

Movie: Se7en (1995)

Synopsis

Taking place in NYC, veteran detective Somerset (Morgan Freeman) is teamed up with a newly minted detective Mills (Brad Pitt), who is itching to prove himself. Their first crime scene together involves a man who is forced to eat until his stomach literally bursts. A single word: “Gluttony” is written at the scene. Shortly after, the duo is called to a second murder, a wealthy attorney who made his fortune by defending high profile criminals. He was killed after a pound of flesh was carved from his body with “Greed” written nearby in his blood. Detective Somerset recognizes that the murders resemble the seven deadly sins and is worried that there will be 5 more victims. Throughout the movie, in addition to gluttony and greed, three other sins were brought to life: sloth, lust, and pride. Shortly after the ‘pride murder’ is discovered, Somerset and Mills take the murderer, John Doe, into custody after he surrenders at the precinct. They are then led on wild chase to find the last 2 sins: envy and wrath. Will John Doe be able to finish his masterpiece? He leaves this up to Detective Mills.

How it relates to the field of psychiatry

The seven deadly sins depicted in this movie were first described in the works of the 4th century Greek monk Evagrius Ponticus; eventually made famous by the Italian poet, Dante, in the 12th century. These sins were published in his poem: *Purgatorio* (the *Divine Comedy*). *Purgatorio* depicts Dante’s climb up Mount Purgatory. His path is blocked by a she-wolf and the pilgrim Dante is only able to reach heaven (*Paradiso*) by first descending the 9 circles of hell (*Inferno*) where he encounters the aforementioned deadly sins.

At Rutgers-RWWMS, the seven deadly sins are referenced to teach the Personality Disorders (Table 1). The antagonist, John Doe, personifies envy; the cardinal trait of Narcissistic Personality Disorder. Additionally, John Doe’s dialogue with the two detectives is a crucial scene that allows the viewer to observe a pervasive pattern of grandiosity, need for admiration, and lack of empathy.

As mentioned above, John Doe’s conversation with Detectives Mills and Somerset demonstrates his pathological trait of grandiosity. When Doe is taunted by Detective Mills about being insane, Doe responds that he did not chose this life, but was chosen. He claims that “[He is] setting the example” of how people shall no longer accept the seven deadly sins as the norm (he was just in murdering them). Even Detective Mills [correctly!] recognized his “delusions of grandeur” after Doe explains that he is doing God’s work. The belief of doing the work of a higher power is a fundamental aspect of grandiose belief.

Furthermore, this scene also illuminates John Doe’s need for admiration. John Doe has spent years planning for these murders. In addition to being grandiose and believing that he is working for a higher power, Doe yearns for admiration. When Detective Mills probes Doe on what makes him so special, he responds that he is not special, but his work is. He goes on to explain that people may not be able to comprehend all of his work now; however, once it is complete, they won’t be able to deny it’s importance.

Lastly, John Doe’s dialogue also elucidates his lack of empathy. In the car, Detective Somerset counters Doe’s claim on ‘being chosen’ by asking that if he was chosen by a higher power (as implied by Doe), then why did he get so much enjoyment out of it. He also asks how enjoying torturing them keeps with his claim of martyrdom. He responds with “nothing wrong with a man taking pleasure in his work”. He refers to brutally murdering and torturing people as “work” as similar if he was working a normal 9 to 5 job. Doe finishes his rant by adding: “don’t ask me to pity those people, I don’t mourn them anymore then I do those who died at Sodom and Gomorrah.”

Table 1. The seven “deadly” sins and their associated Axis II pathology

Sin	Axis II	Role	Ego Fixation	Sinner	Mythology
Lust	Antisocial	Challenger	Vengeance	Cleopatra	Achilles
Gluttony	Egocentricity; risk factor for Personality Disorders	Enthusiast	Planning (anticipation)		
Greed	OCPD	Investigator	Stinginess	Ciacco	Cerberus
Wrath	BPD	Reformer	Resentment		Plutus
Sloth	Dependent	Peacemaker	Indolence		
Envy	Narcissistic	Individualist	Melancholy		Furies and Medusa
Pride	Histrionic	Helper	Ingratiation (flattery)		

Chris Pumill, Anthony Tobia, MD, Copyright © 2016 Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School. All rights reserved.