

The devil and his works: the owl in Hieronymus Bosch (c. 1450-1516)

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This article interprets the work of early Netherlandish painter Hieronymus Bosch from the theological perspective of medieval Christian symbolism. The art of the early Netherlandish painter Hieronymus Bosch should be understood as part of the theological framework of the Renaissance (14th-16th centuries) and earlier Christian art. In Christian symbolism the owl stands for the devil and his works, and this article investigates the possibility of this interpretation for several works of Bosch. The owl makes a regular appearance on the Dutchman's paintings and many in the Christian society of Bosch's day were familiar with the religious implications of its presence. This bird of the night and darkness is a key to understanding Bosch's thinking and the message of his paintings, which were largely produced for a religious setting, e.g. as altar paintings. Bosch painted in a society where the devil was seen as a real and present danger to any person. This article concludes that from the perspective of Christian symbolism and medieval Theology, the owl should not be taken as a traditional symbol of wisdom, but as representative of the devil and his schemes.

Key words: Hieronymus Bosch, owl, devil, Renaissance, symbolism

Die duiwel en sy werke: die uil in Hieronymus Bosch (c. 1450-1516)

Hierdie artikel verstaan die kuns van die vroeg Nederlandse skilder Hieronymus Bosch vanuit die teologiese perspektief van middeleeuse Christelike simboliek. Die kuns van Hieronymus Bosch behoort verstaan te word binne die teologiese raamwerk van die Renaissance (14de tot 16de eeu) en vroeëre Christelike kuns. In Christelike simboliek verteenwoordig die uil die duiwel en sy werke en hierdie artikel ondersoek die moontlikheid van hierdie interpretasie by Bosch. Die uil maak dikwels sy verskyning op die skilderye van die Hollander en baie mense in die Christelike samelewingskonteks van Bosch was bekend met die godsdienstige implikasies van sy aanwesigheid. Die voël van die nag en duisternis is 'n sleutel tot die verstaan van die boodskap van sy skilderye, wat in baie gevalle geskep is vir 'n religieuse omgewing, bv. as altaarstukke. Bosch het geskilder in 'n sameleving wat die duiwel as 'n persoonlike realiteit en ernstige gevaar gesien het. Hierdie artikel stel vas dat vanuit die perspektief van Christelike simboliek dit nie volhoubaar is om die uil in Bosch te verstaan as 'n simbool van groot geleerdheid nie. In die skilderye van Bosch staan die uil vir die duiwel en sy plannetjies om mense tot sonde te verlei.

Sleutelwoorde: Jeroen Bosch, uil, duiwel, Renaissance, simboliek

Demons, evil creatures, weird and outright nightmarish and grotesque pictures dominate the work of the Dutch Renaissance painter Hieronymus Bosch (c. 1450-1516). Why did he paint in this way? History does not suggest any medicinal reason, so what inspired him? The key to understanding Bosch might well be found in a multidisciplinary approach, by involving the field of Theology, in particular the religious symbolism of the Renaissance. This article will test this hypothesis for a bird that functions prominently in Bosch's paintings, the owl. Is this a symbol of wisdom or rather something very sinister? Either interpretation has crucial implications for understanding Bosch's works of art and the message he wished to portray (e.g. Jacobs 2000: 1009-1041). Whether the owl represents great learning, or presides over many a scene of sin and destruction, has great consequences for one's interpretation of Bosch's art. How tenable is the popular view that in the works of Bosch the owl is a representation of great learning? This view is not restricted to popular publications only, but has also been advocated in scientific journals, for instance by Elena Calas (1969: 451) who takes the owl as traditionally symbolizing both wisdom and philosophy, or, alternatively, as a slightly arrogant mocker. This interpretation is found as early as Benesch (1937: 260-264) who took a similar view and also wanted to recognize a notion of sadness, the wise owl who shakes his head, as it were. Calas

(1969: 450) saw the owl also in a positive light, at least with the moral high ground of a mocking bird. This article, however, will suggest that its presence is much more sinister than that of a wise observer shaking his head as he sees the follies of mankind.

Some of this has been recognized in the field of the Arts as well. Although this article doesn't claim anything more than the application of Christian symbolism, it is helpful to notice that the connection between Satanic influence and the owl in the work of Bosch was already suggested by Dixon (1981: 109). Particularly since the publication of Paul van den Broeck's thesis (1985: 19-135), on the owl as symbol for sin, several Bosch experts have started to appreciate the owl in Bosch's art as a negative symbol.

Silver (2001: 630-632) sees the owl "ominous bird of night" and an ominous animal par excellence, a profoundly negative symbol in Bosch. He goes as far as to identify owls with demons when he discusses the 1516 triptych *the Hay Wain* (Silver 2001: 636).

Hartau (2005: 313) agrees:

Ein negatives Omen ist insbesondere die Eule. Eulen sind in fast jedem Bild von Bosch anwesend; sie sind Lockvögel und Warnzeichen vor der Falschheit der Welt und der willentlichen Abkehr vom Christentum. [The owl in particular is a negative omen. Owls are present in nearly every picture of Bosch's; they are decoy birds and danger warnings for the hypocrisy of the world and against wilful apostasy from Christianity.]

At any rate, without making the direct link to the owl, earlier contributions already recognized that the devil is an important theological theme in Bosch's works of art (Traeger 1970: 298-331). This contribution from the field of Christian symbolism takes a subsequent step in interpreting the owl in Bosch's art. It will test the thesis that the owl actually represents the devil personally and his subversive activity. From a historical perspective this seems natural as Renaissance artists operated in a religious framework of medieval Catholic theology, which included a belief in a personal Satan who was involved in everyone's life, as well as in human history in general.

In antiquity the symbolism of the owl was already dubious and already a negative omen. In Christian symbolism, however, the owl becomes is one of the most profound representations of the devil. Although he makes no reference to Bosch as such, Fergusson (1989: 22) in his standard work on symbolism in Christian art says that the owl was increasingly used by Christians to portray the devil in the fine arts:

The owl, since it hides in darkness and fears the light, has come to symbolize Satan, the Prince of Darkness. As Satan deceives humanity, so the owl is said to trick other birds, causing them to fall into the snares set by hunters.

Owls are prominently used to lure and trap other birds. Jeroen Stumpel (2003: 150) concludes that this metaphor often denotes "the trapping of an individual, especially by the Devil." He particularly applies this to the northern Renaissance painter Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528), a contemporary of Bosch (Stumpel, 2003: 156): "To summarize, the identification of the devil as metaphorical fowler in Dürer's engraving seems secure."

That a personal role of the devil in the symbolism of the owl in Bosch maybe warranted, is indicated by Pinson (2005: 67): "the owl ensnaring other birds might also symbolize Satan."

In this regard it is important to realize that the setting of Bosch's paintings. Koerner (2004: 81) argued that in Bosch's day, most paintings still had their place in Roman Catholic churches.

They drew their structure from that actual locality: “Artists labored to link the fictive spaces of their works to the real space of rituals in which those works functioned.”

So despite the popular view of the owl as a positive symbol of wisdom, there are dissenting voices. In the following section the viewpoint of medieval Christian symbolism of the owl as the devil and his work will be applied to several of Bosch’s paintings, to show that this is a plausible and valid interpretation of the works of this early Netherlandish artist. This may be illustrated from a selection of Bosch’s paintings: of the sin of envy in *The Seven Deadly Sins and the Four Last Things* (c. 1500); *Hearing Forest and the Seeing Field* (uncertain date); *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (c. 1490-1510); *The Ship of Fools* (c. 1490-1500); *The Temptation of St Anthony* (c. 1501); *The Prodigal Son* (started 1487, finished 1516) *The Hay Wain* (c. 1516); *The Last Judgement* (c. 1482) and *The Conjurer* (c. 1502). While this selection covers a variety of themes, its chronological diversity guarantees a measure of consistency in evaluating the Bosch’s use of the owl as a Christian symbol for the devil and his works.

Different approaches to Bosch

Hieronymus Bosch (1450-1516) was the son of Anthonius van Aken (meaning “from Aachen”), but his father and grandfather were already citizens of ‘s Hertogenbosch in northern Brabant (presently southern Netherlands) at the time of his birth. His name derived from the church father Hieronymus (347-420), as parents in the Renaissance period often called their children after the saint on whose day the birth or baptism and name giving took place. Bosch signed a number of his paintings as “Jheronimus” Bosch, the medieval Latin form of his first name. He is also known as “Joen” (middle Dutch) or Jeroen Bosch. The surname points to his birth place, ‘s-Hertogenbosch (the duke’s forest/Bois le Duc), which is commonly called “Den Bosch”. Bosch was an orthodox Catholic and a prominent member of a local religious Brotherhood. He completed panels for their church of St. John which had been left unfinished by his father, who was a painter as well. In the 1480’s he married into a good family and inherited property (Osborne 1986: 149).

Recent years have seen the publication of several new books on Jerome Bosch, for instance Kurt Falk (2009), Lynda Harris (1996) and Richard Smoley (2007). Particularly authors who might be characterized as New Age sympathizers religiously and leaning towards conspiracy explanations of history otherwise, have shown a profound interest in the Dutch painter. The results make up for some fascinating reading: Bosch is ‘portrayed’ either as a member of a mystery religion, as one of the last Cathars, or as an covert promoter of the feminine divine who could teach Dan Brown (who promoted this recently in his best seller *The Da Vinci Code*) one or two lessons. Those who eagerly anticipate the next instalment about Bosch as the last Templar, who married a descendant of Mary Magdalene, should probably not continue to read this article. As background information it is important to be aware how Bosch is treated in popular literature, and sometimes even elsewhere, but from a historical and theological point of view there is hardly any warrant for taking these speculations seriously.

A more productive approach can be found in Dick Heesen’s (2010) “The secret message of Jerome Bosch”, published by the *Jheronimus Bosch Art Center* in the painter’s former hometown of Hertogenbosch and contains reproductions of all Bosch’s paintings. Heesen was a wealthy businessman who sold his machine factory to dedicate himself fulltime to the work of Bosch. He was a bit of a mystic in the best traditions of the Franciscans, a monastic order dating back to the Middle Ages. Surprisingly, to the postmodern reader in art circles at any rate, most of

this book consists of quotes from the Bible. For Heesen the key to understanding Bosch is to be found in Holy Scripture. His approach is admittedly less spectacular than bloodlines and grails, but far more productive if one takes Bosch's historical context into account.

The world of Hieronymus Bosch was culturally that of the Renaissance, which was still heavily influenced by the Middle-Ages on a theological and spiritual level (cf. Dante's *Inferno*). This was reflected by Bosch's professional life. Many of his commissions were for churches, a common source of livelihood for artists in those days. Less than a century after Bosch's passing, King Phillip II of Spain (1527-1598), one of the most obsessed Roman Catholic monarchs of all time, acquired many of Bosch's paintings. They greatly appealed to his specifically religious appreciation of art. Philip was very much concerned with enforcing medieval Catholic concepts on all of his empire, which was one of the factors that led to the Dutch war of independence in 1568. Bosch's art seemed compatible with the radicalized Roman Catholic perceptions of the Counter Reformation (from the second half of the 16th century), a movement Phillip represented and supported. From Heesen's book it seems clear that the King of Spain may have overlooked some of Bosch's messages, some of his paintings, like *Ship of Fools*, are highly critical of the role of the clergy. Nonetheless, the same can be said about loyal sons of the Church like Erasmus of Rotterdam. There is sufficient indication, and no evidence to the contrary, to suppose that Bosch was a loyal Catholic himself and a son of his time. Moral reforms were long overdue. In this, Bosch agreed with many of his contemporaries. In a world where the Vulgate Bible was widely read and preached from, in a society that was marked by Christianity in almost all aspects, it makes sense to understand Bosch in the light of his times and culture, rather than introducing popular 21st century fads and mystery hunts as key to the interpretation of his art.

The art language of the late Renaissance

For the owl, Heesen (2010: 85) also follows the much repeated view that the owl in the works of Bosch is a symbol of wisdom or great learning.

Otherwise, Heesen's main conclusion is that the painter from Dutch Brabant criticized the corruption in the Roman Catholic Church and Christian society of his day, using biblical symbolism in his art. Although this is true of some of Bosch's paintings, there is probably more to it. A weakness of Heesen's book is that it doesn't discuss different opinions, but merely provides his personal insights, showing what Bible references might apply. This makes for interesting reading, but is often subjective. All very legitimate, Heesen was an artist himself. However, for a more scientific understanding of Bosch one needs to take the historical context of Bosch and the religious symbolism of Christian Renaissance art into account. To understand an artist, you need to understand the language that he paints in, the conventions of the time. So to understand Bosch, knowledge of the Bible, familiarity with the history of the Western Church and the picture language of Renaissance painters is needed.

This may be illustrated with Bosch's painting of the sin of envy in the *The Seven Deadly Sins and the Four Last Things* (c. 1500).

This work of art shows a gentleman with a falcon. Still this isn't a scene about hunting, but a theological symbol of sin, not the sin of killing or animal rights, but one of the sins that every person in Renaissance Europe was familiar with. Without knowledge of theology and Christian doctrine it is almost impossible to grasp Bosch's intentions. Because of secular tendencies, Western culture in the 21st century runs the risk of failing to understand Bosch's biblical world of reference and his Renaissance art language. Everyone in Europe five hundred years earlier still

shared a common Christian civilisation with a common Latin language and Christian symbolism in many respects of society. All people in Bosch's day were at least nominally Christian and were familiar with the seven deadly sins: wrath, greed, sloth, pride, lust, envy, and gluttony. Dante Alighieri mentions them all in his epic poem *The Divine Comedy* (1309-1318). In Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (c. 1390) they function as well, particularly in the *Parson's tale*. However, arguably the best story about one of the deadly sins, greed, is found in one of the other stories on the road to Canterbury, the *Pardoner's tale*. This pardoner was a clergyman of some sort who travelled the country to sell forgiveness of sins. "My tale is always one, and ever was, *radix malorum est cupiditas*," are his legendary words. Greed is the root of all evils. This is a quote from the Bible (1 Timothy 6: 10). While the pardoner spoke up against the evil of greed continuously, he was committing it non-stop himself. Even for clergymen it was an easy sin to fall into.



Figure 1
The Seven Deadly Sins and the Four Last Things, c. 1500 (source: public domain internet).



Figure 2
The Seven Deadly Sins and the Four Last Things: envy (invidia) (source: public domain internet).

Hieronymus Bosch painted the man with the falcon to portray the deadly sin of envy, one closely connected with greed as the last of the Ten Commandments: you shall not covet anything that belongs to your neighbour. Why is a domestic falcon, a positive emblem in Christian symbolism, used in connection with this sin?

Fergusson (1989:18):

There are two kinds of falcons in religious symbolism: the wild and domestic. The wild falcon symbolized evil thought or action, while the domestic falcon represented the holy man, or the Gentile converted to the Christian faith. As the favourite hunting bird, the domestic falcon was often represented during the Renaissance in pageants and courtly scenes, and was often held by a page in the company of the Magi.

Jerome's painting carries a positive message though, as he clearly uses a tamed falcon, used in game-hawking. It sits on the hunter's glove, strapped on his arm, with a little cap. This shows that the falcon is tamed and domesticated. This signifies, from a theological perspective, that sin is under control. In other words, give the eyes no wrong desires to look at and let the hunter be in control. It is a mark of saints that they have "crucified the flesh" so in Renaissance paintings

the tamed falcon is often used to represent a saint or some pagan who converted to the Christian faith. Bosch's message is encouraging for his fellow believers. It is not just a warning against the sin of greed, but by connecting it with a tamed falcon, he basically conveys the message: "Take heart, this thing of greed may be kept under control. You don't need to be its victim."

Another symbolism used in Renaissance art is nudity (Fergusson 1989: 49-50). Seldom, if ever, in the work of Bosch does it have a connotation of sex appeal. Quite the contrary, the arts distinguished between four different kinds of nudity (*naturalis*, *temporalis*, *virtualis en criminalis*), which all spoke a different message.

Nudity was applied to show man's natural inability, vulnerability in a temporary existence on earth, his original innocence, and fallen state as sinful creature who realizes his nakedness and sinfulness in the sight of God, his Creator.

Bosch often makes use of the nudity *criminalis*, which has the association of shame, and *temporalis*, which has the reminder of mortality. This has a biblical background, as humanity only discovered its nakedness after it sinned and fell away from God (Genesis 3). After they had failed God, they first realized they were naked (nudity *criminalis*). Adam and Eve's response to their crime was to try and cover up their nakedness with big leaves. The bible makes it clear that the consequence of their failure to observe God's commandment was death. Their realization of nudity coincided with the awareness of guilt and them becoming subject to the curse of death (nudity *temporalis*).

The owl

For Renaissance painters in general, and Bosch in particular, the owl came first to mind as representation of the devil and his schemes (Fergusson 1989: 22), God's adversary from the beginning. His advice resulted in worldly wisdom to the detriment of man's spiritual state. When one looks at Bosch's paintings that include owls from the perspective of Christian symbolism, much of it suddenly starts to make perfect sense.

Fergusson (1989: 22) states: "As Satan deceives humanity, so the owl is said to trick other birds, causing them to fall into the snares set by hunters." The owl, par excellence, is the animal that hides under the cover of darkness when he goes about killing other birds and small animals. He stands for the power of darkness, which the New Testament contrasts with God's power of light through Jesus Christ as spiritual light of the world. The devil owl tricked other birds into the fowler's snare, resulting in bondage and death, actions that closely resembled Satan's activities as a tempter. Fergusson allows for positive symbolism of the owl in scenes associated with the crucifixion of Christ (1989: 22):

The owl is sometimes seen in scenes of the crucifixion due to its positive attributes of wisdom and virtue, as such it represents Christ, who sacrificed himself to save man, "to give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death. . ." (Luke 1:7)

From a theological perspective this is an unlikely point of view, as the Gospels portray Jesus' passion as a period of profound darkness, when the devil seems to be in full control. This is no coincidence, as Jesus himself had indicated that this was the hour of his adversaries "and the power of darkness" (Luke 22: 53). Although the later Christian symbolism of associating the owl with the devil was not yet practiced in the New Testament period, no reference to an owl is made in the New Testament, darkness is used to symbolize Satan. Jesus is portrayed as the light, so it would be illogical to connect him with the bird of the night. The three hours of darkness

over Calvary's hill during the day of the crucifixion suggest that the owl operates in the power of darkness, overseeing the demise of the Son of God.

For Renaissance painters it all started in Paradise, where the devil caused the human race to fall away from God, but the light of God shone in the darkness, and the darkness was not able to overcome it (John 1:5).

The Hearing Forest and the seeing Field (of uncertain date)

One of Bosch's drawings (*Hearing Forest and the seeing Field / Owl in dead tree* (date uncertain) shows an owl in a hollow dead tree. Living trees in the background and two flying birds of paradise suggest the Garden of Eden as setting. The tree of life is withered because of the schemes of the devil, which tempted Adam and Eve with the unreliable worldly wisdom that made them fall away from God (Genesis 3). A fox near the roots of the tree suggests further trickiness at the expense of others. Fergusson (1989: 18) sees the fox as a symbol of cunning and guile, and also as representing the devil. During the Renaissance this symbolic use of the fox was largely confined to book illustrations.

From a theological point of view it makes sense to understand the two human ears next to the tree at the level of the owl, to indicate that instead of preferring God's tree of life in Paradise, mankind gave ear to the suggestions of the force of darkness. According to Fergusson (1989: 46) the human ear has come to be one of the symbols of the betrayal of Christ, which was preceded to Adam and Eve's failure to give ear to God. As a result the tree is withered, Paradise lost, and human eyes lie scattered in the ground before the tree.

This latter symbolism is somewhat unusual, but has precedent in biblical imagery, both in the Old and New Testament. The fact that Hieronymus painted seven eyes on the earth combines two pictures from Scripture. Jesus is portrayed with seven eyes in the visions of St John the Divine (Revelation 5: 6). The fact that these eyes are scattered over the earth, present an Old Testament message of hope in Bosch's otherwise sinister painting. These eyes recall 2 Chronicles 16:9: "For the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to shew himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward him."

While darkness seems in control and Paradise lost, there is hope in Christ who will strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him.

The owl in The Garden of Earthly Delights (c. 1490-1510)

The owl functions prominently on the famous triptych *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, which is usually dated between 1490 and 1510, the last twenty years of his life. It combines many symbols, but most prominently the owl and nakedness.

The panel on the left shows Adam and Eve in nudity *naturalis*, in their original state without sin together with Christ in the Garden of Eden. In the middle, made somewhat inaccessible by a pond and the underwater rocks on which it rests, stands a beautiful pink fountain. In church liturgy Pink symbolizes joy and happiness. In various churches it is used either for the Third or Fourth Sunday of Advent, the Sunday of Joy at the impending birth of Jesus. It is an important theological theme that God already made provision for man's sin by means of planning Christ's sacrifice from the foundation of the world (Revelation 13: 8). Jesus also portrays himself as a fountain of living water (John 7:3 8).



Figure 3
Hearing Forest and the Seeing Field,
uncertain date (source: public domain
internet).



Figure 4
The Garden of Earthly Delights, c. 1490-1510 (source: public domain internet).

A pink fountain in Paradise foreshadows the source of life that the promised advent of Jesus will provide: a message of lingering hope, despite of mankind's fall and subsequent expulsion from Paradise. The shape of the fountain resembles a tree, as it has branches and carries fruit. The hollow part near the bottom provides housing for the owl. It is the tree of knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:16-17), the one tree Adam and Eve were not allowed to eat from. As in Genesis 2, they are not yet interested in its fruit and have only eyes for their relationship with Christ. This would soon change (Genesis 3).

The centre panel shows a wild procession of all sorts of naked people, obsessed with fruit. Two owls feature prominently, one to the left and one to the right. To the left, where the processions of men and animals seem to start, Adam embraces the owl, the source of all trouble. Adam and Eve walk, possibly quarrelling, but unable to halt the procession. The chain of events that the owl put into motion cannot be stopped. The owl's counsel results in a self-obsessed partying crowd. To the right, however, it becomes clear that the eating of the forbidden fruit is going to have disastrous results. Adam and Eve are trapped inside a forbidden fruit, the same pink fruit visibly growing out of the tree fountain on the left-hand panel. They want to eat other fruit, want to continue in Paradise and enjoy its benefits, but they can't because they have been swallowed, back to back, to tummy level by the forbidden fruit. They struggle, and their arms stick out, but a fat owl sits on top and presses the fruit firmly down. They are blinded by the devil and his wisdom, caught up in their own troubles. They are caught back to back, indicating that not only does sin blind their eyes to the real world, but also ruins human communication and relationships.

The third panel gives the result of this unwillingness to listen to God, symbolized by cut-off ears. Now all the green, the fruits and the beauty have disappeared. Instead darkness, fire, bondage and all sort of abuse abound, while demons sow death and destruction, as they instead of Christ take the human race by the hand to enjoy their dark world.

The owl in *The Ship of Fools* (c. 1490-1500)

The owl returns in one of Bosch's other famous paintings: *The Ship of Fools* (Paris, c. 1500). This piece is possibly a fragment of a lost triptych which also included "Allegory of Gluttony" and "Lust" (which is the lower part of the Ship of Fools wing) and "Death and the Miser" (the other outer wing). It may have been inspired by Sebastian Brant's famous satire *Das Narrenschiff*, published by Bergmann in 1494, which popularity and influence of which were not limited to Germany. It was published with 114 woodcuts. A Latin version by Jacobus Locher (1497) rivalled its popularity and in 1509 Alexander Barclay's loosely imitated the German poem. All expressed the idea that there was something seriously wrong with the morals of the Christian society of their day, not least in the Church. Jerome Bosch laborates on this theme.

The Ship of Fools shows a small boat that is going nowhere, as its crew is eating, drinking and singing. Members of the cloth are portrayed very prominently in the centre: a nun playing the lute with a monk opposite her at an improvised table. Some men folk swim naked around the boat and desire a share of the spoils. Even the only oarsman is more interested in the food dangling before his face. The bowsprit appears to be a tree, growing out of the ship's front. Sitting on its main branch is the jester, complete with foolscap and sceptre. Not surprisingly, he is drinking. Unlike Brant's ship, which was packed with jesters, this is a boat carrying ordinary people who behave like fools without the dress. For Bosch the jester on the bow is sufficient

indication of the nature of the enterprise. The jester also surfaces in the *Seven deadly Sins*, where the fool is chastised with a large wooden spoon for the sin of extravagance (*luxuria*).

Like the bowsprit, the mast appears to be a tree as well. Two thirds up, with the ship's flag, a roasted fowl of some sort is tied to the mast. A man with a knife, attracted by the prospect of meat, is trying to bring it down. In the Dutch vernacular of Hieronymus Bosch "hanging the roasted cock on display" (*De gebraden haan uithangen*) means to eat and drink excessively. It is not only a fool's enterprise (jester) but also a display of debauchery (roasted cockerel). The dual symbolism becomes triple in nature if one looks higher up.

On top of the mast, taken largely out of sight by the leaves and branches, sits the owl and looks down on the festivities. It is a bunch at fools drifting aimlessly at sea, only interested in partying. It is a fool's enterprise (jester), debauchery (roasted cockerel) and inspired by the devil (owl). As in Paradise, he used the attraction of food. In the beginning he persuaded the first people of the human race to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, inviting God's curse upon them and their descendants. In the mind of Bosch it was food then, it continues to be food now. *The seven deadly Sins* shows this as well. While gluttony is being portrayed it is again the owl who watches from the darkness, while a woman serves up a roasted cockerel.

The temptations of the devil come to all. In *The Ship of Fools* the clergy and the common people are adrift on the same ship. As Bosch often uses Adam and Eve in his art, - and the theme of Paradise and Fall resonates in the background of this painting -, it is not unlikely that the nun represents Eve, playing the tune, while the men folk all sing and focus on the next bite of food. Like Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*, the *Ship of Fools* is a powerful combination of theological thoughts. Like the former it combines the symbolism of the tree, the owl, food, and, although less prominently, nakedness.



Figure 5
The Ship of Fools, c. 1490-1500 (source: public domain internet).

The owl in *The Temptation of St. Anthony* (1501)

Another painting with a religious theme, his triptych portraying *The Temptation of St. Anthony* (Lisbon), contains the owl as well. It tells the story of the desert monk Anthony the Great (c. 251–356), overcoming temptations in the wilderness and elsewhere. One of his struggles was with gluttony, an ever present weakness. To symbolize this as a continuing temptation, particularly for someone living on a monk's diet, artists often portray Anthony in the company of a swine. Bosch does this too. On the centre panel the sin of gluttony is symbolized by a man in black with a pig snout. He carries a lute and leads a doggy with foolscap. Just as in *The Ship of Fools* it is food and music that are considered to be problematic. In the light of the previous paintings unsurprisingly, an owl sits on the head of the pig-man. It is again the devil who inspires from the top, whether on the top of the mast or pushing the fruit down to cause darkness in the life of Adam and Eve.



Figure 6
The Temptation of St. Anthony, c. 1501 (source: public domain internet).

This has a profound biblical background. It is the logic of the devil: “Let us eat and drink, because tomorrow we die!”, as the apostle Paul reminded his flock (1 Corinthians 15:32). It is also reminiscent of a Dutch proverb that Bosch may have been familiar with: “One cannot keep birds from flying over, but one is able to keep them from making a nest on your head. (*Je kunt niet voorkomen dat er vogels over je heen vliegen, wel dat ze op je hoofd nestelen.*)” This basically signifies that it is impossible to avoid the occasional wrong thought, but dwelling on sinful ideas is another matter entirely.

The owl in *The Prodigal Son* (started 1487, finished 1516)

The owl returns when Bosch paints the *Prodigal Son* (Rotterdam), a parable told by Jesus (Luke 15:11-32) about a man who wastes his inheritance and end up with the lowly job of looking after swine (unclean animals for Jews) in a foreign country. In the end he decides to go back to his father and plead for mercy.

Bosch has painted the son as he is on his way to his father, leaving his sinful life behind. It is symbolized by the inn in the background, which features revelling women and a pole on top with a wine-can. On the yard are the swine, but he is also leaving those behind. On the branch of a tree, overlooking the scene, sits an owl.

This time the bird is not sheltered by leaves. Neither is he confidently resting while things go his way, like he did in all the previous paintings mentioned. Here he is in full view. The owl even stoops down and looks at the departing man, but there is nothing he can do to prevent him from leaving. The man's sinful life was inspired by the devil, but now the latter has to let go. The boy is going back to his father. It is beautiful religious symbolism. Like Bosch's work on Jesus' life it is completely devoid of the weird and demonic creatures, that some of his other paintings have become famous for.



Figure 6
The Prodigal Son, started 1487, finished 1516 (source: public domain internet).

The owl above *The Haywain* (c. 1516)

In *The Haywain* (*farm wagon or cart*), Bosch's familiar biblical panorama of history and future is summed up. Mankind has left Paradise because of disobedience (left), is inclined to a vain life of sin (centre) and will suffer the consequences of the allegiance with the devil (right).

The centre piece is significant. It shows the human race chasing after the vainglory of the hay wagon. While an angel is looking up to Jesus and praying that it all might be over soon, people on earth follow the hay wagon, which is drawn by all sorts of demons. All sorts of sin, including quarrels and knifings, abound. On top of the hay a tree with a pole sticking out on the left side, flagging the familiar wine can. On the right and higher up a branch of the tree protrudes and shows the owl at ease in all its glory. Again, Bosch is showing the devil and his schemes. Both the world and the Church are caught up in this. While demons and men are piping and playing, the Christian king and the Pole are among the most prominent followers of the wagon. It is the nuns who are gathering more hay while a fat member of the cloth lifts another beaker of

spiritual strength, wine or beer, to his mouth. As in the *Ship of Fools* and *The Temptation of St Anthony*, a profoundly negative view of the Church in his day transpires.



Figure 7
The Haywain (c. 1516) (source: public domain internet).

The owl in *The Last Judgement* (c. 1482)

The owl is not a later introduction in the work of Bosch. Many of the symbols and theological themes of his later works are already found in the *The Last Judgement* (Vienna), also a triptych.

The panel on the left shares many of the features of *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. Mankind is created, falls into sin and loses his habitation in Paradise. The initial scene is one of nudity *naturalis*, with Christ in the Garden, but it ends in sin and shame: nudity *criminalis*. A dragon-like serpent hands the forbidden fruit to Eve, before she passes it on to Adam. On a branch in a tree not far away, but out of sight for Adam and Eve, sits the owl. Unlike his uneasiness about the converted man in *The Prodigal Son*, he is now completely relaxed and upright: things are going his way.

The results of the devil's schemes become visible in *The Last Judgement*, as the angels blow the trumpet and Christ returns to judge a world that is struck by darkness. The evil creatures crawl all over the place. Naked people suffer tortures of diverse kinds as the demons have it their way on earth.

On the right panel it is time for Satan's roll call. Hell is burning, but the remains of earth on the other side of the river of Death as well. Two thirds up on the painting, the owl presides over the intake of souls from the other side. It is the devil's inspiration that brought them there. They reap the fruit of their actions. Lower down countless people are in hell already and others brought to the entrance by demons. As their names are not found in the book of life they receive entry. A dark lord, who seems to be in control of the procedures, lists the sins of the newcomer

and hands people over to the black dragon at the entry of the pit. Right above him, completely relaxed, sits the owl on his nest. He is at rest and at home here. Now things really go his way. The devil you know!



Figure 8
The Last Judgement (c. 1482) (source: public domain internet).

The owl in *The Conjurer* (c. 1502)

Among the six paintings that have been attributed to Bosch, but that are disputed, one shares the significant symbolism with the owl: *The Conjurer* (Saint-Germain-en-Laye).



Figure 9
The Conjurer (c. 1502) (source: public domain internet).

The magician keeps the attention of the public spellbound, while his assistant is cutting or emptying purses in the crowd. From a little basket attached to the conjurer's belt, the owl watches. The devil and his works are a present reality in everyday life.

Conclusion

Theology and Christian symbolism make a valuable contribution to understanding Hieronymus Bosch and his paintings. The symbolic use of the owl, which was discussed in his article, shows that it is important to evaluate an artist in the context of his own time and the imagery and doctrines of his religion. Hieronymus Bosch was a profoundly religious person and should be understood from the theological framework and symbolism of the late Renaissance and earlier Christian art. As such this bird of the night and darkness is a key to understanding Bosch's thinking and the message of his paintings. From eight examples it has become clear that Christian symbolism works for Bosch. In each painting the notion that the owl stands for the devil and his works, provides a valuable interpretation that does justice to the context and contents of the work and its author. Bosch was an orthodox Roman Catholic and member of a local religious brotherhood and for him and his contemporaries the devil was a real person who was involved in their lives and not a mere force. Bosch wanted the Christians who saw his paintings in church, clergy and laity alike, to recognize the devil's presence and negative influence on their lives, society in general and particularly on the Church of his day. The owl was a familiar appearance: a solemn warning against the devil and his works.

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