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Pride, Sloth, and Lust: A Specific Look at Dante's Use of the  
Seven Cardinal Sins in *Purgatorio*

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## Abstract

The *Divina Commedia* (1308-1321) has been hailed as one of the greatest and most influential literary works in history, and one of the characteristics that puts it in the annals of time is Dante's mastery of Catholic theological ideals, especially the Seven Cardinal Sins, his artistry in portraying them, and his mix of unique and traditional depictions. Dante utilizes both traditional and unique artistic aspects of the Seven Cardinal Sins to provide both structure and to put moral messages in his greatest work, but in order to be aware of Dante's deep understanding of the Sins and how he shapes them to his use, a reader should understand the similarities and differences between the general views of the Sins and the view presented by Dante in *Purgatorio*. Although some of the Sins are also found in *Inferno*, not all of them can be found, and they are not used to provide structure as in *Purgatorio*. The first section of this thesis looks at the evolution of the Sins as can be discerned through academic research by tracing key moments beginning with the origins until the Sins became incorporated into Catholic theology. The second section discusses the influence of the Sins throughout Catholic Europe during the medieval ages. The third section discusses the metaphysical philosophy of the Sins given in *Purgatorio*, which includes what they are, where they come from, and what to do about them, and compares it to other possible philosophies of the Sins. The last section analyzes a few allegories used to strengthen the portrayal of the Sins in the cornices of Pride, Sloth, and Lust, which are used to represent the three categories of misdirected love. The combination of these four aspects of the Sins and *Purgatorio* allows the reader to achieve a greater understanding of Dante's mastery of the concept of the Sins in *Purgatorio*.

Pride, Sloth, and Lust: A Specific Look at Dante's Use of the  
Seven Cardinal Sins in *Purgatorio*

In the past twenty years or so, extensive research on the Seven Cardinal Sins has tapered off. The most thoroughly researched work was written in 1952 by Morton W. Bloomfield, *The Seven Deadly Sins*. In the late 1960s he was followed by Siegfried Wenzel, who wrote a few articles about the Sins, one which disagrees on some points of Bloomfield's, and one dealing with Dante's rationale for using the Sins, "Dante's Rationale for the Seven Deadly Sins (*Purgatorio*, XVII)," which gives a brief look at Dante's possible reasoning for using the Sins. In Dante studies, a plethora of books and articles have been written about every aspect of the *Divina Commedia*, but most only touch on the subject of the Cardinal Sins as a whole. Some, such as Richard Abrams's "Inspiration and Gluttony: The Moral Context of Dante's Poetics of the 'Sweet New Style'" and Joseph Pequigney's "Sodomy in Dante's Inferno and Purgatorio," delve into the details of one, possibly two, of the Sins in *Purgatorio*. Few scholars deal with the entire *Divina Commedia* because, even though the entire three-poem work represents the pilgrim Dante's journey through hell (*Inferno*), purgatory (*Purgatorio*), and heaven (*Paradiso*), each section stands as its own work with unique attributes. This thesis aims to narrow the gap, if only modestly, between the broad, general research of the Sins that briefly mentions Dante and the narrow, focused research that deals only with one of the Sins, by combining a concise summary of the possible origins of the Sins along with their evolution, the context of the use of the Sins in medieval Italy, Dante's philosophy of the Sins as seen in *Purgatorio*, and a brief evaluation of the portrayal of the Sins through looking at the allegories used in the cornices, separate levels (terraces) for each Sin, of

the proud, the slothful, and the lustful. These four sections should give the reader greater understanding of the delicate balance between artistry and accurate explanations found in *Purgatorio*.

*Historical Background: Prior to Dante*

There is a difference between the Seven *Deadly* Sins and the Seven *Cardinal* Sins. This basic difference is that “deadly” implies damnation of a person’s soul, while “cardinal” simply means the chief, or most important, sins. The distinction has been blurred throughout history,<sup>1</sup> but there is still a difference between the origins and purpose of these two terms.<sup>2</sup> In fact, according to Morton W. Bloomfield,<sup>3</sup> “the term ‘deadly sins’ is rarely, if at all, applied to the cardinal sins before the 14<sup>th</sup> century” (44). The author Dante demonstrates an understanding between the two when Od’risi, one of the proud, tells the pilgrim Dante, “Nor would I have been / among these souls, had I not turned to God / while I still had in me the power to sin” (XI 88-90).<sup>4</sup> The author Dante uses other instances to further display the difference between those in *Inferno* (hell) and those in *Purgatorio* when other characters reiterate that they had come to Christ before death, but in different terms. Bloomfield thinks the main reason for the confusion began when the

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<sup>1</sup> Because of this confusion, many scholars now use the two terms interchangeably, so throughout this paper, some sources may say “deadly” in place of “cardinal.”

<sup>2</sup> Morton W. Bloomfield, in his book, *The Seven Deadly Sins*. East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 1952., gives a more in-depth look into the details of the origins of both and how they have been confused. He traces the origins of both the Deadly and the Cardinal Sins, and also discusses how they have been confused throughout time.

<sup>3</sup> Morton W. Bloomfield and Siegfried Wenzel will be frequently referenced throughout this paper because they are two of the most thorough and recent authorities dealing with the Seven Sins. Bonnie Kent, "The Moral Life." *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Philosophy*. Ed. A. S. McGrade. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003., refers to them as being “Classic studies” in her endnotes (252).

<sup>4</sup> John Ciardi’s translation will be used because of his accurate translation and close keeping with the poetic style, which is important because part of the beauty of *Purgatorio* stems from Dante’s blending of accurate information with artistry.

Catholic Church started to convert pagans; because the new converts did not have the same moral standards as the Church, in order to aid the laymen in their confessions, the Church gave them a list of the “worst” sins (43, 57). According to the Catholic tradition, a person has to confess all his sins in order to receive true absolution from them. Dante continues the tradition of confession according to Catholicism when he uses the Paternoster<sup>5</sup> in the terrace of the Proud and the Beatitudes on every level.

Two popular theories of Bloomfield and Wenzel help to establish the possible origins of the Sins. However, debate and speculation have never ceased about the true origins of the Sins, because none of the origins can be definitively proven. But the origins, no matter which theory is given, demonstrate that the Sins began because people knew that certain sins were more problematic in human society. Bloomfield believes that the Sins began as part of a Hellenistic Soul Journey. The main idea of the Soul Journey is that before a person is born, his or her soul passes through seven or eight levels from heaven to earth where the soul picks up certain attributes as it descends. When the person dies, his or her soul ascends to heaven, during which it returns the attributes to their respective levels (16). The idea of a cleansing of the Sins could have started from this idea, which eventually led to the Catholic practice of using the Sins for confession. Wenzel, however, suggests that the Sins, in reference to the original eight of Evagrius, were taken “from biblical texts and Alexandrian commentary, without denying possible influences from Gnosticism or Stoicism” (2). Whichever argument is true, the fact remains that the Sins, no matter their indistinguishable origins, made their way into Christian theology and, eventually, into *Purgatorio*.

Fortunately, Bloomfield and Wenzel are able to agree on at least the identity of

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<sup>5</sup> The Paternoster is the recitation of the Lord’s Prayer, especially in Latin.

the “father of the Seven Deadly Sins.” He is Evagrius Pontus (345-399), a hermit in Egypt who is thought to have later started teaching Gnostic ideas to monks. He created a list of Sins which a monk had to fight on a daily basis, but he did not associate the Sins with confession or penance. Bloomfield states that they were not used for confession until the seventh and eighth centuries. His list of the Sins consisted of eight vices: *gula* (gluttony), *luxuria* (luxury),<sup>6</sup> *avaritia* (avarice/greed), *tristitia* (sadness), *ira* (wrath), *acedia* (sloth), *vana gloria* (vanity), and *superbia* (pride). He reasoned that those were most likely the sins that hermits and monks would struggle with the most during their lives of contemplation and solitude in monasteries and away from secular civilization (Bloomfield 57).

The next major figure to the evolution of the Sins was John Cassian (360-435). He was a student of Evagrius, but Wenzel and Bloomfield disagree on whether or not he used Evagrius’ concept of the vices, and just changed it to fit his purposes (Bloomfield 71, “Seven Deadly Sins” 4). Some of his works “introduced the teachings of the desert fathers to the West” (“Seven Deadly Sins” 4), and with those works he includes his altered list of the Sins. Bloomfield and Wenzel also disagree on whether Cassian’s list contained eight or six Sins. In the list given by Bloomfield, Cassian’s list contained

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<sup>6</sup> Bloomfield translates the list of Evagrius from its original Greek into the Latin terms he thinks would have been used during medieval times. Some of the words do change through translation, one of the most apparent being *πορνεία* (*luxuria*). The literal translation of *πορνεία* is fornication and prostitution, which describes the actual action of committing the sin. *Επιθυμία*, *πάθος*, and *ορεξις* are the actual words for lust, which describe the desire. However, even though the literal translation of *luxuria* is “luxury” and there is no etymological connection between lust and luxury, many sources use it as synonymous for fornication, and sometimes lust. According to Rosemund Tuve, “Notes on the Virtues and Vices.” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*. 27 (1964): 42-72., chastity is the virtue set across from *luxuria* (58), which also gives *luxuria* the connotation of fornication, along with Chaucer’s portrayal of *luxuria* as “Lecherie” in “The Parson’s Tale” (317). Conversely, even though most sources use *luxuria* to mean fornication, the action of sexual immorality, Dante uses lust as the desire, showing that even though the lustful in Purgatory are being punished for their actions, they must also be purged of the desire within their souls before they can reach God.

*gastrimargia* (gluttony), *fornicatio* (fornication), *filargyria* (greed), *ira*, *tristitia*, *acedia* (sloth), *cenodoxia* (vanity), and *superbia* (71). Cassian also believed that the Sins were ordinal—that one Sin would lead a person to another. Wenzel, on the other hand, gives Cassian’s lists as “gluttony, lechery, greed, wrath, sadness, and *acedia*,” but later includes vainglory and pride as being “connected in a similar fashion, but they are not related to the other six” (“Seven Deadly Sins” 4). Nevertheless, Cassian’s list became a key link in the evolution of the Sins from Evagrius to the Catholic Church.

The man whose list was most commonly used in the Church of medieval Italy was Gregory the Great (540- 604). His list canonized the Sins and took away one Sin, leaving the seven that were most commonly used by medieval theologians, which are what people are most familiar with today (Bloomfield 46, Wenzel 4). He too saw the Sins as being ordinal. Dante uses Gregory’s list and order of the Sins in *Purgatorio*—*superbia*, *ira*, *invidia* (envy), *avaritia*, *acedia*, *gula*, *luxuria*—although he does not completely agree with Gregory’s view of their concatenation<sup>7</sup> and uses lust in place of *luxuria*.<sup>8</sup>

#### *Portrayal of the Sins During the Medieval Ages*

As Italian, German, and French culture changed from the time of Gregory, so did people’s view of the Sins. Influences of the Sins could be seen in various forms throughout society, and some changes even took place in the ordering of the Sins themselves. For instance, for a time there was a shift in the order of the Sins in religious

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<sup>7</sup> “Concatenation” means that things are linked together, as in a chain. Some also use the term “ordinal” as a synonym.

<sup>8</sup> When the list is seen in English, lust is used in place of *luxuria*. It seems the Church at that time knew a different connotation of *luxuria* that narrowed the definition down from being a general desire of excess to desiring sexual gratification, but that is pure scholarly speculation based on the use of *luxuria* to represent lust by several modern scholars and older works of literature and not from any etymological evidence.



circles—avarice replaced pride at the top of the list.<sup>9</sup> This change did not extend to art and literature, but some of the clergy saw it as necessary as the views of society changed:

As early as the thirteenth century, when the bourgeoisie had made their presence felt, Roger Bacon listed avarice as first among the cardinal sins and called it the source of the others. The next two centuries saw a vast increase in the economic and political influence of wealthy merchants and townspeople. In this rapidly expanding money economy, the sin of avarice and the sins associated with wealth came to be more and more frequently attacked by both moralists and satirists. (Knight 2)

People came to realize that the term “avarice” extended from only greed of money to greed for power and other possessions. But even though some saw avarice as being a more prominent vice in both individuals and the public as a whole, and therefore at the top of the list, not everyone switched and the majority stayed true to the Gregorian order: pride, envy, wrath, sloth, avarice, gluttony, lust. Dante also remained with the traditional order, seeing pride as the greatest, and probably the root, of all the Sins.

In order to liberate themselves from sin, and the Cardinal Sins in particular, Catholic society developed different ways, both symbolic and literal, to illustrate the Sins so people could visualize the connection of the Sins to each other and the Virtues that were their opposites. Dante was probably familiar with most of these illustration. One such image was through the Gardens of Virtue, a symbolic concept that took physical

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<sup>9</sup> Lester K. Little wrote an article further examining this shift, “Pride Goes Before Avarice: Social Change and Vices in Latin Christendom.” *The American Historical Review* 76.1 (1971): 16-49. He discusses other research done about the origins of the Sins, their place in the Latin arts, and some different views about the order. Then he analyzes the change within European countries during the 11<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> centuries to commercial cultures and how that connected to the desire of some theologians during that time to put avarice at the top of the list.

shape in the form of actual gardens. These gardens are described by the Dominican Frère Lorens in the *Somme le roi* (Kosmer 302).<sup>10</sup> These tangible gardens had many different forms, but each different species of tree usually represented a different virtue. According to Ellen Kosmer, “The *Somme* uses the standard set of seven virtues, commonly associated with the vices or seven deadly sins” (303).<sup>11</sup> Later in her article she comments about groves of vice, which are the antitheses of gardens of virtue. Kosmer describes an Italian engraving dating to 1470 that personifies Pride,<sup>12</sup> but one very significant part she describes is how “[a]ll the trees spring from the common root which has visual correspondence with the seven streams in the *Somme le roi* virtue-garden” (307). Her description shows that at least one person felt the Sins came from a common source. In another discussion about the *Somme le roi* and the virtues, Rosemond Tuve remarks that just as all the Sins come from a common source, which she believes was thought to be pride, so also the virtues spring from a common root, humility (59).

This, however, is not the first use of trees to represent the Sins. Bloomfield

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<sup>10</sup> A more in-depth discussion of the *Somme le roi* can be found in Rosemond Tuve’s article, “Notes on the Virtues and Vices.” She discusses the portrayal not only of the Sins in the *Somme le roi*, but also looks at various sets of sevens that have been set against them, including the Beatitudes, the Seven Sacraments, the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit, and several others. She provides visuals of the artwork in the treatise and explains the myriads of sets of Seven and how they were seen to fit together.

<sup>11</sup> The most commonly known list of the Seven Virtues is what Tuve refers to as the “Three plus Four” (three theological and four cardinal): Faith, Hope, and Love, and Prudence, Justice, Temperance, and Fortitude. Tuve, however, believes that the seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit, which are considered moral virtues, are the actual virtues that are used to oppose the Sins: Humility, Love, Patience, Perseverance, Mercy, Chastity, and Temperance. Dante does not expressly represent each of these in each terrace, but he does allude to the “Three plus Four” at the beginning of *Purgatorio* with the stars. The “Three plus Four” is also seen in canto XXIX in the form of maidens, with the three theological virtues at the left wheel of the Chariot, which represents the Church, and the four cardinal virtues at the right wheel.

<sup>12</sup> For the details of the engraving involving the personification of Pride, look at Kosmer’s article (307), “Gardens of Virtue in the Middle Ages.” Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes 41 (1978): 302-307.

considers Cassian the first person to use the illustration of a tree and roots in connection with the Sins, which came out of Cassian's emphasis that each Sin is a result of the one that came before (70), similar to the way Dante must travel through the terrace of every Sin before he is able to reach heaven. Kosmer also notes that the groves can be found in literature dating from Dante on (307). The comparison of the Sins to trees and gardens influenced Dante's use of allegory in *Purgatorio*. Throughout *Purgatorio* the reference to roots commonly occurs to demonstrate common origins. In the first cornice, the question is asked: "If they forever speak of our good above, / what can be done for their good here below / by those whose will is *rooted in God's love?*" [emphasis added] (XI 31-3). The question suggests that if a person's will is "rooted in God's love," then all that grows out of the person will be of virtue. It would follow that a person rooted in pride will produce a myriad of sins.

Another image of the purification from the Sins comes from the German Sister Matilda (d. 1299), who writes about a vision in her *Revelations* in which Christ takes her up seven steps, each of which has a virtue-fountain in which she washes herself.<sup>13</sup> Although Bloomfield does not believe that Dante was aware of Sister Matilda's imagery of the Sins (158), Dante does use a similar idea in the structure of *Purgatorio*; as the character Dante ascends through the levels in Purgatory, the *P*'s that are on his forehead, which stand for the "deadly *peccata* or wounds of sin borne by all human beings after the Fall" (Schnapp 93), are gradually removed by an angel, thereby cleansing Dante in a way similar to Matilda's washing herself of the Sins in the virtue-fountains.

Along with the imagery of purification in society, the Catholic Church also used

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<sup>13</sup> Both Bloomfield (158) and Kosmer (302) go in to greater detail about Sister Matilda's vision in *Revelations*.

the Sins for confessional purposes. Hugo of St. Victor (d. 1141) connected the Sins to the Lord's Prayer by "setting the seven petitions of the Lord's Prayer against them" (Bloomfield 85), and Dante uses a form of the Paternoster in the cornice of the proud. As was stated earlier, once the Church began using the Sins outside of the monastic life, they used them as a way to help laymen remember what sins they had committed so they would not risk forgetting a sin and miss complete forgiveness. Schnapp mentions the uses of the Beatitudes on every terrace, and also says that "biblical materials form the backbone of Purgatory's re-education program" (98). The Sins were not always stated in everything, but they were a constant reminder of what the Church considered the worst, or at least the cause, of all sin.

#### *Dante's Philosophy of the Sins*

Dante's understanding concerning the Sins incorporates aspects of his philosophical and theological backgrounds. His Catholic beliefs brought him to weave pieces of Catholic tradition and doctrine throughout the entire work. He sets the Beatitudes against the Sins in every cornice, which was common in Catholic theology. He also has the Proudful recite a form of the Paternoster, which his Catholic audience would have known and understood since childhood. While those two are the most easily seen in *Purgatorio*, his audience most likely saw other pieces of Catholic doctrine that had been ingrained into them as well as Dante. His understanding of the philosophies of Augustine, Boethius, and Aquinas can be seen through the explanations about the Sins told by Virgil and other penitents in Purgatory. Some scholars remind readers to keep in mind these philosophers especially while studying Dante, even though he may have some similar views with other philosophers.

Within the confines of theology and philosophy arose various “models” concerning the rationales for the Sins:<sup>14</sup> the “concatenation,” “psychological,” and what Wenzel terms the “cosmological” (4). The way a person grouped the Sins demonstrates how he viewed them in relation not only to man, but also in relation to each other. The first rationale, concatenation, sees the Sins as being linked in a certain order, so that out of one comes another (Wenzel 4). Two proponents of this rationale were Gregory and Cassian. Cassian saw pride as being the origin of all the Sins, the “root of all evil” (Bloomfield 69-70).

The second rationale, the psychological, is based on the concept that “vice” means that the soul is corrupted, so, logically following, a person simply has to separate the soul into parts where each Sin will fit (Wenzel 5). Cassian and Alcuin (c. 735-804) were both proponents of this model. Cassian divided the Sins into the three Platonic parts of the soul (“Seven Deadly Sins” 5). Alcuin also gave the soul three divisions: “concupiscent,” “irascible,” and “rational,” although only humans possess the final division. Out of these three parts, if corrupted, arise the Sins (Bloomfield 81).

The last rationale, the cosmological, “develops the idea that ‘man is a septenary,’ that is, a composite of the three powers of the soul and the four elements of the body” (Wenzel 8). The concept connects each element to a Sin, which Wenzel describes by quoting and translating a section from the treatise “Quoniam ut ait sapiens” in the British Museum:

According to [the nature of] earth, which is the lowest element, springs  
*acedia* and greed. *Acedia*, because Greek *melan* is *terra* or *nigrum* in Latin

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<sup>14</sup> Wenzel gives a detailed account, complete with diagrams, of each model in his article “The Seven Deadly Sins: Some Problems of Research.” *Speculum* 43.1 (1968): 1-22.

[!], whence the *melencolici*, who are very much troubled by *acedia*. [Then follows a statement that actually *acedia* belongs to both body and soul.] . . . Greed [arises according to the nature of the earth] because like the earth it is cold and dry. . .<sup>15</sup>(8)

Some also connect the seven divisions of the body and soul to the seven virtues, of which there are three theological (connected to the soul) and four cardinal (connected to the body). Wenzel includes William Peraldus (c. 1190-1271) as the other person who held this model, which links him with Dante as believing that the Sins are a result of the perversion of love.<sup>16</sup>

Even though Dante agrees with Gregory's concatenation "model," he does not completely agree with Gregory's rationale, despite the fact that in order for a person in Purgatory to rise to heaven, he or she must be cleansed of all the Sins prior. Each Sin is given its separate level, which Dinsmore sees as a testament to Dante's genius. Dinsmore sees order as being "the first law of [Dante's] nature" (264), but it also shows part of how Dante viewed the Sins; the rest of *Purgatorio* illuminates the other parts. He uses Virgil to explain the philosophy of the Sins, while the character Dante discovers specifics of each Sin and all they entail empirically.

The Sins are explained to Dante throughout *Purgatorio*, each time bringing the reader closer to understanding what place they had in humanity. Virgil summarizes the general idea in one stanza: "Thus you may understand that love alone / is the true seed of

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<sup>15</sup> The entire translation is not quoted here, but can be found in Wenzel's article "Dante's Rationale for the Seven Deadly Sins (*Purgatorio*, XVII)." *The Modern Language Review* 60.4 (1965): 529-533.

<sup>16</sup> Wenzel further compares the philosophies of Dante and Peraldus in his article "Dante's Rationale for the Seven Deadly Sins." *The Modern Language Review* 60.4 (1965): 529-533.

every merit in you, / and of all acts for which you must atone” (XVII 103-5). The concept presented here by Virgil is that, in a phrase, “love is the root of all evil.” But he clarifies both before and after this statement to show that the true root of evil is misdirected love.

A. J. Butler describes Dante’s concept this way:

According to this the soul when created is a *tabula rasa*, but having certain capacities inherent in it in consequence of the nature of its Creator. The Creator being absolutely veracious, the information imparted by the senses is infallible. Further, the Creator being absolutely happy, the soul naturally seeks happiness, and is said to love that in which it expects to find happiness. . .Where it [error] can come in is in the inferences which the mind draws from the information which the senses give, and in either its choice of an object to love, or the vigour with which it pursues that object. (137)

So instead of believing, like previous scholars of the Sins, that the Sins came from evil spirits or corruptions of the soul, Dante sees them as a corruption of man’s struggle to find what he was created for—happiness. This philosophy follows in the Augustinian tradition, and later that of Thomas, which is that the nature of man is to want to be happy (Kent 232). Instead of the cause of the Sins springing from an external source, they come from an innate desire which was created by God. Virgil likens it to the instinct of bees to make honey, which brings up the question of free will and the question Dante has later about blame. After all, if a person is created with a drive to love, should it be that person’s fault if they love the wrong things? Virgil’s answer is that Reason should guide love:

Now, that all later wills and this first bent  
 may thrive, the innate counsel of your Reason  
 must surely guard the threshold of consent. . . .

Or put it this way: all love, let us say,  
 that burns in you, springs from necessity;  
 but you still have the power to check its sway. (XVIII 61-3, 70-2)

Although the Sins originate from an inherent desire from God, the responsibility for the person is to fulfill that desire by reaching for his Creator.

The perversion of love transforms into divine love by the constancy of the purifying love that draws them toward heaven. According to Schnapp, “To reach and ascend Mount Purgatory requires human effort *and* superhuman support. Both are necessary if the gravitational pull of sin is to be transmuted into the levitational, ‘God-ward’ pull of sacred love” (93). The “‘God-ward’ pull of sacred love,” as Schnapp puts it, is symbolized through the weight that is lifted from Dante with every *P* that is erased from his forehead. Virgil explains to Dante:

When the *P*'s that still remain,  
 though fading, on your brow, are wiped away  
 as the first was, without a trace of stain—  
 then will your feet be filled with good desire. (XII 121-24)

Here the assumption is that without sin a person will automatically want the virtuous things in life. But Virgil could also be telling Dante that without the Sins in his soul, there will be room for the Virtues to reside, thereby “filling” his feet with “good desire.”



On each terrace a symbol of divine love is given to help those in Purgatory cleanse themselves of a particular sin. One of Dante's purposes in writing the *Divina Commedia* was to influence society, so by showing his readers that divine love purifies, he is stating that God is the only way to truly be cleansed from sin. But just because love is the overarching "cause" of Sin does not mean that the same kind of Sin stems from the same kind of love. On the contrary, Dante separates the Sins into three categories: "bad love," "too little love," and "immoderate love" (Ciardi 30). Under the heading of bad love fall pride, envy, and wrath. Sloth is the only Sin categorized as too little love. The last three fall under immoderate love: avarice, gluttony, lust. According to Wenzel, only one other theologian who followed Augustine's principles came to the theory of perverse love, William Peraldus ("Seven Deadly Sins" 7). But Dante also used Thomist philosophy to explain his rationale of the Sins.

Virgil also tells Dante about two different kinds of love: animal and mind-directed:

Neither Creator nor his creatures move,  
 as you well know," he said, "but in the action  
 of animal or of mind-directed love.

Natural love may never fall to error.

The other may, by striving to bad ends,  
 or by too little, or by too much fervor.

While it desires the Eternal Good and measures

its wish for secondary goods in reason,  
 this love cannot give rise to sinful pleasures.

But when it turns to evil, or shows more  
 or less zeal than it ought for what is good,  
 then the creature turns on its Creator.<sup>17</sup> (XVII 91-102)

The concept presented here by Virgil is that every creature, or animal, made by God loves, which is the “animal” love. That love is of the “natural” kind and because it is built into every living creature, no one has control over it. It is inherent in every being, and is not subject to error. The other type of love, however, the “mind-directed” love, is only held by those created in God’s image—humans—and does have the ability to err. Because mankind is flawed, when a person has a choice of what to love and how much, error will occur. For Dante, it is from this flaw that the Sins spring forth.

Another question that the pilgrim Dante asks is how the shades can have physical appearances. How they can suffer physically if they are only souls? Virgil allows Statius to answer, who gives a 74-line answer which shall not be repeated here.<sup>18</sup> He does, however, cover some Thomist philosophies about the connection of the soul and how they are one, although Statius’ explanation is more complex and involves two forms of blood which do not fit into Thomist tradition. According to Aquinas, neither the body nor

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<sup>17</sup> In the original Italian, *Purgatorio* is written in *terza rima* (aba, bcb, cdc, etc.). The extra spaces express the feel of tercets not found in the English translation.

<sup>18</sup> Statius’ explanation is based on the medical belief at that time that babies were formed from the comingling of the blood of a man and woman. He describes two different types of blood, the active and the passive, and explains how they combine in the womb to form a body. The active blood becomes a soul, while the passive becomes the flesh of the person. When a person dies, the soul (active blood) retains all the attributes of the person and descends into Purgatory, where *formative power* (as Statius refers to it) gathers around the soul and cause a reflection, or shade, to form.

the soul is complete, but together they form a person. Eberl gives a salt analogy to try to clarify this concept. This analogy states that salt is made of two elements, sodium and chloride, which, individually, make nothing that resembles salt, but together provide a seasoning (336). Likewise, a person cannot live without either his soul or his body.

The reason souls suffer for the sins committed by the body is that, according to Aquinas, “a human being’s soul is the source of its capacities; a human being’s body is the material support for such capacities” (Eberl 338). The soul is what contains the pull toward love, but without the body a person cannot fulfill those desires, and since a person makes the soul and body one, the soul must suffer punishment because the body is not able to do so after death.

### *Allegories of the Sins*

Before looking at the allegories in *Purgatorio*, two things are in order: a brief discussion of Dante’s use of the Sins, and a clarification about the allegory in *Purgatorio*. In order to truly grasp why Dante chose to use the Seven Cardinal Sins in his greatest work, the *Divina Commedia*, one must understand Dante’s application of them. Does he simply use them to give structure to *Purgatorio*? Probably not. Is he making a moral statement to his audience? Almost definitely. Dante probably had several reasons for using the Sins in particular. The fact that the Sins add perfect symmetry to *Purgatorio* is undeniable, but Dante does more than just use them for architecture. Each Sin is presented in such a way that allows the reader to understand that the Sins occur to even the greatest of people. The Sins provide a theme in *Purgatorio*—the knowledge of sin and need for redemption, like the themes of *Inferno* and *Paradiso* are damnation and divine love.

Charles S. Singleton examines Dante's definitions in *Convivio* of "allegory of poets" and "allegory of theologians," the former of which makes everything to be examined as fiction while the latter means everything should be looked at with an eye for the true, or historical.<sup>19</sup> In the "allegory of poets," writers take artistic liberties with facts, sometimes using imagery to give underlying meaning. "Allegory of theologians," however, uses fact to provide both literal and symbolic meanings. Both have literal meanings, but, according to Singleton, if the theological has no meaning beyond the literal it has no purpose (81). J.A. Scott also echoes Singleton's warning and emphasizes the need to differentiate between the literal and the allegorical meanings within *Purgatorio* (168). Even though *Purgatorio* contains historical figures, the "allegory of poets" will be used, which means the literal only serves as way to convey a deeper meaning.

Due to limitations of space, only three Sins will be scrutinized: Pride (XI-XII), Sloth (XVIII-XIX), and Lust (XXV-XXVI). For Dante, Pride is the worst of the Sins, and humility, the opposite of pride, is woven throughout the entire work, especially in connection to the pilgrim Dante. Pride is also part of the category of "bad love," so it can represent the other two in that category. Because Sloth is the only one in the category of "too little love," it stands to reason that it will be the one analyzed. No category can be neglected. Finally, Lust will also be analyzed because it is the least of the Sins, at least by Dante's account. Lust also falls under the final category, "immoderate love," and can therefore stand for the other two forms.

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<sup>19</sup> In *Convivio*, Dante makes what he believes is a necessary distinction between these two forms of allegory. According to Singleton, Dante tells his readers that his works follow the allegory of poets, but in his article "Dante's Allegory." *Speculum* 25.1 (1950): 78-86. Singleton makes arguments for why in some ways Dante's works, especially the *Divina Commedia* should be considered an allegory of theologians, despite Dante's claims stating otherwise.

Because Purgatory is a place where souls are cleansed before entering heaven, Dante includes several aspects of purification from the Church. Among the first allegories encountered are the seven P's on Dante's forehead when he enters Purgatory. Like the rest of mankind, Dante has to cleanse himself of the Sins one at a time, starting with Pride, which is the one he struggles with the most. As he continues up the mountain, a P is taken from his forehead for every Sin that is cleansed, like Catholicism's belief that a person's sin is forgiven for each act of penance performed.

One noticeable tradition from the Church is the use of the Beatitudes throughout the levels. As stated earlier, other scholars of the Sins have tried to fit the Beatitudes as opposite the Sins, and some have found that they are not a perfect fit. This fact does not seem to bother Dante, most likely because Catholic doctrine commonly used the Beatitudes as a way to battle the Sins. For each of the Sins Virgil and Dante hear one of the Beatitudes as they leave: *Beati paupers spiritu* (Blessed are the poor in spirit) for the proud; "Blessed are the merciful" for the envious; "Blessed are the peacemakers" for the wrathful; "Blessed are they that mourn" for the slothful; and for the gluttonous, "Blessed are they whom Grace so lights within that love of food in them does not excite excessive appetite, but who take pleasure in keeping every hunger within measure" (XXIV 152-55). As can be seen, not all of the Beatitudes fit exactly with their coinciding Sin, and two of the Sins are missing Beatitudes, which was a problem encountered by earlier scholars when trying to align the Beatitudes with the Sins.

When Dante first enters the cornice of the Proud, he hears the prideful reciting a version of the Paternoster. The prayer itself is conducive to asking for humility. One line of the prayer recites, "so teach all men to offer up their own" (XI 12), which requires the

confession of inability to do everything. Later, the prayer also states, “Our strength is as a reed bent to the ground” (XI 19). This is not the first instance in *Purgatorio* that a reed is used to symbolize humility.<sup>20</sup> Before Dante and Virgil even enter Purgatory, they descend to the island at the bottom of the mountain, which also symbolizes humility because it is a requirement to be cleansed of all the Sins. Growing along the shoreline are reeds, and later, when Virgil plucks one to tie around Dante’s waist, Dante refers to it as a “humble stalk” (I 133). The pliability of the reed also lends to the idea of humility. One other theory concerning the reason that the prideful recite the Paternoster is that this prayer is so familiar to the Church that even children are able to recite it. This fact implies that the proud must return to being children, an idea which also gives the image of going down to achieve humility<sup>21</sup> (Ciardi 125).

Even the punishment of the proud suggests that humility requires being below where one formally was. Each person in this cornice is weighed down by stones, so they are forced to bend under the heaviness, and the only way to be free from their bondage is through God’s grace. Omberto tells Dante, “Here until God be pleased to raise my head / I bear this weight” (XI 70-1). He does not even presume to be able to have the strength to raise his own head once his burden is lightened, but recognizes the sovereignty of God as the only one who has the ability to cleanse him of Pride. But Pride is not the only Sin that

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<sup>20</sup> In the ante-purgatory, Virgil ties a reed around Dante’s waist (I 95), and a description is given about the reeds growing on the shore-line (I 100-5). Ciardi’s note concerning the allegory of the reeds states that the reed is not only a symbol of humility, but that the reed replaces the rope used to defeat sin in the form of the Leopard in *Inferno*, signifying that submission to God’s will is now what is needed to further Dante’s journey to heaven. Also, having the reed tied around Dante’s waist gives him a constant reminder of humility (39).

<sup>21</sup> The idea of returning to a child-like mentality is also found in Matthew 18:3-4, where Jesus states, “Truly I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (ESV). Like the Paternoster, Dante and other Catholics may have been familiar with this passage and understood that child-like faith and humility are requirements for being a virtuous person.

correlates with weight. Sin itself is given a physical form in weight. Dante feels lighter every time he is cleansed of a Sin and a *P* is removed from his forehead, a process that allows him to ascend toward God.

An interesting allegory noticed by Ciardi in his translation of *Purgatorio* is the symbolism in the bas-reliefs that Dante describes as he walks through the cornice of the proud:

The present rein is elaborately conceived and consists of thirteen bas-reliefs cut into the pavement over which the souls pass. Dante's description of the first four panels begins with "I saw," of the next four, with "Oh!" and of the next four, with "It showed." In Italian these phrases are: *Vedea. . .O! . . .Mostrava*. Acrostically (*V* being equal to *U* in Latin), this combination reads: *UOM*, i.e., "man." The tercet describing the thirteenth panel repeats the three phrases in order at the beginning of each of the three lines. The pattern in the original read, therefore: *UUUU*, *OOOO*, *MMMM*, *UOM*. This elaborate structure is clearly intended to show not only that Pride is the first and heaviest of man's sins, but that it is so characteristic of him that PRIDE and MAN are practically synonymous.<sup>22</sup> (Ciardi 134)

Not only do the individual depictions give examples of pride, but they are "divinely wrought," meaning that no human can claim credit for their beauty and grace. Only God

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<sup>22</sup> In a similar use of Latin, the character Dante refers to those who "read OMO in the face of man" (XXIII 32) in the terrace of the Gluttons. Ciardi's note clarifies by explaining the medieval belief that God created man's face to hold the letters O-M-O D-E-I, "Man [is] of God" (239), which contrasts with the earlier depiction of the bas-reliefs that imply that man is pride. Perhaps Dante is making a statement that God put his signature on man, but that without him man because proud, so the only way to conquer pride is to admit that God is the Creator and ultimate power.

can take the admiration and have pride in the work that the bas-reliefs demonstrate.

After Dante travels through the levels of Pride, Envy, and Wrath, he begins to climb to the cornice of the Slothful, where he experiences a sense of lethargy and asks himself, “O strength, why do you melt away? . . . for now / it seemed [his] legs were turning to lead” (XVII 73-5). His experience demonstrates the common definition associated with Sloth, physical lethargy, and gives a contrast when Virgil gives him the definition of Sloth: “That love of good which in the life before / lay idle in the soul is paid for now / Here Sloth strains at the once-neglected oar” (XVII 85-7). According to Virgil’s definition, “Sloth” refers to an inactivity in the pursuit of the love that a person felt in the soul, which suggests a spiritual lethargy. The purification process for the Slothful is running, being “spurred by good will and high love” (XVIII 95), which counteracts both the physical and spiritual aspects of slovenliness.

Once Dante cleanses himself of Sloth and has another *P* erased, he climbs through Greed and Gluttony, arriving in the final cornice of Sin in Purgatory—the level of the Lustful. Here Virgil warns him to keep his eyes close. Virgil could have multiple meanings for this warning. The literal meaning would imply that the fire surrounding them could burn Dante’s eyes. The allegorical meaning could mean more than one thing. Virgil could be telling Dante that Lust, since it is at the top of Purgatory, is the Sin most easily fallen into. Or he could be cautioning Dante because Lust most commonly enters through the eyes, especially the “lust of the eyes.” Richard Abrams connects lust to gluttony through the “analogy of oral and sexual gratification” (34), but Lust, Gluttony, and even Greed can be connected through the “lust of the eyes.” Each Sin begins with the person seeing what he desires and that desire growing into an irresistible craving.



The fire which surrounds Dante serves the purpose of purifying the Lustful, who had, while they were living, burned with desire. The Lustful also sing “*Summae Deus clementiae*”—a hymn that prays for chastity. While Dante talks to those in the fire, he witnesses the arrival of another group coming from the opposite direction, the Sodomites. The obvious allegory here is that sodomy goes against the natural form of love. Even though only three Sins were looked at, hopefully these examples can be used to further analyze and understand the other four in *Purgatorio*: Wrath, Envy, Greed, and Gluttony.

### *Conclusion*

The origins of the Sins, their influence in medieval society, the belief of the source of the Sins, and the allegories used to describe them—all of these play a role in what is one of the greatest pieces of literature ever written. Various images of the Sins are found through history—most of them gruesome and grotesque, like the carved images found in the *Somme le Roi*—while images of the Virtues generally appeal to the eyes and senses, like the Gardens of Virtue. But from looking closely at how Dante weaves the Sins throughout *Purgatorio*, people who read the *Divina Commedia* for pleasure and scholars alike can see that Dante brings artistic beauty to the ugliness of death and sin through giving hope and a promise of redemption.

As for those who look at the Sins themselves apart from art or literature, analyzing Dante’s portrayal of them in *Purgatorio* provides a way to humanize a concept that discusses weaknesses of humanity as a puzzle to be solved. Dante provides real people to demonstrate real sins. *Purgatorio* pulls aspects of the Sins from Catholic tradition, well-known art and literature, Greek philosophy, and other depictions of the Sins that may not be known today, and melds them together to make a piece of literature

that gives a masterpiece that depicts the hideousness of human depravity through stunning imagery and verse, with the underlying hope of divine love.

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