

## The Evolution of the Seven Deadly Sins: From God to the Simpsons

Lisa Frank

I can personally attest that the seven deadly sins are still very much with us. Today, I have committed each of them, several more than once, before my lunch hour even began. Here is my schedule of sin (judge me if you will):

- 7:00 - I pressed the snooze button three times before dragging myself out of bed. *Sloth.*
- 7:11 - I took an obscenely long, hot shower with no consideration for my sister, with whom I live. (Don't even bother mentioning the ecological implications.) *Greed.*
- 7:52 - I noticed a pool of cat vomit on the floor and chose to ignore it, knowing that my sister would dutifully clean it up. *Sloth.*
- 8:22 - I gave someone the finger after they cut me off in traffic. *Wrath.*
- 8:33 - I helped myself to two complementary pastries at the office meeting (although I had breakfast only an hour before). *Gluttony.*
- 8:42 - I flirted with the guy next to me, ignoring the speaker to whom I was supposed to be listening. *Lust.*
- 10:04 - I ignored someone's incessant knocking on the door of the only restroom in the building where I work in order to spend more time putting on makeup in front of the mirror. *Pride.*
- 10:42 - I lied and told a homeless person that I didn't have any change. *Sloth.*
- 11:02 - I purposely got to class early so that I could take another student's usual seat, which was much better than mine. *Envy.*
- 11:27 - I lied and told someone that I got an A on a paper, when in actuality, I only got a B. *Pride.*
- 11:49 - I took three free movie passes, although the sign said to only take one. *Covetousness.*

Relatively speaking, I am an average person who commits an average number of the deadly sins each day, give or take a sin. I am not particularly malicious in my sinning, but it would be untrue to say that they are committed for righteous purposes, either. I am human; therefore, I

sin. A lot. As early Christian doctrine repeatedly points out, the seven deadly sins are so deeply rooted in our fallen human nature, that not only are they almost completely unavoidable, but like a proverbial bag of potato chips, we can never seem to limit ourselves to just one. With this ideology, modern society agrees. However, with regard to the individual and social effects of the consequences of these sins, we do not.

The deadly sins of seven were identified, revised, and revised again in the heads and classrooms of reportedly celibate monks as moral and philosophical lessons taught in an effort to arm men and women against the temptations of sin and vice in the battle for their souls. These teachings were quickly reflected in the literature, theater, art, and music of that time and throughout the centuries to follow. Today, they remain popular motifs in those media, as well as having made the natural progression into film and television. Every day and every hour, acts of gluttony, lust, covetousness, envy, pride, wrath, and sloth are portrayed on television. Social ethics have shifted dramatically since those early days, as has our regard for the seven deadly sins. With the possible exception of our presidents, we no longer struggle to fight our natural tendency to commit these sins. Instead, we have chosen not only to accept them, but also to embrace them and even to use them to our advantage.

### The History

The seven deadly sins were first discussed as separate entities throughout the scriptures of the Bible. Later, the sins were developed into self-help guides by the early theologians and moralists, as a means to save the souls of their local rubes from the decay of immorality and to teach them some basic manners. They believed that those who were morally and ethically superior (i.e., monks) were happier human beings and, generally, better company. The goal was to teach men and women how to control their behavior, so that their inner virtue would dominate their wrongful tendencies toward sex, wine, and song, therefore guiding them toward the path of magnetic stepford-like happiness.

Although the seven deadly sins were originally classified as "capital" in the fourth century by some lesser known monastics, it was the final alterations made in the early sixth century by Gregory the Great, (who was so great that he was later made a saint), that led society to regard him as the final and true compiler. Gregory was also noted for making two important points: 1) that pride is the root of all sin; and 2) that there is a distinction between the sins of the spirit (pride, envy, wrath, sloth, and greed) and the sins of the flesh (lust and gluttony). However, much to the dismay of his fellow Christians, St. Greg failed to include a top ten list of examples for each or any of the seven deadly sins.

In the thirteenth century, the well known, anally obsessive St. Thomas Aquinas devised the most methodical and concise analysis of sin, virtue, and vice written (that did not, however, include the name Monica Lewinsky) in his three volume series, *Summa Theologiae*. His teachings were then translated from the abstractness of theology into a more accommodating language suited to the common man (much the same service that *Reader's Digest* performs today). By applying his teachings to everyday life situations, Christians were taught practical methods for overcoming temptation. To further the cause, these teachings were then enumerated into classic literature, so they could be casually name dropped at all the VIP, socially-elite cocktail parties of the day (and for centuries to follow). These titles included Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy*, Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, and John Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

In modern society, we have accepted our fate as sinning machines. We have taken what the Christians regarded as vices that harmed humanity and turned them into virtues that aid mankind. We have come to understand the power that each of these vices holds and how it can make us happier and stronger people. Advertising agencies and marketing firms know this and have taken full advantage of it, selling each of the seven deadly sins in record numbers and encouraging us to work with what we've got (while still holding focus groups on the development of sins eight, nine, and ten).

#### *The Simpsons*

Since it was created in the late 1980s, *The Simpsons* has continued to parody all facets of American culture with honesty and with humor. From our daily mundane activities to key events in world news, it mirrors our society in a dark and distorted light, usually with great insight, and always in jest. Perhaps the most brilliant aspect of the show is its uncompromising boldness in addressing the various hypocrisies of our culture in a way that no other show has ever dared to do before, including those of the seven deadly sins. And so without further delay, I present...

#### The Seven Deadly Sins

##### *Pride*

[T]hat first archetype  
Of pride, and paragon of all creation  
Who, of the light impatient, fell unripe.

—*The Divine Comedy* 46-49, 402

According to the cloistered Christian monks of long ago, pride is the mother of all capital sin. Not only that, but it is said to prompt each of the other sins, as well as being present in them. Robert Broderick's *The Catholic Encyclopedia* defines pride as the "inordinate desire for honor, recognition, and distinction" (490-91). It is the result of a lack of humility and inevitably develops into a self-love, which becomes sinful when it causes insubordination, especially to God, who like Santa Claus, watches our every move. In the second part of Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, Dante and his guide, Virgil, enter Mount Purgatory and talk with the souls they meet about the sins the souls have committed during their lives. They learn that in order to get to heaven, the souls must first cleanse themselves of their past sins by performing a corresponding penance. The first souls Dante and Virgil meet are those who have committed the sin of pride. In bewilderment, they watch as the souls are taught the evil of their ways by carrying heavy stones on their backs as a means to lessen their spirits.

In modern society, pride is not just considered a positive trait, but one of absolute necessity. In each aspect of our lives, from our careers to our romantic relationships, we are made to sell ourselves. Pride in our appearance has become increasingly important in modern times. We spend thousands of dollars on clothing, hair products, makeup, plastic surgery, and gym memberships in an effort to improve our image and the probability of being selected as a contestant in the next installment of *Survivor*. In an episode of *The Simpsons* entitled "Simpson and Delilah," our growing fixation with outer appearance is delineated when Homer commits insurance fraud in order to buy a one thousand dollar bottle of miracle hair growth formula. Instead of being punished for his sin of pride, Homer grows a full head of hair, his love life soars, and he lands a promotion.

We are also taught to take pride in our endeavors, especially in our regard for sports. In an episode entitled "Lisa On Ice," Bart and Lisa are on opposing teams in a hockey tournament. The spirited Homer tells Marge: "It's your child versus mine! The winner will be showered with praise, the loser will be taunted and booed until my throat is sore." Such pride in mere athletic achievement would surely not have been understood by St. Thomas Aquinas.

##### *Envy*

The infernal serpent; he it was, whose guile  
Stirred up with envy and revenge, deceived  
The mother of mankind.

—*Paradise Lost*, Book I, 34-36

In his book, *The Seven Deadly Sins*, Solomon Schimmel defines envy as "the pain we feel when we perceive another individual possessing some object, quality, or status we do not possess" (57). This pain may cause feelings of inadequacy in us, which, in turn, may lead us to wish or even to cause the loss of what is envied. As with wrath, envy not only has the power to fully consume our consciousness, but worse yet, it makes us buy sport utility vehicles when we live in well-paved cities.

In Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Satan is a character afflicted with the sin of pride, who refuses to pay homage to God. After leading a rebellion of the angels, he is cast out of heaven by God and is sent down to hell, where he plots his revenge—the temptation of Adam and Eve. In Books I and II, the seven deadly sins are presented individually by seven delegate speakers, each representing the embodiment of their vice. Envy is represented by Satan's Ed McMahon, Beelzebub, who only feels joy in another's tragedy and feels pain when others are happy. The reader is shown the immorality of Beelzebub's envious nature that motivates him to advise the council to seek revenge against God.

In modern society, we view envy not only as a natural emotion, but also as a tool that helps further us toward self-improvement. Without envy, there would be no competition, and without competition we might lose the motivation to spend our life savings on the Jenny Craig program in an effort to ensure that we always look better than our friends and neighbors. In an episode of *The Simpsons* entitled "Lisa's Rival," Lisa, the token overachiever, becomes envious of a new student, Allison Taylor, who begins to outshine Lisa. At the end of the episode, the guilt-ridden Lisa apologizes for resorting to unscrupulous, Bart-like tactics in an effort to discredit Allison in a science project competition. However, Allison tells Lisa that if it weren't for their mutual envy and competitiveness, neither of them would have cause to work toward their maximum capacity. Thus, envy is shown to be a device that brings us closer toward achievement and success.

### Wrath

I was angry with my friend;  
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.  
I was angry with my foe:  
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

And I water'd it in fears,  
Night & Morning with my tears;  
And I sunned it with smiles,

And with soft deceitful wiles.

—William Blake, "A Poison Tree,"

*Selected Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (1-8)

Wrath, also referred to as anger, also referred to as my personal favorite emotion, is a milieu of pain and pleasure that arises in our human existence when a person believes he or she has been unjustly wronged. Pain is received in reaction to the wrongful injury and pleasure is taken in the sweet taste of vengeance. Picture this: I go outside to have a much needed meditational moment and a cigarette. First, pain is experienced when my moment is interrupted by the endless, high-pitched screams of the monster children next door, jumping up and down on their inflatable trampoline. Then, pleasure is received when I imagine what might result when I toss my still-burning cigarette over the fence in their direction.

Moloch, the embodiment of wrath (much like his modern counterpart, Dirty Harry), is the third delegate speaker in *Paradise Lost*. He is persistent in his argument for a large scale war against God's angels in the War in Heaven in Book VI. Later, though, we see the perils of his nature as his wrath diminishes to fear and cowardice as he is stricken by Gabriel's sword.

Today, from *Sesame Street* to the *Jerry Springer Show*, we are taught the importance of expressing our anger and are urged to not let it be bottled up inside ourselves, but rather to vent and to express to others exactly what we're feeling. The effects of bottling up one's anger are presented in an episode of *The Simpsons* entitled "Hurricane Neddy," featuring Homer Simpson's neighbor and friendly Christian, Ned Flanders. When Ned's house is demolished in a hurricane and his specialty store for the left-handed is looted, he becomes unable to control his emotions and checks himself into the same mental hospital that he was committed to as a child. After observing Ned, a doctor renders his opinion that Ned's anger stems from the inferior therapy he received as a child, when he was urged to suppress his anger, rather than to express it constructively. Unlike Moloch, Ned could have averted his downfall, had he been taught to vent properly in the first place.

### Lust

But virtue, as it never will be moved,  
Though lewdness court it in a shape of heaven,  
So lust, though to a radiant angel link'd,

Will sate itself in a celestial bed,  
And prey on garbage.

—Hamlet, Act I, Scene V, 54-58

Lust was referred to by the uptight celibates of early Christianity as an unnecessary, excessive, and irrational feeling that ultimately leads to the committing of various unmentionable acts (all of which, of course, the monks were forbidden to participate). The Early Christians tried desperately to tame the hideous beasts that they believed their bodies to be, yet these efforts inevitably proved unsuccessful. For ultimately, the beast was always unleashed. Quite simply, they believed mankind is made to honor God with the body and to exercise self control. Should man fail and be spotted in a raincoat at a special showing of *Deep Throat*, he will develop an excessive attachment to the material sexual world and will, eventually, fall down the path of madness.

In the second book of *The Divine Comedy*, the reader is shown the consequences of the sin of lust. In Canto XXV, these sinners are punished by being purged in flames (at a time when being flaming did not involve pink feather boas or an excessive love of musicals).

In modern society, we embrace feelings of lust and revel in the energy and excitement it brings to our lives (hopefully over and over again). We all want to feel sexy and we have accepted our nature as condom-carrying, desire machines, who have long since lost control of the lust we feel. In *The Simpsons*, the notion of socially acceptable lust is conveyed in the nonchalant depictions of an affair between the elementary school principal, Seymour Skinner and teacher, Edna Krabapple; the contemplation of extramarital affairs by both Homer and his wife, Marge; and the casual confession of one-night stands that led to bastard children by both town villain, Mr. Burns, and Homer's senior citizen father, Abe. Even though the Christian Right will never confer, lust has come to be regarded as a desirable attribute for people of all ages and social positions.

### Gluttony

And by his side rode loathsome Gluttony,  
Deformed creature, on a filthie swyne.  
His belly was up-blowne with luxury,  
And eke with fatness swollen were his eyne;

—*The Faerie Queene*, Book I, Canto IV, Stanza 21

According to *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, gluttony is "the inordinate longing for or the indulgence in food or drink" (241). So, you see, the pleasure that we seek from scarfing down an entire carton of Ben and Jerry's ice cream or getting wasted at family weddings reflects a weakness of our reason and will and defies God's intention for us. Therefore, it is considered a sin. Allowing our bodies to become unhealthy by the excess of fried chicken and Ding-Dongs is also sinful, since according to Christianity, we are meant to preserve ourselves in order to better serve God (who, by their own account, is ultimately responsible for the creation of fried chicken and Ding-Dongs in the first place). Worse yet, early Christians believed that the pursuit of these pleasures can lead to the committing of other sins, such as lying or stealing in order to fulfill our craving.

These notions are conveyed by the pardoner in one of Chaucer's twenty-four short dramatic stories included in the *Canterbury Tales*. These stories, written as separate tales told by separate narrators on a pilgrimage to the Canterbury Cathedral, were meant to entertain and to provide moral lessons, including those of the seven deadly sins, for the fictional men and women en route to Canterbury. It is thus that the Pardoner discourages sins of gluttony by creatively linking food and drink with decay. He says:

O thou belly! Stinking pod  
Of dung and foul corruption, that canst send  
Thy filthy music forth at either end. (264)

Gluttony may not make us better people (though it may certainly make us bigger people), but nothing makes us happier than food or drink, with the possible exception of sex. In a segment of *The Simpsons* entitled "The Devil and Homer Simpson," Homer demonstrates our inordinate love for food when he sells his soul to the devil for a donut. Our love for drink is equally well presented in the tales of the family Simpson. One of the popular tourist attractions in Springfield, the fictional town where the Simpsons live, is Duff Gardens, which features rides and attractions that "either promote alcohol consumption or simulate inebriation" (Groening 23).

### Covetousness

the nature of man, which coveth divination, thinks it no peril to foretell that which indeed they do but collect.

—Bacon 780, XXXV

Covetousness, a.k.a. avarice or greed (which makes it sound bad), is referred to in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* as "the inordinate love of temporal or earthly things" (59). It is a perversion of right values of when we fail to recognize that we really don't need yet another Ginsu knife in our collection, but, nonetheless, we still find ourselves maxing out our credit cards in order to buy it.

In Chaucer's *The Pardoner's Tale*, the sin of covetousness is depicted in the portrayal of three greedy gamblers who swear eternal friendship to one another in God's name. We are shown the evil that greed leads to after they lie, cheat, and kill one another for a measly pot of tattered gold.

It may well be argued that coveting is the one thing all of mankind does well. Let's face it, we're a culture of coveting whores. We are all so proud of our vast CD collections, our matching shoes and sweaters, our tattoos, and our wide-screen TV's. In *The Simpsons*, our tendency to covet is parodied in their elaborate array of specialty stores in Springfield, including All Creatures Great and Cheap (specializing in freeze-dried pets that come to life when watered), and Corpulent Cowboy (for the plus-sized cowboy enthusiast).

In an episode appropriately entitled "Bart Gets Hit By a Car," the current societal trend of filing frivolous lawsuits is depicted perfectly. After Bart is hit by Mr. Burns' car, Homer takes advantage of the situation and sues Mr. Burns for a million dollars, although Bart remains virtually unscathed. Such ludicrous greed can only surely be laughed at . . . or so, we can only hope.

### Sloth

If something's hard to do, then it's not worth doing.

—Homer Simpson, *The Simpsons*, "The Otto Show"

*The Maryknoll Catholic Dictionary* refers to sloth as "the disinclination to spiritual action" that "leads to tepidity in keeping God's law, the desire for that which is forbidden, faint-heartedness and despair of salvation" (538). Translation—sloth equals laziness. St. Thomas Aquinas, who apparently never had a lover to spend Sunday mornings in bed with, argued that because it is our duty to serve God, a refusal to do so is a sinful denial of the purpose of our existence. In canto XVIII of Dante's *Purgatory*, the reader is presented with the ultimate fate of those who commit sins of sloth. The sinners on Mount Purgatory are absolved of their sins by running swiftly up the mountain and proclaiming expressions of zeal (much like high school cheerleaders do today).

In modern society, mankind's tendency to move toward the realm of sloth is most notably present in the creation of the almighty remote control. Without our natural inclination toward sloth, we would actually have to get ourselves up from the couch or risk watching the fifteenth episode of *The Brady Bunch* marathon. If we weren't slothful, cars, fax machines, and Prozac might never have been invented. Then, where would we be? We would actually be forced to walk the two blocks to our local McDonald's, to talk with one another face to face (oh my God, the anxiety that brings us), and to deal with our emotions on our own.

In *The Simpsons*, our social indifference for the ill effects of sloth is most strongly parodied in Homer, who holds the record as the employee who has worked the most years in an entry level position at the plant where he works. In an episode entitled "The PTA Disbands," he says to Lisa: "if you don't like your job you don't strike. You just go in every day and do it really half-assed. That's the American way." Perhaps the best example of Homer's weakness toward sloth is in an episode entitled "King-Sized Homer," where, in order to avoid working, he decides to boost his weight up to 300 pounds so that he will be eligible for disability. Who knows? If disability were around when St. Thomas Aquinas was alive, maybe he would have been tempted, too.

Human nature hasn't changed much since the first century and thankfully, the seven deadly sins are still very much alive and well today, providing endless material for contemporary writers and artists. The only difference is that now we work with our vices instead of against them, not only accepting them as the core of who we are and what is natural within us, but also as a measure of what we're capable of. It's a way of coming full circle, if you will, in mankind's understanding of sin. In time, as social ethics continue to evolve, the notion of the seven deadly sins may ultimately surrender to being a mere relic of the past. Consequently, it will be interesting to see how the artistic and fictional depictions of pride, envy, wrath, lust, covetousness, gluttony, and sloth will, then, further evolve. Stay tuned.

### Note

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