SEVEN DEADLY SINS

W C Fields said that "a man who drinks whisky and hates children can't be all bad." We thought the same might be true of the seven deadly sins. Are they so deadly? We asked seven writers to investigate. The pictures come from "Harper's Magazine," which asked seven advertising companies to produce advertisements promoting the sins. Seven is of course a magic number (see editorial by Stewart), and the paper that follows the analysis of the sins shows a seven year growth cycle for ears.

Lust

Liam Farrell

Lust does not appear in *Index Medicus* or on Medline. We in the medical profession pretend that the most atavistic and implacable of all forces does not exist, though our colleagues in the clergy consider it the deadliest of all the deadly sins.¹ What, then, is lust? Like any good Irishman, shuddering with repressed Catholic guilt and Victorian prudery, I interpret lust as unfettered sexual desire, and not as some wishy-washy Van Goghian lust for life in general; as Jenny Diver screeched triumphantly in Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera*, "Sexual obsession hath him in thrall." In truth, our primal drives offer us little choice; we must see our descendants thrive and our genes become immortal. But Mother Nature has been capriciously kind and has given us this irresistible imperative with a twinkle in her eye. Procreating is fun, great fun, though archaeologists now say that for the past few million years humans have consciously separated sex from reproduction; fortunately sex, even without procreation, is still great fun. It may be an empty experience, but to paraphrase Woody Allen, as empty experiences go, it's one of the best.

Crossmaglen, County
Armagh BT35 9HD
Liam Farrell, general
practitioner

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A snake in the garden

Lust drives us to create, to achieve, to make ourselves as attractive as possible; whether our dick substitute is a big shiny car or the tenderest love poem or the most outré art nouveau is simply a matter of taste—we are combing our peacock plumage with different strokes. But there is a snake in our garden of Eden, the serpent of sociocultural patterns which trammel this rich creative force into the bottlenecks of monogamy and sterility. Imagine driving down the motorway in a Porsche and encountering a 30 mph zone; how do you restrain the six tons of throbbing horsepower between your legs? What congealing effect will it have on your spirit?

This is in regrettable contrast with the happy sexuality of other mammals, where sex is governed only by the availability of the female. The unfortunate female human who engages in sex without emotional involvement has been shown to feel vulnerable and this emotional vulnerability increases with the number of partners.² But could it be our society and its legacy of sexual limitation and equivocal morality which is the real cause of this vulnerability? Many other cultures display this unfair, dimorphic attitude. In Mangaia, in Polynesia, a boy who has had many women is admiringly described as being like a bull; his female counterpart dismissed as a pig.³ Women, I am strangely relieved to say, can be just as superficial, and are more likely to consider sex with a man who has high socioeconomic status (SES) and consequently greater earning potential,⁴ no matter if he is as unappealing as a hernia with a goatee.

Turning tide

Perhaps the tide is turning; women are now more often initiating sexual contact,⁵ and as they wield more social and political power, their sexual attitudes may also become more aggressive. And then we men can start lusting after them for their SES as well as their SEX.

But even unsatisfied lust may have its good points. When Yeats, only 23, fell in unrequited love with Maud Gonne, his loss inspired the greatest body of love poetry in the English language; the anguish, the ruin, the grief, the lurching between melancholy and despair, "It had become a glimmering girl/With apple-blossom in her hair/Who called me by my name and ran/And faded in the brightening air." Would a few good hard shags right at the start of their relationship have deprived us of these sublime and unforgettable verses? As Balzac said (afterwards), "There goes another great novel."

- 1 Capps D. The deadly sins and saving virtues: how they are viewed by clergy. *Pastoral Psychology* 1992;40:209-33.
- 2 Townsend JM. Sex without emotional involvement. An evolutionary interpretation of sex differences. *Arch Sex Behav* 1995; 24:173-207.
- 3 Marshall D. *Sexual behaviour on Mangaia; human sexual behaviour*. New York: Basic Books, 1971.
- 4 Townsend JM. Effects of potential partners' physical attractiveness and socioeconomic status on sexuality and partner selection. *Arch Sex Behav* 1990;19:149-63.
- 5 Anderson PB. Reports of female initiation of sexual contact: male and female differences. *Arch Sex Behav* 1993;22:335-43.

Envy

Louis Appleby

Envy is different from the other six deadly sins. It is, unless I am much mistaken, the only one that does not have an enjoyable side. It is all resentment, ill will, and sour grapes. Sometimes the word is used in a way that implies admiration as in "the NHS is the envy of the world"—a common phrase when I was a medical student but one that no longer rings true. In any case, this would be more accurately described as coveting. Envy, did you say? Keep going past coveting and stop just before you reach begrudging.

Withington Hospital,
Manchester M20 8LR
Louis Appleby, professor of
psychiatry

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HARPER'S

But, like the other six, envy is a state of mind: it does not require you to do anything. This strikes me as extraordinary, that you could commit a deadly sin—indeed all seven—without moving a muscle. After all, if you had to come up with seven modern sins the chances are that you would choose actions rather than thoughts. Drunkenness might qualify; fancying a few pints would seem a bit weak. But envy is an unpleasant thought wrapped in an unwanted emotion, and that explains the place that it occupies in medicine.

It was Sigmund Freud's view that envy was the state of mind that explained women. But not just any envy. Everything from women's neuroses to their ambitions, including the desire for psychoanalysis itself, was put down to penis envy. It all begins, said Freud, with the infant girl's realisation that she is different from her father in what advertisements for depilatory creams call the bikini area. Not only does she never quite forgive her mother, who on fairly circumstantial evidence is held responsible for her deficiency (Freud's word, not mine), but she spends the rest of her life trying to get back what she has lost. Not consciously, however—we are dealing here with the father of psychoanalysis, not John Wayne Bobbitt.

It is easy to mock Freud, and envious people have not been slow to do so. One of the towering figures of 20th century thought he may have been, but women, it is said, were his blind spot. But looked at more simply, stripped of the theory that nowadays is hard to swallow, Freud's view of women is uncontroversial, unoriginal even. Take out the penis and what you are left with is sociological envy, women's discomfort at the status, influence, and job success that men can attain and yet not deserve. The fact that it comes with more alcoholism, heart disease, and suicide has never made the penis less enviable.

It is not envy that modern psychiatrists worry about but its mirror image, jealousy. I had been in the specialty no more than a few days when I met my first case of delusional jealousy—Othello syndrome. He was a musician who had treated his premature ejaculation with amphetamines to which he had ready access. The drugs had turned him paranoid and he had accused his girlfriend of infidelity, confronting her with half baked evidence. When she denied it he beat her badly—it may be Othello's syndrome but it was Desdemona's neck.

Jealousy of this intensity is a male preserve. In some cases, you find men who fear their own inadequacies,

who need to possess women in compensation, and who cannot accept that women have other ideas—morbid jealousy tells us more about attitudes between the sexes than penis envy ever could. And, unlike envy, jealousy is more than thought: it leads to action. Men with Othello syndrome sometimes kill their women and occasionally kill themselves. Jealousy may not have made it into the top seven sins but no one can say that it is not deadly.

Wrath

Simon Chapman

Wrath has had a shocking press since the Old Testament. The writer of *Ecclesiastes*, a neglected epidemiologist, apparently had unpublished data showing that "envy and wrath shorten the life."¹ As many found out, God was just full of it, promising to deliver it by the chariot load for the slightest misdemeanour ("Let no man deceive you with vain words; for because of these things cometh the wrath of God upon the children of disobedience").

Today wrath sits alone in the back row in the den of sins, spurned and feared by all the others as they indulge their pleasures and neuroses. The greedy might be contemptible, the gluttonous unsightly, the envious tedious, and the lustful, well...envied. But the wrathful are simply terrifying and reviled. I mean, who would you rather have to your party? Eros, Bacchus or Dionysius? An orgy, a banquet or brachioprocitic red hot pokers?

Sour grapes?

But is this really fair—a sort of sour grapes of wrath? Certainly, the easy part is agreeing that many wrathful people throughout history have been distinctly nasty pieces of work, having caused untold misery and suffering to millions. Between them, this year's killers at Dunblane and Port Arthur ended the lives of 52 people. The continuing genocide in Rwanda doubtless cloaks dozens more unspeakable examples. The community's memory holds a special place for the wrathful, with these sort of events being mileposts in the archaeology of human

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Department of
Public Health and
Community Medicine,
University of Sydney,
Westmead Hospital,
Westmead, NSW 2145,
Australia
Simon Chapman, associate
professor of public health and
community medicine

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