

Vices of Life: A Survey of Genre in Bruegel's *Seven Deadly Sins*

An exploration of the visual language of genre and the comic mode employed by Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1525-1569) in his printed series of *The Seven Deadly Sins*, or *The Vices*, reveals how images of everyday life served the didactic purposes of morality. A devout Catholic, keen humanist, and comic artist, Bruegel sought to depict the essence of human nature by illustrating moralizing imagery through a comic lens. Facets of Netherlandish everyday life can be better understood by placing this series within its historical context, closely examining the prints, assessing where genre can be found within them, and reviewing the comic mode of Bruegel's style. In the past, scholars disputed whether Bruegel's work was influenced more by classical works or by Netherlandish folk tradition, as well as discerning whether the imagery functions as moralizing or entertaining. Today, however, it is commonly accepted that Bruegel's art sought to blend his interests in both areas, aiming to delight as well as to instruct. This study bears in mind the following questions: How can genre in Bruegel's imagery relate to the allegorical? How does everyday life find itself within these images and how do "slices of life" mix with the fantastic approach taken? What is the significance of Bruegel adopting the Boschian absurdist approach to these didactic images? And lastly, how were these images received by their audience?

Any interpretation of Bruegel's work must first take into consideration the context in which he worked. The first half of the sixteenth century saw Antwerp as the "capital of

capitalism.”¹ By the time Bruegel had been admitted to the Antwerp painter’s guild of Saint Luke in 1551, the city found itself at the height of its economic growth, serving as an intersection for the commercial exchange of commodities from all over the world.² As a result, the art market also prospered, to the point where Karel Van Mander described the city as a “mother of artists in the Netherlands.”³ Pertinent to Bruegel was the emergence in Antwerp of print publishers, led by the artist’s own publisher, Hieronymus Cock (1518-1570). Publishers allowed Bruegel’s work to be reproduced multiple times and become widely spread. In 1549, Holy Roman Emperor Charles V (1500-1558) declared that the Seventeen Provinces, composed of the Low Countries (for the most part Netherlands, Belgium and Luxemburg), were to fall under the dominion of Habsburg Spain.⁴ However, this “Golden Era” would soon be severely impaired because in 1557, Spain declared bankruptcy, followed by Portugal and France. The late 1560s witnessed the Dutch Revolt, where Protestant Reformers successfully rose up against the authority of the Vatican and the Holy Roman Emperor Philip the II of Spain.⁵ During such a time of political and religious turmoil, Bruegel might have felt threatened and unable to portray his own views for fear of personal safety, and he was not alone. Annette LeZotte’s study of the Antwerp marketplace reveal that “economic competition, religious strife, and political change in the Netherlands fostered an environment where artists embraced the seeming ambiguity of readings that genre imagery could offer as a means of surviving the rapidly shifting values

¹ Silver, Larry. *Pieter Bruegel*, 37.

² Ibid, 37.

³ Snyder, James. *Northern Renaissance Art: Painting, Sculpture, the Graphic Arts from 1350 to 1575*, 506.

⁴ Ibid, 438.

⁵ Ibid, 440.

of their time.’⁶ The city was torn between extreme orthodoxy and secularized capitalist concerns that were religiously ambivalent. The iconographical and allegorical strategies that emerged in the arts at this time resonated with these shifting values.⁷ Specifically, genres emerged as a reaction to Protestant Reformers’ warnings against worship of false idols. As a result, the production and sale of artworks was affected, bringing forth a rising interest in humanist literature. It is probable that Bruegel was working with this in mind, trying to incorporate the demands of a materialistic world with the “sincere intent to demonstrate faith.”⁸ Consequently, Bruegel’s *Seven Deadly Sins*, composed between 1556 and 1558, may be viewed under the scope of this turmoil, and meaning may be found in what is- and is not- depicted.

In each preparatory drawing for Hieronymus Cock’s engravings, a female personification of the depicted Vice is seated in the center of the composition, acting out the accused sin while accompanied by the symbolic animal that represents said vice.⁹ She is placed in a surreal landscape and is surrounded by demons and various figures- human and supernatural- that engage in several foolish activities that correspond to each vice, suggesting Hell on Earth. These Seven Deadly Sins are considered by Catholic doctrine to be the foundation for all human misconduct. In order to comprehend how these images were used and received, a brief description of each one that centers around their imagery of “everyday life” must be established.

⁶ LeZotte, A. *Moralizing Dialogues on the Northern Market Economy: Women’s Directives in Sixteenth-Century Genre Imagery*, 51-66.

⁷ Ibid, 4.

⁸ LeZotte, A. *Moralizing Dialogues on the Northern Market Economy: Women’s Directives in Sixteenth-Century Genre Imagery*, 51-66.

⁹ Ibid, 143.

The first of Bruegel's preparatory drawings for this series was "Avaritia" (Greed) (**fig. 1**), and it set the model for the remainder of the Vices. According to Nadine Orenstein, "Bruegel may have chosen to initiate his sequences with "Avaritia" because of the subject of avarice and its related socioeconomic issues were of particular importance to him," and this is made clear by his inclusion of the subject in several of his other works, including *Everyman* and *The Battle About Money*.¹⁰ This was to be expected of a prosperous economy the scale of Antwerp's; greed was certainly the most proximate temptation. Here, the female personification resonates with the greedy money changers of previous generations, as she is dressed in the same manner.¹¹ She is accompanied by a toad- the corresponding animal of greed- and sits among boxes of coins and devices used to measure and test them. Greed is exemplified here by several different accounts of robbers scrambling for coins and, in some cases, robbers stealing from thieves. Undoubtedly, the act of counting coins forms a part of everyday life, but here Bruegel warns against an overzealous attention to money.

"Lust" (Luxuria) (**fig. 2**) displays a nude female seated on the lap of a demon that fondles her breast. Above this "unequal couple," a cock-symbolizing lustfulness- is perched on the back of the chair that hosts the couple.¹² The cock is echoed by the head of a stag- another animal correlated with lust- that is depicted as a branch on the hollow tree that surrounds the couple. At the top of the tree a mussel shell, another symbol of lust (a so-called aphrodisiac), houses a crystal globe where a couple can be seen inside of it, resembling Bosch's erotic pairs in *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (**fig. 8**).¹³ Larry Silver

¹⁰ Orenstein, Nadine. *Pieter Bruegel the Elder: Drawings and Prints*, 158

¹¹ Silver, Larry. *Pieter Bruegel*, 147.

¹² *Ibid*, 145.

¹³ *Ibid*, 153.

has noted that “very few humans are actors in these images; for the most part, they are acted upon,”¹⁴ perhaps suggesting that humans are the victims of their lust. Behind the mismatched couple, a hoard of creatures and nude figures are being led by a fool in costume that is playing a bagpipe; the “instrument of folly.”¹⁵ The use of a mismatched couple denotes a category of genre imagery. Here, elements of everyday life are present as this mock parade can be associated with the custom of *chirivari*, a “village condemnation of poorly matched couples.”¹⁶

In the case of “Anger” (**fig. 3**), the personification is not a seated figure, but rather an armored ill-tempered woman who leads a progression of soldiers and other creatures. She wields a sword in one hand and a flaming torch on the other, fighting under an emblem of a crescent moon, an emblem of Islam.¹⁷ The *virago* is accompanied by a bear, who in turn bites the leg of a nude figure. Bruegel considered anger to be one of- if not the most- alarming of the Vices, as anger fuels war, which in turn destroys all in its path.¹⁸ Severe anger was often associated with madness, as Erasmus’ *Enchiridion* demonstrates: “between a madman and someone crazed with anger there is not more difference than that existing between chronic and temporary insanity.”¹⁹ To Erasmus, war is madness, and here war prevails over the entire image. The dominating cloaked figure at the top center has an arm in a sling, “suggesting overall illness, a broken condition in the world.”²⁰

¹⁴ Ibid, 145.

¹⁵ Silver, Larry. *God in the Details, Bosch and Judgement*, 635.

¹⁶ Silver, Larry. *Pieter Bruegel*, 147.

¹⁷ Sullivan, Margaret. "Madness and Folly: Peter Bruegel the Elder's Dulle Griet," 60.

¹⁸ Silver, Larry. *Pieter Bruegel*, 148.

¹⁹ Sullivan, Margaret. "Madness and Folly: Peter Bruegel the Elder's Dulle Griet," 58.

²⁰ Silver, Larry. *Pieter Bruegel*, 147.

“Pride” (**fig. 4**) encompasses a fashionably dressed woman, personifying vanity as she gazes at her reflection in a hand glass, recalling a *vanitas* image.²¹ In front of her stands a peacock- the animal symbol of pride- showing off its beautiful feathers. There are a few other mirrors located on the foreground, where demons gaze at their reflections (or their rear ends), no doubt serving as satirical tools mocking the woman. The left side of the composition shows a beauty parlor, whose roof is being defecated on by a nude man, and whose bowels are perhaps being used by a demon to wash a girl’s hair who is standing close by.²² Above these figures, a music sheet and a lute are present, suggesting the frivolity of the image.²³

Like “Avaritia,” “Gluttony” (**fig. 5**) is also personified by a woman in an archaic headdress. She is seated on her accompanying animal, a pig, at a round table that she shared with nude figures and demons, and empties a jar of beer into her stomach.²⁴ A giant windmill is located at the top left corner which takes the shape of a human head, with windows for eyes and a mouth for a door. The windmill is echoed by a similar humanized building on the right. On the bottom left corner, a big fish eats a smaller fish, depicting the proverb “Big Fish Eat Little Fish,” a subject that recurs in other works by Bruegel. This image is reminiscent of a dissolute household, even though it takes place outside, figures gather around a table for the merriment of food, however they are so engrossed in stuffing themselves that they hardly notice the world of chaos that surrounds them.

²¹ Gibson, Walter S. *Pieter Bruegel and the Art of Laughter*, 37.

²² Gibson, Walter S. *Pieter Bruegel and the Art of Laughter*, 35.

²³ *Ibid*, 35.

²⁴ Silver, *Pieter Bruegel*, 151.

The personification of “Sloth” (**fig. 6**) lazily naps atop of her chosen animal, the ass, and rests her head on a pillow supplied by a demon.²⁵ The setting displays several sleeping figures, too lazy to be wakened by the bells that are wrung by a figure hiding in the tree that is positioned behind Sloth. Underneath this figure a nude female is displayed sleeping on an angled table, too sluggish to notice the demons that surround, taunt, and molest her. Above her, two dice are displayed, strengthening the subject of folly, as it is suggestive of games at play. Coming into the frame of the lower corner, a figure on a bed that does not even raise his head as he eats, is being pulled by a “spoon-billed demon in monkish robes, perhaps and indictment of the idleness of monasticism.”²⁶ In the background, a giant’s bottom is being poked at by arrows belonging to several figures inside a rowboat, aiding him in the process of defecation, as he is too lazy to do it himself.

Finally, “Envy” (**fig. 7**) is personified by a woman in archaic headdress who “eats her own heart.”²⁷ She points to a turkey-which is not usually the animal used for the representation of envy- as a counterpoint for the peacock seen in “Pride,” as turkeys share similar characteristics with peacocks but are quite unattractive by comparison. Vanity is also displayed by the insertion of peacock feathers on the tree that stands behind Envy. She obtains a mock halo given to her by a demon as if to satirize the high status that she aspires to have.²⁸ She is placed amidst a collection of building structures that resemble Boschian architecture, which are given facial characteristics. On the bottom corner a shoemaker is attending to possible clients, perhaps highlighting the capitalist desire for material possessions that others have.

²⁵ Ibid, 152.

²⁶ Silver, Larry. *Pieter Bruegel*, 152.

²⁷ Ibid, 156.

²⁸ Ibid, 156.

Scholars have continuously attributed Bruegel's success to the inspiration and reference he drew from Hieronymus Bosch (1450-1516). Bosch sought to morally instruct his viewers by depicting human nature's tendency towards sin, and thus begging of them a need for grace.²⁹ There is no doubt that Bruegel was a close follower of Bosch, and if his surreal landscapes and absurd settings are not evidence enough, real ties can be drawn between the two through an examination of Bosch's iconographical and visual strategies, particularly those used in *The Last Judgement* (**fig. 9**). Like Bruegel's prints, this triptych features a wide variety of nude figures and wild demons in the presence of giant figures confined to large, architecturally vague buildings. Bruegel often employs motifs such as broken eggshells, cloistered hooded robes, platypus-like monsters, and omnipresent owls; images he surely referenced from Bosch. More specifically, distinctive motifs appear in the works by both artists: in "Avarice," Bruegel echoes Bosch by displaying a sinner whose punishment is to be rolled in a barrel and by having riders that face backwards; "Lust" exhibits a sinner being publicly humiliated in a procession, a mussel shell and a crystal globe housing an amorous couple; in "Gluttony," a dining table that seats both humans and demons is also present; and "Anger" presents a man on a spit as well as a giant knife.³⁰ Further, the works of both artists exhibit a similar overall tone through austere and frightening settings bordering on the humorous. However, as much as both of these artists have in common, Bruegel "combines giant figures with buildings or makes buildings out of animal or plant forms in ways that call attention to his own inventive mixtures and incongruities rather than to any pain from hellish punishments."³¹ By the

²⁹ Silver, Larry. *God in the Details: Bosch and Judgement*, 628.

³⁰ Silver, Larry. *Pieter Bruegel*, 157.

³¹ *Ibid*, 157.

end of the 16th century, Bruegel's artistic identity shifted to encompass a persona in his own right because he had found his own artistic voice.

Perhaps one of the most evident indications of Bruegel's indebtedness to Boschian language is in the *Seven Deadly Sins*.³² To understand how these images function and how their audiences received them, it is important to assess Bruegel's fascination with peasant life, the literary sources that influenced his work, and the comic mode that he employed when approaching his subject matter. For Bruegel, peasant imagery was the quintessential vehicle for depicting the nature of Netherlandish man and his behavior. According to Larry Silver, art admirers of the late 16th century saw Bruegel as the "epitome of naturalism in art, the climax of the Netherlandish tradition."³³ Renowned cartographer, Abram Ortelius (1527-1598), once said that his works could "[hardly be described] as works of art, but as works of Nature. Nor should I call him the best of painters, but rather the very nature of painters." This statement articulately encompasses Bruegel's untiring pursuit for the depiction of truth, to depict life as it is amidst gore and glory. And what better way to enlighten the public of the Netherlands' everyday life than through the lens of comedy? Surely implementing humor into his work made his public more receptive to the moralizing messages he aimed to convey.

According to the Flemish art historian Karel van Mander (1548-1606), Bruegel often employed the habit of disguising himself as a peasant and attending their festivities, such as weddings, parades, or kermises. Although it is unknown whether or not this is true, it is evident that van Mander states this as an indication of the authenticity of Bruegel's peasant scenes. According to Svetlana Alpers, there was a "true flowering of

³² Silver, Larry. *Pieter Bruegel*, 142.

³³ *Ibid*, 44.

interest in peasants, their customs and costumes in the 16th century. Artists started to travel about Europe collecting, compiling and publishing costume-books illustrating the native costumes of various countries, while at the same time writers were collecting proverbs in the vernacular.”³⁴ In the middle of the 16th century, peasants maintained a high economic level, making their lives attractive to outsiders. Their displays of well-earned leisure and the apparent acceptance of satisfying the human instinct were perhaps envied by city dwellers, who might have gotten exasperated by Antwerp’s growing population, noise, and industrialization.³⁵

Famous historian Walter Gibson describes laughter in the 16th century as a commodity, “meaning both ‘something useful’ and ‘anything bought and sold.’...not only was it desirable and necessary to one’s physical wellbeing, but it was also an important staple in the marketplace.”³⁶ The two main strains of 16th century comedy that are pertinent to this study are medieval folk carnival tradition, and humanist wit such as Erasmus’ *Praise of Folly, Adages*.³⁷ Both of these were employed in the works of Bruegel, and were often considered not under the scrutiny of the moralizing “right” behavior, but as an exploration of the nature of peasant life. This was due to a wide spectrum between the ideals of proper behavior and the everyday conduct of real people. When assessing the culture of laughter in 16th century Netherlands, it becomes evident that there were opposing viewpoints as to whether laughter was inherently right or wrong. Aristotle proposed that laughter is a “uniquely human characteristic,” while Erasmus insisted that “loud laughter and the immoderate mirth that shakes the whole body...are

³⁴ Alpers, Svetlana, *Bruegel's Festive Peasants*, 165.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 169.

³⁶ Gibson, Walter S, *Pieter Bruegel and the Art of Laughter*, 12.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 174

unbecoming to any age but much more so to youth...and the person who opens his mouth wide in a rictus, with wrinkled cheeks and exposed teeth, is also impolite.”³⁸ However, laughter was generally seen in a more positive light; in his *Book of the Courtier*, Baldassare Castiglione has one of his main characters, Cardinal Bibbiena, state that laughter “restores the spirit, gives pleasure, and for the moment keeps one from remembering those vexing troubles of which our life is full.”³⁹ Laughter was also a significant commodity offered by the Netherlandish *rederijkers*, or rhetoricians, and Bruegel demonstrated an allegorical play on what these rhetoricians professed.⁴⁰ The *rederijkers* played a crucial role in spreading humanist ideas through the subjects they drew from ancient mythology, and their fondness for puns and proverbs resonated with Bruegel’s work.⁴¹ Further, Rederijker literature served as a vehicle from which to relieve the tension from subjects such as religious turmoil, the impending civil disorder, crop shortages, and rising taxes.⁴²

In a time of economic prosperity and a booming art market, followed by the impending Dutch revolt against the rule of the Roman Catholic Church, artists in Antwerp found themselves caught between the religious and economic turmoil that impeded them from expressing the full potential of their ideals. Nevertheless, Pieter Bruegel the Elder found that his interests for depicting everyday life could be manifested through his portrayal of Netherlandish peasants in the didactic and moralizing images of sin and folly: *The Seven Deadly Sins*. In this series, he employed a visual language of genre hidden

³⁸ Gibson, Walter S, *Pieter Bruegel and the Art of Laughter*, 17

³⁹ Ibid, 19.

⁴⁰ Gibson, Walter S. *Artists and Rederijkers in the Age of Bruegel*, 428.

⁴¹ Ibid, 430.

⁴² Ibid, 430.

behind absurdist Boschian settings that elevated their meaning beyond one of simple moral instruction. Through his work, Bruegel was able to carefully study the lives of peasants, and thus sought to encapsulate the nature of man in 16th century Netherlands. With the aid of literary sources such as Erasmus' *Adages*, and *Praise of Folly*, Bruegel was able to employ a comic mode that enabled him to both instruct and entertain.

Referenced Images



(fig. 1) Pieter van der Heyden after Pieter Bruegel the Elder, “Avaritia” from *The Seven Deadly Sins*, engraving, 22.5 x 29.6 cm, 1558, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



(fig. 2) Pieter van der Heyden after Pieter Bruegel the Elder, “Lust” from *The Seven Deadly Sins*, engraving, 22.6 x 29.6 cm, 1558, Bibliotheque Nationale de France, Paris.



(fig. 3) Pieter van der Heyden after Pieter Bruegel the Elder, “Anger” from *The Seven Deadly Sins*, engraving, 22.5 x 29.4 cm, 1558, Bibliotheque Nationale de France, Paris.



(fig. 4) Pieter van der Heyden after Pieter Bruegel the Elder, “Pride” from *The Seven Deadly Sins*, engraving, 22.9 x 29.6 cm, 1558, Bibliotheque Nationale de France, Paris.



(fig. 5) Pieter van der Heyden after Pieter Bruegel the Elder, “Gluttony” from *The Seven Deadly Sins*, engraving, 22.5 x 29.4 cm, 1558, The British Museum, London.



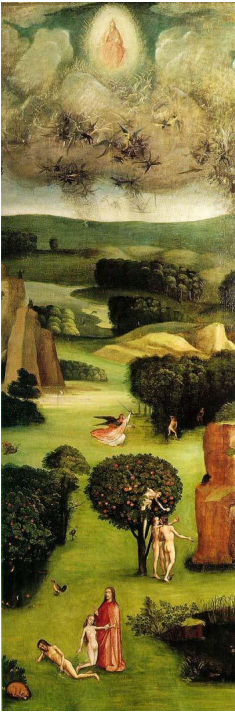
(fig. 6) Pieter van der Heyden after Pieter Bruegel the Elder, “Sloth” from *The Seven Deadly Sins*, engraving, 23 x 29.1 cm, 1558, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



(fig. 7) Pieter van der Heyden after Pieter Bruegel the Elder, “Envy” from *The Seven Deadly Sins*, engraving, 22.8 x 29.5 cm, 1558, Bibliotheque Nationale de France, Paris.



(fig. 8) Hieronymus Bosch, *Garden of Earthly Delights*, interior, oil on panel, 220 x 389 cm, ca. 1510-1515, Museo del Prado, Madrid.



(fig. 9) Hieronymus Bosch, *The Last Judgement* triptych, interior, oil on panel, 163 x 127 cm, ca. 1482, Akademie der Bildenden Künste, Vienna.

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