

FULL LENGTH ARTICLES

Hieronymus Bosch's Purgatory in *In Bruges*

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In this paper I analyze the critically acclaimed film *In Bruges*, directed by Martin McDonagh, arguing that the film transforms the town of Bruges into a narrative embodiment of the Purgatory depicted in Hieronymus Bosch's medieval paintings. The Boschian transformation is achieved through the use of medieval symbolism, themes of sin, repentance, and the afterlife, as well as visual references to Bosch's characters, scenes, and his Last Judgement triptych in Bruges.

Hieronymus Bosch is an artist so iconic that his unique approach to religious narratives inspired his very own term, 'Boschian'. His work, distinguishable by his wildly inventive imagery and creatures, continues to inspire and influence contemporary artists across various art mediums, including cinema. Martin McDonagh's *In Bruges* (2008) is an existential comedy-crime thriller following two Irish hitmen hiding out in the Belgian town of Bruges after a severely blundered assassination job. While the two men are stuck in a limbo between jobs, they get to know the town of Bruges and, eventually, through various bizarre scenarios and characters, they find themselves pondering over their past sins, the afterlife, forgiveness, and repentance. *In Bruges* takes great inspiration from Bosch's work, most notably his *Last Judgment* triptych (1486 Groeningemuseum, Bruges) that is featured in the film, to narratively transform the town of Bruges into Purgatory as its two main characters go on their journeys of atonement. The film achieves this transformation by using biblical symbolism, visual and thematic parallels to Bosch's work, and focusing on themes of sin, repentance, and punishment; these themes present themselves in the characters we meet, the torture the two main character's go through, and the town of Bruges itself.

The film opens by introducing us to its main characters, Ray (Colin Farrell) and Ken (Brendan Gleeson), as they arrive in Bruges straight out of the town's train station as per their boss, Harry's (Ralph Fiennes) instructions. Ray immediately wants out of the "shithole" town, while Ken delights in the idea of getting a break from the job and laying low while sightseeing instead. Ray's first inner conflict that the audience is exposed to is his inability to sit with the uncertainty of their current instruction to simply "get the fuck out of London" and to "get to Bruges." He is being forced to temporarily live in a sort of nothing-place, it's not his home and there's no real objective for him

there yet. After messing up his last hit job and accidentally killing a seven-year-old boy, he has been sent to a place where Harry can still reach them, but the London authorities cannot, an in-between place: Purgatory.

The dilemma of in-betweenness is often present in Bosch's work, including in the center panels of *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, his *Last Judgment* triptychs, and the Prado *Haywain*, in which each sits between paradise and perdition. The center panels each represent earth in a different state. The *Haywain* is an earthly scene of humanity's material sin of greed and desire. *The Garden of Earthly Delights* depicts a world without boundary, sinful in our perception, but guilt-free to those inhabiting the painting's garden.¹ *The Last Judgment* shows judgment day on earth, where the forces of Heaven escort the souls chosen for salvation, and where demons are sent.

The Last Judgment triptych is featured in the film's thesis statement scene, when Ken and Ray visit the Groeninge Museum. Before it transitions into the museum the film reveals Ray's accident which brought them to Bruges. He sits in a confessional as a priest asks why he murdered someone, "for money" Ray replies. Then as the father asks who he murdered for money, Ray replies "You, Father" and shoots him multiple times, unknowingly shooting a little boy in the next room over. The scene then transitions into a view of Jan Provoost's *Death and the Miser*, then Gerard David's *Judgment of Cambyses*, two works with themes of bribery, punishment, and death. Ray and Ken step away from the paintings looking disgruntled, perhaps connecting the paintings to their own lives. The two join each other in front of Bosch's *Last Judgment*. Ray takes a liking to it and asks Ken what it's all about; Judgment Day, Ken explains, "when mankind will be judged for all the crimes they've committed". It's when humans get sent to Heaven or Hell, or the other one, Purgatory, "the in-betweeny one" as Ray calls it. It's important to note that Ray almost entirely blocks the Heaven panel and Ken partially blocks the Hell panel from the viewers. Then when the movie gives us panned close-ups of the painting, the camera very deliberately stops at both sides of the center panel's framing. As seen in [figure 1](#), we see details of a bird-human hybrid eating humans, possibly a symbol for gluttony, a lantern building that holds a brothel, and a nude male figure being tortured and cut on a giant knife that points into a mussel, a symbol for lechery.² The detail shots invite viewers to introspect on the sights and characters we've already seen and foreshadow the same.

After the hitmen have first situated themselves into their shared hotel room, they, along with the audience, begin exploring Bruges. The pair start their journey on a canal boat ride, innocent touristy sightseeing yes, but, as pointed out by Catherine O'Brien in her Augustinian analysis of the film, it's also a scene reminiscent of the journey across the Styx down to Hades, where

1 Pethö "The Garden of Earthly Delights: Cinematic Adaptations of Bosch, From Modernism to the Postmedia Age," 471.

2 Janssen et al. "Everyday Objects in the Paintings of Hieronymus Bosch", 174.



Figure 1. Hieronymus Bosch, *The Last Judgment* (interior central), Groeningemuseum, Bruges.

one's soul would then be judged.³ This scene possibly foreshadows that the characters we will meet in Bruges will also be receiving their judgment in this mystical place.

Multiple times throughout the film, Bruges is described as an almost otherworldly place. Ray, while walking down the foggy cobbled streets, says he feels like he's in a dream. Ray's line holds significance in relation to Bosch as his work is often described to be dream-like. In his *Trattato dell'arte della pittura*, Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo, a 16th-century Italian artist and writer, describes Bosch as unique and divine in his "representation of apparitions and extraordinary and horrible dreams".⁴ In the *Effigies*, poet Dominic Lampsonius praises Pieter Bruegel as the "new Hieronymus Bosch who

3 O'Brien "In Bruges': Heaven or Hell?" 99.

4 Gibson "Bosch's Dreams: A Response to the Art of Bosch in the Sixteenth Century," 206

brings his master's ingenious dreams to life once more".⁵ The connection between fantasy, hybrids, and dreams is found in Roman art and decoration known as *grotteschi*, or grotesques, possible inspirations for Bosch's hybrid monsters. In the eleventh-century Roman grotesque carvings found their way onto church decorations in Europe, including the Netherlands; they are often seen on the undersides of the church's folding seats or on corbels.⁶ In *Arts Poetica*, the highly influential first-century Italian poet, Horace, describes the original Roman grotesque hybrids as pictures that are "shaped like a sick man's dreams".⁷ This quote, which is often cited when discussing Bosch's work, attributes the artistic creation of unearthly hybrid creatures to the dreamworld.

Aside from being called dream-like, Harry and Ken both call Bruges a fairytale place. While on the canal ride, Ken tells Ray that Bruges is one of Belgium's most well-preserved medieval towns in an attempt to excite Ray about their stay. Similarly, when Ken tells Harry the town might not be Ray's "cup of tea", Harry gets agitated and asks "How can all those canals, and bridges, and cobbled streets, and those churches, not be somebody's fucking thing?" as the antiquity of the town is one of its main attractions. In that same phone call, Harry instructs Ken to kill Ray, whom he has sent to Bruges — the fairytale town Harry visited at age seven — as a dying gift. To Harry's surprise, the town has changed since then. The first thing one sees after departing the train is a dual carriageway (a divided highway), two big paths in and out of the town. Bruges has shifted into something else. It's not suitable as a final destination as Harry intended, but rather is now an in-between place that takes Ray, a man who was meant to die there, on a reflective journey that confronts him with his sins and teaches him to want salvation even after all of the suffering he will endure there.

Similar to the pilgrimage story that Bosch portrays in the exterior of *The Haywain* in Madrid, Bruges tests Ray, it sends him obstacles and punishments that make him question his faith and really force him to contemplate his regrets. One of the forms the obstacles manifest in is through the people he meets. At the city's center, Ken climbs the Belfry of Bruges, and Ray decides to stay below. While waiting for him, a family of overweight Americans — a more modern take on the deadly sin of gluttony — ask him about the tower and he rudely warns them "it's all windy stairs" and that they wouldn't make it to the top. Perhaps out of pride, they go up anyway. Later in the movie, we learn that the father died of a heart attack at the top of the tower, betrayed by his own body just as a sinner is roasted in his own fat present in the center panel of the Vienna *Last Judgment* ([figure](#)

⁵ Gibson, 206.

⁶ Buras, "Social Influenced on Sculpted Romanesque Corbels" 5

⁷ Gibson, 217.



Figure 2. Detail of Hieronymus Bosch, *The Last Judgment* (interior central), Akademie der bildenden Künste, Vienna.

2).⁸ Both the *In Bruges* scene and the *Gula* scene in *The Seven Deadly Sins and the Four Last Things* feature four characters, including a family of three stockier characters, who portray gluttony via overeating; these three parallel the American family (fig. 3). At their side is a skinny man in tattered clothes drinking so much alcohol it's dribbling down his chin, a glutton through over-drinking; he is Ray's parallel, as Ray is always shown going down to pubs or drinking in his free time.

There are a few other characters we encounter that may represent the other deadly sins. While Ray is on a date with Chloë (Clémence Poésy), a local he met the day before, we witness wrath in two Canadians sitting next to the couple. They are incredibly quick to anger when cigarette smoke gets blown at them, despite knowingly being sat in the smoking section. Their

⁸ Janssen et al. "Everyday Objects," 173.



Figure 3. Detail of Hieronymus Bosch, *The Seven Deadly Sins and the Last Four Things*, Museo del Prado, Madrid.



Figure 4, 5. Detail of Hieronymus Bosch, *The Seven Deadly Sins and the Last Four Things*, Museo del Prado, Madrid.

comeuppance arrives when Ray promptly beats the couple up. This scene also visually resembles the *Ira* section of *The Seven Deadly Sins and the Four Last Things*; in both scenes, furniture ends up scattered about in the fight's aftermath (fig. 4). After her husband gets knocked out, the Canadian woman comes at Ray with a wine bottle in hand much like the man with the headwrap swinging a pitcher and sword. Ray, paralleling the woman in the painting, is calm and quick as he takes care of the problem.

Envy is present in Eirik (J r mie Reiner), the jealous ex-boyfriend of Chlo , who interrupts Chlo  and Ray in her room after their date. Although this scene doesn't share as many visual characteristics as the previous examples, the painting's *Invidia* scene does feature a man longing for a taken woman as well (fig. 5). A young man in red stands outside a young

lady's window presenting a flower, but alas, she already holds one of her own. Additionally, the woman in the painting wears a headdress, possibly indicating that she's already been married.⁹ While Chloë brings out envy in Eirik, with Ray she brings out lust. Her room, in which the couple was going to sleep together before getting interrupted, is decorated with lantern-like lamps and hanging lights, and the one piece of decoration that the movie focuses on is a toad-shaped jar. Lanterns and toads are lewd symbols present in the brothel-like scene in the Bruges *Last Judgment* center panel ([fig. 1](#)).¹⁰

The sin of lust also appears in the character of Jimmy (Jordan Prentice), who buys services from prostitutes. We first meet Jimmy when Ray stumbles along a movie set, the filming catches his eye because “they’re filming midgets”. The film very purposefully calls attention to Jimmy’s status as a little person, which suggests he’s a Boschian character, through his disability. During the Medieval Ages and Bosch’s time, dwarfs were associated with deformity and their disability was thought to have been a manifestation of their folly and sin, making them fit for the role of a jester or fool.¹¹ In the last act of *In Bruges*, Jimmy is given a child’s school uniform to wear for the movie he’s acting in, a pastiche of Nicolas Roeg’s *Don’t Look Now* (1973).

However, Jimmy’s film flips Roeg’s ending in which its main character is killed by a dwarf mistaken for a child, here Jimmy’s character is meant to be a “loveable little schoolboy” rather than “the psycho dwarf” from *Don’t Look Now*. Jimmy describes the conclusion of his film as being “all some kind of Boschian nightmare”. The film having him wear children’s clothes further links Jimmy to Middle Age symbols of folly, as showing adults holding children’s toys or acting childishly, made one a fool.¹² This symbolism became more commonly referenced through *The Ship of Fools* by Sebastian Brant that was published in Dutch in 1497, we know Bosch had read it as he referenced it in his painting of the same name ([fig. 6](#)).

In Bruges itself paints little people as sinful by repeatedly having Ray call them suicidal. Two times, first to Chloë then to Jimmy, Ray drops his not-so-reliable knowledge on the high suicide rate among little people — “a disproportionate amount” he says — before attempting to name famous little people who killed themselves. Although suicide is never outright called a sin in the Bible, it does condemn murder, and many consider suicide to be self-murder thus, making it a sin. Perhaps this thought caught traction from the Christian philosophy book *City of God* (426 AD) in which Saint Augustine condemns the act claiming that “anyone who kills himself is certainly a murderer” (*City of God*, 1.17).¹³ Moreover, the act of suicide connects one

9 Gelfand “Social Status and Sin: Reading Bosch’s Prado Seven Deadly Sins and Four Last Things Painting,” 253.

10 Janssen et al. “Everyday Objects,” 177.

11 Seemann “A Model Christian and ‘Child of God’: A German Count Dwarf and His Funeral Sermon” 218.

12 Pinson “Folly and Childishness Go Hand In Hand: Hans Holbein’s ‘Dixit Insipiens,’” 1.

13 O’Brien “In Bruges,” 98.



Figure 6. Hieronymus Bosch, *The Ship of Fools*, 1490-1500, Musée du Louvre, Paris.

to Judas, who, through killing himself, did not allow salvation for himself.¹⁴ Bosch paints Judas' body and soul being carried away to Hell on the closed wing of *The Adoration of the Magi* in Prado. Ironically, it's Ray who attempts to take his own life when, much like Judas, he's unable to forgive himself for his crime of murder.

The one who pulls Ray out of his despair and stops him from committing suicide is Ken who was seconds away from shooting him on Harry's orders. In contrast to the characters that were representatives of sin and folly, Ken represents a holier being. Throughout the film, Ken serves as Ray's guardian angel. While sightseeing, perhaps in an attempt to bless him, Ken brings Ray to visit the Basilica of the Holy Blood which is said to have a drop of Christ's blood. The two confess the kills they feel most guilty over on a bench after

¹⁴ O'Brien, 98.

visiting the museum: the little boy and an innocent lollipop man. The act is a sort of imitation of last rites, which is painted on the top left corner of *The Seven Deadly Sins and the Four Last Things*. He even gives Ray a ticket out of Bruges, but because he has yet to fully repent for the murder of a child, (and because he was reported to the police for beating up the two Canadians) he isn't able to leave just yet.

Ken could be comparable to the angel-guide in *The Vision of Tundale*. The angel gives Tundale a tour of Hell and Purgatory, where he is punished for his earthly sins before being given a second chance and sent back to life, where he can further right his wrongs. Followers of Bosch paint quotes from the Irish story in their depictions of Purgatory and Hell, so it's very likely Bosch knew of and got inspiration from the story for his own paintings. While witnessing the souls in Purgatory the angel explains to Tundale how the people in Purgatory each had the opportunity to repent as they found faith moments before their deaths, but they still must receive punishment before being allowed into Heaven. Although Ken never inflicts punishment onto Ray while touring him around, there are moments where Ray acts as though he is, such as the moment when he throws a tiny fit over having to follow Ken into the Basilica of the Holy Blood. After Ken gives Ray his second chance at life by stopping him from shooting himself and putting him on a train out of Bruges, he tells him to just keep moving, to go away somewhere, get out of the business, and try to do something good. Tundale's angel says much the same to Tundale, "Go again into your body and clean out the filth from your heart! Abstain from sin.", as his body regains consciousness back on earth.¹⁵ When Ray says he should be allowed to kill himself as it's his own life, Ken sternly replies "No, you're not!" and takes Ray's gun, because, as his guardian angel, he wants Ray to be saved both in life and the afterlife.

Just before the movie's climax, Harry arrives in Bruges to kill Ken for acting against his instructions; the pair chooses to do it on the bell tower from earlier in the film. Just before Harry chooses to let Ray go, he gets word that Ray is at the bar below the tower and shoots Ken in the neck and leg. Ken, rather than chase after Harry as he's hardly able to walk, drags himself back up the belfry to send Ray a warning. The view from the top of the tower reveals a thick fog stopping Ken from being able to see Ray below, and vice versa. Ken stashes his gun in his coat pocket, slowly drops spare change to warn anyone on the ground, then jumps, successfully gets Ray's attention and with his dying breath, warns him that Harry is on his way. In his final act of self-sacrifice he becomes the warning bell that, seconds earlier, stood only a few feet behind him ([fig. 7](#)). In the Bruges *Last Judgment* center panel Bosch has painted a large bell that holds a condemned human's body inside it rather than a clapper, the same sight is seen in one of Bosch's drawings,

¹⁵ "The Vision of Tundale", 26.



Figure 7. Martin McDonagh, *In Bruges* (2008), 1:29:18.



Figure 8. Detail of Hieronymus Bosch, *The Last Judgment* (interior central), Groeningmuseum, Bruges.

Figure 9. Detail of Hieronymus Bosch, *Infernal Landscape*, private collection, Bosch Project.

Figure 10. Detail of Hieronymus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (interior left), Museo del Prado, Madrid.

Infernal Landscape, and in the right panel of *The Garden of Earthly Delights* underneath a donkey's skull (fig. 8-10). In death by his own hands, Ken receives his divine punishment.

Ray's own punishment comes seconds after Ken's death. After being chased around town and shot in the back by Harry, Ray finds himself stumbling back onto the film set and the audience finally gets a closer look at the scene that Jimmy previously described as a "Boschian nightmare". His description was not at all an exaggeration. On the brink of death and limping through medieval cobblestone streets and walls Ray is surrounded by movie extras dressed in peasant's clothes and hybrid masks; he has been placed directly into Bosch's world. We see a few of Bosch's characters including a



Figures 9-12. Martin McDonagh, *In Bruges* (2008), 1:37:03-12.



Figures 13-15,17. Details of Hieronymus Bosch, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (interior central), oil on oak, Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, Lisbon.

Figure 16. Detail of Hieronymus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (interior left), oil on oak, Museo del Prado, Madrid.

curly-haired pig-man with an owl perched atop his head and a harp-wielding figure that wears a donkey's skull — both directly pulled from the Lisbon *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* center panel — as well as a hooded rat-man (fig. 9, 10, 13-15). There's also a woman dressed in nun's clothes with a crescent-shaped headdress, a similar figure is seen in *The Garden of Earthly Delights*' interior right panel (fig. 11, 16). A bird-man passes him by quickly, a hybrid that is one of Bosch's more common creatures, seen in both of Bosch's *Last Judgment* paintings, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, the Saint Anthony triptych, and multiple times in his drawings.

In Bosch's world, condemned souls are often punished with whichever instrument they committed their sins with, or given a mirrored torture.¹⁶ Thus, in an almost perfect replication, Ray's greatest sin is reenacted once more. Dazed and possibly hallucinating, he stops running in front of Jimmy, who is still clad in a little boy's school uniform. Ray, paralleling the priest he killed, whispers "The little boy". Harry shoots Ray multiple times from behind and the bullets pierce through his stomach, and into Jimmy,

16 Janssen et al. "Everyday Objects," 176.

completely disfiguring his face. Harry, seeing the faceless dwarf, now believes he's killed a little boy and shoots himself. After suffering through his greatest torture, physically through being shot, and mentally by reliving an imitation of the little boy's murder, Ray is carried onto a stretcher. The demonic Boschian characters pass by him and are slowly replaced by the people he met in Bruges, his innkeeper Marie, Eirik, and a crying Chloë, signifying his return back to humanity and the earthly realm from Purgatory. Now knowing he has the capacity and desire to change, to use his second chance, make up for and own up to his past sins, he wishes to live.

In Bruges tells the story of two 21st-century hitmen and through religious symbolism and Boschian themes and characters, it transforms the Belgian medieval and fairytale town of Bruges into Purgatory. The film accomplishes this by visually and thematically subtly paralleling its scenes, such as the seven deadly sins characters, with Bosch's paintings. *In Bruges'* and Bosch's themes of sin, repentance, and punishment become all too clear, perhaps even a bit too on the nose, when McDonagh takes his two main characters and the viewers on a visit to the Groeninge Museum which holds Bosch's *Last Judgment* triptych. The medieval influence on the film is obvious and fits in so well with the film's location, Bruges. Around 500 years after Hieronymus Bosch's death, and still, his work influences so many artists to this day regardless of medium.

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