United Nations, fights in the Persian Gulf War. British and American soldiers and troops from many other coun countries fight against Iraq after that country invades Kuwait.

1930s: The Labour government resigns over budget disputes. The prime minister forms an emergency coalition government comprised of Conservatives and Liberals.

1990s: The British vote the Conservatives out of office.

1930s: Britain develops into a "social service state." From 1934 onward, legislation is instituted that ensures a social security system that ranks among the most generous of the major western countries.

1980s: Under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, Britain makes cuts in social spending, including the complete elimination of some programs

What Do I Read Next?

Agatha Christie is one of the most popular mystery writers of all times. *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920) was her first detective novel. Her detective Hercule Poirot follows a confounding set of clues to discover who poisoned an old woman.

G. K. Chesterton, who co-founded the Detection Club with Sayers, created a priest-sleuth in this Father Brown series. Father Brown first appeared in *The Innocence of Father Brown* (1911). On the surface, Father Brown appears to be clumsy and naïve, but his clever mind, penetrating insight, careful observational skills, and deep understanding of human evil allow him to catch the criminal.

Sayers and thirteen other members of the Detection Club co-wrote *The Floating Admiral* (1932). Each writer wrote one chapter, and in the subse subsequent chapters, writers had to take into account characters and clues introduced.

Six members of the Detection Club, including Sayers, participated in *Ask a Policeman* (1933). One member supplied a plot, four members wrote solutions using another member's detective, and another member wrote the conclusion.

Sayers is well known for her Peter Wimsey mysteries. In 1923, she published her first Wimsey mystery, *Whose Body?*.

Throughout her career, Sayers became increasingly interested in delving into the psychology of her characters. In 1935, she published *Gaudy Night*, which was in essence a murderless mystery. With this novel, Sayers believed that she had achieved her goal of fusing the mystery with the novel of manners.

Further Study

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Rader, Barbara D., and Howard G. Zettler, eds., *The Sleuth and the Scholar: Origins, Evolutions, and Current Trends in Detective Fiction*, Greenwood Press, 1988.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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