

The Seven Deadly Sins

RLST 3750

Spring 2009, MW 1:00-2:45pm, CC-4

Professor Ray

Office: CC-16

Office Hours: TTh 1:00-2:00pm and by appointment

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Course Description & Format

Last spring, Pope Benedict announced a new list of seven deadly sins. A new list?! What was wrong with the old one—the one that was good enough for over 1,000 years?! That question got me thinking about those so-called “deadly” sins. I tried to name them but, like the seven dwarves, kept leaving one or the other out. Once I arrived at a complete list, I began to wonder what was so “deadly” about, say, sloth. Sloth? Who talks about sloth anymore? Why would sloth or envy be considered more deadly than—oh, I don’t know—nuclear warfare, terrorism, or serial murder? Thus were the seeds of this course planted.

I am by now thoroughly fascinated by the seven deadly sins—a tradition that has left a profound mark on Western literature, art, and religion and that continues to inspire contemporary art, music, film, comic books, and, of course, any number of sermons and Sunday school lessons. I invite you to join me in the fascination, to join me on this journey into the wild and wonderful world of the seven deadly sins.

As professor, I will serve as official guide for our journey. In addition, I have created a rough map for our journey: I have pre-selected certain “sites” (texts, issues) to be visited, a proposed route (syllabus) to be traveled, and a series of landmarks (assignments) by which to mark and evaluate our progress. However, it is vital that you understand *I am a fellow traveler with you*—perhaps more excited than you about the upcoming journey but equally a novice when it comes to the particular route we will take. While I have scouted out the possibilities in some detail, I have never walked this path before. If we are to have an interesting and enjoyable journey, we will need each other’s good company; diverse gifts, interests, and areas of expertise; and commitment. If you are not willing to contribute these things, please jump ship now. We’ll miss you, but we don’t need the dead weight.

Course Goals

Students who successfully complete this course should be able to communicate intelligently about the history and development in Western thought of the notion of the seven deadly sins, drawing on evidence from literature, religion, art, and popular culture. They should also have a well practiced ability to follow and analyze complex arguments, as well as a developing ability to construct their own sustained arguments related to course themes. Finally, students should be able to consider the possible relevance of traditional notions of the seven deadly sins for contemporary contexts.

To achieve these goals, specific learning objectives for the semester can be identified. Students who successfully complete this course should be able to:

- * summarize, analyze, and reflect critically upon the logic and relative persuasiveness of formative arguments in the seven deadly sins tradition;
- * comment intelligently on the vestiges of that tradition in contemporary culture;
- * demonstrate mastery of formative texts and arguments related to one of the sins (your choice);
- * construct a sustained, informed, and intellectually and rhetorically coherent argument of one's own about one or more of the sins.

Course Readings

These required readings are available for purchase in the Millsaps College bookstore:

Augustine, *Confessions*

Mark Musa, *The Portable Dante*

Daniel Born, Mike Levine, and Donald Whitfield, eds., *The Seven Deadly Sins Sampler*

Henry Fairlie, *The Seven Deadly Sins Today*

In addition, a course reader should be purchased from the instructor.

Course Hopes/Expectations/Requirements

I *hope* you will be a glad and even enthusiastic co-traveler this semester. I *hope* you will throw yourself into the texts, questions, and issues we encounter--engaging with them actively and voluntarily. I *hope* you will approach the daily writings, exams, and paper as opportunities for intellectual growth. I *expect* you to be collegial and respectful, to pull your own weight in group-work, and to complete all assignments in a timely fashion. The official course requirements are as follows:

- 1) **Attendance** - Your presence in class is vital, so please be present and punctual every class meeting. If you do miss class, you are solely responsible for materials covered in class, including announcements about upcoming assignments. Absences in excess of three will result in the lowering of your final grade by one increment (e.g., from a B to a B-) per absence. Significant or repeated tardies will count as one-half an absence. Those with perfect attendance will get two points added to their final grade.
- 2) **Participation (10%)** - This is a discussion-intensive course. Students wishing to earn an "A" (Excellent, Superb) for this portion of the grade should expect to make informed, thoughtful, and courteous oral contributions in each class and to be engaged listeners. Students wishing to make a "B" (Above Average, Good) for this portion of the grade should expect to make informed, thoughtful, and courteous oral contributions in most classes. Students who rarely contribute in class or whose contributions are ill-informed, spurious, or consistently dominating should expect a below average grade (C- through F) for Participation.
- 3) **Daily Writings (20%)** - On nine class days (marked below with asterisks*), an informal written reflection engaging specific aspects of assigned readings is due at the beginning of class. Late papers will not be accepted. Eight of the nine Daily Writings will be averaged together to comprise this portion of the final grade. (This means you can miss or drop one

of the nine.) Unless otherwise noted, Daily Writings should include the following elements for each text assigned on a given day:

- a. a brief summary, in your own words, of the author's argument or main point;
- b. direct quotation followed by a brief paraphrase of at least two passages that develop, support, or exemplify the author's argument in important ways;
- c. brief personal reflection on one or more point of interest or confusion to the student.

Daily Writings will be evaluated periodically for completion and thoughtfulness. While the evaluative focus will be on *content*, these should be well written enough to allow for easy comprehension by the reader.

- 4) **Exams** (45%) - There will be two exams designed to encourage and evaluate your ability to recall, synthesize, and reflect critically on the content and import of course materials, including mini-lectures. The first exam will be worth 15% of the course grade, while the final exam will be worth 30% of the course grade.
- 5) **Paper** (25%) - There will be one 8-10 page paper in which you are to develop a clear, coherent, and compelling argument about one of the seven deadly sins. Sources for the paper should include relevant course readings, as well as 3-5 additional scholarly sources, for a minimum of six scholarly sources. Your argument should be informed by both past and present. In order to set you up for success on this assignment, a series of pre-writing exercises is set forth in the Daily Schedule below. These exercises are not optional; they are designed to help you produce a textually-informed, argument-driven paper that is a pleasure to read. Grades for the Pre-Writing Exercises will be averaged together to comprise 5% of the course grade, while the final paper will comprise 20% of your grade in the course. The final paper will be evaluated in terms of clarity, coherence, and intelligence of argument; marshaling of textual evidence in support of argument; elegance of expression; creativity and complexity of thinking; proper handling of sources; and grammatical correctness.

Seniors whose graduation status exempts them from the final exam and who have a C or better in the course prior to the final exam (including any demerits for excessive absences) may have their grades computed as follows: Participation (10%), Daily Writings (25%), Exam (25%), Paper (40%).

Grading

While I hope you will work long and hard on this course and its assignments, I must warn you that when it comes to written work and oral presentations, you will be graded on the *quality* of the work you produce rather than the effort you put into it. In most cases, effort correlates with quality: Rarely can someone put in very little effort and still create a high quality product. At the same time, let us simply admit to the fact that some of us have to work a lot harder than others to make the same grade. In addition, some of us may find that our intellectual talents are better suited for one subject matter than another, or for one type of assignment instead of another, or that our talents don't really blossom until a later stage in life. Whether we like them or not these kinds of realities are simply the stuff of life. I will not, as an evaluator of your work, lie to you by telling you your work is better than it is. On the other hand, I would be pleased as punch if every single person in this class submitted high quality work all the time and hence earned a grade of "A" in the course.

All that being said, here is what letter grades mean in this course:

A grade of F means the work you have done on the assignment basically fails to respond to it.

A grade of D means your work speaks to the assignment but still does not meet its minimum requirements. Your paper has serious problems.

A grade of C means you have successfully met the minimum requirements of an assignment. Your paper has no major problems of any kind, but there is still much for you to do to better your grade. Your work on that paper is average.

A grade of B means you have succeeded in important ways. Your work has gone beyond the minimum requirements of the assignment. For example, you have demonstrated adequate mastery of complex materials; you have successfully balanced description with analysis; well-chosen evidence is offered in support of your assertions and interpretations; you express yourself clearly, coherently, and meaningfully. Your work on that paper is good.

A grade of A means you have produced a highly impressive, exemplary paper. You have demonstrated complex thinking and excellent mastery of materials; you have presented your thesis coherently and persuasively; you have organized your thoughts effectively; and you have supported your interpretations meticulously. An A paper is also one that is excellent in style and voice or tone. And in an A paper, attention to form (spelling, punctuation, grammar, documentation) is as rigorous as it is to the content. Your work on that paper is superior.

Complex thinking is often termed "critical thinking". This term does not refer to the act of being critical. Rather, critical thinking is thinking which is able to incorporate multiple points of view, addresses problems which may have no neat and simple answers, tolerates ambiguity, finds connections, and is not reliant on others' assessments. Critical thinkers can subject their own assumptions to rational inquiry and are able to be self-assessors.

Letter grades are assigned to increments of 10 on a scale of 100.

A 94-100 A- 91-93

B+ 88-90 B 84-87 B- 81-83

C+ 78-80 C 74-77 C- 71-73

D+ 68-70 D 61-67

Special Needs: Students with special needs because of a disability are encouraged to discuss those needs with me at your earliest convenience.

Cell Phones: Please, no texting during class. Please silence phones as you enter the classroom.

Honor Code

All work completed in this course should comply with the letter and the spirit of the Millsaps Honor Code. Suspected violations of the Code will be forwarded to the Honor Council for consideration. If at any point in the semester you or anyone you know has questions about the Code or its relation to a given assignment, please do not hesitate to contact me. Ignorance and the absence of malice are not acceptable excuses for violating the Honor Code.

Daily Schedule

1/12 Introduction to the course and to SIN

ST. AUGUSTINE: AN INFLUENTIAL SIN THINKER

1/14* Augustine, *Confessions*

1/19 MLK, Jr. Day events. No class.

1/21* Augustine, *Confessions*

THE SEVEN

1/26* Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Parson's Tale" from *The Canterbury Tales*
Edmund Spenser, from *Faery Queen*
Thomas Aquinas, "The Capital Vices" from *Summa Theologica*

PRIDE (*Superbia*)

1/28* John Milton, from *Paradise Lost*
Aquinas, "Pride"

2/2 Dante, *Purgatory*, Cantos I, IX-XII (*Portable Dante*, 194-200, 240-262)
William Faulkner, "A Rose for Emily" (*Seven Deadly Sins Sampler*)
Flannery O'Connor, "Good Country People" (*SDS Sampler*)

2/4 Henry Fairlie, *The Seven Deadly Sins Today*, 39-58

ENVY (*Invidia*)

2/9* St. Basil, "On Envy"
Plutarch, "Envy and Hatred"
Aquinas, "Envy"

2/10 The 2009 Summers Lecture: 11:30am, AC Recital Hall

2/11 Dante, *Purgatory*, Cantos XIII-XIV (*Portable Dante*, 263-275)
Edith Wharton, "Roman Fever" (*SDS Sampler*)
Tobias Wolff, "Smokers" (*SDS Sampler*)

2/16 Fairlie, 61-83

PAUSE

2/18 Class begins at noon. Lunch provided.
Film: "Se7en" (Brad Pitt, Morgan Freeman, Gwyneth Paltrow, Kevin Spacey)

2/23 **Exam**

ANGER/WRATH (*Ira*)

2/25* Seneca, from *On Anger*
Aquinas, "Anger"

3/2 Dante, *Purgatory*, Cantos XV-XVII (*Portable Dante*, 275-291)
Rudyard Kipling, "Mary Postgate" (*SDS Sampler*)
Margaret Atwood, "Hairball" (*SDS Sampler*)

3/4 Fairlie, 87-109

3/5 Special Religious Studies lunchtime lecture: 11:30am, Leggett Center

SLOTH (*Acedia*)

3/9* Aquinas, "Sloth"
Dante, *Purgatory*, Canto XVIII (*Portable Dante*, 291-297)
Anton Chekhov, "The House with the Mezzanine" (*SDS Sampler*)

3/11 Bobbie Ann Mason, "Shiloh" (*SDS Sampler*)
Fairlie, 113-130

GREED/AVARICE (*Avaritia*)

3/23* Chaucer, "The Pardoner's Tale"
Aquinas, "Greed"

3/25 Dante, *Purgatory*, Cantos XIX-XXII (*Portable Dante*, 297-322)
D.H. Lawrence, "The Rocking-Horse Winner" (*SDS Sampler*)
Elizabeth Bowen, "The Inherited Clock" (*SDS Sampler*)

3/30 Fairlie, 133-152
Paper topic and preliminary bibliography due

GLUTTONY (*Gula*)

4/1* Aquinas, "Gluttony"
Dante, *Purgatory*, Cantos XXIII-XXV through verse 108 (*Portable Dante*, 322-338)
Raymond Carver, "Fat" (*SDS Sampler*)

4/6 Xu Xi, "Famine" (*SDS Sampler*)
Fairlie, 155-171

LUST (*Luxuria*)

4/8 Aquinas, "Lust"

Perri Klass, "Not A Good Girl" (*SDS Sampler*)

Nathan Englander, "For the Relief of Unbearable Urges" (*SDS Sampler*)

4/13 Interlude: Paper Pause

Annotated bibliography, opening paragraph(s), and paper outline due

4/15 Dante, *Purgatory*, Cantos XXV verse 109 - XXVII (*Portable Dante*, 338-351)

Fairlie, 175-190

LAST THINGS

4/20 Fairlie, 193-214

Martin Luther King, Jr., from *Strength to Love*

Aristotle, TBA

4/22 **Paper due**

5/2 **Final exam, 9:00am**

