

***The Documents in the Case* by Dorothy L. Sayers: Allusions and British Interwar Audiences**

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Abstract

Dorothy L. Sayers and Robert Eustace's Documents in the Case (1930), an epistolary novel published during the Golden Age of British crime fiction (1920s–1930s), represents an ambitious project that attempts not only to entertain readers with a murder story but also to capture the contemporary sociocultural background of its publication. The novel is notable for its frequent use of allusions to works that were published and staged in the 1920s, which makes it an authentic portrayal of contemporary opinions on literature. A significant part of the analysis is the consideration of best-selling novels that show the reading preferences of the majority. The paper aims to explore the novel through the lens of intertextuality. A special focus is given to the character of Margaret, who identifies with the bestsellers and shapes the reality of her life according to these pieces of literature. As will be demonstrated in works such as If Winter Comes and the Sacred Flame, the consumption of such pieces alters Margaret's worldview, perception of herself and her approach to morality, leading her to the wrong solution to her marital problems. The use of literary allusions in the crime novel thus reflects the audience's attitudes towards the interwar period in Britain.

Keywords: Dorothy L. Sayers, Robert Eustace, *The Documents in the Case*, intertextuality, bestseller

Introduction

The Documents in the Case (1930), labelled by Kenney as a “novel of ideas” (1990: 142), gives readers the experience of crime fiction against the backdrop of the tumultuous cultural changes of the twenties. Dorothy L. Sayers and her co-writer, Robert Eustace, present an accurate epistolary format, as the letters written by the characters are filled with details of their everyday lives, as well as their thoughts on various sociocultural phenomena of their time. This paper aims to explore in greater detail the aspect of literature consumption portrayed in the novel. It suggests that the frequent allusions to contemporary literature consumed by the characters are not mere conversation fillers but a significant component of the novel's framework and that the study of intertextual relations reveals the characters' responses to the changing literary market. Thus, the readership attitudes of the 1920s are preserved here in their contemporary authenticity. The paper primarily examines works that achieved popularity and influence among the masses, commenting on the phenomenon

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of the British bestseller and assessing its role in character motivation. A special focus is given to the *Sacred Flame* (1929), classifying the play as a central allusion in the crime novel.

***Documents in the Case* (1930)**

As a crime novel written in an epistolary format, *The Documents in the Case* comprises of the correspondence exchanged by the characters, their notes concerning the narrated events, court statements, and excerpts from newspapers. Paul Harrison provides the stack of documents to Gilbert Pugh, the Director of Public Prosecutions, with the request to examine the material and take the next steps in the investigation of a suspected murder of his father, George Harrison. The crime novel is predominantly discussed in connection with Sayers, as she is the one responsible for the literary craft. It is known that Eustace provided the scientific background for the plot and consulted his ideas with Sayers (Reynolds 1996: 274–281).

George and his much younger second wife Margaret share their suburban household in Bayswater with Miss Agatha Milsom. Margaret used to work as a typist, but she currently stays at home as a housewife. The Harrisons hire Miss Milsom to take care of the housekeeping, and she is the one who gives Margaret company. Their mundane life is interrupted by the arrival of their new neighbours, the artist Harwood Lathom and the poet Jack Munting. The two young men belong to the artistic and intellectual circles of society, and they are hoping to advance in their careers. Lathom makes a good impression on the Harrison household, and the neighbours soon start interacting with each other. George tells them about his passion for fungi and cookery. Every year, he spends vacation at his shack, where he works on a book discussing poisonous mushrooms.

It is gradually revealed that Margaret and Lathom are having a love affair. Later, Lathom is caught in front of Mrs Harrison's room but is mistaken for Munting as he borrows his dressing-gown. Munting accepts the blame to protect his friend's secret. Margaret's frustration over her marriage is growing. Refusing divorce in order to avoid scandal, she impatiently begs Lathom to act. As a result, Lathom commits a murder. Lathom visits George at his shack and poisons him with synthetic muscarine, a substance that may be found in toadstools in its natural form. To avoid suspicion, he arranges the discovery of the body so that Munting is the one who finds it with him. The initial theories include George erroneously using a toadstool containing natural muscarine in his cookery or suicide. However, laboratory testing shows that the nature of the muscarine found in Harrison's food was, in fact, synthetic. Based on the documents, it is uncovered that Lathom stole the synthetic substance from a laboratory and is subsequently found guilty and punished for his crime.

Each letter offers a unique perspective on the narrated events, albeit one that is not devoid of the inevitable personal biases of the characters. The most important components of a crime novel are stated explicitly, such as who the victim is, how he was murdered, by whom, and who is convicted, but the remaining pieces of the puzzle are left entirely to the readers. To mirror a real investigation, they are expected to read the materials, weigh the character's testimonies against each other, read between the lines and reconstruct a mental picture of the crime.

The novel contains numerous allusions to books the characters read. They may be identified by brief, explicit references to works published during the 1920s. Even though the allusions are activated by the localized reference, the scope of the allusion expands over the entire narrative. As Irwin says, an allusion may be typically short in length, but it can span over a vast portion of a text, e.g. a full stanza alluding to a different stanza. Allusion may also be realized through the formor style (2001: 288–289). A work may also create an intertextual relation to another text's themes (Pasco 2018: 7), although it is necessary to differentiate between a true allusion, an integrating of one text into another (5), from mere similarities or an imitation in style (Irwin 2001: 288).

Drawing on Leahy's findings in *The Victorian Approach to Modernism in the Fiction of Dorothy L. Sayers* (2009) about the Victorian intertextuality in Dorothy L. Sayers' fiction and Zsámiba (2017), this paper examines the body of literature consumed by the characters in an attempt to uncover the intertextual relations between the novels. In order to demonstrate the connections between the popular literary taste at the time, it is necessary to first discuss the state of the literary market in the 1920s.

Literature and consumerism in the 1920s

The novel is set in 1929, corresponding with the actual timeframe of its creation. As a result, it reflects the contemporary reality in which the authors lived, and echoes the sociocultural trends of the past decade. After WWI, the literary market changed to suit the tastes of the increasing number of middle-class readers of novels. At the time, the consumption of novels was also strongly linked to female readers. With the number of women being higher than men due to the losses in WWI, women represented a significant part of readership (Melman 1988: 5). Melman argues that the developments at the time already suggested a future expansion of the reading public to lower middle classes and further beyond (7).

In the 1920s, the term 'best-seller' entered British discourse to describe easily accessible literature aimed at the general public. Initially, the term carried a pejorative connotation (MacLeod 2015: 21). Simultaneously, critics were intrigued by these books, whose immense success exerted significant influence over readers (Melman 1988: 10), even reaching cult status (12). In

some instances, popularity led to a personality cult of certain best-selling authors (67). During a period when critical debates about the distinctions between high-brow, middle-brow, and low-brow literature—known as the ‘Battle of the Brows’ (Macdonald & Singer 2015: 3) – resonated across cultural circles, the emergence of best-selling literature caused anxiety among critics regarding the future of literary value (MacLeod 2015: 21). Nonetheless, the ‘brow’ distinction had its limitations, especially if readers themselves could not agree on the classification of a novel. An example is MacLeod’s remark on A. S. M. Hutchinson’s **If Winter Comes** (1921): “If to many of its readers it constituted high art, it was the worst kind of popular fiction to another set of readers, notably those who were part of existing and emerging modernist literary networks” (27). Moreover, Melman contends that studying best-sellers is valuable to literary scholarship because it accurately reflects the thoughts that resonated with the majority, thus capturing the spirit of specific historical periods (Melman 1988: 9).

The consumption of contemporary literature plays a crucial role in the lives of the characters in the *Documents in the Case*. The letters reveal that literature is among the frequent topics of their discussions on what constitutes worthy reading material. Munting admits that they “had a little difficulty, because her idea of an important writer and [his] idea are not exactly identical ...” (Sayers & Eustace 1992: 54). Lathom and Munting lean towards the modernist and the intellectual, while Margaret and Miss Milsom prefer the literature for the masses. As a middle-brow author herself, Sayers did not let the ‘Battle of the Brows’ limit her appreciation for literature of various kinds (Leahy 2009: 11–12). However, rather than implementing her own views, Sayers concentrates on the overall depiction of the readership at the time (81). Therefore, the characters occasionally venture outside of their comfort zone and proceed to explore fiction on the opposite side of the ‘Battle of the Brows.’ There is the example of Munting, who also heavily leans towards academic, scientific, and philosophical texts, and is able to agree with Margaret and appreciate the qualities of the *Constant Nymph* (1924) by Margaret Kennedy.

Munting himself publishes texts that are deemed scandalous by the suburban reading public. Although these titles are entirely fictional and thus do not create an intertextual relation to another previously existing text, it is useful to consider how the public response to his writings reflects the literary tastes of the time. Mr Harrison describes them as a collection of “risqué verse” and a “salacious novel” (Sayers & Eustace 1992: 67). Upon reading his *Deadlock*, Margaret feels “disgusted with its coarseness and cynicism” (33). Munting admits to his fiancée Elizabeth Drake that his works do not sell, but in the end, he finds success with his next book. Regardless of his progressive views, he sympathizes with George Harrison and agrees with his opinions on

what a woman should and should not do, though he is self-aware enough to realize the hypocrisy of such thinking.

Margaret as the product of mass literature consumption

Even though Munting's contemplations about literature are frequent, they are also partly influenced by his position as a creator. It is primarily Margaret who is associated purely with the role of a consumer. In this section, the paper suggests that the allusions to Margaret's reading preferences are directly linked with the way she thinks of herself and the world around her. She is thus the product of her own reading habits as early as at the beginning of the novel, which prepares the ground for the murder she is about to cause.

On multiple occasions, it is stated that reading novels is Margaret's primary occupation while she stays at home. Miss Milsom worries about her impractical nature and her tendency to "lose herself in a book or a daydream" (Sayers & Eustace 1992: 13). Because she sees her as the victim of the marital issues, she however later supports her interest in literature as a way of escapism. George Harrison comments that "it's a pity she can't find something better to do with herself than reading trashy novels all day" (13). George is ironically at the root of the habit he despises in his wife due to his expectations of Margaret. As a housewife, she is supposed to be a homemaker, yet it is Miss Milsom who deals with the housework. Mrs Harrison thus faces boredom as reading is the only activity available to her (Zsámiba 2017: 123).

While she seeks escapism, the books of her choice remind her of real-life problems, feeding the gradually increasing frustration. The first type of fiction alluded to by *The Documents in the Case* in connection with Margaret are romance novels, which were in high demand in the twenties. Apart from Henry de Vere Stacpoole's works and *Sweet Pepper* (1923) by Geoffrey Moss (its young female protagonist travels to Budapest and experiences intense love), novels by Michael Arlen are given the greatest prominence. Margaret buys Arlen's latest work to 'cleanse her palette' after Munting's *Deadlock*. When the neighbours become the unwilling witnesses to an argument between the Harrisons, Munting tries to divert attention elsewhere: "Awful realisation creeps over us all that the sitting-room door has been left open. I say hurriedly: 'Have you read the new Michael Arlen, Miss Milsom?'" (Sayers & Eustace 1992: 107). This suggests that he considers Arlen a safe topic.

Romance best-sellers of the twenties are connected with the notion of female sexuality and romantic fantasies of a young woman (Melman 1988: 42). Margaret appears to be the target audience here:

the suburban female personified the hollowness of existence in the modern big city. ... She still possessed some of the stock characteristics of the Victorian prig: prudishness, hypocrisy and middle-class respectability. But she was also

endowed with a libido. She was the typical consumer and projected heroine of erotic fantasies (Melman 1988: 48).

For Margaret, whose marriage is implied to be sexless, such literature provides a glimpse of the ingredient that is missing in her life and further deepens her yearning for the physical fulfilment of love: "She saw herself robed with all the glowing radiance that dazzled her half-educated eyes in the passionate pages of Hichens and de Vere Stacpoole" (Sayers & Eustace 1992: 137).

Another pillar of her slow descent towards cold-heartedness of murderous intent is represented by the allusion to Arthur Stuart Menteth Hutchinson's *If Winter Comes* (1921), which is known as one of the most-read novels of the decade (MacLeod 2015: 14). The protagonist Mark Sabre suffers from his marriage with Mabel who overall seems as a poor choice of a partner for him. For example, Sabre cares about people and the difficult situations they face, intending to help them, and is, in general, interested in different social causes, while Mabel leans towards gossip and does not have much empathy. Other characters notice the "sort of stiffish feeling you sometimes feel in the air with two people who don't quite fit" (Hutchinson 1922: 7). The same might be said about George and Margaret, who not only do not share any interests but also possess conflicting temperaments.

In contrast with George's brute and boring personality, Margaret carries herself in a very animated and dramatic manner: "Her enormous vitality, her inconsequence, her melodrama ... got on his nerves, and produced an uncontrollable reaction of irritability" (Sayers & Eustace 1992: 134). Both couples suffer from issues with communication. Sabre barely explains his actions to Mabel, and Mr Harrison speaks kindly of Margaret to other people in her absence but not to her directly. Sabre's marriage is empty, and the fulfilment of romantic love comes from outside of it, personified by his former flame Nona. After a series of events that end in Mabel divorcing Sabre, he and Nona can finally be together. Here, infidelity is emotional, and Sabre does not engage in a sexual affair. Considering he is portrayed as a victim enduring the burden of a dysfunctional marriage, there is a possibility Margaret sympathizes with his situation, adopting a victim mentality herself. It is an early instance of a book on romantic love outside of marriage that she reads. Leahy states that her fear of a divorce is heightened by the contemporary books she reads (Leahy 2009: 126). Such a statement corresponds with the fact that Sabre's divorce is accompanied by public shaming.

Margaret immerses herself very deeply in the narratives that she consumes. As a result, this brings the problem of her self-identification with the characters and the themes related to marriage. Miss Milsom says that "she has a wonderfully vivid and romantic imagination, which makes the world of literature very real to her" (Sayers & Eustace 1992: 74). Margaret thinks that "poetry and imagination and the beautiful things of the mind are the only true

realities" (43). According to Munting, "She would adopt any attitude that was offered to her, provided it was exciting and colourful enough" (137). Zsámbsa explains the cause of her tendencies is her lack of identity resulting from an empty and unfulfilling life (Zsámbsa 2017: 127).

Mrs Harrison complains that her husband never takes her to any events and does not help her pursue any intellectual interests. She wishes to be a part of thought-provoking discussions on art and culture: "I am ashamed of being so ignorant of the things everybody is talking about" (Sayers & Eustace 1992: 170). Lathom notices her needs and, in his naivety, believes in her potential to become a truly modern woman: "She has the makings of a decent pagan soul if one could teach her" (99). Therefore, he advises her to read Lawrence's *Women in Love* (1920), providing her with an opportunity to think about the questions of female sensuality and the philosophies influential at the time. Margaret's reaction to the novel stands at the very core of the novel's framework. Faced with such a complex text, she struggles to grasp the underlying messages of the novel, missing the intended goal by Lathom. According to Zsámbsa, she is unable to comprehend the literary work due to her shallow mentality and lack of intelligence. (Zsámbsa 2017: 127-129).

Despite her effort to keep up with the most recent literary phenomena, Margaret does not succeed in becoming a part of the knowledgeable audience. Focusing on details, she fails to recognize what is essential in a literary work. *Women in Love* leave the impression as "very queer and coarse in parts" and "rather bewildering, but some of the descriptions are very beautiful" (Sayers & Eustace 1992: 170). Margaret remarks: "What funny people Lawrence's characters are! They don't seem to have any ordinary lives or have to make money or run households or anything. ..." (170) Her earlier participation in the literature debates shows her lack of vocabulary connected with the topic. Usually, she describes literary works in simplistic means, e.g. as "powerful" and having a "sense of the beautiful" (54). Considering all the factors listed above, her self-identification with literature leads her to apply a misguided and ignorant approach, creating a dangerous foundation for her future motivations.

***The Sacred Flame* (1929) as the core allusion**

Margaret's inability to stop living through the fiction she consumes – and, to make things worse, the fiction the meaning of which she is unable to grasp – escalates after her trip to Paris. When visiting the city of art, the Harrisons are accompanied by Lathom, who assumes the role of a guide, part of his motivation being to be by the side of his secret lover. The trio is the audience of a popular play that makes a very strong impression on Margaret, *The Sacred Flame* by William Somerset Maugham, which was first staged in 1929 in London. The taboo topic of euthanasia (among other things) was seen by some

members of the public, e.g. the Bishop of London, as shocking and immoral (Hastings 2009: 370).

During the 1920s, Maugham's works received somewhat polarizing responses. On the one hand, they did not attract much serious attention from the British critics; on the other hand, they achieved enormous success with mass audiences not only in Britain but also internationally, and the author was thus accordingly well-paid (Böttiger 1993: 91). In 1908, London was staging four of his plays at the same time (93). Tiozzo's study (2021) discusses Maugham's popularity in Sweden. Based on sources in Swedish, his paper explores the fact that he even caught the interest of the Nobel Prize Committee and was thus among the candidates (Tiozzo 2021: 128). Tiozzo emphasizes that while Maugham eventually did not win the prize, the committee members respected his literary craft and arrived at their decision due to economic factors (146). There are noticeable French influences on his writing, which the Swedish Academy expert Hellström attributes to the reason behind the lack of interest among British critics (136). The main reasons mentioned are the cynical nature of his texts and a notable absence of the English humour that consequently made some view him as "more French than British" (136). This may explain Leahy mentioning "a French play" (Leahy 2009: 65) when referencing the *Sacred Flame*.

In this section, the paper aims to suggest that the *Sacred Flame* represents a crucial point in the narrative, and the intertextual connections to the novel by Sayers and Eustace are relevant to its themes. It is the decisive moment when Margaret's fantasies, hopes, and frustrations reach their peak. At the core of the play is the death of Maurice Tabret. After his flying accident, Maurice has been bedridden with no hope for a recovery and utterly dependent on his caretaker Nurse Wayland. Although he is suffering, Maurice does not wish to be a burden to his family, especially his young and beautiful wife, Stella. He encourages her to enjoy her life by attending various events in the company of his brother, Colin. Later, Maurice is found dead due to an overdose of a sleeping drug. Nurse Wayland suspects someone must have murdered him. It is soon exposed that Stella felt no love for her husband. She is, in fact, in an adulterous relationship with Colin and expecting his child. Even though the suspicion falls strongly on Stella, the investigation uncovers that the killer was actually Maurice's mother, Mrs Tabret, who could no longer bear the pain of her bedridden son.

Readers of *Documents in the Case* may recognize here a familiar set of thematic allusions as the play is centred on the contrast of love in marriage and love in adultery, this time fully consummated by a secret pregnancy. Stella and Maurice's marriage seems harmonious at the first glance. Seemingly fond of each other, they treat their spouse with kindness and compassion. In fact, romantic love is one-sided. It is implied that sex used to be the foundation

of their relationship. Now that their intimate life is non-existent with no hope for remedy, their marriage essentially falls apart, and Stella realises that she has never truly loved Maurice. Maurice feels pity mixed with shame that he cannot give his wife a more enjoyable life. Similarly to Mr Harrison taking housework away from Margaret, Maurice forbids Stella from tending to him, and in general, having anything in common with his illness: "Resignation. I've had to set my teeth and learn it. But what has a girl like you to do with resignation?" (Maugham 1948: 16).

The love affair with Colin, "a tall, dark, handsome fellow" (12), is apparently ongoing for years. Like Lathom, who was nearly caught in front of her lover's bedroom, Stella is also close to her secret being exposed. Maurice notices the change in her appearance even though he is unsure of the causes. Later, she confides in Colin: "Maurice was so strange tonight. I couldn't make him out. I was almost afraid he suspected" (26). After Maurice dies and the affair is finally exposed, Stella admits everything: "I suppose I ought to be terribly ashamed of myself, but I must be sincere. I can no more help loving Colin than I can help the rain falling" (51). The absence of guilt is especially notable here, and corresponds with Margaret's attitude towards her love for Lathom:

I never knew how much beauty there was in the world till you showed it to me, and that's why I feel so sure that our love must be a right thing, because one could not feel so much beauty in anything that was wrong, could one? (Sayers & Eustace 1992: 158)

Apart from Nurse Wayland, Stella is forgiven by everyone. They sympathise with her and Colin's love due to the difficult life she had with Maurice. The stories consumed by Margaret thus proceed from extramarital love to the justification and acceptance of infidelity.

Margaret's letters to Lathom as her lover show the same absence of guilt, which is further strengthened by her intellectual disorientation. Both from books and her rather modernist acquaintances Lathom and Munting, she was frequently exposed to contemporary views that incorporated elements of atheism and nihilism. The characters in the play are influenced by atheistic ideas, too, as they do not believe in the continuation of life after death as the Christian faith declares. Margaret is lost in the questions of morality as she loses her moral compass: "I can't believe it was sin – no one could commit a sin and be so happy. Sin doesn't exist, the conventional kind of sin, I mean – only lovingness and unlovingness – people like you and me, and people like him" (176). Munting doubts "she had any moral standards of her own" (137).

The lack of understanding becomes a serious problem once she is, as a member of the audience, presented with the death of Maurice in *The Sacred Flame*. Maugham's goal was to explore the issue of euthanasia. It is only a

matter of time before Maurice dies, and he wishes to escape the pain of his disabled body. That is one of the main reasons why Mrs Tabret overdoses him, saving him also from the revelation of Stella's betrayal. Despite Maurice being killed, the characters do not consider such act as a murder.

In her characteristic tendency to notice certain features and ignore essential messages of a literary work, Margaret does not realize the context of euthanasia when she mentions the play to Lathom:

you were holding my hand, and your hand was telling mine how true and right it was that the useless husband should be got out of the way of the living, the splendid wife and her lover and child. Darling, I think that play is the most wonderful and courageous thing that's ever been written (177-178).

What stays in her memory is the idea that her husband's death would be the solution to her problems, and in order for that to happen, he has to be killed.

Academic analyses of Maugham's work so far seem to overlook some of Mrs. Tabret's words spoken in the play's dialogue. Multiple times, she asserts that the world should prioritise the young and the healthy. Such an unethical view is unacceptable in the 21st century, but in the 1920s, it was one of many questionable philosophies widely discussed and, in some cases, even believed by the public. Mrs. Tabret is aware of Stella's adultery but feels only pity towards her: "Stella is young, healthy and normal. Why should I imagine she has not got the instincts that I had at her age?" (Maugham 1948: 52) and "you are young and the young have a right to life and the future belongs to them." (67). These views align with Margaret's agenda, as both her lover and she are young, in opposition to George, who is said to be about twenty years older than his wife.

It is not surprising that Mr Harrison is enraged after the staging of the Sacred Flame. George is dehumanised in Mrs. Harrison's eyes. In her letters, she refers to her husband as 'him' or in a derogatory manner. Downing notes that by calling George 'a Gorgon,' Margaret sees Lathom as Perseus, a man who can kill him (Downing 2004: 104). The fact that Mrs. Harrison adopts such a dangerous mindset is revealed in the following passage:

What right have the useless people to get in the way of love and youth? Of course, in the play, it wasn't the husband's fault, because he was injured and couldn't help himself—but that's Nature's law again, isn't it? Get rid of the ugly and sick and weak and worn-out things, and let youth and love and happiness have their chance. It was a brave thing to write that, because it's what we all know in our hearts, and yet we are afraid to say it (Sayers & Eustace 1992: 178).

Even though she is not the one committing murder, her mentality is more cold-blooded than the actual culprit's, and she is possibly unaware of her cruelty.

Self-identification escalates into delusion and an inability to grasp reality. Following Leahy's observation that Sayers adds an educational layer to her novels (Leahy 2009: 21), it might be argued that the character of Margaret is a warning against the misuse of literature. Sayers does not advocate against the best-selling and popular literature but brings forward the possible dangers of misguided literature consumption. Misinterpreting may lead to the acceptance of approaches to life that exceed one's understanding and may cause harm to oneself and others. By causing George's death, Margaret loses her potential happiness with Lathom because he is convicted and hanged.

With society's sense of morality twisted, Kenney reminds the readers that "the classic detective story has little patience with the seductive modern notion that people who turn to crime are 'trapped' in their environment and therefore blameless." (Kenney 147) Although Margaret's frustrations and unhappiness with her life are indeed the roots of her future development, the wish to feel emotional and physical connection in marriage is justified, and likewise is her desire for intellectual interests; she is not given the same treatment as Stella, despite being unpunished by the law. The readers can see the true nature of her self-serving, cruel personality.

Conclusion

The characters in the *Documents in the Case* actively respond to the literary market of the 1920s by consuming books published in the decade preceding the events of the novel. Their opinions on literature are referenced by localised allusions and explored as they express them in discussions with other characters. Based on the allusions, the paper attempts to reconstruct their reading preferences – whether it is Lathom and Munting, who see themselves as intellectuals and read modernist works, or Margaret Harrison and Miss Milsom, who are consumers of more accessible literature. It shows that the reading public was unable to agree on the quality of the works, as the common readers did not necessarily share their views with the critics.

Margaret is identified as the typical target reader of the best-selling books. Instead of using reading as a means of escapism, Margaret dangerously identifies with the stories and shapes her reality according to them. The analysis of the works of her 'personal canon' in the literary context of the twenties reveals that she was keeping up with the latest trending works. There is an intertextual relation between these pieces of literature and the *Documents in the Case* in terms of the themes related to loveless, unsatisfying marriage.

The consumption of romance fiction ignites in Margaret the desire for sexual intimacy that she is deprived of in her celibate marriage. Additionally, the best-selling *If Winter Comes* solidifies her views of marriage as a trap and suffering, while the emotions of romantic love come from outside the marriage. She also cultivates in herself the victim mentality.

The paper further argues that the act of murder is decided after Margaret becomes the audience of Maugham's *Sacred Flame*, making it one of the most significant allusions. Having been exposed to philosophies that she does not have the capacity to understand, she loses her sense of morality. As a result, she misinterprets the play. She identifies with Stella, who feels no guilt for her adultery, and adopts unethical views on the disabled and elderly, causing a loss of life. Margaret is thus an example of what happens if the approach to literature is misguided.

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