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# Dream Cities and Cardboard Worlds: Sayers' Moral Vision in Murder Must Advertise

Frances Fowler-Collins  
*Miami University of Ohio*

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# INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume VII

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## **Dream Cities and Cardboard Worlds** *Sayers's Moral Vision in "Murder Must Advertise"*

**Frances Fowler-Collins**

*Murder Must Advertise* represents a turning point in Dorothy L. Sayers's development as a writer and Christian thinker. Previously, she had depicted sinful individuals, but here she expands her moral vision to encompass social sin on a grand scale, focusing on advertising. The novel's major structural device is the comparison of two groups: an advertising agency and a drug trafficking ring. Although these groups differ superficially, Sayers suggests they are fundamentally similar, as each is a "dream city" based on illusion. They resemble each other in three ways. In both, a small group of people operates behind the scenes to exploit a larger group in order to profit financially. Both are relentlessly materialistic. And both deny death even though they are agents of death, either physical or spiritual. Although *Murder Must Advertise* is artistically flawed, it lays the foundation for Sayers's later work in social criticism and Dante commentary.

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## **Dream Cities and Cardboard Worlds: Sayers's Moral Vision in *Murder Must Advertise***

Frances Fowler-Collins

In 1922 the British-American poet T. S. Eliot published one of his best known works, *The Wasteland*, an often obscure modernist poem. In it he depicted post-World War I Europe as a spiritual desert from which traditional religious and political values had vanished, leaving both aristocrats and ordinary working people to lead meaningless lives that they filled with materialism and hedonistic pleasure in an attempt to forget their ultimate end. . . death. Eliot was not a Christian at the time, but he had been on a spiritual journey for several years, a journey that culminated in 1927, when he was received into the Church of England by baptism. Five years later, the English detective novelist Dorothy L. Sayers—the daughter of a clergyman and a lifelong member of the Church of England—published *Murder Must Advertise*, her ninth mystery novel. Although *Murder Must Advertise* is a much less significant work than *The Wasteland*, it explores many of the same themes. It also represents an important shift in Sayers's writing. Her previous detective novels and short stories had depicted sinful individuals; in *Murder Must Advertise* she portrays a sinful society, a moral wasteland. Her treatment of this theme is uneven, but it foreshadows the themes of her later work. In this paper I will briefly summarize the plot for the benefit of those who have not read the novel; then I will discuss at length Sayers's moral vision as it emerges in the book. Finally, I will suggest some of the ways that her later work further develops the same themes.

### Plot Summary

Victor Dean, an advertising copywriter at Pym's Publicity, Ltd., has recently died, apparently from injuries suffered in a fall down a spiral staircase in Pym's office building. An unfinished letter to the head of the firm is found among his papers; it hints that something very wrong is going on at Pym's. The head of the firm, Mr. Pym, decides to hire a detective to investigate this allegation; and, of course, the detective he hires is Sayers's amateur sleuth, Lord Peter Wimsey. Working undercover and using an alias comprised of his two middle names—Death and Bredon—Wimsey is hired as a new employee to take Dean's place at Pym's. He learns the art of writing advertising copy while investigating the circumstances surrounding Dean's death.

However, he learns very early that Dean had led a double life; a respectable advertising writer by day, at night he ran around London with a fast crowd of "Bright Young Things" who party, drink, and take cocaine with the beautiful but corrupt Dian de Momerie. Therefore, Wimsey must enter this world as well. Disguised as a harlequin, he attends a costume ball with the Bright Young Things and attracts the attention of Dian herself, who is bored with booze, drugs, fast cars, and casual sex and itching for a novel experience, one that she hopes the harlequin can provide. For weeks, then, Wimsey too leads a double life: as Death Bredon he writes inane advertising copy by day; and by night, always dressed in his harlequin disguise, he engages in an equally inane flirtation with Dian. Of course, in the end he is successful—fictional detectives always are—and he discovers who murdered Victor Dean. Moreover, with Wimsey's help, his brother-in-law—who is the Chief Inspector at Scotland Yard—catches the key figures in the drug ring that was supplying Dian and her friends with cocaine.

## Dream Cities Compared

The major structural device in *Murder Must Advertise* is the comparison of two social groups, an advertising agency, along with its clients and public audience and a drug trafficking ring with its customers. Superficially, these two groups differ enormously. To the ethically immature, advertising appears morally blameless while drug traffickers and addicts are obviously criminals. Yet Sayers suggests that these two worlds are morally similar. She makes this clear late in the book in a conversation between Lord Wimsey and his Scotland Yard brother-in-law, Charles Parker.

Parker says: "Do you really believe that the head of this particular dope-gang is on Pym's staff? It sounds quite incredible."

Wimsey replies: "That's an excellent reason for believing it. . .The particular crookedness of advertising is so very far removed from the crookedness of dope-trafficking."

Parker responds: "Why? As far as I can make out, all advertisers are dope-merchants."

Wimsey then sees the parallel, saying: "So they are. Yes, now I come to think of it, there is a subtle symmetry about the things which is extremely artistic." (251)

Sayers considers each social world to be a "dream city" or "cardboard world," based on illusions and marked by great shallowness. An analysis of these social groups and a careful comparison of them reveals how they resemble each other as well as what Sayers thought was wrong with the society in which both flourished.

### Advertising: The Dream City of the Day

Sayers's major artistic success in *Murder Must Advertise* is her brilliant presentation of the advertising industry and office life, a world she knew well, for she had worked at a major London advertising agency for nine years. Undoubtedly, her vivid portrayal of this social world made the book popular in the 1930s and is one of its appeals to modern readers. Pym's Publicity, Ltd. is a respected advertising agency that prepares newspaper and magazine ads, neon signs, billboards, and advertising campaigns for such clients as Dairyfields, a manufacturer of butter and margarine, and Whifflets, a cigarette maker. Pym's employs many people, from directors, group managers, and copywriters on down to typists, messenger boys, and cleaning ladies.

Mr. Pym, the head of the firm, subscribes to the Human Relations School of Management, which was popular at the time; it advocated working hard to build employee morale and loyalty to the company. In pursuing these goals Pym gives new employees a pep talk about "Service in Advertising" and organizes various social get-togethers throughout the year. For example, there is a monthly tea party, a twice yearly at-home for the copywriters and artists, an annual garden party for the typists, and even an "Office Boys' Christmas Treat" during the holiday season. In May everyone is invited to a Grand Annual Dinner and Dance. Unfortunately, like many proponents of the Human Relations School, Pym thinks that feel-good activities can substitute for decent salaries; this is why one of his employees has been sucked into the other dream city, the world of drug dealing.

Pym's, like most offices, is full of cliques, jealousies, gossip, and rivalry. The university educated copywriters look down on those who are less well-educated; all the copywriters regard the clients with scorn; and the typists consider the employees above them in the hierarchy to be intellectuals who are out of touch with everyday reality. Like Sayers herself, two or three of Pym's employees even have doubts about the morality of their job. For example, Mr. Ingleby observes early in the novel: "Three years in this soul-searing profession have not yet robbed me of all human feeling. But that will come in time" (9).

### The Drug World: The Dream City of the Night

One of the major artistic flaws of *Murder Must Advertise* is that Sayers's picture of the world of drug dealing and using is less vividly realized and more weakly developed than her portrayal of the world of advertising. She was aware of this weakness and commented in a September 14, 1932 letter to her publisher, "I can't say I 'know dope'" (*Letters, 1899-1936*, 323). Even so, she describes the drug world with enough detail to permit comparison with the advertising world and to advance the development of the novel's theme.

On the surface, the drug world consists of a set of fashionable young Londoners, most of whom have more time and money than they know what to do with. Their social life revolves around the daring and beautiful Dian de Momerie, an "aluminum blond" who dresses stylishly (and provocatively) and leads a life of hedonistic frivolity. She and her pals—"friends" would suggest a deeper relationship than any of these people are capable of—sleep most of the day and play all night, dancing, gambling, drinking, driving fast cars around town, and sleeping with anyone who is available. On Friday and Saturday nights they party at Major Tod Milligan's palatial home on the Thames, a mansion with a lovely rose garden, a pool, statuary, and fountains. At Milligan's parties, alcohol flows freely and erotic entertainment titillates the party-goers, preparing them for amorous encounters in the curtained cubicles Milligan has thoughtfully furnished with couches and mirrors. Milligan appears to be a wealthy retired military officer, but actually he is a drug dealer who receives a cocaine delivery every Thursday to sell to his regular customers at his parties. Behind Milligan, of course, lurk underworld figures who never attend the raucous parties by the river.

### Parallels Between the Dream Cities

The two dream cities, the city of the day and the city of the night, resemble each other in three important ways. First, in both dream cities, a small group of people operates behind the scenes to exploit a much larger group for financial gain. And in both cities intermediaries work on the frontier between the small and large groups. In advertising, the behind the scenes actors are the managers of manufacturing companies that produce goods to sell to the public and retain Pym's to advertise their wares. None of them ever appears directly in *Murder Must Advertise*, but everyone at Pym's who writes advertising copy is acutely aware of their presence because they have well-known preferences. They tend to be a puritanical bunch, who explode in anger if any of Pym's ads can be interpreted sexually or seem to advocate such sins as gambling. However, for the most part, they leave the work of developing advertisements to the professionals at Pym's Publicity, who are the intermediaries between them and their customers.

The major intermediary is Mr. Pym who--as Wimsey observes--“is a man of rigid morality—except, of course, as regards his profession, whose essence is to tell plausible lies for money” (76). That is the major problem with advertising as Sayers sees it—it does not present a factual review of products with information about their features and prices. Rather, it distorts the truth and appeals to the weaknesses of the public in order to sell them products which may or may not live up to the claims made for them. At times, the ads are based on out and out lies; for example, Wimsey is told to write copy for Green Pastures Margarine, stating it is as good as butter. More often, however, the ads lie by implication. For example, Pym’s employees can never state that a product is “pure” because such claims could lead to prosecution by the government; but they are free to suggest purity by using such terms as “highest quality,” or “finest ingredients.” The advertisers also design their text and pictures to appeal to customers’ weaknesses—their snobbery, hypochondria, fear of social stigma, and longing for romance. For instance, they urge people to smoke Whifflets cigarettes because they are smoked by “discriminating men” in such places as “the Royal Yacht Club at Cowes” (34). As a final strategy, they overwhelm the public with advertising; it is everywhere—in the newspapers and on buses, on billboards and in neon signs. There is no escaping it. Ordinary citizens—or, more accurately, consumers—have little understanding of how it is produced or how it affects ordinary people. However, it shapes not only how they live but how they think and what they value. Sayers describes the general public as made up of people who can be easily “bullied or wheedled into spending their few hardly won shillings on whatever might give them, if only for a moment, a leisured and luxurious illusion” (188).

Similarly, the dream city of the drug dealers and users is controlled by a small group of people who remain behind the scenes. Ultimately we meet the king pin, a Mr. Cummins, who runs his drug operation out of a pharmacy. Numerous people work in the shadows for him, including enforcers who spy on the dealers and users and “suppress” (i.e., murder) them if they get out of line. The intermediaries are the people who actually sell cocaine to the addicts, and we meet one of these in the book—Major Tod Milligan. He is not an addict himself, but a relatively clean-cut man who is in the business for the money. He somewhat resembles Mr. Pym; Sayers tells us that Milligan is “blank as to morals but comparatively sober in his habits, as people must be who make money out of other people’s vices” (192). The users are, of course, the much larger group that Milligan and the people higher up in the drug ring exploit for financial gain. Unlike consumers swayed by advertising, the drug users are relatively well informed about how the drug ring operates. They are unable to escape from Milligan and others like him because they have become addicted to cocaine. . .and also because they fear for their lives. In a conversation with Wimsey, Dian de Momerie confides that she hates Milligan and would like to break away from him. However, she can’t because “he’s got the stuff” (157) and she’s afraid of “the people behind him” (158).

A second similarity between the two dream cities is that both are relentlessly materialistic. Advertising “call[s] on the public to save its body and purse” (91), but it never suggests that people develop their minds, hearts, or spirits. Instead, it implies that all problems can be solved by acquiring things. Farley’s Footwear can help a man build his career; Muggins’s Magnolia Face Cream can help a typist attract the man of her dreams; Sopo cleaning products can provide the weary housewife with time to relax at the movies. Advertising also constantly urges people to buy more things and to try new products. Its not so subtle message is: “Never be satisfied. If

once you are satisfied, all our wheels will run down. Keep going—and if you can't, try Nutrax for Nerves!" (91). The logic of the economic system demands more and more purchasing of things because, as Mr. Pym explains, "Whether people like it or not, the fact remains that unless you continually increase sales you must either lose money or cut down quality" (282). The extent to which Mr. Pym is dominated by the desire to make money rather than by concern for his employees is revealed toward the end of the novel when Wimsey tells him that a dope-ring is operating out of his business.

"Here's the brutal fact," Wimsey said. "Someone's running an enormous dope-traffic from this office. Who is there that has far more money than he ought to have, Mr. Pym? We're looking for a very rich man. Can you help us?"  
But Mr. Pym was past helping anybody. He was chalk white.  
"Dope? From this office? What on earth will our clients say? How shall I face the Board? The publicity. . . ." (286)

In short, materialism overrides every other value.

In "that other dream city—the city of dreadful night" (189), the world of drug dealing and abuse-materialism is also the major value. The top figures in the dope-ring are, like the manufacturers and Mr. Pym, motivated by a desire for money, and lots of it. They will do anything to obtain it. They will lie, smuggle, steal, ruin young lives, and even murder to protect their profitable enterprise. Nothing else matters to them, as Major Milligan indicates toward the end of the novel when he tells Wimsey: "I think you'll find it to your advantage to listen." "Financial advantage?" asks Wimsey. "What other kind is there?" the Major replies (240).

Money, however, is not the major value of the drug addicts, who are already extremely wealthy. They revel in another form of materialism—sensuality. They are pleasure seekers, and they seek it even though they are risking both their health and their lives in doing so. Like consumers swayed by advertisements to buy more and more goods they do not need and cannot afford, the Bright Young Things seek greater and greater pleasures, more and more thrills. While dancing at one of the many parties she attends, Dian de Momerie ruminates:

My God! I'm bored. . . . Money, tons of money. . . .but I'm bored. . . .I'm sick of everything. . . .wonder where the Harlequin man went to. . . .I think he could give me a thrill. . . ." (90)

Here, too, materialism overrides every other value.

Finally, the dream cities resemble each other because on the surface they deny the ultimate earthly reality—death—even though at a deeper level they are agents of death. Pym's Publicity officially denies the existence of death. None of its clients produce goods associated with dying or funerals; and, needless to say, none of its advertisements ever mention the end of life. Sayers makes this omission explicit toward the end of the novel when she describes the Whifflet Campaign Wimsey has developed. In this campaign, Whifflets' Cigarettes offers a coupon in every package which, when combined with the required number of additional coupons, can be used to purchase train tickets, nights in hotels, wedding cakes, photographs, furniture, and far, far

more. Sayers writes: “[T]he Whifflet Campaign is and remains the outstanding example of Thinking Big in Advertising. The only thing you cannot get by Whiffing is a coffin; it is not admitted that any Whiffler could ever require such an article” (266). No amount of denial can prevent death, however, and it is significant that the first chapter is entitled “Death Comes to Pym’s Publicity.” The title has a double meaning; it refers to the recent death of Victor Dean in Pym’s office building and also to the arrival of Peter Wimsey under alias “Death Bredon.” No amount of advertising fluff can indefinitely obscure the fact that death awaits us all.

Pym’s Publicity not only denies death; it also contributes to the intellectual and spiritual death of those who write advertisements and those who are influenced by them. Successful ads are based on half truths, lies, and stereotypical thinking. They create illusions and intrude into private lives with callous questions like: “Are you troubled with Fullness after Eating?” and “Do you ever ask yourself about Body-Odour?” (65). Over time they lead to intellectual superficiality and spiritual insensitivity. Sayers summarizes the murderous impact of advertising in these words:

[At Pym’s] the spiritual atmosphere was clamorous with financial storm, intrigue, dissension, indigestion and marital infidelity. And with worse things—with murder wholesale and retail, of soul and body, murder by weapons and by poison. These things did not advertise, or, if they did, they called themselves by other names. (293)

Similarly, the Bright Young Things who party regularly at Milligan’s mansion deny death. They engage in many activities that could lead to an early death. . .and, indeed, their mortality rate is high. However, they push such gloomy thoughts aside and refuse to face reality. For example, when Wimsey points out to Dian that her last three boyfriends have met untimely ends—one from excessive drinking, one from suicide, and one in an apparent accident—she brushes his statement aside, saying, “I couldn’t help that. . . .That wasn’t anything to do with me” (155). In contrast, the leading figures in the drug ring do not deny death at all; rather, they use it as a threat and a tool to keep their underlings in line. Their enforcers know many ways to kill: they push superfluous people under subway trains, run them down with trucks, or slit their throats. But like the advertisers they also kill the minds, hearts, and spirits of those who populate their world. Dian de Momerie and Tod Milligan are the chief examples in the novel of people who are spiritually dead, unable to love or to find real meaning in life beyond having fun and making money. As Chief Inspector Parker summarizes: “Dope-runners are murderers, fifty times over. They slay hundreds of people, soul and body, besides indirectly causing all sorts of crimes among the victims” (252).

### Sayers’s Moral Vision in 1932

When Sayers wrote *Murder Must Advertise*, she was a well-instructed Christian laywoman on the threshold of her fortieth birthday; she certainly possessed the intellectual and spiritual maturity necessary to assess the condition of the society she lived in. She recognized it as a world that had moved a long way from the ideals of a Christian society. Like Eliot, she saw it as a spiritual desert populated by people who filled their emptiness with fun and shopping in a desperate attempt to hide the meaninglessness of their lives. However, in this novel she not only describes people’s behavior but moves toward an analysis of the problem.

To Sayers, the root problem in her society was philosophical materialism, a theme she had addressed in her fiction from the very beginning. Indeed, in her first murder mystery, *Whose Body?*, a major clue to the identity of the murderer is an article he had published, explaining that all human behavior is caused by chemical reactions. After reading the article, Lord Peter—who must have read Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*—realized that a person who held such views would be capable of doing almost anything. However, *Murder Must Advertise* differs in a significant way from the earlier novels; in them Sayers depicted individuals as materialistic, but in *Murder Must Advertise* she depicts British society as a whole that way. Of course, none of the characters in the later novel is a philosophical materialist, and certainly neither Mr. Pym nor Major Milligan has ever written an article explaining his views. But virtually all of the characters in the novel can be considered “vulgar materialists”—that is to say, they have absorbed the materialist worldview piecemeal from the surrounding popular culture, from books and newspapers, from radio programs, from advertising, and from the education they received as children. They do not hold the philosophy in a coherent manner and their beliefs are often contradictory, but they have clearly learned that people and their actions do not matter much because ultimately the world we can see and hear is all that exists. This is why the Bright Young Things devote their time and money to sensual pleasures; it is why the manufacturing executives and advertisers twist the truth to sell products; and it is also why the leaders of the drug-ring casually kill people who know too much.

In *Murder Must Advertise*, Sayers portrays the situation and advances some ideas about how her materialistic society works. She depicts in brilliant detail one of the modern institutions that exploits the emptiness of the wasteland by manipulating people--advertising. But, of course, there are many others, and she largely ignores them. However, in Chapter XII she briefly touches on another, the modern press. She tells the story of a young reporter returning from his coverage of an early morning fire, proud of the “snap, pep, and human interest” (205) he had included in his article, especially his interview with the cat who had awakened the night watchman when she smelled the fire. In fact, he had come up with the “brilliant inspiration” (205) to purchase the heroic cat’s imminent litter of kittens and to suggest that his newspaper use them as part of a publicity stunt. In short, he was proud of emphasizing the trivial and the shallow because that is what appealed to the paper’s readers. Sayers touches even more briefly on the use of advertising techniques to manipulate the public politically when, in the string of advertising slogans that ends the book she tucks a political ad in among the advertizing for beer, oatmeal, and soups. It runs: “Vote for Punkin and Protect your Profits” (356). However, she doesn’t develop these ideas in any depth; they remain hints, hints of themes she will explore in her later work.

#### Foreshadowings of Work to Come

*Murder Must Advertise* was almost the last of Sayers’s twelve detective novels. Published ninth, it was actually conceptualized and written tenth, since Sayers had already written much of *The Nine Tailors* when she put it aside to produce what she thought of as a “pot-boiler” to meet the requirements of her contract with her publisher. Only *Gaudy Night* and *Busman’s Honeymoon* came after it, and *Busman’s Honeymoon* was a successful stage play before Sayers adapted it as a novel. Once her royalties for her mysteries had reached a sufficient level to support her family, she turned to the writing she really wanted to do: plays, especially plays on religious themes;

essays on the Christian faith and the society in which she lived; and the translation of *The Divine Comedy* along with a substantial body of literary criticism about Dante's work. In her later writing she develops many of the themes that emerged in *Murder Must Advertise*. These include the materialism of contemporary society, the problem of work, the narrowing of the Christian understanding of morality, and the ways that the corruption of the means of exchange lead to the increasing corruption of society as a whole.

Although Sayers never ceased to consider her society materialistic, her understanding of the materialism of her day became more sophisticated with the passage of time. Eventually she came to believe that "false economics" was the basic cause of the problem and thought that Western societies had been "madly turning" in an "appalling squirrel cage of economic confusion" since the seventeenth century ("Why Work?", 90). The result was a system based on "glut and waste" ("Why Work?", 94) in which most people were condemned to spend much of their lives working at meaningless jobs that enabled them to put food on their tables but provided no intellectual, aesthetic, or spiritual satisfaction. Indeed, her conviction that work should be meaningful and a true vocation in the spiritual sense of that word is a theme in much of Sayers's later writing. This idea is an important subtheme in *Gaudy Night*; the central theme in her first religious play, *The Zeal of Thy House*; and the subject of several talks and essays produced during World War II. Sayers feared, though,--as it turned out, with good reason--that after the war people would "again be bamboozled by. . . vanity, indolence, and greed into keeping the squirrel cage of wasteful economy turning" ("Why Work?", 97).

As a Christian Sayers believed that the churches had been complicit in the development of the economic squirrel cage, for over time they had reduced and distorted Christian moral teachings. In the Middle Ages, Christians had understood that there were seven deadly sins: Pride, Envy, Avarice, Sloth, Anger, Lust, and Gluttony ("The Other Six Deadly Sins," 154). But as the economic squirrel cage developed, Christians focused increasingly on Lust and Gluttony, ignoring the other five sins. They redefined *immorality* to mean *sexual immorality* and also fixated on drinking, smoking, and other forms of Gluttony as the major sins. Eager to condemn the sins of the flesh (which impeded the smooth functioning of the new industrial economic system), they preferred not to comment on such sins as financial fraud, charging excessive interest, or admiring rich people simply because they were rich (sins that were embedded in the economic system and encouraged by it). In short, they "acquiesc[ed] in a social system based upon Envy and Avarice" ("Why Work?", 90).

Eventually Sayers came to believe, through reading the work of Charles Williams and Dante, that much of the corruption in modern society derives from the corruption of the means of exchange, particularly that central means of exchange, language. Advertising appears again in her most mature work: the commentaries included in her translations of *The Divine Comedy* and her essays on Dante. Not surprisingly, given Sayers's views, advertisers are found rather far down in Dante's Hell—in the Eighth Circle with the Panders, Seducers, and Flatterers, where "all the media of the community's exchange are perverted and falsified" (*Hell*, 185). Sayers tells her readers:

Dante did not live to see the full development of political propaganda, commercial

advertising, and sensational journalism, but he has prepared a place for them. (*Hell*, 185-186)

Here and in her essay, “The City of Dis,” she handles the themes she had explored rather superficially in *Murder Must Advertise* with the wisdom and moral intelligence of a mature Christian thinker.

In the final analysis, *Murder Must Advertise* is a sparkling, witty entertainment with a dark and serious side. It portrays the modern social wasteland and provides some rudimentary analysis of what was going wrong in the society Sayers knew, but ultimately it does not fully come to grips with the problems. It does, however, reveal that Sayers was beginning to handle the themes that would dominate her mature work.

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