**The Seven Deadly Sins of Writing**

1. **Pride**

Pride (as any good Christian will tell you) is the worst of the sins, and the one from which all the others derive. It’s the sin that got Lucifer kicked out of heaven.

When you are proud, you believe you are already more than good enough. It’s not your fault the world hasn’t recognised, celebrated and rewarded your genius, it’s the world’s fault. You are impatient.

Kafka wrote:

*“ There are two main human sins, from which all the others derive: impatience and indolence. It was because of impatience that they were expelled from paradise; it is because of indolence that they do not return. Yet perhaps there is only one major sin: impatience. Because of impatience they were expelled, because of impatience they do not return. ”*

I agree with this. However, the full Seven Deadly are a useful way of picking Pride apart.

The way that Pride manifests for writers is in not doing the basics. The basics are (in order of importance) re-reading, re-writing, reading and writing.

(Re-reading others, not yourself.)

If your sin is Pride, you should read and then re-read a writer who is so good you know you’ll never match them. Then start writing again, concentrating on the basics you can see that writer doing.

1. **Envy**

When Pride isn’t assuaged, Envy starts up. It may seem to be the obvious – that another writer has that thing you want. That thing may be an agent, a publishing contract, a literary prize or thousands of readers. That thing may also be the ability to make readers feel they know and respect and love you.

The way Envy presents itself is in writing at something, rather than about something.

Envy, combined with Pride, isn’t really Envy of another person, though – it’s the self envying the self. All its bad habits are delighted in, and all its misbehaviours encouraged.

If you address the page with the attitude, ‘Wow, I’m going to write this so that it stays fucking written about – when I’m finished, no-one else is going to go near it’ – if you catch yourself thinking this, you can finish that page but you better dispose of it in a safe and responsible manner. It’s toxic.

If your sin is Envy, you should read interviews with a writer that you love and know is good (or, even better, read their diaries). The chances are, they won’t sound all that self-satisfied. Good writers rarely do. When you start writing again, imagine you’re addressing someone who is extremely vulnerable. You’re not going to shout at them, are you?

1. **Wrath**

When envious writing gets the writer nowhere, they get pissed off. They reach Wrath. To write wrathfully is, usually, to write with the attitude, ‘Well, X does this, so why shouldn’t I?’

Sometimes the attitude can be up, ‘Well, X does this brand of wonderfulness, so why shouldn’t I?’ and sometimes it can be down, ‘Well, Y gets away with this shit, so why shouldn’t I?’

Just because someone else writes badly (in your wrathful opinion) is no reason for you to write badly. There’s no hierarchy here of genre and literary writing. Wrathfully imitating Rachel Cusk is just as corrosive of your soul as wrathfully imitating E.L.James. You may believe that you’re writing out of love, and in sincere tribute, but beneath it is Wrath – and that’s what the reader gets, and shies away from.

If your sin is Wrath, then you should stop reading the writer you think is your favourite writer but who you actually hate. Read someone who doesn’t ingratiate themselves to you in any way. Start writing again, in the most direct way you can, about subjects you’ve been avoiding.

1. **Sloth**

After the burst of wrathful writing, there can come years of the slothful.

It’s not not-rewriting that signifies sloth. A writer can re-write dozens of time. They can pride themselves on how many drafts they do.

But if these drafts are done without an effort of soul, without a deep reconsideration of the virtue of the enterprise, they are slothful.

Each new draft will merely address the scenes and the sentences without addressing the work as a whole. You can call it tinkering or polishing. It’s wanking.

I’ll be frank, lots of books are unreadable not because they are badly written as such, but because their main character is a wanker.

They might be a misogynist wanker, or a snidey-literary wanker, or a genre-main-character-stooge wanker – but a wanker is what they are. Because they are writing slothfully, the writer has never stopped to consider that this might be a problem.

If your sin is Sloth, you need to detach from your habits of rewriting. You should take something you have completed and rewrite it in order that it has the opposite effect to the one you originally intended. That story you hoped would make people cry, make it funny. Then start a new story.

1. **Greed**

In order to cover up their Sloth, the writer will display to themselves all the false energy of Greed.

The greedy writer doesn’t want to write, they want to have written. But wordcount means nothing.

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A thousand words a day is, in itself, no achievement. There are millions of 80,000 word novels that are no better than the previous 80,000 word novels their writer wrote. Everyone on twitter cheering one another on for mere productivity is misguided. Sorry. Most of them would be better stopping the novel and writing a short story. Most of them would be even better writing a decent sonnet.

This is not to say that producing words at a decent rate isn’t necessary if you’re hoping to write a novel. But you need to be writing virtuously to make those words worthwhile.

If your sin is greed, read and reread writers who do what they do in a small number of words. Poets. Then halve your previous wordcount and stick to it.

1. **Gluttony**

After the Greed of writing a lot comes the Gluttony of putting a lot into the writing – a lot of the stuff the writer likes, and so hopes the reader will like, too.

This might, in your case, be violence or beautiful similies or sensitivity or wry everyday observations.

However many times you’ve heard good writers talk about writing being more about subtraction than addition, you’ll think, “Yes, but they’re still putting all that stuff down somehow. They’re getting it on the page.”

There can be a Gluttony of cutting, too. It is one of the commonest forms of Gluttony – particularly among writers on Creative Writing Courses. Less is only more if you’re distilling rather than disposing.

If your sin is Gluttony, stop writing and start planning. Don’t look at the details any more – look at the overall shape. Keep at this until you feel you know everything there is to know about the piece, apart from the sentences. Work from the end you want to achieve back to the means you need to achieve it. Only then start writing.

1. **Lust**

Once a writer has got to the stage of Gluttony, then Lust is just the application of that to everything out there. What applies to the words applies equally to the world.

The lustful writer may believe (because they’re still proud) that they’re ready to do the world.

However, most likely this is not how Lust manifests. It will manifest as, in the Buddhist understanding, the craving for non-existence. The lustful writer may believe that they’re ready to un-do the world – end it.

Most writers end up depressed at some point or other. Desiring everything and desiring nothing are exactly the same thing. “There’s no point. I will never write anything good. I may as well give up.”

This is Lust.

If Lust is your sin, you should stop writing for a while and do something you’re really bad at. That may be picking up a new musical instrument, drawing flowers, listening closely to what someone is saying, sitting very still. Take time away from the writing, and try to go back to it for its own reasons – not yours.

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