

Seven deadly sins: personification essay



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The Seven Deadly Sins is a major aspect to the religion of Christianity. Religion in the Middle Ages was exceedingly important and the central character to the lives of the people living in this time era. In early fourteenth century, Robert Manning of Brunne wrote a poem of an educational text informing people to avoid the seven deadly sins. Sometime later, in the late 1500s, Edmund Spenser wrote a book entitled *The Faerie Queene* and in Book 1, Canto 4, Spenser discusses the Seven Deadly Sins as the two characters, Redcrosse and Duessa, embark on their journey to the sinful House of Pride.

Spenser has a unique way of which he alters to readers an artful conception of such a broad aspect as based on this common literary and religious motif. Spenser personifies the seven deadly sins as people who are riding on corresponding animals that relate to the human species. Personifying and characterizing The Seven Deadly Sins as actual persons with human traits is an image that Spenser chose to create. Spenser may be one of the few writers to ever take on a challenge such as this.

To be able to take something as so religious and common and turn it into a person-like form requires much inventiveness and initiative. Spenser depicts each of the seven deadly sins, one as a queen and the other six are her unequal beasts, or counselors. Each of these seven sins holds importance to the book as well as holding true to the common form of literary and religious themes. Spenser takes each of these Seven Deadly Sins, Pride, Idleness, Gluttony, Lechery, Avarice, Envy and Wrath and turns them around into human-like forms.

He gives them characteristics and lets their actions speak for their name and who they are. Such as Idleness being drowned in his sleep, Gluttony swallowing up the feast, Lechery longing for the lady he did not have, Avarice carrying gold and two iron coffers and so on. The first of the seven deadly sins that Spenser personifies is Lucifera, or pride. Lucifera, the queen of the palace, is the worst of the Seven Deadly Sins. Spenser chooses to portray Lucifera as the sin of pride because it is the most deadly, serious and powerful out of the Seven Deadly Sins.

Pride is considered the original and the source of the others. Lucifera full of pride, shows off for the Redcrosse knight by calling her couch, which is pulled by six beasts upon which ride her six counselors: Idleness, Gluttony, Lechery, Avarice, Envy and Wrath and their appearances are appropriate to their names. The remaining six sins are seen as her counselors traveling on beasts, or respectable animals, in the parade alongside their queen, Redcrosse and Duessa. The second that Spenser talks about “ Was sluggish Idlennesse the nourse of sin / Upon a slouthfull Asse he chose to ryde” (599).

Sloth is personified as Idleness and Spenser chooses the character to ride on an ass. Sloths and asses are relevant characters to each other in that they are both portrayed as lazy and boring. “ For of devotion he had little care / Still drowned in sleepe, and most of his days ded / Scarse could he once uphold his heavie hed” (599). Spenser is describing the way Idleness is leading this pack of unequal beasts and counselors and how he seems to have very little care as to the others who are following him. Spenser uses the sin of Gluttony next and the corresponding animal to it, a pig.

Spenser refers to it as a “ Deformed creature, on a filthie swine / His belly was up-blowne with luxury / And eke with fatnesse swollen were his eyne” (599). Gluttony is over-indulging food and drink and Spenser chooses to have Gluttony ride on the pig because pigs tend to overeat and sweat, such as a glutton would. He also mentions the crane, as the crane is the symbol of gluttony. “ And like a Crane his necke was long and fine / With which he swallowed up excessive feast ... He spued up his gorge, that all did him deteast” (599).

Lechery, or lust, is being traveled by a goat and his “ Whally eyes (the sign of gelysy,) / Was like the person selfe, whome he did beare / Who rough, and blacke, and filthy did appeare / Unseemely man to please faire Ladies eye / Yet he of Ladies oft was loved deare” (600). Lust is a standard where each sex strives to suppress the other and is here personified as Lechery and the goat. Lechery is followed by the fourth, greedy Avarice and the camel, who is loaded with gold in two iron coffers.

With precious mettall full, as they might hold / And in his lap an heape of coine he told” (600). Avarice being the most wretched wight, he sacrifices very little of his devotion to the queen and his fellow members as well as living a miserable life, “ He led a wretched life unto him selfe unknown” (600). Avarice is according to Spenser, the most wretched wight, and this is a characteristic of avaricious men who usually resort themselves to contractible devices to hoard their wealth in, such as the iron coffers.

Through living a miserable life, Avarice is the “ Most wretched wight, whom nothing might suffise / Whose greedy lust id lacke in greatest store / Whose

need had end, but no end covetise / Whose wealth was want, whose plenty made him pore / Who had enough, yet wished ever more” (600). Following Avarice in the parade is the malicious Envy upon a ravenous wolf and the wolf is chewing a venomous toad as well as secretly chewing “ his owne mawe. ” He is clothed in a discolored garment painted with eyes, and a “ hatefull Snake” is also secretly curled in his bosom.

Avarice grudges at the felicity of his own company, and for the most part hates good writers: “ He does backebite and spightfull poison spues / From leprous mouth on all that ever writ” (600). Wolves, snakes, toads and self-consumption go with envy, as pigs and sweat go with gluttony. The last in the line of the parade and the last of the Seven Deadly Sins is that of the “ fierce revenging Wrath / Upon a Lion”. The characteristics of Wrath are him carrying a burning sword and his eyes sparkling fiery red.

Lions traditionally represent pride or wrath, so it is no question as to why Spenser related the lion to the sin of Wrath: “ And stared sterne on all, that him beheld / As ashes pale of hew and seeming ded / And on his dagger still his hand he held / Trembling through hasty rage, when choler in him sweld” (601). Edmund Spenser took the most common motif known to humans and turned it into something so imaginable and explicable.

Interpreting the Seven Deadly Sins s people and contributing them to respectable animals could only have been done by Spenser. Spenser’s technique of utilizing the Seven Deadly Sins with characterization created a way to his audience that provides knowledge to the virtues and to stay away from the sins, or face self-consumption or self-destruction. Spenser

exclusively modified this common literary and religious theme in his own way to show readers a crafty formation of such a large feature known as the Seven Deadly Sins.