The Imp of the Perverse

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF EDGAR ALLAN POE

Edgar Allan Poe's life was tragic from the beginning; he was abandoned by his father before he was a year old, and his mother died of consumption (tuberculosis) only a year later. After being taken in by a wealthy merchant and slave trader, Poe received an excellent education but struggled for social acceptance. He drifted between his attempts to conform and his need to find himself throughout his life. He served in the military in various capacities, only to be discharged after several failed attempts to meet expectations. His gambling debts and argumentative nature eventually led to the loss of his foster family's support and his reputation. He drank to excess, and his dark, despairing moods often took disturbing life in his works. A life that began with tragedy ended in much the same way when he was found incoherently shouting on the streets of Baltimore in someone else's clothes. He was taken to Washington Medical College, where he died a few days later. His work outlived him, however, and today he is considered one of the most important voices in early American literature.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Poe wrote in the midst of the turbulent decades leading up to the American Civil War, as the nation sought to define itself and slavery threatened to pull the Southern states away from the North. While "The Imp of the Perverse" contains no specific setting and relates to no specific historical events, its grim mood may be a reflection of the politics of the time. Poe lived in border state cities such as Richmond and Baltimore, where the tensions that ultimately led to the Civil War were close to the surface.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"The Imp of the Perverse" belongs to early American literature, alongside the work of authors such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville. More specifically the story falls somewhere between the Gothic—a precursor to the modern horror genre which concerns itself with themes of darkness, tragedy, and death—and a larger Romantic moment, largely characterized by an emphasis on individuality, emotion, and an appreciation of nature. Poe's works involved tales of madness, horror, and the supernatural, specifically with stories and poems like "The Telltale Heart" and "The Raven." His work also focused on the commission of crimes and the means of bringing the criminals to justice. Stories like "The Purloined Letter" helped create the detective genre and later influenced the Sherlock Holmes stories of Arthur Conan Doyle, such as *The Hound of the Baskervilles* and *The Sign of the Four*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "The Imp of the Perverse"
- **When Published:** July 1845
- **Literary Period:** Romantic
- **Genre:** Short Story, Horror, Crime
- **Setting:** A cell in an unnamed prison
- **Climax:** The narrator awaits his hanging after confessing to murder
- **Antagonist:** The Imp of the Perverse; madness
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Plagiarism. Biographers have cited Poe's very public feud with American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, affectionately referred to as the "Longfellow War." Poe accused Longfellow of plagiarizing Tennyson's "The Death of the Old Year" in his "Midnight Mass of the Dying Year." Poe did not accuse him of direct theft, but of stealing the essence of the poem: "this plagiarism; which is too palpable to be mistaken [...] belongs to the most barbarous class of literary robbery." Longfellow never directly responded to the claims, and the feud died when Poe did. However, subsequent comparisons of the poems support Poe's assertions that Longfellow took considerable liberties with Tennyson's verse.

PLOT SUMMARY

The "Imp of the Perverse" begins with a meditation on the narrator's peculiar philosophy. He denounces various methods of evaluating human psychology, such as **phrenology**, because they do not adequately deal with the concept of a certain impulse. Phrenology assumes human impulses to be beneficial and sent by God (the periodic need to eat, for instance), but the narrator insists that darker impulses exist that can even override the need for self-preservation.

Some such impulses, the narrator maintains, are actively harmful—they drive a person to "perversely" do what they know they shouldn't do. The narrator refers to this impulse as "**the Imp of the Perverse.**" The sensation of standing at the edge of a cliff and feeling the need to jump, for instance, comes from the Imp. The narrator also blames the Imp for his current circumstances: he is in a prison cell, condemned to be executed for murder.

The narrator goes on to reveal that he plotted murder "for

many weeks and months" in order to gain a large inheritance from his victim. He finally hits upon the notion of using a **poisoned candle** in the victim's room, since "I knew my victim's habit of reading in bed. I knew, too, that his apartment was narrow and ill-ventilated." The ruse works, and the victim is declared dead by an act of God.

For many years, the narrator enjoys his inheritance and the life it affords. Eventually, however, he grows preoccupied by a fear of discovery. The narrator keeps his troubling thoughts at bay for a time by periodically repeating the phrase, "I am safe." Eventually, though, he changes the wording of the phrase: "I am safe—I am safe—yes—if I be not fool enough to make open confession!" Once this thought enters his mind, the narrator finds that he cannot get rid of it. In an effort to shake the thought, he takes off running in the street. As he begins to run faster, his flight attracts attention, and a crowd begins to pursue him. Nevertheless, he still fights the growing urge to confess to the point where he collapses—or, as he puts it, "some invisible fiend, I thought, struck me with his broad palm upon the back." He confesses to the deed, though he doesn't remember doing so.

Back in the story's present, the narrator now waits in a prison cell for his inevitable execution (he is to be hanged the next day). He wonders where his spirit will end up after he is killed.

CHARACTERS

The Narrator – The unnamed narrator is a condemned man attempting to convince the reader that an irresistible impulse, which he calls the **Imp of the Perverse**, made him commit murder. The narrator, who apparently has an interest in **phrenology**, kills his victim and gets away with murder only to confess out of the blue years later in a seeming fit of insanity. He begins the story by claiming that human beings are beholden to some impulses that they know are actively harmful. "Our first impulse is to shrink from the danger," he claims. "Unaccountably we remain." This is caused by "perverse" instincts that can override humanity's own capacity for self-preservation. In this way, the narrator attempts to justify his strange confession to an unspeakable crime. The crime itself doesn't seem to bother him, but he regrets being caught, and blames both the Imp itself and humanity's inability to comprehend the Imp as the source of his dilemma. In this, the reader can spot several key characteristics. First, the narrator is immoral—willing to commit murder for inheritance money (the victim is implied to be somehow related to him) and able to live happily for years afterwards. He is also incapable of taking any true responsibility for his actions. Based on his verbose and technically complex argument at the start of the story, the narrator is also an intelligent man. He uses his skills for evil means, however, killing without remorse and outwitting the authorities so that he isn't caught until the Imp makes him reveal his crime. He is clearly prone to obsession as well, as he deliberates over the murder for months, then obsesses over being caught, and finally is driven mad by the "perverse" idea of confessing everything.

The Victim – The man that the narrator murders at the story's outset. Aware of the victim's nightly ritual of reading in bed, the narrator swaps the man's **candle** with a poisonous one, knowing that the victim's claustrophobic apartment will mean that he breathes in the candle's poisonous fumes and quickly dies. The plan works, and the coroner can't discern a cause of death, deeming it "Death by the visitation of God." The narrator and the victim are implied to be related somehow, since the narrator receives the victim's inheritance.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

REASON VS. IMPULSE

Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Imp of the Perverse" opens with what seems to be an essay on human impulses. Using verbose and technical language, the first-person narrator discusses how sciences like **phrenology** have ignored a certain impulse towards "perversity." Instead, they assume that all impulses must be beneficial and sent by God, and a "perverse" impulse is inherently destructive. This introduction then shifts to a discussion of the narrator's own life: he is in prison for committing a murder, which he inexplicably confessed to years after the fact. The narrator attributes this confession to the human impulse towards self-harm, which he dubs the "**Imp of the Perverse**." The "Imp," he claims, drives him to "make open confession" despite otherwise having gotten away with the perfect murder. Through both the narrator's scientific discussion and personal story, Poe paints a chilling portrait of the power of impulse, arguing that even seemingly "perverse" and unreasonable desires should not be ignored—or they can lead to devastating consequences.

In the story's first pages, the narrator argues for the principles of reason and objectivity in the face of idealism and logical fallacies. Using phrenology (a pseudoscience devoted to studying the skull) as a stand-in for all psychological sciences, the narrator claims that people have ignored an important aspect of the human experience: the apparent impulse towards perverseness. The narrator makes some good scientific points in the process, arguing that phrenology started out with assumed conclusions—presuming to know what humans are

intended to do, and in the process presuming to know God's intentions—and has worked backwards from there, instead of observing the way people really act and drawing conclusions based on facts. The narrator highlights his own objectivity here, making him seem very reasonable and logical to the reader.

This essay, however, is all for the purpose of arguing that humans are incredibly *un*reasonable at times. The Imp of the Perverse is the narrator's personification of the impulse to do what one knows they "should *not*." As an example, the narrator describes a person standing on the edge of a precipice, knowing they should move away but lingering, and even feeling a wild desire to leap. This description was actually rather groundbreaking for the time (Sigmund Freud would write about it as the "death drive," but not until nearly a century later), as it went against the accepted wisdom that humans were designed reasonably by God, and so would not have natural impulses to self-destruction. Through this acute insight about the "Imp," then, both the narrator and Poe highlight the power of impulse to go even against what we want and know is best.

Ironically, the narrator is not impulsive about his most drastic act in the story: committing murder. He is instead very thorough and deliberate, rejecting any plan that he thinks might get him caught until he finally hits upon a foolproof scheme: murdering his victim with a **poisoned candle**. In his apparent psychopathy, he sees people as merely objects and means to an end, and so disposes of his victim without remorse. He doesn't seem to have any hatred for his victim (who is implied to be related to him), but merely wants his wealth and inheritance. Horrifying though this is, it is in a sense very logical, and the narrator acts in his own best interests.

The narrator's reasoning is ultimately overcome by impulse, however, as the Imp of the Perverse claims him and forces him to confess to his crime (which he had previously gotten away with). Once the thought enters his head—"I am safe—yes—if I be not fool enough to make open confession!"—he cannot resist acting on it. In an attempt to escape his own unreasonable desire, he takes off running, eventually drawing a crowd. He then seems to black out and confesses to everything, though he has no memory of doing so. Despite his logical mind and the careful, deliberate nature of his crime, he is overcome by a sudden self-destructive impulse and loses everything he worked for. It is because of this, then, that he made his initial argument for the existence of the Imp and its powerful influence on human behavior.

Part of the importance of "The Imp of the Perverse" is simply its innovation in describing and giving name to its titular impulse. Despite his many references to phrenology (which is now thoroughly debunked), Poe does make a legitimate psychological insight in the midst of his brief tale, going against the religious idealism of the time and looking forward to the age of psychoanalysis. The horror-story twist of a murderer driven not to kill but to confess dramatizes human impulses, but also argues for the importance of truly recognizing them—observing real human nature, even its darkest and most destructive aspects.

CRIME, JUSTICE, AND PUNISHMENT

Poe is known for his horror stories and murder mysteries, and "The Imp of the Perverse" flirts with both genres. This is a tale of murder and punishment: the anonymous narrator commits a seemingly perfect crime, gets away with it for years, then inexplicably confesses and is condemned to be hanged. Though the narrator expresses no guilt for his crime, and the murder itself is described only briefly and detachedly, justice does find him in the end. Interestingly, in this story there is no brilliant detective to catch the murderer (Poe is also credited with inventing the detective story)—instead, the narrator's own "perverse" impulses bring him to openly confess. With this, Poe seems to hint at the existence of a kind of divine justice, one that punishes the remorseless narrator despite his "perfect" crime, as he is driven by the **Imp of the Perverse** to confess and then is seemingly condemned to hell after his impending execution.

As with many of Poe's tales, "The Imp of the Perverse" centers around a grotesque crime. The narrator, desiring his victim's inheritance (they are implied to be related), deliberates for months about how to commit murder without getting caught. He finally comes across the idea of using a **poisoned candle**. Knowing his victim's "habit of reading in bed," as well as his "narrow and ill-ventilated" apartment, he switches out the victim's candle for a poisoned one. The scheme works: the man dies in the night, the narrator is able to remove evidence of the "fatal taper," and the authorities declare the victim's death a "visitation of God." It seems that the narrator has escaped justice, though the brief reference to God here suggests that the narrator has only escape mortal punishment, not a divine reckoning.

It's important to note that the narrator is not driven to murder by the Imp of the Perverse. Instead, the crime seemingly comes entirely of his *own* volition, and he never tries to blame it on the Imp or anything else. His description of the murder is short and detached, and it seems that he killed his victim entirely out of greed, not because of any special hatred or other strong emotion. He sees the victim as a means to an end, and so disposes of him coldly and logically. This is the truly horrifying aspect of the story: the narrator's chilling psychopathy, not the Imp's drive towards self-harm.

Indeed, the narrator only hates and fears the Imp because it makes him confess to his crime, leading him to both earthly and divine justice. For a long time he is happy with his newfound wealth and the satisfaction of duping everyone. Eventually, however, he becomes "haunted" by fears that he will be discovered and unmasked as a murderer. To comfort himself, he

takes to frequently saying "I am safe" under his breath. One day, though, "in a fit of petulance," he attaches a fatal addition to these words: "I am safe—yes—if I be not fool enough to make open confession!" With this, the Imp of the Perverse takes hold of the narrator's mind, driving him to do exactly the opposite of what he wants. He starts running, hoping to escape his impulse, and attracts a suspicious crowd. He then collapses, confesses, and is arrested: "consigned [...] to the hangman and to hell." In saying this, he seems to recognize that justice has found him, and that he *deserves* to be condemned. The narrator never expresses remorse for his crime, and he does consider himself a "victim" of the Imp, but he also never protests against the punishment he receives after his confession. He only wanted to outwit the police and avoid earthly punishment—he seems to have assumed that he would eventually be condemned to hell for his crime.

In first describing the Imp of the Perverse, the narrator says that the impulse cannot come from Satan (the "arch-fiend") because sometimes it works "in furtherance of good." While he is still speaking broadly here, it seems that he is also referencing his own case: the Imp doesn't drive him to murder, but instead drives him to receive the punishment that he deserves. Poe doesn't let his murderer get away with it, and with this he gestures towards a larger justice, which, though not explicitly Christian, invokes a "God" who ultimately judges the wicked no matter the failures human authority. The narrator himself seems to recognize this as well, as the story ends with his desperate question of where his soul will end up after his execution.

MADNESS AND OBSESSION

Poe wrote about madness frequently, and many of his most famous stories concern protagonists who have either gone insane or are being driven insane as the story unfolds. The narrator, as both a cold-blooded killer and a victim of his own self-destructive impulses, exemplifies various kinds of madness and obsession. Indeed, though the essay's opening paragraphs are largely devoted to proofs of the narrator's objectivity and sound reasoning ability, his actions suggest that he is a very mentally unstable man. At certain points he exemplifies a kind of obsessive intelligence, a psychopathic amorality, and a total helplessness in the face of his darker, more "perverse" impulses. In turn, Poe offers a meditation on madness and obsession that is meant to relate to the reader in an uncomfortable way, while also being grotesque and horrifying.

After an essay-like introduction that makes the narrator seem objective, reasonable, and intelligent, he suddenly reveals that he is in prison for murdering someone, and that the members of the general public ("the rabble") think he is insane. He then shifts to a description of the murder itself. Notably, the narrator never questions whether or not he *should* have murdered his victim, but simply begins his tale by explaining how he finally did it. In this, he seems psychopathic—he doesn't see his victim as a fellow human being, but merely as an object that must be disposed of for the narrator to get what he wants.

The narrator "ponder[s]" for many months, obsessing over methods of committing a perfect murder. He doesn't appear to hate his victim—he just wants to get him out of the way, and wants to avoid being caught in doing so. The narrator never expresses any passion related to the murder, and also never seems remorseful for killing his victim (who is implied to be related to him, considering that the narrator receives his victim's inheritance upon his death). Furthermore, it is *not* the **Imp of the Perverse** that inspires the narrator to kill. His murderous act is not impulsive; it is cold, calculated, and sickeningly logical. Thus the narrator initially shows one aspect of madness and obsession: a kind of psychopathy that sees other human beings as expendable, and that uses intelligence and curiosity for wholly selfish ends.

After committing the murder and reveling in his success at escaping detection, the narrator eventually becomes haunted by the idea of being caught and condemned for his crime. To reassure himself, he begins habitually saying "I am safe" over and over. One day, however, he adds to this phrase, saying, "I am safe—yes—if I be not fool enough to make open confession!" He is then overcome by the "perverse" impulse to do exactly what he has told himself *not* to do. All of these thought processes—deliberating over how to commit the perfect murder, smugly ruminating on the success of his crime, anxiously fearing detection, and finally becoming fixated on the self-destructive idea of confessing—suggest a similar obsessiveness, as the narrator seems to continually brood over the same thought in various incarnations. The final instance of this obsession, however, relates to a different kind of madness: helplessness in the face of one's impulses, most notably what the narrator dubs the "Imp of the Perverse."

Though the narrator devotes the opening pages of the story to a discussion of the Imp, this impulse doesn't enter his own personal tale until its finale. It is different from his obsessive ruminations and amoral psychopathy—it is an impulse that he has no control over, one that seems to take over his body and mind and makes him act in ways he cannot comprehend. He clearly has previous experience with this as well: he even says that in the past, "in no instance had [he] successfully resisted" the urgings of his "fits of perversity." When the Imp overwhelms him and pushes him "to make open confession," he takes off running and soon collapses. He then confesses to his crime, speaking in a sort of trance that he cannot remember afterwards. This is an extreme example of another aspect of the narrator's madness: an impulse to act that is beyond reason, desire, or control.

The narrator exhibits his obsessive and mentally disturbed nature throughout the story, but he also makes important

scientific points and presents ideas that readers will be familiar with. This contributes an unsettling tension to the story, then, as readers who have also experienced the influence of the Imp of the Perverse will find themselves aligned (however briefly) with a man who is undeniably immoral and insane. The narrator claims that his audience will "easily perceive" his sanity and innocence—and he certainly believes himself sane, if not innocent—but his tale ultimately expresses a kind of madness that is both demonstrably evil and horrifyingly relatable.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE IMP OF THE PERVERSE

In the story, the Imp of the Perverse symbolizes human impulses that are irrational, harmful, and seemingly inexplicable. The Imp (an imp is traditionally a kind of small demon) doesn't actually exist in the story. Rather, it's the spirit of self-destructive impulse: the being that whispers in the ear of someone standing on the edge of a cliff and urges them to jump. The Imp of the Perverse represents Poe's genuine examination of a human psychological quirk—similar to what Sigmund Freud would call the "death drive" almost a century later—but with a twist. The Imp seems like it would drive the narrator to commit evil acts, but it's not actually the Imp that makes the narrator murder his victim. Instead, the narrator's own greed and seemingly psychopathic lack of empathy lead to his crime; these are human traits, but not ones that the narrator sees as "imps." The Imp, meanwhile, is what pushes him to confess. This is what makes the Imp so perverse—the narrator's own evil nature inspired him to commit murder, but the Imp causes him to destroy *himself*.

The narrator doesn't seem to believe that he's dealing with an actual supernatural entity, but he does personify humanity's "perverse" impulse as a demon, and even seems to feel a hand on his back push him down just before he confesses. In this way the symbol almost comes to life by the end of the story, as a self-destructive instinct within the narrator becomes an external force leading to his own condemnation.

PHRENOLOGY

Phrenology symbolizes humankind's failure to grapple with the impulses that the narrator claims stems from the **Imp of the Perverse**—in other words, Poe uses phrenology to symbolize the shortcomings of science and religion, suggesting that human understanding is imperfect and incomplete. Now known as a form of pseudoscience, phrenology was based on the idea that the shape of the skull could lend insight regarding the contours of the brain and thus predict human behavior. It attained some popularity in the first half of the 1800s, when Poe was writing, but has since been thoroughly debunked as quackery, and indeed was actively used as a "scientific" basis for flat-out racism (it was particularly popular with the Nazis a century later).

Poe mentions phrenology six times in the first two paragraphs of "The Imp of the Perverse," and it appears to be a stand-in for "rational" psychological sciences and even realms of religious inquiry that rely on rationality. As the narrator writes, "Induction, *a posteriori*, would have brought phrenology to admit, as an innate and primitive principle of human action, a paradoxical something, which we may call perverseness, for want of a more characteristic term." This is a rather verbose way to suggest that if phrenology were perfect in its observations, it would have identified the Imp of the Perverse as part of human nature already. Human understanding is imperfect, however, and as such cannot account for irrational impulses such as the Imp. In this way, phrenology both acts as a stand-in for all explorations of human nature and also represents Poe's sincere interrogation of how science at the time ignored darker and less rational aspects of psychology.

THE POISONED CANDLE

After his discussion of **phrenology** and the **Imp of the Perverse**, the narrator confesses to a murder—and he says he killed his victim by using a poisoned candle. The narrator describes ruminating for months over how to commit the perfect murder, and finally coming upon this ingenious idea in a French memoir. The narrator is familiar with his victim's habit of reading in bed, as well as his poorly ventilated apartment, so he replaces the victim's candle with a poisoned one (what kind of poison isn't stated). The plan works, and afterwards the narrator is able to dispose of the "fatal taper" himself, removing the evidence of his crime.

In "The Imp of the Perverse," the poisoned candle represents intelligence and knowledge being turned to evil ends. The victim uses the candle to read, using its light to seek truth and gain knowledge. The narrator, however, literally poisons this noble endeavor so that it becomes fatal. Similarly, the narrator himself has twisted his own intellectual gifts. Based on his elevated language and complex arguments in the story's first paragraphs, he is an intelligent and curious man, but he uses his mind for evil purposes, researching ways to commit the perfect murder rather than trying to help others (or even to avoid actively harming them). Just as he poisons the candle that his victim reads by, he poisons his own gifted mind with greed.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the

Vintage edition of *The Complete Tales & Poems of Edgar Allen Poe* published in 1975.

The Imp of the Perverse Quotes

It would have been wiser, it would have been safer, to classify (if classify we must) upon the basis of what man usually or occasionally did, and was always occasionally doing, rather than upon the basis of what we took it for granted the Deity intended him to do. If we cannot comprehend God in his visible works, how then in his inconceivable thoughts, that call the works into being?

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 280-281

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator opens the story with what seems to be an essay on human psychology. Using technical and elevated language, he criticizes the ideas of phrenology (the now-debunked pseudoscience of determining human behavior through skull types) and argues for the importance of a certain impulse towards "perverseness." In this quotation, the narrator actually makes a scientifically valid point: that those who study human nature should observe the way people actually act, rather than assuming how people are *intended* to act and working backwards from those assumptions. This is then bound up with the idea of God, since those assumed intentions are believed to come from "the Deity." As the narrator says here, however, God is inherently unknowable, and so too are his intentions, so humans should not presume to "comprehend" them.

Though the narrator opens the story by emphasizing his own objectivity and detachedness, it's important to keep in mind that he is making these arguments to ultimately justify his personal decisions—which include murder. The story's first paragraphs seem almost like an essay, and the narrator seems eminently reasonable, but all his logic and intellect are in the service of a fundamentally immoral (and even insane) cause.

Induction, *a posteriori*, would have brought phrenology to admit, as an innate and primitive principle of human action, a paradoxical something, which we may call *perverseness*, for want of a more characteristic term. [...] Through its promptings we act without comprehensible object; or, if this shall be understood as a contradiction in terms, we may so far modify the proposition as to say, that through its promptings we act, for the reason that we should *not*. In theory, no reason can be more unreasonable; but, in fact, there is none more strong. With certain minds, under certain conditions, it becomes absolutely irresistible.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 281

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator here explains the idea he has been referencing since the story's beginning: that there is a universal human impulse towards "perverseness," or doing what "we should *not*." He will later characterize this impulse as the "Imp of the Perverse," suggesting that it acts like a demon influencing people to actively harm themselves.

The characterization of this impulse is at the heart of the story, and is also an important psychological insight for the time (Sigmund Freud would write about a similar instinct, the "death drive," almost a hundred years later). Poe critiques the science of his contemporaries—as represented by phrenology—for working backwards from preconceived conclusions rather than observing human behavior and drawing conclusions based on that. This is what he means by "Induction, *a posteriori*"—that if sciences like phrenology used induction (essentially, reasoning) *a posteriori* (proceeding from observations and known facts, not assumptions), they would admit that this perverse impulse exists, even though it seems actively harmful and seemingly inexplicable.

That single thought is enough. The impulse increases to a wish, the wish to a desire, the desire to an uncontrollable longing, and the longing (to the deep regret and mortification of the speaker, and in defiance of all consequences) is indulged.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 281-282

Explanation and Analysis

This is a concise layout of how the narrator believes that the Imp of the Perverse operates: detailing the slow progression of thoughts from a stray notion to full obsession. He has previously described just what the Imp is: the impulse to do what we know we "should not," even if it is actively harmful. Of course, not everyone suffers so strongly from the Imp's influence as the narrator describes—otherwise everyone on the edge of a precipice would always jump—but for an obsessive person like the narrator, the Imp is seemingly irresistible. As he says later, he has never been able to resist "indulging" his perverse impulses.

> We stand upon the brink of a precipice. We peer into the abyss—we grow sick and dizzy. Our first impulse is to shrink from the danger. Unaccountably we remain. By slow degrees our sickness and dizziness and horror become merged in a cloud of unnamable feeling. [...] It is merely the idea of what would be our sensations during the sweeping precipitancy of a fall from such a height.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 282

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator gives an iconic example of the Imp of the Perverse, or the human impulse to do what we know we should not. He describes standing on the edge of a cliff and feeling a sudden, dizzying desire to leap. Even if the reader has never actually done this, it is still an extremely relatable feeling, which encourages the reader to connect with the narrator and agree with his conclusions about human psychology. Importantly, this comes *before* the narrator reveals himself as a seemingly insane murderer.

This passage also highlights the core of the Imp's sinister messages, and the very human impulse that creates them. Part of our minds wants to know what it feels like to fall from a great height because it would be a new sensation and the experience might be interesting. That curiosity—the need to know and understand new things—has driven human innovation for thousands of years, but here it can be turned against us and used to quite literally destroy ourselves.

> Had I not been thus prolix, you might either have misunderstood me altogether, or, with the rabble, have fancied me mad. As it is, you will easily perceive that I am one of the many uncounted victims of the Imp of the Perverse.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 283

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the narrator finally comes to his point: claiming that he is a victim of the Imp of the Perverse, who is responsible for his current predicament. As a statement, this says a great deal about the character. In the first place, as the reader learns, he doesn't blame the Imp for planning and committing murder. He blames the Imp for getting him caught. This betrays not only a lack of morality, but also a monstrous pride in conceiving of a murder plot so perfect that he would have gotten away with it and lived the rest of his life in peace and comfort had not "the Imp" induced him to confess. That makes the narrator far less of a victim than he wants the reader to believe. The fact that he lumps his crime in with people who might actually be "uncounted victims"—those who are induced to self-harm by perverse impulses without having killed anyone else—is proof that he simply doesn't understand what he has done wrong.

The narrator also betrays his extreme arrogance here, as he references the "rabble" who think he is insane (which seems reasonable), and again uses technical language ("prolix" means overly long or verbose) that shows his intelligence. He recognizes that he has written a lot about the Imp of the Perverse, but also feels that being "prolix" has justified himself in the eyes of the reader.

For weeks, for months, I pondered upon the means of the murder. I rejected a thousand schemes, because their accomplishment involved a chance of detection.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Victim

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 283

Explanation and Analysis

Having set up an elaborate—and disturbingly convincing—argument about the existence and purpose of the Imp, the narrator finally comes around to his point: he committed murder and got away with it. This quote further demonstrates the cold logic evinced during his earlier arguments, as he planned the murder deliberately, spending a lot of time and effort to ensure he wouldn't get caught. At the same time, it demonstrates a key moral failing in the narrator's arguments about the Imp. Clearly, he's as obsessive about committing the murder as he will be later when he confesses to the crime. He focuses on the second obsession—the urge to confess his crime—throughout the story, but this is the only glimpse the reader has into the first obsession: the need to commit the murder itself. This passage demonstrates the same focused behavior as later in the story, only now it's centered on an act of direct evil. The narrator doesn't attribute his thoughts here to the Imp, however; even if the Imp is responsible, he shows no need to shift the blame. Considering that the murder was a patently immoral act, it demonstrates that—Imp or no Imp—the narrator deserves his fate.

The next morning he was discovered dead in his bed, and the Coroner's verdict was—"Death by the visitation of God."

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Victim

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 283

Explanation and Analysis

This passage describes the narrator's successful ruse. Having hidden the cause of the murder (a poisoned candle), he leaves investigators with no choice but to rule out foul play. His evil deed is thus covered up and he subsequently enjoys the money he inherits from the victim's death. There's a chilling tone to the quote, in keeping with the remainder of the story, as it demonstrates how flawed human authorities can be. Justice fails because the narrator outthinks the police. And yet Poe also chooses to invoke God in his description—quoted by the authorities, perhaps, but very pertinent in light of the narrator's previous ruminations about God. Though the statement appears to release him from humanity's justice, it infers that God's justice can't be dodged so easily. If so, then his urge to confess—induced by the Imp or not—serves God's purpose in bringing a killer to justice.

For a very long period of time I was accustomed to revel in this sentiment. It afforded me more real delight than all the mere worldly advantages accruing from my sin.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 283

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the narrator shows his true colors, reveling in his wicked deed and overtly stating that he carries no remorse for it. It isn't just that he commits murder for money—an objectively immoral act—but that he gets away with it, and actively delights in the fact that he got away with it. (This also shows his obsessiveness again, as he shifts from ruminating on how to commit murder to constantly "reveling" in the results of that murder.) The sense of satisfaction becomes one of the benefits that he enjoys, along with this inheritance and all the nice things that money can buy. This also colors his eventual confession, of course, since he clearly has no pangs of conscience and doesn't feel bad about what he's done to gain his lifestyle. The narrator is fundamentally immoral, and his act of murder has nothing to do with the Imp of the Perverse—meaning he isn't a "victim" at all.

But there arrived at length an epoch, from which the pleasurable feeling grew, by scarcely perceptible gradations, into a haunting and harassing thought. It harassed because it haunted. I could scarcely get rid of it for an instant [...] In this manner, at last, I would perpetually catch myself pondering upon my security, and repeating, in a low undertone, the phrase, "I am safe." One day, whilst sauntering along the streets, I arrested myself in the act of murmuring, half aloud, these customary syllables. In a fit of petulance, I remodelled them thus; "I am safe—I am safe—yes—if I be not fool enough to make open confession!"

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 283-284

Explanation and Analysis

The quote here links the pleasure the narrator takes in his cunning plan to his ultimate obsession over confessing (and his eventual undoing). The Imp—or at least the fear that causes it to appear—directly follows the enjoyment he gains from thinking that he got away with murder. Since the Imp doesn't drive the narrator to murder, but only to confess, it's suggested that there is some subconscious bit of ethics deep in the narrator's soul, present since he first conceived of the murder and brought forth only gradually over years of indulgence. Furthermore, it reinforces the notion that the narrator's urge to confess stems from the same obsessiveness that caused him to murder in the first place. He thinks about his successful ruse constantly, but because he spends so much time thinking about getting away with murder, he's unable to turn those thoughts off when they become self-destructive.

This is the moment where the Imp gets its hooks into the narrator for good (or, his insane obsession fixates in the self-destructive thought that will undo him). Earlier in the story, the narrator talks about "perverse" impulses growing step by step, from an idle thought to an all-consuming mania. This is the thought itself, which he has spent most of the story discussing, articulating, and framing in an emotional context. When it finally arrives, it carries a sense of shock, which conveys the narrator's surprise and horror at realizing that the notion of confession is now inexorably planted in his head.

And now my own casual self-suggestion that I might possibly be fool enough to confess the murder of which I had been guilty, confronted me, as if the very ghost of him whom I had murdered—and beckoned me on to death.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Victim

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 284

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator's thoughts here are rich with irony, juxtaposing his "casual" undoing against years and years of being careful about hiding his crime—essentially, showing the power of impulse over reason. The last part of the quote also reinforces the chilling mood of the story as a whole, and the understanding that the narrator's madness—whether exacerbated by the Imp or not—in some ways could not have led to any other end.

With its reference to the "ghost of him whom I had murdered," this passage also returns to notions of justice, and its status as a God-given quality instead of something that mortal authorities can deliver. The narrator may finally understand that in this moment, and recognize that no matter how well he may have fooled his fellow man, there are forces beyond his control that will balance the scales.

They say that I spoke with a distinct enunciation, but with marked emphasis and passionate hurry, as if in dread of interruption before concluding the brief, but pregnant sentences that consigned me to the hangman and to hell.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 284

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has described the Imp as the true agent of his destruction, and here he reinforces this notion for a final time, as the narrator confesses his crime to a crowd of bystanders. By claiming to be unconscious when he confesses, he states that he had no agency in what he said

and merely served as a conduit for "perverse" impulses beyond his control. This shows the Imp of the Perverse—a recognizable human impulse—acting in an extreme way, as it seems to make the narrator black out and act against his will. He also claims that he felt a hand push him down, as if of an "invisible fiend"—personifying the Imp more fully, such that the symbol of an impulse becomes an external entity pushing the narrator to his destruction.

This passage also shows the narrator recognizing the justice of his fate. He might have evaded the human authorities for a while, but he cannot escape divine justice, and he is condemned to "hell" no matter what. Thanks to the Imp, however, he is condemned to the "hangman" as well. This points back to the narrator's earlier assertion that the Imp can't truly be the devil, because sometimes it works in the service of a greater good.

> But why shall I say more? To-day I wear these chains, and am here! To-morrow I shall be fetterless!—but where?

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 284

Explanation and Analysis

The final lines in the story reflect the narrator's realization that justice is a cosmic entity rather than a human one. Once he's hanged, mortal hands will no longer be able to punish him, but divine ones finally will. He is unsure about his destination, though clearly worried about hell, suggesting that he still clings to the belief that the Imp is responsible for everything and that God (or whatever force governs justice in the universe) will notice and exonerate him. However, his narrative until now implies both that he knows deep-down what his final destination will be and that he still feels no remorse for the murder that will send him there. Poe's carefully constructed tone—the narrator's clinical arguments, his discussion of the dark impulses supposedly created by the Imp, the murder itself, and the horrifying breakdown that leads to his confession—culminates only in a proposed escape clause for the narrator: the vain hope that whatever lies beyond the hangman's noose will be something better than he deserves.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE IMP OF THE PERVERSE

The story's unnamed narrator argues that human beings underestimate the importance of a certain universal impulse. He believes that schools of thought like **phrenology** (the "science" of predicting mental traits based on skull shape) have "overlooked" this impulse, ignoring it because it seemed to be illogical. Humans have missed the importance of this "propensity," the narrator claims, largely because philosophies like phrenology attribute all impulses to God and assume that they know what God's intentions are. Therefore, they describe humanity's instincts using reason alone, rather than observing them scientifically via lived experience.

The story's beginning seems more like an essay on human behavior than a piece of fiction, but it's important to keep in mind that this is all in service of its plot. The narrator, who is later revealed to be a murderer, tries to emphasize that his ideas are wholly objective and scientific—more scientific even than the accepted science of the day (phrenology). He is also clearly very verbose and technical in his language, showing that he is an intelligent and thorough man. In essence, he is stating here that the science of his day has ignored a certain impulse because it seems to be illogical, or against the assumed intentions of God.

Phrenology, for instance, suggests that humans eat because God designed them that way. However, phrenology doesn't question *why* humans eat or examine the objective data that could suggest a scientific cause for eating. It simply attributes to God the impulse to eat, then "assign[s] to man an organ of alimentiveness" (the instinctual desire for food) and fails to investigate further. Similar irresistible impulses (such as the need to procreate) are also often attributed to God by phrenologists (or "Spurzheimites"). The narrator believes that this thinking does not allow for the possibility of free will in human beings. As he claims, attributing human impulses to God means "deducing and establishing everything from the preconceived destiny of man, and upon the ground of the objects of his Creator."

Phrenology has been debunked as quackery—and racist quackery to boot—but it still carried influence in Poe's day. Here, the narrator uses this pseudoscience as part of his explanation for why "perverse" impulses aren't well understood. He's trying to point out the flaws of what he sees to be the scientific consensus, specifically stating that scientists have worked backwards from assumed conclusions, rather than observing the way people really act and drawing conclusions from that. The narrator isn't explicitly talking about himself here or justifying his actions, which gives his monologue an air of objectivity and credibility, but it's worth remembering that this is all self-interested. Spurzheim was a leading proponent of phrenology, who popularized the pseudoscience in Europe in the early 1800s.

The narrator claims that it would be far more useful to examine humanity's actions in and of themselves, instead of relying on assumptions about what people are "intended" to do. After all, God is by nature impossible to understand, and so too are his intentions. A closer investigation of impulse, the narrator claims, would cause **phrenologists** to "admit" to a "paradoxical something" that he terms "*perverseness*." These perverse impulses impel people to do what they "should *not*"—yet they are just as instinctual and "irresistible" as the impulses impelling people to do what they *should*. He clarifies that this is not a matter of self-defense through "combativeness," but is something entirely opposite: a "strongly antagonistical sentiment" to the "desire to be well."

The narrator makes a good point here: that science should be about observation, not working backwards from preconceived conclusions. Though the specific situation he is leading up to is one that is immoral and even insane, the arguments that he makes on the way are often sound. This leads the reader to relate to him at first (if they can sift through his overly technical language). In this passage the narrator also starts to get more specific about what impulse he is referring to: the vague human instinct toward self-destruction or, as he says, doing what we "should not."

The narrator appeals to the reader to examine their "own soul" and admit that they too have felt this impulse to perverseness, often doing what they know they should not do, and for no discernible reason. What occurs, he claims, is that "the impulse increases to a wish, the wish to a desire, the desire to an uncontrollable longing, and the longing [...] is indulged." The narrator gives examples of common situations where this impulse takes over, like stubbornly procrastinating in a task that one truly desires to do, or standing on the edge of a cliff and feeling a dizzying desire to leap, despite knowing that the fall would be deadly.

This is actually an acute psychological insight Poe is making here, particularly for his time. Sigmund Freud would articulate similar ideas in his theory of the "death drive" (the human impulse towards self-destruction), but not until almost a century later. Poe recognizes this nearly universal human instinct for "perverseness," something that the science and religion of his day (represented by his references to phrenology) would have ignored. The essay-like tone of the story also gradually moves towards a specific plot, as Poe slowly establishes a tone of foreboding and dread. The text hints at dark obsessions, insanity, and people doing things that will cause them direct harm.

The narrator concludes that such impulses come "solely from the spirit of the Perverse." He says that one could attribute this impulse to the devil, or "arch-fiend," except that sometimes it is "known to operate in furtherance of good." The narrator then explains why he has offered this account: to explain why he is currently in prison, condemned for a crime. Though "the rabble" have called him insane, he declares that he is instead one of "the many uncounted victims of the **Imp of the Perverse**."

Here the narrator personifies this impulse as a "spirit" and then as an "imp" (a kind of small, mischievous demon), but also clarifies that he thinks the instinct isn't supernatural, since it isn't always as evil as the work of the devil himself would be. In admitting this, the narrator might even recognize his own punishment as justice—an example of the Imp working towards good, since it drives him to confess to his murder instead of getting away with it. This passage also shows the narrator suddenly changing focus from a broad discussion of human nature to a specific recollection of his own life. Other people find him insane, but he thinks that he is merely too logical and intelligent for others to recognize—especially since he alone acknowledges the existence of the Imp of the Perverse.

The narrator goes on to describe the crime for which he has been convicted. He claims that he spent months researching the means to commit murder, inventing and discarding "a thousand schemes" because he thought they might get him caught. After thorough research, the narrator reads a French memoir describing a woman who almost died when she lit a **candle** that had been "accidentally poisoned." This inspires him to replace the candle on his victim's nightstand with a poisoned one, since he knows "the victim's habit of reading in bed," and also that his apartment is "narrow and ill-ventilated."

This passage brings in another key element of Poe's work: the murder mystery. Poe is credited with helping to invent the detective story (specifically through stories like "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and "The Purloined Letter"), and the notion of a poisoned candle used to commit a surreptitious murder fits the genre as well. The candle also represents the pursuit of truth and knowledge being twisted to evil means. The victim uses the candle to read, but the narrator poisons it so that this act of intellectual curiosity becomes fatal. Similarly, the narrator has "poisoned" his own intelligence by using it to devise a murder.

The plan succeeds: the narrator replaces the victim's **candle** with a poisoned one, the victim lights the candle in his stuffy quarters, and he is swiftly killed. When his body is found "dead in his bed," the authorities don't detect the poison in the candle, and declare the death "a visitation from God." The narrator then removes the remains of the candle without being detected, and covers up all other signs of the crime. He inherits his victim's estate and lives quite comfortably for many years. Indeed, he revels in his seemingly perfect crime, claiming that "it is inconceivable how rich a sentiment of satisfaction" he gains whenever he thinks about getting away with it.

Having succeeded at murder, the narrator feels no pangs of remorse for his crime, and indeed, takes active joy in getting away with it. It's important to note that he doesn't blame the Imp for committing the crime. He's not upset by the murder: only by the later confession. This enhances the cold, clinical nature of the murder itself, while seeming to confirm the narrator's psychopathy.

Eventually, however, the narrator begins to fear capture, with the satisfaction of successfully committing murder slowly giving way to a constant "pondering upon my security." He becomes obsessed with the thought of capture, and begins to tell himself "I am safe" as a way of keeping his fear at bay. This works for a time, until one day he adds an extension to the thought: "I am safe—yes—if I be not fool enough to make open confession!" He then immediately fixates on this revised thought and fears suddenly and inexplicably confessing to the crime. He is familiar with the "fits of perversity" that he has previously described, and knows that he has never been able to resist acting on his perverse impulses.

The narrator shows his obsessive nature more clearly here. Previously he was ruminating for months on the means of murdering his victim, and he presumably had a preoccupation with phrenology based on the story's beginning, but now he begins to obsess over the possibility of being caught. The narrator then shows the "perverse" impulse's power in his own life, after giving his broader explanation earlier. Like a real demon, the "Imp" plants a seed in the narrator's mind, letting him fixate on it and ratcheting up the pressure until he can't think about anything else. It's a frightening concept, which serves to convey the nature of the narrator's madness and how out of control he feels when confronted with his own mind. It's especially telling that he has never been able to resist the Imp before.

The thought consumes the narrator until "Every succeeding wave of thought overwhelmed me with new terror." He walks faster and faster, and eventually begins running, fighting "a maddening desire to shriek aloud." His actions draw a crowd, which begins to pursue him, and he "felt then the consummation of my fate." His desperation to avoid confessing leads him to wish he could tear out his own tongue, until a force—which he attributes to "an invisible fiend"—strikes him on the back of the neck. He then apparently confesses to the murder—though he doesn't remember doing so—undoing his so-called "perfect" crime and landing him in prison to be executed.

The moment that finally dooms the narrator arrives when his obsessive thoughts become irrational actions, allowing him to be noticed by others. It's a pointed use of irony: in his effort to escape the Imp and the implications of his crime, he actually ends up tipping his hand, which ultimately leads to his capture and confession. That suggests that some kind of cosmic justice does prevail, and that even when the human authorities can't catch a killer, his deeds will catch up to him nonetheless. Using the narrator's own words from earlier in the story, this might be an example of the Imp "operat[ing] in furtherance of good."

The narrator concludes his tale by noting that he is currently chained in a cell, but will be "unfettered" the next day, when he will be hanged. He wonders where his soul might finally end up.

The narrator clearly believes in an afterlife, and with his execution impending, he wonders about his immortal soul. Is he merely one of the innocent "victims of the Imp of the Perverse"? Or will he be consigned to hell for the murder he committed? The story ends abruptly and on an ambiguous note, as the narrator still has expressed no remorse for actually murdering his victim, and only seems to regret his inability to resist the Imp's power. It may be that he even recognizes the justice of his fate, as he seems pessimistic about his future in the afterlife.

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