Poe's Guinea Pigs: Narrators and Perversity in Selected Tales

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Poe's Guinea Pigs: Narrators and Perversity in Selected Tales

by

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"Examine these and similar actions as we will, we shall find them resulting solely from the spirit of the Perverse. We perpetrate them merely because we feel that we should not. Beyond this there is no intelligible principle . . ."

--Edgar Allan Poe, "The Imp of the Perverse"

For Joelle.
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Many scholars and critics make the mistake of closely linking Poe with his narrators, some going so far as to say that Poe’s tales are autobiographical, at least in part. While it may be said that certain of Poe’s writings seem to reflect particular aspects of his life, a purely autobiographical reading falls short of any real understanding of Poe’s stories. Examining five of Poe’s writings—The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket, “The Tell Tale Heart,” “The Black Cat,” “The Imp of the Perverse,” and “The Cask of Amontillado”—in the order in which they were written reveals a pattern of thought developed through the selected tales as if they are a series. This pattern reveals that Poe is not connected to his narrators but is instead an observer; learning from their actions and recording for his readers what knowledge he is able to glean pertaining to the issue of perversity.

Before delving into this reading, an examination of several critical viewpoints is offered. Each is broken down and individual strengths and weaknesses of each reading are offered as they relate to the reading being put forth. Upon completion of the review of literature, each of the five tales is closely examined, and the distinction between Poe and the narrator made clear. Additionally, the progression of thought through the tales in the series is demonstrated and it is shown how Poe seeks answers to certain questions, how those questions are answered by each of the tales, and what Poe does with these answers. In the first two, perversity is seen but undefined. In the third, it is defined but never fully explained or understood. In the fourth, it is explained in detail but never controlled. In the fifth it is knowingly used by the final narrator—guinea pig—in Poe’s series of experiments.
Chapter One: Introduction

More than 150 years after his mysterious death, Edgar Allan Poe remains perhaps the most enigmatic figure in American literary history. Although he is widely read and studied, few critics agree on how to view either Poe or the stories that he wrote. Critics, scholars, and authors as significant as T.S. Eliot, Aldous Huxley, W.H. Auden and Henry James view Poe's style as "vulgar," "primitive," or "cheap" (Gargano, "Question" 56). Conversely, some scholars have gone to great lengths to prove that Poe demonstrates an "intelligible rationale" ("Question" 56). Putting aside questions of style, there seem to be two schools of thought regarding Poe's tales, particularly his tales of the grotesque, which include such well-known works as "The Tell Tale Heart," "The Black Cat," and "The Cask of Amontillado." In addition to these are the perhaps lesser known, but significant story "The Imp of the Perverse" and Poe's longest work, The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket.

On the one hand, many scholars and biographers choose to see in these stories many autobiographical elements, claiming that Poe wrote them based on events in his own life, either out of fear of how he might have acted, or to express a desire to act in that way (Silverman 316-17; Ketterer 101-14). Others believe, with James Gargano, that these stories, and in particular their narrators, are individuals, who must be viewed as entirely separate from Poe, the author. In examining these works, I have come to see that while there may be circumstantial evidence to support the theory that these stories are autobiographical in nature, it is weak evidence at best,
based on, as James Gargano says, "the untenable and often unanalyzed assumption that Poe and his narrators are identical literary twins [. . .] their shrieks and groans are too often conceived as emanating from Poe himself" ("Question" 56, emphasis added). Making this assumption seems to me to be doing a great disservice to Poe. No other American author that I have read or studied has been so closely linked by scholars and critics to his or her writings, let alone directly connected to the attitudes and actions displayed by the characters. Nor should this be the case for Poe. Instead, I agree with Gargano when he says [. . .] Poe's narrators possess a character and consciousness distinct from those of their creator. These protagonists [. . .] speak their own thoughts and are the dupes of their own passions ("Question" 57).

Gargano is correct in seeing that Poe and his narrators operate as separate entities in these tales. His idea serves as the foundation for this thesis, and I will build upon his idea, taking it forward another step. In closely examining these tales, it can be seen that Poe is not only separated from his narrators, but he is actually using them as his guinea pigs, or experiments, recording their thoughts and actions as he attempts to define the force behind not only their individual actions but also the inexplicable behavior of humanity as a whole. In reading the five aforementioned tales, it can be seen that there is a progression as Poe refines his discoveries. As a result of these experiments, Poe is able to observe the force of perversity at work in individuals, then the force is identified for him, and finally he is shown how to control this force. As a result of these experiments, Poe passes on to his readers what he has been able to see through the actions of the narrators.
Considered chronologically, the stories are placed in the following order: *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, published in 1838 (hereafter referred to as simply *Pym*); “The Tell-Tale Heart,” published in January, 1843; “The Black Cat,” published in August, 1843; “The Imp of the Perverse,” published in July 1845 (“Imp”); and “The Cask of Amontillado,” published in November, 1846 (“Cask”). This chronological reading reveals the patterns of Poe’s experiments, and as such, the stories are best discussed in this order. In writing *Pym* and “The Tell Tale Heart,” Poe is simply an observer, trying to determine what it is that causes people to act in ways that are clearly not in their own self-interest and recording what he observes. With the publication of “The Black Cat” and “Imp,” a definition is revealed to Poe in the former, and refined and elaborated upon in the latter. In the final experiment, “Cask,” Poe observes and records how the spirit of perversity can be controlled when it is recognized. Before delving into this reading of the stories, however, I feel it prudent to examine some of what has been said about them by others, particularly with regard to what has been seen in the way these tales relate to the idea of perversity.
Chapter Two: Review of Literature

An article entitled “The Question of Poe’s Narrators” by James Gargano seems the most appropriate starting point for a review of related criticism. In this 1963 article, Gargano examines the idea of whether or not Poe and his narrators are one and the same, and reaches the conclusion that he does not believe that they are. He closely examines five of Poe’s narrators, three of which—the narrators of “The Tell Tale Heart,” “The Cask of Amontillado,” and “The Black Cat”—are examined in this thesis. In addition to these three, he also discusses the narrators of “Ligeia” and “William Wilson.” To support his proposal that Poe is indeed different from his narrators Gargano makes several excellent points. He does not, however, directly connect any of the narrators in a series as I am proposing here. His essay provides a strong starting point for some of the arguments I will make in this thesis.

In speaking of Poe’s narrators in general, Gargano says, “Poe understands them [his narrators] far better than they can possibly understand themselves. Indeed, he often so designs his tales as to show his narrators’ limited comprehension of their own problems and states of mind” (57). This is exactly one of the points I will argue in this thesis. Poe is able to observe his narrators’ actions, and through a series of repeated experiments, it becomes clear why the narrators act as they do, even though not all of them are aware of it. Gargano goes on to reinforce this point, claiming that Poe is using these narrators for a specific purpose in which he “suggests to his readers ideas never entertained by the narrators” (57). This is done, he says, “not to enable us to lose ourselves in strange or outrageous emotions, but to see these emotions and
those obsessed by them from a rich and thoughtful perspective" (57). In short, Gargano is saying, and I agree, that Poe is attempting to teach his readers exactly why people behave as they do, and his narrators provide the answers to those questions.

In focusing on the narrator of "The Tell Tale Heart," Gargano continues to build a foundation for my idea that Poe's narrators are functioning in a sort of experiment. He tells us that "Poe assuredly knows what the narrator never suspects [. . .] that the narrator is a victim[. . .]") (58). He is right when he claims that the narrator never suspects, as will be demonstrated later, but I disagree with his assertion that Poe knows the answers. I believe that at the time of the experiment with "The Tell Tale Heart," Poe has no greater understanding than the narrator himself.

The second story in the series I have outlined that Gargano deals with is "Cask." In writing of Montresor as narrator, Gargano makes clear his point that Poe and his narrators are separate, saying, "Far from being his author's mouthpiece, the narrator, Montresor, is one of the supreme examples [. . .] of a deluded rationalist who cannot glimpse the moral implications of his planned folly" (59). While I agree that Montresor certainly does not speak for Poe, I maintain that Montresor knows only too well just what he is doing, and sees it not as folly, but as an act of ultimate success. Gargano assigns to irony many of the pieces of the story that serve to most strongly reinforce the idea that Montresor is acting in a perverse manner, all the while being fully aware of it. Instead of acting perversely, Gargano claims that Montresor acts and speaks ironically, arrogantly, and unconsciously (60).
Third in the series, and last in Gargano’s essay, is “The Black Cat.” Gargano has said much on this story in a previously written article, much of which is discussed below. While he repeats many of the same ideas in this essay, he does make some new statements of import. Most importantly, Gargano says, “Poe does not espouse his protagonist’s theory [that he is being driven by the perverse] any more than he approves of the specious rationalizations of his other narrators” (61). Gargano is exactly right when he makes this statement, but he does not state why it is true. It is true because Poe is simply an observer of his narrators, not a judge. He is not writing the stories in an attempt to judge behavior but to understand it. He neither condones nor condemns any of the behaviors shown by his narrators.

Gargano concludes this essay by reinforcing the notion that Poe and his narrators are separate entities. He sees Poe as a “serious artist who explores the neuroses of his characters with probing intelligence” (61). Again, Gargano is correct with this assertion, and his ideas can be used as a starting point in recognizing exactly how Poe observes his narrators and then uses what he learns. As the first to be explored, Gargano’s essay has certainly provided a strong foundation for one of the basic premises of this thesis, as does the next article, also by Gargano.

Nearly every critical discussion of “The Black Cat” written after 1961 references Gargano’s essay “The Black Cat: Perverseness Reconsidered,” and so it seems fitting to continue with this article, as it directly deals with one of the stories in the series and since it serves as the basis for some of the arguments made by Gargano in the previously mentioned essay. In his essay, Gargano seems to seek to dismiss the
idea of perverseness from the story, or at the very least, redefine it. In his words, “Far from being a mere treatise on perverseness, ‘The Black Cat’ is on one level an intense study of the protagonist’s discovery of, and infatuated immersion in, evil, and on another level a subtle examination of the protagonist’s refusal to recognize the moral meaning of his career” ("Perverseness" 173). Gargano proceeds to examine the actions of the narrator and explains how each of the incidents of violence in the story can be explained as the actions of a man who reveals “almost complete moral insensitivity” (178). Gargano minimizes the idea that perversity may be at work in the narrator, unless, as he says, “it [the perversity] is the protagonist’s perverseness in being able to dismiss a transparently moral adventure as a mere sequence of inexplicable events” (178). He looks upon the narrator’s discussion of perverseness as he prepares to hang the cat as his attempt to “exonerate himself from the responsibility for his outrage [the hanging of the cat],” and as a “rational attempt to explain away [his actions]” (175). Essentially, Gargano sees the protagonist not as an individual afflicted with the imp of the perverse, but as a man too morally obtuse to recognize what is in fact going on around him (175).

In explaining the sequence of events in the story, Gargano does not go so far as to attempt to see them as “mere household events” (Poe 223). Instead, he sees the actions as having symbolic significance, working together to create a unified tale, which is actually comprised of two parts that reflect each other. The first part, he says, is from the beginning of the story up to and including the burning of the protagonist’s home (176-77). The action in this section, says Gargano, “establishes,
metaphorically, the conditions that must precede the narrator’s murder of his wife” (176). The narrator commits a murder (of sorts), and his crime is revealed to the public through the bas-relief of a cat on the wall of the house. In the second part of the tale, the protagonist again commits a murder, and his actions are again revealed to the public, this time with consequences much more dire. According, then, to Gargano’s interpretation, the narrator is essentially given a warning, but refuses to accept it, because he sees himself as intellectually superior and above the moral law that is operating around him (177).

Gargano’s work in establishing the separation of Poe and his narrators lays a solid groundwork for the ideas I explore in this thesis. Using these ideas as a foundation provides the support for the contention that the stories addressed in this thesis are a series in which Poe, separated from his narrators, is in fact examining the ideas of perversity and human motivations.

In addition to Gargano, Richard Frushell has written an essay on “The Black Cat,” entitled “An Incarnate Night-Mare: Moral Grotesquerie in ‘The Black Cat,’” which has also received much attention from critics and scholars. In his paper, Frushell proposes to “offer observations on the ironically shifting symbolic meanings of the cats in an investigation of the ‘moral’ undercurrent implicit in the narrator’s degeneration by stages into the condition of grotesque perversity” (43). Frushell proceeds to explain that it is the narrator’s overwhelming pride that leads him to destruction, as he ascends from the state of humanity to one of God (44). After the murder of his wife, says Frushell, the narrator, “in his overreaching pride [. . .] has
demonstrated and [...] defined the perverseness within him. He is sole master over life and death” (44). (This idea of defining and demonstrating his perverseness is one to which I will return). Having allowed his pride to take him this far, logic dictates what will happen to the narrator as a result, and this idea is captured nicely by Frushell: “The narrator’s inability or unwillingness to recognize that he is ‘mere man’ and not God is the cause of his demise” (44). Pride has taken the narrator to a point at which he feels he is above any reproach or retribution, and this of course causes him to give himself up through his bragging to the police, secure in his false notions of supremacy.

Like Gargano, Frushell provides an interesting and compelling theory into the actions of the narrator of “The Black Cat.” Also like Gargano, however, Frushell falls short in his thinking, leaving several holes in his theory. In characterizing the narrator, Frushell puts forth a solid representation of the man, saying, “He is bright, but self-deceived; that is, he is able to intellectualize his problem, but he does not, until the end, sense the implications of what he says, especially in regard to his own actions” (43, emphasis added). I maintain that the narrator does sense the implications of his problem early in the story, but cannot face the truth of what he discovers. This concept will be more fully explored in a later chapter. Also, Frushell's attempt to blame perverseness on pride seeks to classify or define the concept in familiar terms, making it easier to deal with, but perhaps this is a concept that should not be dealt with too easily or seen as simplistic. Like Gargano, Frushell questions the narrator's claim that the act of hanging Pluto is a deadly sin that will
separate himself from God, claiming, “If the cat were only a cat and not a symbol of part of the narrator’s essence as a human being, the passage would be ludicrous since there would be no ‘deadly’ sin [. . . ]” (44; see “Perverseness” 173). In reading this passage from Poe, it seems a viable position to look at the issue from another angle and say that the narrator does not see the hanging of the cat as the “deadly” sin but the fact that he is succumbing to his perverse nature, which he recognizes will lead him to destruction and separation from God. This also is an idea that will be further developed later in this thesis.

A third article regarding Poe and the perverse is J. Rea’s “Poe’s ‘The Cask of Amontillado.’” With this article, Rea comes very near to making the point I am attempting to demonstrate, how Poe is using his narrators to understand perverse human behavior. While ostensibly an article about “Cask,” Rea discusses perverseness in enough Poe stories, including most of those that I have chosen, to come quite close to anticipating the theory that I have put forth. She stops just short, but introduces enough excellent points to make this a very worthwhile and valuable article, which provides valuable support to the ideas put forth in this thesis.

Rea disputes the argument made by others that claim Montresor kills Fortunato out of revenge (57). Instead, she states that, “Montresor kills Fortunato because Fortunato has been good to Montresor, and Montresor knows this” (59). Rea wastes no time in delving into Poe’s theory of the perverse, defining it, in part, as the idea that “we want to hurt or to kill or to bury alive someone because he has been good to us. It is an unbelievable desire [. . . ] The desire is nevertheless very strong”
Rea makes exactly the point that while the concept of perverseness may seem unbelievable, it is also undeniable and cannot be so easily cast aside or explained away. Her point is that this desire—the desire to injure someone who has been good to you—“is so unbelievable that only the philosophers will admit that it exists. The ordinary man refuses to believe it and seeks what he thinks is a more reasonable excuse to account for what he has done” (Rea 60).

Before detailing her arguments for Montresor’s perversity in “Cask,” Rea briefly discusses some other instances of the perverse in Poe’s writings, including “The Tell Tale Heart,” “The Black Cat,” and “The Imp of the Perverse.” She does not see them as links in a chain of thinking being constructed by Poe, but as individual stories with a single common thread running through them. She correctly characterizes the narrators when she says of them that they “are not paranoics, [ . . .] nor madmen, [ . . .] but good men who have become victims of the imp of the perverse” (64). While that statement may be true of three of the narrators, Montresor is by no means a victim. He has carefully planned his actions and even relies on and manipulates perversity in others to assist him in accomplishing his goal.

Interestingly, Rea makes exactly this point in discussing Montresor’s orders to his servants and his repeated pleas to Fortunato that they retrace their steps, leaving the catacombs. She stops short of fully developing this idea, claiming instead that Montresor’s plan works only by accident (62).

Rea spends a good deal of time in her article discussing exactly where Poe may have gotten his theory of perversity, finally determining that Poe reaches his
theory through analysis (62). She argues against those that seek to identify these stories with Poe, and those who say that Poe merely looked inside of himself and saw perversity at work. Instead, Rea says, “Poe does the impossible in identifying his intellect with someone unlike himself who does not love those who love him, and he does this enough times to arrive at a generalization or law that all men have the impulse of the perverse in them” (63).

After determining where Poe may have arrived at his theory, Rea discusses the impulse of the perverse in terms of confession, another thread connecting the stories she is dealing with. She deals with each confession in terms of time—that is, how long between the deed and the confession in each story. Rea makes the point that the reason for the confession in each case is that it delights the confessor. She says they do not confess because of conscience but because of delight (66). This “fierce delight” is likened to the narrator’s description of what it would be like to fall into the abyss in “The Imp of the Perverse,” and, as Rea puts it, “the longer he can delay the fall, the longer will his delight last” (66). This claim is the foundation for the idea that Poe is conducting a series of experiments, for when the confessions are placed in an order that reveals the progression of the idea of perversity, it can be demonstrated that each confession is an important link in a chain. Rea then goes on to relate how much each narrator enjoys what he is doing, even though it results in his demise (66-7).

Rea concludes her article by pointing out that Poe develops his theory of perversity over a long period of time, beginning in 1831 with “MS. Found in a
Bottle.” She goes on to trace some of the highlights of stories written between that and “Cask,” connecting several by their various degrees of perverse characters and actions. She stops short of fully developing the idea that Poe is intentionally working in a sort of “trial-and-error” fashion until he satisfactorily understands perversity, but provides an important basis for that claim. Additionally, she leaves *Pym* out of her discussion, but her remarks and insights regarding the stories related to and surrounding it help to show that its inclusion in further studies is not improper.

In his “Irresistible Impulses: Edgar Allan Poe and the Insanity Defense,” a more general article not focusing on any one particular story, John Cleman examines Poe’s use of the perverse through connections with the insanity defense. While this article does not, as I have said, focus on one particular story, it does examine several of those in the series, particularly “The Tell Tale Heart,” “The Black Cat,” and “The Imp of the Perverse.” Cleman makes several excellent points relating to the idea of perversity and how it functions in an individual, some of which support my theory of Poe’s stories. Cleman presents a strong case, and his evidence raises questions regarding his conclusion that each of the narrators is at least partially insane (634).

Cleman spends the first third of his article defining insanity from a legal standpoint and detailing several major criminal cases being tried at the time Poe was writing some of these stories. It is when he begins to directly deal with the stories as they relate to these cases that he makes his points. His article is most useful in defining terms such as insanity and perverseness, which is quite similar to the way I see Poe defining them through these tales. Cleman quotes Dr. Isaac Ray, who gives
an excellent definition of perversity, although he terms it "moral insanity." This is
defined as a state of mind in which

"no delusion is present to disturb the mental vision" and yet [the
person suffering this mental state] "finds himself urged, perhaps, to
the commission of every outrage, and though perfectly conscious of
what he is doing, unable to offer the slightest resistance to the
overwhelming power that impels him." (Cleman 629)¹

He further quotes from Ray, stating that all who suffer from this state, "possess one
feature in common, the irresistible, motiveless impulse to destroy life" (629). In the
case of at least four of the five stories in this series, Ray's definition fits perfectly.
The killing in Pym would not seem to fit quite so nicely, a fact that will later be
explored.

Cleman claims that a common characteristic of "The Tell Tale Heart," "The
Black Cat," and "Imp" is that they are "not confession but self-defense, an attempt to
provide a rational account of apparently irrational events" (630). Like Rea, Cleman
lays the groundwork for the theory being presented here, and in building on his work,
an important distinction can be seen. The narrators are not attempting to defend their
actions. None of them is making excuses; none seems to be seeking a way of
escaping punishment.²

Later in his essay, Cleman uses what he sees as evidence from each of the
stories to attempt to prove his ideas that the narrators are either acting in self-defense
or are partially insane. His arguments here are weak. He makes the claim that the
“calmness, deliberateness, and rationality [of the narrator of “The Tell Tale Heart”] signify insanity insofar as they are at variance with his ‘normal’ state” (632). Clearly there is no point in the story at which the narrator shows any of those traits, as will be demonstrated. He states that it was indeed the cat that drives the narrator of “The Black Cat” to murder, which, as I have said, is nothing more than a weak attempt to logically explain the actions (636).

Cleman does make several well-supported observations regarding “Imp” as he concludes his article, and these become another piece in the foundation upon which this thesis stands. He makes the significant recognition of the fact that “the narrator's overt aim is to make the apparently unreasonable reasonable, to ground the irrational in reason and logic” (637). Overall, Cleman, like Rea, puts forth a solid understanding of how Poe is using these stories. Cleman recognizes perversity, and he is able to see and clearly articulate why he believes the narrators act as they do.

In order to see how Poe operates as an observer of his narrators, a close reading of each of the texts is required. As shown above in the review of literature, this has been done before. Using as the starting point the work done by earlier scholars, the reading I present here will build on the findings these scholars have put forth. In the course of the research done for this thesis, I have not found an established model of reading these stories as a set. Most critics instead choose to focus on one tale or perhaps various elements of several, but I have not seen evidence that anyone has considered them as a strongly connected and even interdependent group. In examining each of the stories in the series it may be
demonstrated that Poe is at work on multiple levels. As the author, he is the person actually writing the stories. He is not, however, the person telling the stories. Instead, he functions as an observer and a recorder, watching the narrators of all five stories in an attempt to answer his questions regarding human motivation and behavior. These observations provide Poe the observer with answers, which he then passes along to his readers as Poe the author. The close reading of each text demonstrates exactly what Poe learns and how he learns it.
Chapter Three: *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*

*The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* is unique among the tales in this series. It is the only story of the five in which there is no illogical murder committed by the narrator, and as a result, there is no confession given by the narrator in a spirit of perversity. This does not, by any means, indicate that there is a lack of perversity. Nor does this mean that the perverse acts shown are somehow less significant or of a lesser degree than those which are shown in the other stories. As the first of Poe’s experiments looking into human motivation, this novella is very much a test for Poe, as he seeks to learn if there is any merit in pursuing his quest. What he finds may not be as dramatic or disturbing as the actions of the next three individuals in the series, but it certainly shows Poe that there is something at work in people that drives them to act in ways that cannot easily be explained. Poe saw no
by their narrators to an unnamed listener and "The Black Cat" is penned entirely by the narrator to his readers, _Pym_ offers a twist. According to the introduction written by Pym, Poe has written the first portion (after being told the details by Pym) and Pym himself has written the second. If we accept the fact that the narrators of the stories are separate from Poe, as has been discussed, we are forced to take this introduction at its word and accept that Pym exists just as the other narrators do, and Poe is doing nothing other than recording what he is told and observing the actions of the true narrator, Pym. In the "Introductory Note" of the novella, the writer, identified as A.G. Pym, tells his readers that the tale they are about to read is true, but is being presented as fiction, in a sort of "ruse" (748). In reading this introduction, we are forced to view Pym as two separate individuals: Pym the character in the novella, and Pym, the _author_ of at least part of the tale. In fact, Pym goes so far as to make the claim that,

[... ] it will be seen at once how much of what follows [is] my own writing; and it will also be understood that no fact is misrepresented in the first few pages that were written by Mr. Poe. [... ] it will be unnecessary to point out where his portion ends and my own commences; the difference in point of style will readily be perceived.

(749)

The claim that the difference in style will be plain to the reader is obviously a lie, as there is no point in the novella at which there is any indication of a change of author. This lie being perpetrated on his readers by Pym the author is subtly reinforced during
the telling of his tale, interestingly enough, at a point in the novella at which Pym the character is experiencing one of his fits of perversity, as detailed below.

Pym’s first adventure is undertaken at the sole urging of the perverse, although he is unable to recognize it as such. Having spent an evening drinking with his friend Augustus, Pym is quite surprised when Augustus, whom Pym supposes to be thoroughly intoxicated, suddenly determines to take his boat out for a “frolic” and put to sea (751). Clearly this is a risky proposition, for it is the middle of the night, and “it was blowing almost a gale, and the weather was very cold—it being late in October” (751). In addition to the dangers posed by the weather, it must be noted that Pym is “altogether incapable of managing the boat” (752), and Augustus’ supposed state of drunkenness should be cause for concern. Pym, however, tells us, “I can hardly tell what possessed me, but the words were no sooner out of his mouth than I felt a thrill of the greatest excitement and pleasure, and thought his mad idea one of the most delightful and reasonable things in the world” (751, emphasis added).

Clearly, in the face of obvious risk and danger, Pym has here become victim of the perverse. He willfully chooses to partake in an action that he recognizes as dangerous and potentially harmful to himself, and Pym here becomes one of those who, in the words of the narrator of “The Black Cat,” finds himself “committing a vile or a stupid action, for no other reason than because he knows he should not” (225). There is clearly no logical or rational explanation for Pym’s desire to set out on this undertaking, knowing the risk he is running. His actions can only be explained as
stemming from an inexplicable urge which he is unable to recognize, but will later be defined by the narrator of “Imp” as perversity.

Once Pym gives in to his urge and goes out on the boat with Augustus, he “sprang out of bed [. . . ] in a kind of ecstasy” and quite happily proceeds to undertake the adventure. The fact that he describes his state of mind as being in ecstasy indicates that he has lost (at least for the moment), the capability of rational thought; and has now become wholly consumed by the perverse. He is now one who, as described by Dr. Isaac Ray, “finds himself urged, [. . . ] to the commission of every outrage, and though perfectly conscious of what he is doing, unable to offer the slightest resistance to the overwhelming power that impels him” (Quoted in Cleman 629). This inability to offer resistance to an action that he knows to be harmful mirrors exactly the actions later witnessed by Poe through the actions of the narrators of “The Tell Tale Heart,” “The Black Cat,” and “Imp,” and leads to consequences nearly as dire.

Pym and Augustus are run down by a whaling ship and miraculously rescued. For a person in control of his actions, this would be seen as a lesson, and he would no doubt never again attempt such a dangerous and foolhardy stunt. Pym, however, is now under the control of his own imp of the perverse, and it refuses to let him go. As Pym himself admits following his rescue and a period of recovery,

It might be supposed that a catastrophe such as I have just related would have effectually cooled my incipient passion for the sea. On the contrary, I never experienced a more ardent longing for the wild
adventures incident to the life of a navigator than within a week after our miraculous deliverance. (757)

Rather than be dissuaded from ever again putting to sea, Pym now goes against what is obviously in his best interests (to say nothing of his going against the wishes of his mother and grandfather) and actively seeks a way that he can again go out on a ship for more and greater adventures. As perverse as this fact is by itself, when combined with the reasons Pym gives for so desperately wanting to go to sea he is truly taking perversity to a higher level.

Pym describes conversations he has with Augustus after their initial escapade and tells us that these conversations further fanned the flames of his passion for the sea not because of anything pure or beautiful, but rather because of the disturbing images they conjured up in Pym’s mind. Pym tells us,

It is strange, [. . .] that he [Augustus] most strongly enlisted my feelings in behalf of the life of a seaman, when he depicted his more terrible moments of suffering and despair. For the bright side of the painting I had a limited sympathy. My visions were of shipwreck and famine; of death or captivity among barbarian hordes; of a lifetime dragged out in sorrow and tears, upon some gray and desolate rock, in an ocean unapproachable and unknown. (757)

Pym most fervently desires those things that are the most sure to bring him sorrow and pain, even death. These are not the desires of a man in full control of his rational thought. He does recognize that his thoughts are “strange,” but he is completely
unable to do anything to change them. Nor does he seem inclined to even try to do so. As a man afflicted by a nameless condition, he does what so many others have done—he tries to find a logical, comfortable explanation for his behavior; something that provides him with at least some small measure of comfort. He claims of his wishes that, "such visions or desires—for they amounted to desires—are common, I have since been assured, to the whole numerous race of the melancholy among men" (757). His rationalizations sound similar to those later given by the narrator of "The Tell Tale Heart," who tells his listener that he too suffers, not from melancholy, but from some sort of "nervous" disorder, and that he has a "disease" (303). As the first of Poe's experiments, Pym has established perversity at work early in his narrative, and he now proceeds to further demonstrate it at different points in his tale.

As will be later detailed, digression is one of the examples of perversity in "Imp." This connection serves as one proof that these tales are closely linked as a part of a series dealing with a common issue. It is worthwhile, then, to examine the digressions in Pym more closely. There are two major digressions given by Pym that follow one another rather closely in the course of his narrative, coming in chapters six and seven. Digressions are not necessarily always perverse. The narrator of "Imp" recognizes this when, in the course of his explanations, he qualifies digression as an example of perversity by saying it must be done to "tantalize" and "displease" the listener (281). Looking at the two examples of Pym's digression, I believe it is clear that he is intentionally trying to do exactly that.
The first digression comes at the point of the story at which Pym is finally rescued from the hold of the *Grampus* by Augustus. Pym has been a veritable prisoner in the hold for a period of more than two weeks. During that time a mutiny has occurred on board, and Augustus is unable to reach him. Augustus finally manages to get to Pym and tell him what has taken place on the deck of the ship and then leads Pym to the secret hole in the floor of Augustus’ cabin, where Pym will now stay. At this point in the tale, there is a great deal of suspense. The ship has been taken over by rogue sailors, Captain Barnard murdered, Augustus taken prisoner, and there is nothing to indicate that the mutineers will treat Pym with any degree of kindness or civility. Rather than continue the story in a manner that will allow the reader to quickly learn the fate of those now in peril, Pym decides to give a two-and-a-half-page description of the proper manner of stowing cargo in the hold of a ship. This is done because, as Pym states, his previous descriptions of the stowage “may appear ambiguous to some of my readers who may have seen a proper or regular stowage [. . .]” (785). In the course of this digression, Pym goes so far as to relate the sad fate of “Captain Joel Rice of the Schooner Firefly” (787), a story obviously unconnected to his own and having no direct bearing on Pym’s present situation. Pym’s sole purpose with this digression is to keep his readers in suspense, tantalizing them. Pym knows that his readers will be displeased, as there is nothing gained by including this passage. In fact, if the passage is omitted, the narrative loses nothing at all. This is another example of perversity at work in Pym, and it will not be the last.
Pym's second digression is even more distasteful to the reader, as it comes at a time of some of the highest action in the narrative to this point. Pym and Augustus have managed to secure an ally in the form of Dirk Peters, and they are in the process of devising a plan that will allow them to retake control of the ship. Pym is in the process of describing to the reader how unusual it is for a guard to be stationed on deck during a storm, which he sees as evidence of the first mate's suspicious manner, which means any attempt to overthrow him will be a difficult undertaking. At this crucial stage of their planning, Pym decides to give his readers another lesson in seamanship, launching into a description of exactly what is meant by the phrase "lying-to." This topic of digression is chosen intentionally, as the language used here by Pym is plainly meant as a pun, reflecting the "lie" he has told us earlier in the introduction. Pym excuses this digression, claiming it is necessary because, "As I address myself principally, if not altogether, to persons who have never been to sea, it may be as well to state the exact condition of a vessel under such circumstances" (793). This statement makes Pym's explanations perfectly reasonable and not the least bit perverse, as he is only trying to further the knowledge and understanding of his reader. The truth is quickly seen to be the opposite.

In the midst of this digression, Pym "explains" to his audience of landlubbers, exactly how ships are made to lay-to, telling them,

Large square-rigged vessels have sails for the express purpose, called storm stay-sails. But the jib is occasionally employed by itself,—sometimes the jib and foresail, or a double-reefed foresail, and not
unfrequently [sic] the after-sails, are made use of. Foretopsails are very often found to answer the purpose better than any other species of sail. (793)

Pym cannot seriously expect an audience that has never been to sea to understand what he is describing here. Pym is doing nothing here to educate his readers. He is seeking only to annoy and frustrate his readers, who are at this point far less concerned with the position of the ship than they are the impending fight for control of the ship.

Pym ends his lesson in nautical maneuvering by off-handedly remarking that he will now "return from this digression" (794). He picks up right where he left off, with the discussion of how to overcome the guard that has been posted by the first mate. Pym never meant to instruct his reader. He has been seized by the perverse, and has given in to the urge to torment his readers without even realizing what he has done. He has no more understanding of why he has tormented his listeners with this passage than he does of why he so willingly followed Augustus onto his boat that cold October night. He could very well reprise his comment from earlier in his narrative as he agrees to follow Augustus on that wild venture, and here say, "I can hardly tell what possessed me, but [ . . . ] I felt a thrill of the greatest excitement and pleasure, and thought [my] mad idea one of the most delightful and most reasonable things in the world." Pym has no more control over his actions at this point of the book than he has shown in the previous examples. Furthermore, he has no more knowledge of what is controlling them. This lack of understanding follows him
onward through his adventures and is displayed with Pym’s final act of perversity, the fall from the precipice.

With his final act of perversity, Pym provides another scene that will later be recounted by the narrator of “Imp,” but more importantly, he shows his first (and last) struggle with himself as he faces the perverse action head-on. Previously, Pym has seen his behavior as inexplicable or dangerous only with the benefit of hindsight, if at all. Standing on the precipice on an island inhabited by cannibals, Pym is forced to recognize that he is indeed being controlled by something that is frighteningly real and a part of him. He cannot, as he has done earlier, blame his thoughts or actions on the fact that he possesses a certain air of melancholy (757) or that he is acting out of a desire to somehow benefit someone else (793).

Pym’s fall from the precipice and perhaps more importantly, the description he provides of his mental state before the fall, leave Poe, the observer, with a clear-cut demonstration of the perverse at work in an individual. There is no rational explanation for the thoughts in Pym’s head in the moments before he releases his grip on the ledge, nor does Pym attempt to offer one. Instead, he provides for his readers, and for Poe, a clear picture of the process of the perverse at work in someone’s mind. Pym, of course, does not identify this action as being perverse, but his word choice is interesting when he tells his readers that, “my whole soul was pervaded with a longing to fall; a desire, a yearning, a passion utterly uncontrollable” (875). This description of an uncontrollable passion mirrors the definitions later given by the narrators of both “The Black Cat” and “Imp.”
Before falling, Pym describes what is going through his head. This description could be used by any of the narrators in this series, with the exception of Montresor (for reasons that will be explained later in this thesis) to explain how it is that they come to act as they do. Pym first describes his struggle "not to think," as he seems to know what will be told to us in "Imp," that is, "To indulge, for a moment, in any attempt at thought, is to be inevitably lost" (282). Pym cannot stop the visions from flowing in front of his mind's eye, however, and the process continues. He actually pictures his fall, imagining what it will be like. Finally, he gives in to the urge to look down, telling us, "I could not, I would not, confine my glances to the cliff; and, with a wild, indefinable emotion, half of horror, half of a relieved oppression, I threw my vision far down into the abyss" (875). The instant he does so, he becomes filled with the desire to let go, to allow himself to fall, and he is unable to offer even the least amount of resistance. He releases his grip on the cliff and falls, only to be saved by the quick thinking and remarkable climbing ability of Dirk Peters.

Pym has now offered his readers numerous examples of perverse actions and Poe has witnessed them all, carefully noting the actions themselves, and, with the fall, some of the thought process behind the actions. The first experiment in the series is now complete. Poe has not been able to satisfactorily answer the question that is driving him, as the reason for the actions has not yet been defined and explained. Poe has seen enough, however, to realize that there is something at work in Pym, and that whatever it is, it is no doubt at work in other individuals as well. While it is true that several years go by between this experiment and the next, it seems fair to say that the
question is never far from Poe’s mind, and he is certainly not finished with his search for an answer. With his next experiment, “The Tell Tale Heart,” Poe will again witness the actions of a man consumed by the perverse without understanding what it is that is causing him to act as he does. Excuses like those offered by Pym will again be presented, but an examination of the evidence will be enough for Poe to continue his search and eventually come to the realization of what is truly at work.
Chapter Four: "The Tell Tale Heart"

"The Tell Tale Heart" was originally published in *The Pioneer* in January 1843. Given the fact that five years passed since the publication of *Pym*, it seems prudent to demonstrate that the question of what motivates human actions, particularly those that hurt oneself or those one loves, is still near the forefront of Poe's thinking. In fact, the problem appears to have perhaps increased in intensity, as the remaining four works in the series are written in the space of less than four full years. Poe struggled with alcohol, and he may have feared what this could cause him to do or say, especially as it affected his wife, Virginia. As J.R. Hammond phrases it, "Poe was expressing [...] his fear that his fits of temper might hurt those he cared most for in the world [...] Sober, he knew that he was courteous and refined at all times; he also knew that when in an alcoholic rage rationality deserted him" (82).

Kenneth Silverman, in his biography of Poe, quotes from several of Poe's letters in which he refers to his drinking. Poe claims that he drank as a result of Virginia's illness and the terrible struggle it put him through as he endured cycles of hope and despair based on her physical condition. As Silverman puts it,

The strain toppled him. "I became insane [...] with long intervals of horrible sanity." It was during these fits, and to pacify them lest they destroy his mind, that he drank, Poe said "God only knows how often or how much." [...] he drank because crazed by Virginia's struggle, "the horrible never-ending oscillation between hope & despair which I could not longer have endured without the total loss of reason." (334)
It is with these factors in his mind that Poe returns to exploration of his theory of perversity, seeking to provide himself with answers more satisfactory than those he gained from his observations of the behavior of Pym.

As it has been shown that reading Poe’s tales as purely autobiographical is erroneous, some explanation for the connection between Poe’s life and his works is in order. I mention the connection not to show that Poe is speaking through his narrators but only to support the claim that it seems likely that Poe is still, even five years after the publication of the first tale in the series, seeking answers to what motivates the harmful actions of humanity. I do not believe that Poe is using his tales or his narrators to confess to any action he has committed, but rather, he is continuing his search for a satisfactory answer to what is clearly (given his statements quoted above) a very real question.

As Poe states in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” “The analyst throws himself into the spirit of his opponent, identifies himself therewith [. . .]” (142). In the case of “The Tell Tale Heart,” Poe (as analyst) faces the narrator as an opponent in the spirit of perversity. While the term perverseness is not used in this tale, the idea, or spirit, certainly is. The narrator kills an old man for no legitimate reason whatsoever, and then confesses to the crime, an action that hurts no one but himself and is indeed the more mysterious action of the two. Examining the actions as they were committed reveals to the reader, and to Poe, that the actual motivation is neither insanity nor a nameless disease, but perversity.
Poe begins his observations at the same point the readers do—after the fact. The crime has been committed, the confession made. The accused is now recounting the events to an unnamed listener. He may be speaking to a lawyer, a judge, a psychiatrist, or to a friend. Knowing that Poe is seeking answers from this narrator, it does not seem too far-fetched to claim that the listener is none other than Poe himself, who simply records the ranting of the narrator word for word. Certainly this supposition seems to fit throughout the series of tales, including even Pym. Pym himself tells us that Poe writes only the first portion of his narrative, and even then it is made up “from facts afforded by myself” (748). The narrators tell three of the other four tales to an unnamed listener; only “The Black Cat” is written, rather than spoken, by the narrator. It appears plausible then, that Poe is functioning as the unnamed listener in the three stories. It is almost as if Poe has asked, just before putting pen to paper, “Why did you murder an innocent old man and then confess to it? Are you mad?”

In an interesting twist that has been overlooked, the narrator is not the only person to be at a loss for an explanation of the events in the story. The narrator repeatedly makes reference to the fact that his unnamed listener thinks he is mad and takes great pains to persuade the listener otherwise. Some critics see these repeated denials as proof that the narrator is indeed mad (Hammond 82). These denials, coupled with the actions of the narrator in the presence of the police at the conclusion of the story, however, reinforce the notion that Poe is exploring the idea of perversity and its effects on a person. At the time he records the story, Poe has little more
insight into perversity than the narrator. He asks the question of the narrator not because he actually supposes him to be mad but because he is truly seeking an answer to the question of why the narrator acted as he did.

The narrator begins telling Poe of the murder, starting with his actions leading up to the actual crime itself.

It is impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain, but once conceived, it haunted me day and night. Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire. I think it was his eye! yes, it was this! One of his eyes resembled that of a vulture—a pale blue eye, with a film over it. Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold; and so by degrees—very gradually—I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever. (303, emphasis added)

To any rational line of thinking, the narrator has no motive for killing the man. Even his flimsy excuse of the "Evil Eye" is clearly made up as an afterthought, created during his retelling in order to ascribe what, to the narrator, is a logical reason for murder. The truth is, there was no logical or rational reason for the murder. It was an act of perversity. In this case, the narrator is completely unable to explain his actions because he has neither the words (perverseness is not used in the story) nor the understanding of what he has just done. Instead, the narrator cleverly disguises his actions, making himself sound insane. While he does not claim or imply that insanity
defends his actions, his speech and manner of acting insane certainly go a long way in explaining them.

As the second story of these five dealing with perversity, "The Tell Tale Heart" shows Poe exploring the issue, but without any concrete ideas as to what it is he is dealing with. He is simply aware that he has been experiencing feelings within himself that go against any logical standard of moral behavior, and he is attempting to account for them. When the narrator protests that he is indeed sane, he is telling the truth. What has been overlooked for too long is the difference between that which is insane and that which is simply irrational. An insane action is one that is deranged or abnormal, whereas an irrational act is one that cannot be easily explained. Looking at the narrator of this tale removed from any connection with other stories or narrators of the same type may well lead one to determine that he is insane, as his actions seem abnormal and deranged. Given Poe's analytical prowess, and looking at this narrator as a part of an experimental group, we begin to see that his actions are merely irrational. A closer look at the actions of the narrator as described in the story will reveal that he is not acting insanely (abnormally or deranged), but irrationally, in a spirit of perversity.

The first events described by the narrator are the nightly visits to the old man's room. Every night at midnight the narrator cautiously opens the door of the old man's room and looks in at him while he sleeps, taking as much as an hour to place his head inside the door. Not once during this week does he kill him, however. His reason for this, as he tells his listener after the fact, was because the old man was
asleep and he could not therefore see the vulture eye. As has been explained, this is not truly his motive, so there must be found a true reason for his lack of action during that week. The true reason that he did not kill the man was not due to the fact that the old man was asleep during that time but rather because the old man was awake on the eighth night. When the old man groans out loud, the narrator describes his reaction, which is clearly perverse but not insane: “I knew what the old man felt, and pitied him, although I chuckled at heart” (304). An insane murderer would have no pity for his intended victim, but a killer acting in the spirit of perversity, doing what he knows he should not, would feel pity yet be unable to stop himself precisely because of the perversity at work in his mind. Like Pym, this narrator has surrendered control of his actions and is no longer in command of his reason. Instead, he is a victim of his imp of the perverse. Had the old man groaned aloud on any of the previous seven nights, the murder would no doubt have taken place on that night, without any further waiting.

The next piece of evidence pointing to the narrator’s perversity rather than insanity is his claim to hear the old man’s heart. In speaking of the effect of the old man’s heartbeat, the narrator says, “I have told you that I am nervous: so I am. And now at that dead hour of the night, amid the dreadful silence of that old house, so strange a noise of this excited me to uncontrollable terror” (305 emphasis added). The noise he hears is clearly not that of the old man’s heart, but his own, as it beats with “uncontrollable terror” at the thought of what he is about to do. After
suffocating the old man, he hears the heart for several minutes. This, too, is his own, as he slowly relaxes after his exertions, both physical and mental.

The third major action described by the narrator is his disposal of the body, which he dismembers, then hides in the floorboards, while using a tub to catch the blood, leaving no trace. This action seems at first glance to be the work of an insane individual, but once again, we must look to our definitions. Simply because there is no rational or logical explanation does not mean that the deed is insane. In fact, as the narrator protests, he shows remarkable clarity of thinking. A deranged killer may indeed dismember a corpse, and perhaps even hide it in the floorboards, but it is doubtful that an insane mind would function well enough to replace the boards so cleverly that “no human eye [. . .] could have detected anything wrong” (305). In addition, he carefully catches all of the blood, leaving no stain, placing it in a tub and disposing of it. Clearly the narrator acts in a way that defies a rational explanation, but his manner of covering his crime is no more insane than the crime itself—it is perversity at work, not insanity.

It is with the fourth major event of the story that Poe’s experiment is plainly seen, and with which this story is connected to others in this series most explicitly: the arrival of the police and, more importantly, the subsequent confession. It will be seen that while the crime certainly is necessary for Poe to examine perversity, he is much more interested in how perversity works after the act is complete. The confessions of his narrators are as perverse, if not more so, than the crimes themselves.
Upon the arrival of the police, the narrator goes to answer the door “with a light heart,—for what had I now to fear?” (305). It is with this question and its ensuing repetition that we clearly see the formulation of Poe’s ideas regarding perversity, and Poe shows us what is perhaps the most brilliant aspect of that theory. The narrator asks himself twice what it is that he has to fear from the arrival of the police. Obviously, as the police have no suspicions, the answer is that he has nothing to fear—from the police. The reality is, however, that he has much to fear—from himself. It is at this point that Poe, as listener, and the readers of the tale begin to clearly recognize perversity at work. Obviously the narrator has been acting in response to an unnamed force that is driving his actions as he kills the old man and hides the evidence. (Poe will later see that force identified as perversity). The narrator has even gotten away with the crime, as evidenced by the attitude of the police. Poe could easily stop his experiment here, allowing the narrator to escape. What he does, however, is far more interesting.

Continuing to allow the narrator to function as an independent entity, Poe (as the unnamed listener) asks the question, “What did this force drive you to do next?” The narrator provides the answer, which is recorded in the story as the answer to his own question of what he has to fear. It is not guilt, it is not insanity, and it is certainly not the sound of a beating heart that forces the narrator to confess. It is his perversity. The spirit of perversity, manifesting itself in his “enthusiasm of [. . . ] confidence,” and “the wild audacity of [his] perfect triumph” (305) forces him to confess to the police simply because he should not! He fights the impulse as hard and as long as he
can, knowing that it will do him no good, but he is unable to resist this urge any more than he could resist the urge to kill the old man. Unlike Pym, whose struggle with the spirit of perversity takes place entirely in his head, this narrator physically wrestles his impulses, trying to suppress them.

The narrator tells his listener that a sound came to his ears, “a low, dull, quick sound—much such a sound as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton” (306). He is the only man in the room that can hear the sound, and he tries to convince the listener that this sound is the beating of the dead man’s heart. Obviously this cannot be. The sound, then, if it exists at all, must be that of his own heart, as his would be the only heartbeat audible to him. The narrator goes on to describe his actions as he attempts to drown out this sound by stomping on the floor, yelling, swearing, and scraping a chair across the floorboards. Clearly the narrator is convinced that the sound does exist, and he is equally sure that the police can hear it and are saying nothing as a way of mocking him. He is obviously misled. Like the excuse for killing the old man because of his eye, his attempt to explain what is causing the sound is something made up after the fact, in a vain attempt to at least in part rationally explain his behavior. He is aware that confessing to a crime for which he has absolutely no expectation of capture is outrageous, so he now feels compelled to ascribe to it some degree of logic. Since he has no idea what it is that he is struggling against in either the murder or the confession, all of his excuses are concocted for the same purpose—to try to explain his actions. If Poe as an observer and we as readers do not believe his reason for killing the man, how can we believe his reason for confessing? Nor
can we be fooled into thinking that this sound that he claims to hear is simply a manifestation of a guilty conscience. That does nothing more than assign a rational explanation to the actions, which is exactly what the killer wants and what Poe is seeking to avoid.

Having witnessed Pym, and now this man, Poe has begun to understand that the actions have no logical explanation. He recognizes that there is something inside of these men that has acted in a way that causes them to harm themselves. It is not an outside influence, nor is it a mental defect of some sort, as both men are clearly sane. He is still seeking an answer, however, and with his next experiment turns to the illogical to find it.
Chapter Five: "The Black Cat"

The narrator of "The Black Cat" functions as Poe’s guinea pig by providing Poe with some answers to his search for a workable theory to explain perverseness. The structure of Poe’s experiment in "The Black Cat" is similar to that in "The Tell Tale Heart," but the parameters are expanded by the narrator, who goes further in his actions, committing several more perverse deeds than the two committed in "The Tell Tale Heart" and withholding his confession for a longer period of time. As mentioned earlier, this tale is not told to an unnamed listener but rather penned by the narrator, much like the latter portion of *Pym*. If we maintain the notion that Poe is to be kept separate from his narrators, as is suggested above by Gargano, we can then see that Poe is again functioning here as an observer, seeking answers to the questions that have been plaguing him. As a result of this experiment, Poe will gain some answers, but these answers will lead to further questions that will need to be answered.

Several significant similarities between "The Tell Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat" serve to highlight the idea that Poe is searching for answers to some troubling questions. These similarities have been noticed and commented on by critics and scholars. Christopher Benfey summarizes these similarities nicely in an essay entitled "Poe and the Unreadable: ‘The Black Cat and ‘The Tell Tale Heart.’" Benfey states,

"The Black Cat” was published later the same year, 1843, as “The Tell Tale Heart.” It resembles the earlier story in several obvious ways, as
though Poe were digging deeper in a familiar vein. It too purports to be a killer’s confession, and the murder victim is again a member of the killer’s household. This killer is also eager to assure us of his sanity: “Yet mad am I not – and very surely do I not dream.” In both stories, furthermore, the police seem almost reluctant to pursue their investigations. The killers must insist on their guilt, even offer proof of it. In each case the discovery of the concealed body is the result of the killer’s own obsessive need to reveal its hiding place. (35, emphasis added)

For the first time, Poe receives a name and some explanation as to the workings of the thoughts and actions that he finds troubling. This is seen as an important discovery for Poe, and the narrator goes so far as to capitalize all of the letters of the word perverseness, highlighting its importance both to himself and the reader. He says,

And then came, as to my final and irrevocable overthrow, the spirit of PERVERSENESS. Of this spirit philosophy takes no account. Yet I am not more sure that my soul lives, than I am that perverseness is one of the primitive impulses of the human heart—one of the indivisible primary faculties, or sentiments, which give direction to the character of Man. [. . .] It was this unfathomable longing of the soul to vex itself—to offer violence to its own nature—to do wrong for the
wrong's sake only—that urged me to continue and finally to consummate the injury I had afflicted on the unoffending brute. (225)

Using this definition, it is clear that the narrator of "The Tell Tale Heart" is indeed sane. He is driven not by some psychological disorder but by an inner function innate to humanity, of which "philosophy takes no account" (225). Until this point for Poe, this spirit is both undefined and unexplained.

With the narrator's definition of perverseness coming before the description of the major acts of perversity, the reader (and Poe, as observer) is armed with an explanation for those events, an explanation that was noticeably lacking in "The Tell Tale Heart." With this tale, as the narrator describes how he kills first Pluto and then his wife, the reader knows why the narrator is doing it. Unfortunately for the narrator, while he is aware of the spirit of perversity functioning within himself, he is unable to recognize that this spirit is the sole cause of his actions. Instead, like the narrator in "The Tell Tale Heart," this narrator searches for a more logical, rational answer. In the first story, the answer was the old man's evil eye. In this story, the narrator attempts to blame his actions on alcohol and the torments put upon him by the second cat.

The first act that the narrator sees as perverse is the hanging of Pluto. In relating the scene to the reader, the narrator describes the action as being done in the spirit of perversity, which he has defined as the "unfathomable longing of the soul to vex itself—to offer violence to its own nature—to do wrong for the wrong's sake only" (225). This definition provides answers to a host of questions stemming from
the earlier tales. Now it appears plain why Pym went on the boat with Augustus, ran away to sea, digressed in the course of his narrative, and wanted to fall from the precipice. Suddenly it becomes clear why the narrator of “The Tell Tale Heart” committed a murder for no real reason and then confessed to it when he had gotten away with it. Poe’s persistence has paid off, but now a more troubling question must be answered—can this impulse be controlled? Does it always destroy those who succumb to it? Poe continues to observe this narrator, waiting to see if he can prevent a fate that will destroy him.

The narrator recognizes that perversity exists, is at work in his life, and is driving his actions. Like so many others who have witnessed actions similar to his, he fails to understand them and seeks to explain them rationally. He states the true reason for his actions, then rejects it only a short time later. It is this rejection of the truth that leads to his destruction, as he is unable to control the perverse in his life, since he has rejected the premise that it is what is causing him to act as he does at the end of the story. Richard Frushell makes the claim that it is pride that leads to the destruction of this narrator (44). I disagree with this assertion. It is not pride that destroys the narrator. In fact, the narrator himself identifies exactly what it is that destroys him, then turns his back on it and forgets. In defining perversity, the narrator says that the spirit of perverseness came “to my final and irrevocable overthrow” (224). The narrator never mentions pride, nor does he act in a way that demonstrates pride. The narrator’s statement requires examination. Exactly what does lead to his final overthrow? An examination of his actions reveals that he is right when he
makes the statement, but he fails to realize it. It is indeed perversity that destroys him, not pride. There are four major deeds in this tale that can be seen as coming at the prompting of the spirit of the perverse: the gouging out of Pluto’s eye, the hanging of Pluto, the murder of the narrator’s wife, and the actions leading to the revelation of the murder.

The narrator fails to recognize that the perverse is at work in him early in the story. He claims that the gouging out of Pluto’s eye is done as a result of alcohol. He returns home “much intoxicated” and claims that his malevolence is “gin-nurtured” (224). In between these statements, though, is a significant phrase. The narrator tells us that, “I knew myself no longer. My original soul seemed, at once, to take its flight from my body, and a more than fiendish malevolence, [. . . ] filled every fibre of my frame” (224, emphasis added). This description very nearly mirrors Pym, when he describes his feelings at Augustus’ plan to go on a sort of joy ride at sea. Pym tells us, “I can hardly tell what possessed me [. . . ] I felt a thrill of the greatest excitement and pleasure” (751). Both men are now completely in the grip of the spirit of the perverse, although neither of them recognizes it. Pym never does, but this narrator becomes aware of the fact with his next action.

The narrator’s next action, hanging Pluto, is the one and only action that he himself recognizes as stemming from the perverse. It is with this action that he gives his readers the aforementioned definition and demonstrates how he hanged Pluto, “with the tears streaming from my eyes, and the bitterest remorse at my heart” (225). Clearly he recognizes what he is doing is wrong, but is no more able to stop himself
than either Pym or the killer in "The Tell Tale Heart." Much has been made of the narrator's statement that killing Pluto is "a deadly sin that would so jeopardize my immortal soul as to place it—if such a thing were possible—even beyond the reach of the infinite mercy of the Most Merciful and Most Terrible God" (225). James Gargano says of this claim that it is "embarrassing even to the most shameless animal lover; it is an outrageous excess that the narrator should, for the hanging of a cat, condemn himself" ("Perverseness" 173). The point that the narrator is making, and that Gargano and others have missed, is not that the narrator feels condemned for killing the cat. He feels condemned for having given in to the spirit of perversity when he is able to see it and recognize the fact that it is controlling his actions. He makes no attempt to fight it as Pym and the narrator of "The Tell Tale Heart" did. He merely gives in and weeps because of his weakness.

The third action is the killing of his wife. The narrator attempts to blame this murder on the cat, saying that it was the cat he was originally attempting to kill, and he only kills his wife because she interferes. Once again, however, the narrator's own words trip him up. In describing the murder, he says he was "Goaded by the interference into a rage more than demoniacal" (228, emphasis added). This rage is again the spirit of the perverse, just as it was when he took the eye of Pluto. Once again the narrator fails to see it at work. Given the fact that the spirit was at work in his life, it was only a matter of time until his violent deeds escalated to this point. John Cleman makes mention of this when he quotes Charles Brigham, who makes the assertion that long periods of time between evil deeds is not enough to ensure that
they have ended, as "A time would still come when there would be laid to his [a killer's] charge another —although hardly a more horrible—deed of sudden violence and bloodshed" (Quoted in Cleman 633). The claim here is that the spirit of the perverse cannot be controlled; the very dilemma Poe is now seeking to solve. This claim seems to be confirmed by the final act of perversity in the story.

Having killed his wife and disposed of the body, the narrator now finds himself feeling relaxed and secure for several days. As in "The Tell Tale Heart," however, the spirit of the perverse is not yet through with him. There is one more act to be committed, an act that does lead directly to his "final and irrevocable overthrow" (225). He must now somehow confess to his crime. As previously stated, the narrator claims that the spirit of perverseness is what ultimately destroys him. It becomes clear then, that his "confession" is an act of perversity, just as the confession in "The Tell Tale Heart" is.

The narrator says he is calm, innocent, and without embarrassment (229). As the police prepare to leave, he describes what is the key to his confession, but does so almost in passing, with no indication that he recognizes the importance of what he is saying. "The glee at my heart was too strong to be restrained. I burned to say if but one word, by way of triumph [. . . ] (229, emphasis added). The same perversity that has driven him to commit murder is now driving him to confess it, even though he realizes that he should not. He goes on to say, "in the rabid desire to say something easily, I scarcely knew what I uttered at all [. . . ] and here, through the mere frenzy of bravado, I rapped heavily upon that very portion of the brickwork behind which stood
the corpse of the wife of my bosom” (230). He is no longer in control of his actions. Once again the spirit of the pervers has taken over and the narrator is helpless to stop himself. He has no idea what he is saying or why he is saying it, let alone what is causing him to speak. Clearly, the spirit of perversity is not through with him yet. He does not realize this, however, as he is too shocked to even think straight, claiming it is folly to try to describe his thoughts to the reader at this point. He has once again failed to control the perversity at work in him and it is this failure, and the resulting actions that have condemned him.

What is most significant about this narrator’s failures is that while he misses the point, Poe records the tale in such a way that his readers do not. It is now clear what has happened to this narrator, as well as the previous two. Poe, as author, has now revealed to his readers the spirit of the perverse in action within three men. Two of these men have no idea what causes them to act as they do. The third realizes what is going on and is even able to provide a name for the mysterious motivation. Poe’s original question has been answered, as he now has demonstrated why people behave in ways that are detrimental to their own well-being, but now a fresh question, equally as important has surfaced. Poe now sets out to demonstrate whether or not this newly discovered and frightening urge can ever be controlled. This question drives him to the tale told by the narrator of “Imp,” and the result there is the same as with “The Black Cat” — that is, it can be recognized, but not completely controlled.

Additionally, Poe is still seeking clarification of the term given by the narrator of “The Black Cat.” This narrator has briefly defined perversity, but in turning so
quickly from it he leaves Poe and his readers with unanswered questions. These questions are dealt with by the narrator of the next tale, "The Imp of the Perverse."
Chapter Six: "The Imp of the Perverse"

Poe's July, 1845 story "The Imp of the Perverse" contains the key to Poe's investigations thus far. It is with this story that Poe is at last presented with solid definitions. One can examine the claims made in this story, then look back to the earlier stories and trace the development of the interconnected line of thinking as Poe progresses through the first three experiments. In this story, perversity is clearly defined for Poe and he is shown several examples of it at work. Specifically, the narrator provides three examples of what can be called "everyday perversity," or instances of the perverse at work in ways that any reader can identify with, as they do not involve extraordinary acts such as murder or self-destroying acts of confession. Each of the examples given in this tale is seen as being practiced in the previous stories.

"The Imp of the Perverse," published in 1845, is the point at which a theory of perversity is finally made plain for Poe. In fact, the very form of the story itself indicates that much more is at work here than simple entertainment. The narrator is, in fact, attempting to educate his listener (and Poe his readers) by explaining to him what he has discovered. As David Ketterer puts it, "In some ways, 'The Imp of the Perverse' [. . . ] is more an exercise in definition than a tale" (108). Unlike the three stories in this series previously observed by Poe, there are no supernatural or unbelievable events, no ranting narrator, and no questionable sanity. In fact, the first two-thirds of the tale read more like an essay than a story. While it is tempting to think that Poe is speaking through most of this story, it is important to remember that
he is using the narrator as his guinea pig, testing the theory he has worked out for himself based on the first three experiments. This story functions as a compendium of his research thus far. He allows the narrator to logically explain and defend his theory for the first two-thirds of the story, then allows the narrator to function as his own a posteriori evidence.

The idea of each narrator being independent of Poe has previously been mentioned as a significant assumption of this thesis, so it seems appropriate to discuss it further at this point, before delving more deeply into a specific reading of this tale. As detailed in the earlier section on “The Tell Tale Heart,” it seems that Poe functions here, with “Imp,” as the listener and merely records what he is told by the narrator for his readers. In this way, Poe conducts this experiment, observing the narrator’s behaviors as he listens to his tale and records it for his own meditation as well as that of his audience. This idea reinforces some of the comments made by Gargano in “The Question of Poe’s Narrators” regarding the separation of Poe and his narrators.

In “Imp,” Poe is listening to the narrator confess (for the second time) to a murder he has committed. Rather than simply delving into the details of the murder and the first confession, the narrator takes a fair amount of time to present his listener with some facts that he deems important. These facts become especially significant to Poe, as they finally provide him with the answer he has been seeking. It is through the explanations of this narrator that Poe receives details further refining what is at work in the minds of people, driving their seemingly inexplicable behaviors.
The narrator describes perversity as what man is “always occasionally doing,” and that which has been overlooked, through “pure arrogance of reason” (280). He then explains why it has been overlooked, saying, “we saw no need of the impulse [. . . ] we could not have understood in what manner it might be made to further the objects of humanity, either temporal or eternal” (280). This is the very truth that many Poe critics fail to see, as described above in Gargano’s “Perverseness” and Cleman, when they choose to explain away the actions of certain Poe narrators by assigning them comfortable labels such as insanity. This is because, as the narrator states, “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” (280). Perversity itself seems to serve no legitimate purpose and is perhaps disturbing but real nonetheless.

The narrator provides a solid definition of what perversity is and how it functions, “as an innate and primitive principle of human action [. . . ] through [whose] promptings we act, for the reason that we should not” (280). As he puts it, perversity is defined as an “[. . . ] overwhelming tendency to do wrong for the wrong’s sake [. . . ] a radical, a primitive impulse—elementary” (281). The narrator here is repeating almost verbatim the words of the narrator of “The Black Cat,” who briefly defines perversity as he hangs Pluto, as previously mentioned in this thesis. Clearly this closeness of language serves to demonstrate the relationship of the stories in the series, as the simple definitions given to explain actions in one story are refined
and strengthened in another, just as the findings of one scientific experiment are
further observed and refined in additional tests.

This definition of perversity provides the perfect explanation for the actions
of the narrators in all of the stories in this series. All of them undergo actions that are
clearly harmful to them, and all of these actions are committed with absolutely no
outside influences or pressures. With this definition and the subsequent explanations
and examples provided by the narrator of “Imp,” Poe is now able to fully recognize
and understand the answer to the question that has been tormenting him. With each
element given by the narrator, Poe and his readers are able to look back to the first
three experiments in this series and recognize how perversity has been at work
already, although it has gone largely unrecognized by the subjects of those trials.

With his first example of perverseness as seen in familiar situations (as
opposed to the extraordinary circumstances of the previous stories) the narrator
describes a speaker having the burning desire to “tantalize a listener by
circumlocution” (281). This circumlocution is elaborated upon and this elaboration
shows us that what the narrator is referring to may be more commonly recognized as
digression in speaking. He says,

The speaker is aware that he displeases; he has every intention to
please, he is usually curt, precise, and clear, the most laconic and
luminous language is struggling for utterance upon his tongue, it is
only with difficulty that he restrain himself from giving it flow; he
dreads and deprecates the anger of him who he addresses; yet, the
thought strikes him, that by certain involutions and parenthesis this anger might be engendered. 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. (281)

Clearly Poe and his readers, hearing these words coming from this narrator’s mouth, will be compelled to hearken back to the earlier experiments that have been conducted. It becomes obvious at once to Poe and his readers that they have already observed this very action (digression). It seems a trivial example, perhaps even too inconsequential to be considered perverse at all. However, when one looks back at the progression of the experiments Poe is conducting, it must be quickly remembered that the first experiment, *Pym*, is full of instances in which Pym digresses, much to the frustration of the reader, and such digressions are noted by Pym as superfluous and even apologized for, as he recognizes the reaction that his reader will undoubtedly undergo. As correctly recognized by the narrator of “Imp,” however, Pym makes no attempt to control his urges to digress, but rather launches into digression at some of the most inopportune moments of his narrative, at the height of the action. It is as if Pym is giving in to an impulse that he knows is wrong, but cannot fight, just as described by the narrator of “Imp.” Clearly this serves to demonstrate that Poe is indeed using these stories as a series, resulting in a progression of thought that is refined with each experiment.
The second example of common acts of perversity given by the narrator in "Imp" is the tendency of nearly everyone to procrastinate the completion of a task to the point at which it becomes impossible to successfully complete it. This is done, says the narrator, for no reason, "except that we feel *perverse*, using the word with no comprehension of the principle" (282). This description mirrors exactly the mental state of the first three narrators. The protagonist of "The Black Cat," especially, perfectly fits this description, when he labels some of his actions as stemming from perversity, without fully understanding what it is that he means. Nor does he comprehend the full extent of the principle, as he fails to see that it is what drives him to confess. While none of the narrators put off any significant actions, their reactions to their acts of perversity mirror exactly the reactions laid out by the narrator in this section of "Imp." Both the two murdering narrators and Pym "tremble with the violence of the conflict within [them]—of the definite with the indefinite—of the substance with the shadow" (282). All of them try to resist succumbing to the perverse urges they are facing, just as one struggles—often without success—to resist the urge to procrastinate.

In describing a final example, the narrator describes the feeling one gets when looking over the edge of a precipice, of wanting to jump off, plunging to death.

We stand upon the brink of a precipice. We peer into the abyss—we grow sick and dizzy. [...] Unaccountably we remain. [...] there grows into palpability, a shape [...] a thought, although a fearful one, and one which chills the very marrow of our bones with the fierceness
of the delight of its horror. It is merely the idea of what would be our sensations during the sweeping precipitancy of a fall from such a height. And this fall [. . .] for the very reason that it involves that one most ghastly and loathsome of all the most ghastly and loathsome images of death and suffering which have ever presented themselves to our imagination [. . . ] do we now the most vividly desire it. [. . .] To indulge, for a moment, in any attempt at thought, is to be inevitably lost; for reflection but urges us to forbear, and therefore it is, I say, that we cannot. If there be no friendly arm to check us, [. . .] we plunge, and are destroyed. (282-3)

As with the first example, Poe and his readers are here again made to look back at his prior experiments with narrators for evidence of this example of perversity. In Pym, for instance, we witness a scene exactly as described above, in which Pym literally falls from a great height into an abyss (875). Additionally, the narrator of “The Black Cat” says, as he is in the process of undertaking the action that will lead to his demise, “The glee at my heart was too strong to be restrained. I burned to say if but one word, by way of triumph, and to render doubly sure their [the police] assurance of my guiltlessness” (229). Clearly, since there is no “friendly arm” there to stop the narrator, he falls, on a figurative level, into the abyss and is destroyed.

In each example, the narrator of “Imp” describes how the “impulse increases to a wish, the wish to a desire, the desire to an uncontrollable longing, and the longing [. . .] is indulged” (281-82). This progression of thought is again seen in each of the
previous stories. In Rym’s account of his potentially fatal fall, he relates to the reader his thought process as he first imagines falling, then struggles “not to think,” and finally surrenders to the urge, the “longing to fall; a desire, a yearning, a passion utterly uncontrollable” (875). In describing his prelude to murder in “The Tell Tale Heart,” the narrator says he made up his mind to kill the old man “by degrees—very gradually” (303); the narrator of “The Black Cat” on several occasions makes reference to the passage of time and the slow degrees of change he undergoes (225-28). Each of these narrators experience what only the narrator of “Imp” is able to put into words that both he and the reader can fully understand. They all struggle to control their uncontrollable longings, and all three fail to do so and are destroyed.

After detailing these examples of everyday perversity, making the concept clear to the reader, the narrator shifts gears and begins to describe his own encounter with, as he calls it, the “Imp” of perversity. At this point, the story shares far more with “The Black Cat” and “The Tell Tale Heart” than with Pym, which is not surprising, given the fact that all three are short stories and their publications followed one another over a much shorter time period than that which elapsed between Pym and “The Tell Tale Heart.” The parallels between the three stories more clearly demonstrate the progression of Poe’s thinking, although, as has already been demonstrated, it is clear that Poe’s discoveries in Pym certainly play a role.

We suddenly learn that the narrator of “Imp” has committed a murder and, like the previous murderers, has confessed to his crime. He planned the murder meticulously, finally accomplishing the feat by poisoning a candle whose fumes
killed his victim with absolutely no trace, leaving him free and clear of any connection to the murder (which was actually ruled a death by natural causes). While the murder in this story differs from the first two in that it seems to have been more deliberately planned, and this narrator apparently had a genuine motive (he inherited the estate of the deceased), it is the confession more than the murder that truly reflects perversity. On this point, the story parallels the earlier murders almost exactly. All of them have escaped detection by anyone for the murders and have no expectation of being caught. Only their own confessions, driven by perversity, can bring about their downfall. One major difference separates this story from the first two tales of murder: this narrator knows that the spirit (or imp) of perversity has driven his actions. Unlike the narrators of Poe's earlier experiments, the narrator of "Imp" is able to understand and accept this fact. As he states, "I am safe—I am safe—yes—if I be not fool enough to make open confession" (284). As soon as he makes this statement, the narrator knows that he is lost because he recognizes that his own imp is affecting him. The first two murderers had either a lack of understanding or an incomplete understanding, and neither of them demonstrated acceptance. Instead, they offered other, more rational explanations of their behaviors. This lack of understanding is shown through the question of the killer in "The Tell Tale Heart," who asks himself not once but twice, "what had I now to fear?" Clearly he has himself to fear but cannot see it. This knowledge that the third killer has further demonstrates that Poe, as experimenter, is witnessing a sort of culmination of his observations thus far. The answers that were either not given or were incomplete in
the first two tales of murder and confession are now being provided and fully explained by this narrator. Poe continues to observe, as if he is curious to see if the narrator can completely control the imp, or if he will allow it to defeat him as it has the previous narrators. He allows the narrator to continue to set his own course of action and records the events following the murder, culminating in the actual confession.

Mirroring almost exactly the narrators of the previous murders, this narrator describes how, after the murder,

all went well with me for years [. . .] I had left no shadow of a clew \[sic\] by which it would be possible to convict, or even to suspect, me of the crime. It is inconceivable how rich a sentiment of satisfaction arose in my bosom as I reflected upon my absolute security. [. . .] I was accustomed to revel in this sentiment. It afforded me more real delight than all the mere worldly advantages accruing from my sin.

(283)

Like the previous narrators, he has escaped punishment for his crime. In this case, this freedom lasts several years, as opposed to the hours or days enjoyed by the earlier killers. Eventually, however, this narrator falls victim to the same fault that destroyed the first two. By now Poe knows what the outcome will be, having witnessed it twice already. Predictably, the narrator confesses of his crime, this time in the middle of a crowded street, speaking “as if in dread of interruption before concluding the brief but pregnant sentences that consigned me to the hangman and to
hell" (284). While this confession makes it appear as if this story ends exactly the same as the first two, there is a significant difference between this confession and the first two. This narrator knows what has driven him to confess. Recognizing it, however, is not enough.

Having seen the narrator of "The Tell Tale Heart" confess due to what appears to be guilt and the narrator of "The Black Cat" due to apparent arrogance, Poe patiently waits for this narrator to confess, but this time, Poe understands the true motivation behind the confession. The narrator describes how he always felt safe from detection, and he reassures himself of this fact by literally saying out loud, "I am safe" (284). As previously detailed, it is at this point that his fate is sealed, and he realizes right away that he will be unable to stop himself from confessing, admitting that,

I had had some experience in these fits of perversity [. . . ] and I remembered well that in no instance I had successfully resisted their attacks. 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. (284)

With his knowledge of perversity having been already explained, and his understanding of how perversity works within himself, as in all people, the narrator sees the inevitability of his future condemnation. Serving as the culmination of Poe's experiments thus far, his confession, like those of the first two murderers, is now
clearly seen as coming about as a direct result of perversity. Clearly recognizing the spirit of the perverse at work within oneself is not enough to control it, and Poe finds that his experimentation cannot be over. It is not enough for him merely to identify the force that drives the inexplicable actions of humanity. Poe now sets out to perform one final experiment, recorded in “Cask.”
Chapter Seven: “The Cask of Amontillado”

The final story in the series, “The Cask of Amontillado,” functions as a chance for Poe to see all sides of the spirit of perversity at work in an individual—in this case, two individuals. “Cask” serves to answer Poe’s new questions—his attempt to determine whether or not perverseness functions within everyone and if it can be controlled and perhaps even used to one’s advantage. Once again, the narrator is allowed to function independently, and Poe records the results. As with “The Tell Tale Heart” and “Imp,” this story is told to an unnamed listener by a narrator guilty of murder. Montresor describes this listener as one who “so well know[s] the nature of my soul” (274). This description seems to fit Poe nicely, as he is now at a point in his observations at which he is able to recognize exactly what it is that causes Montresor to act as he does. The obvious significant difference between this story and the three other short stories immediately preceding it in this series is that in this tale, the narrator goes unpunished (at least in the way each of the others was punished—jail or death) for his deed. This, then, is not an eleventh hour confession, nor is it an example of a misguided attempt to explain one’s actions. Montresor has learned the truth about how perversity works and is eager to show how it can be used and controlled. This idea of controlling perversity is significant for Poe, especially coming after what he has been able to observe and learn from the previous three narrators.

“The Cask of Amontillado” was published in the November, 1846 edition of Godey’s, and it was “the first tale he had published in a year, and only the second in
nearly two years of stalled effort, illness, and conflict" (Silverman 316). This tale, then, while it appears to be separated from the first three by time, is actually not that far removed. Poe is not writing very much, again due to his host of personal problems. He is still struggling with alcohol, financial difficulty, broken relationships, and the health of his wife, who dies only three months after the appearance of this story. As stated earlier, these facts do not indicate that Poe is writing autobiographically. Instead, it is again shown that Poe is continuing his quest for answers. Clearly the struggles facing Poe would still force the issue of perversity to be at the forefront of his thinking, especially how to deal with the mysterious forces within himself that he has now examined, identified, and explained. Having done so, he realizes that knowledge of the spirit of the perverse is not enough, as evidenced by the narrator of “The Imp of the Perverse.” One must not only have knowledge of perversity at work, but also, more importantly, one must be able to control it. Control for Poe does not mean resistance. One can, as Montresor shows, give in to perversity, control it and use it to serve a purpose without allowing it to destroy one’s life. Indeed, following the model laid out in “The Imp of the Perverse,” Montresor becomes a textbook case of a man not only afflicted with the spirit of perversity but also controlling it and using it to his advantage.

Of the two characters in the story, both exhibit behavior stemming from the spirit of the perverse. Fortunato functions much like Pym and the narrator of “The Tell Tale Heart.” Fortunato succumbs to the perverse by insisting that he be permitted to continue into the depths of the catacombs when it clearly against his best
interest, due to his health. In this way he mirrors Pym when he goes with Augustus for a frolic at sea and the narrator of "The Tell Tale Heart" when he is unable to resist his urges. Montresor, on the other hand, offers a new model for Poe to observe. He functions as though he too has seen the actions of the previous narrators and has learned from their experiences. A look at the perverse actions of each of these men reveals how Montresor is able to use his knowledge of the perverse to accomplish his goals, while at the same time Fortunato is shown as one that cannot recognize when he has lost control of his actions and has been seized by this same spirit.

Montresor is seen as using his knowledge of the perverse at the very outset of the tale. He finds Fortunato on the street and makes up a story about his recent purchase of a pipe of Amontillado. Fortunato reacts just as Montresor knows he will, by demanding to be taken to the vaults to verify the authenticity of the wine. At this, Montresor attempts to dissuade Fortunato, telling him, "I will not impose upon your good nature. I perceive you have an engagement. Luchesi—" (275). This is the second time he has mentioned the name of Luchesi, and it is done intentionally. He is skillfully luring Fortunato into the vaults, relying on the spirit of the perverse, here in conjunction with Fortunato's pride, to draw Fortunato into doing something he knows he should not. He further plays on these feelings by warning Fortunato that he should not go because he sees that Fortunato is afflicted with a cold and "the vaults are insufferably damp. The walls are encrusted with nitre" (275). The fact that Fortunato actually does have a cold and is affected by the dampness is evidenced a short time later when, in the vaults, he breaks into a fit of coughing that lasts several
minutes (276). Fortunato clearly should not be in this environment, but he refuses to turn back, being driven by his own spirit of the perverse. Not leaving anything to chance, Montresor encourages the perverse within Fortunato by again at this point referring to Luchesi, as if to taunt Fortunato. As expected, Fortunato rejects the idea of turning back and his fate is sealed. This taunting of Fortunato is continued after Montresor has secured him within the niche in the catacombs, saying, “pass your hand [. . . ] over the wall; you cannot help feeling the nitre. Indeed it is very damp. Once more let me implore you to return. No? Then I must positively leave you” (278). Fortunato is utterly helpless at this point, and there is no way he can return. Montresor has successfully manipulated him, preying on the side of Fortunato that Montresor knows will never permit him to return, no matter what the cost. Fortunato realizes he never should have set foot in the vaults, but Montresor’s constant pleas to return urge him onward as if Montresor were daring him to continue. Fortunato has become an unwilling victim of the spirit of perversity, just as Pym does when he agrees to go with Augustus on their frolic (751). Fortunato is like the man described in “Imp,” standing on the brink of a precipice unable to stop himself from plunging over the edge—“If there be no friendly arm to check us, [. . . ] we plunge, and are destroyed” (283). Clearly there is no one to “check” Fortunato as he walks closer and closer to his death, and he serves as Poe’s final model of a man unable to control his own perversity (or even recognize it), leading to his destruction. Montresor, on the other hand, has mastered this spirit
and successfully used it to accomplish his goal of killing Fortunato. Fortunato’s perversity is not all that Montresor uses, however. An examination of Montresor’s own actions shows us the cold-blooded murderer cleverly using and controlling his own perversity as well as that of others.

In establishing Montresor as perverse, it must be shown how his murder of Fortunato is irrational and how he kills Fortunato with the full knowledge that it is wrong. On the surface, this is a story of revenge, not perversity. Montresor himself attempts to make this claim in the opening paragraph, saying, “I vowed revenge” (274). This is not the true motive for the crime any more than the old man in “The Tell Tale Heart” was killed because of his “vulture eye.” Throughout the story we see that Montresor and Fortunato are indeed friends, and the vague references to “the thousand injuries” and “insult” that Montresor alleges to have suffered at the hands of Fortunato serve only as a feeble attempt to explain what remains a perverse, irrational act.

Throughout the story Montresor refers to Fortunato as a man worthy of respect, noble, and his friend (275-76, 278). Obviously it is easy to claim that these descriptions serve to lull Fortunato into a false sense of security in order to have his revenge, but this explanation falls short of the truth by looking only at the surface of the story. The key to understanding this comes early in the story, when Montresor says that a wrong is “unredressed when the avenger fails to make himself felt as such to him who has done the wrong” (274). Never in the course of the story does Montresor make it clear to Fortunato why he is being killed. In this way, Montresor
falls short in any attempt to claim his actions are revenge. He fails to follow his own set of rules. Clearly, revenge is simply an excuse, used because it is more logical than killing without a motive more tangible than perverseness. Montresor, having a full understanding of perverseness, realizes that almost no one else will be able to truly understand it and so he provides his listener with a more rational explanation, something his listener can cling to and believe in because it seems more comfortable. His desire to kill Fortunato stems from the perverse, not revenge, and so the urge is, as the narrator says in “Imp,” unreasonable, yet strong (280-81). Montresor, therefore, is not “The ordinary man [who] refuses to believe it [perversity] and seeks what he thinks is a more reasonable excuse to account for what he has done” (Rea 60). Instead, he is a man fully aware of what he is doing and at the same time fully aware that no one else will be able to understand this.

In addition to the control over Fortunato’s perversity, Montresor controls and uses the perversity of his own servants. He tells his listener,

There were no attendants at home; they had absconded to make merry in honor of the time. I had told them that I should not return until the morning, and had given them explicit orders not to stir from the house. These orders were sufficient I well knew, to insure their immediate disappearance, one and all, as soon as my back was turned.

(275, emphasis added)

Montresor understands how perversity works in the minds of others, and he realizes that his servants will, in the words of the narrator of “The Black Cat,” commit “a vile
or a stupid action, for no other reason than [they] know [they] should not” (225). He is able to use this urge to rebel in his own interests and all potential witnesses are neatly taken care of.

Montresor, then, is the antithesis of Poe’s first three narrators and Fortunato. He not only recognizes perversity in himself and others but also knows how to use it. After luring Fortunato into the catacombs, he shackles him to a wall and then proceeds to build a wall of bricks in front of him, entombing him forever without a trace. At this point, then, Montresor is just like the other narrators. All committed murders, all escaped detection—for a time. Eventually, the first three were induced to confess by their own uncontrolled perverse natures, leading to their imprisonment and eventual executions. Montresor, however, is able to control the urge to confess to the authorities and is never punished. It may be argued that the fact that he is recording the events fifty years later is still a confession, and he is therefore no different than the first three narrators. It must be noted, however, that unlike the first three, there is no indication given by Montresor that he is confessing from a prison cell or to the authorities. If anything, Montresor is doing exactly what the first three narrators wished to do. They could not control the urge to tell. Their confessions, or actions that led to their demise came about as a direct result of perverseness, creating a paradox, because, “after all, there is no pleasure in getting away with a crime unless it is known that you got away with it; and then, of course, you cannot get away with it” (May 74). Montresor can, and he waits for fifty years before saying anything to anyone about what he has done. His final remark, “In pace requiescat!” (279) is an
exultant taunt, as he revels in the glory of having gotten away with murder. By controlling his perverse urges, he has killed with no motive, and he now is able to celebrate that fact without fear of condemnation.

Poe, as witness to these actions, is now able to clearly understand the answers to the questions that have been plaguing him. He sees the spirit of the perverse at work in six different individuals. Four of these men are ruined or destroyed by their own perversity and one (Pym) is nearly killed. The sixth man, Montresor, is the only one able to successfully control his urges. Additionally, he is able to recognize and use, to his own benefit, the perversity of those around him. As a result of this understanding and control, Montresor is the only one of the six men to not only survive unscathed, but also to actually emerge victorious.
Chapter Eight: Conclusion

Having studied the actions of the narrators of these five tales, it is clear that Gargano is correct when he asserts that Poe and his narrators are separate entities ("Question" 56). Rather than being autobiographical, these five tales function as an experiment for Poe, in which he seeks answers to questions regarding human motivation. With each tale, Poe observes a slightly different set of behaviors. As he progresses through his observations, he slowly comes to understand more of what is happening. Each narrator shows or tells Poe more of what he is seeking, and each teaches him more than the last. Like a researcher recording the outcomes of a series of experiments—each more sophisticated than the last—Poe has been able to provide his readers with a complete set of results. In the course of his research he has observed, identified, and explained the phenomenon of perversity for his readers. In doing so, he is able to provide his readers with an explanation for their own sometimes troubling behaviors. Each experiment in the series brings Poe one step closer to a conclusion and his readers one step closer to the truth.

In observing Pym, Poe and his readers are able to see someone giving into the spirit of the perverse without understanding what is happening or why it is happening. Like many individuals, Pym is an innocent victim of the perverse, one who surrenders control without realizing it. His actions harm no one but himself and do not seem all that serious. The same can be said of the actions of many a person who have unwittingly given in to their own perversity. While it may be true that Pym's actions
are not as dramatic as those of the other narrators, they do prove to be useful in an educational sense nonetheless. Pym’s perversity is more reflective of what Poe and his readers are apt to see on a daily basis. People regularly make decisions that are in direct opposition to their own best interest and many do so with absolutely no understanding of why. After watching Pym, one may not be able to explain why Pym acts as he does, but certainly it must be seen that Pym is not alone in acting in ways that are harmful to himself. This observation, along with the next, lays the groundwork for the future in which Poe’s readers will be able to identify and more closely define the mysterious driving force behind human behavior.

The narrator of “The Tell Tale Heart” allows one to see how those afflicted by the spirit of the perverse may choose to deal with it. As an unbelievable force, perversity often forces individuals to attempt to rationalize their actions in order to provide comfortable explanations for both themselves and those around them. This attempt to rationalize is still present, as people continue to strive to explain their own actions. This rationalization also continues on a critical level, as evidenced by John Cleman’s attempt to support this narrator’s claim that he is insane. Clearly this man is not insane, but perverse. He is, however, unaware of this and therefore attempts to find some sort of explanation for his actions. His ignorance eventually leads to his destruction, as he is unable to wrest control away from the perverse urges that have seized him. In observing this behavior, Poe’s readers should be made aware of the fact that perversity may be far more serious than what is seen from the relatively harmless actions such as those of Pym. In this case, perversity cost one man his life.
and another his freedom. Plainly then, this is a powerful force, and as readers we are therefore driven to study it further.

Poe's third observation, "The Black Cat," allows his audience to finally place a name on the face of the question it has been asking. An inexplicable force controls this narrator too, but he admits to it and identifies it for Poe and his readers. Unfortunately, this man is unable to believe in his own observations and is ultimately destroyed simply because he turns away from the truth. In doing so, he provides a new question. Having finally been shown what the force behind the harmful behavior is called, one must now seek to learn whether or not it can ever be brought under control. In addition, it still remains to be seen exactly how this newly discovered force works within people. Simply knowing the name behind the force does not provide Poe's audience with nearly enough information to understand exactly how this force operates. Beyond this, it must be determined whether or not every individual stricken with perversity is doomed to suffer as a result, or if there is a way to handle the urges and even to use them for one's own benefit.

The fourth and arguably the most instructive guinea pig in the series, the narrator of "The Imp of the Perverse," provides Poe with a wealth of information. Through the tale of this man, Poe and his audience are shown more clearly exactly what perversity is and how it functions within people, on both small and large scales. This narrator conclusively proves that what has been seen thus far is in fact derived from the spirit of the perverse. As a final piece of evidence, this narrator himself demonstrates how perversity can work in someone who is well aware of its existence
and purpose. Knowledge of the existence of the spirit of perversity is clearly not enough to prevent one from being destroyed by it. This fact should trouble Poe’s readers, as they have now witnessed the tremendous power of this force as it has now destroyed someone who appeared to have a strong sense of control over it. These results are far from positive; and Poe therefore seeks out one more experiment to determine once and for all if there is any good to be found from this perverse nature that now appears innate and unstoppable.

In his final observation, Poe is finally able to provide his audience with some positive results (although given through actions that can hardly be considered positive in and of themselves). In Fortunato one sees reflections of Pym and the narrator of “The Tell Tale Heart.” In Montresor one sees a man who apparently has successfully found the answer to the question of controlling perversity. Montresor shows that it is possible to recognize perversity before it destroys you (something the narrators of “The Tell Tale Heart” and “The Black Cat” could not do). Additionally, he shows that perversity is the true reason for some human actions (a truth the narrator of “The Black Cat” could not face) and that the urge can be controlled (something even the seemingly wise narrator of “Imp” was unable to accomplish). Indeed, the urge can not only be controlled, it can be guided or manipulated into serving whatever purpose may be desired. While this means Montresor is able to literally get away with murder, the lesson for Poe and his readers is quite different.

Poe has endured these observations for a reason. He has been witness to the injuries people inflict upon themselves and others, and not merely for the sake of
telling a series of entertaining tales. Nor is Poe attempting to persuade his listeners that it is possible to give in to every wicked urge and perhaps even be successful in performing a deed as horrible as murder. While the stories may be macabre and disturbing, the lessons Poe leaves his readers are not. Poe is not encouraging crime, nor is he even suggesting anyone attempts anything he has witnessed and recorded for us. On the contrary, what these tales seem to offer the reader is a sense of relief—certainly not when viewed separately, but when taken as a whole. Looked at individually, these tales are accurately seen as disturbing images of troubled individuals. Taken as a series, as I believe they were written and the way Poe means them to be read, they are more accurately seen as a demonstration given by Poe to his readers. Poe is able to show his readers that they are not alone in succumbing to the inexplicable or unimaginable urges driven by an unnamed force. Instead, Poe illustrates that this is common to everyone and by identifying it and demonstrating it Poe has given his readers the opportunity to face their own sense of perversity. More than that, Poe has shown his readers that it is possible to not only face it, but as a result of the understanding they now have, to overcome it.
Notes


2 They are, however, attempting to rationalize or make sense of their actions, at least in the case of the first two of these three. The narrator in “Imp” understands why he has done what he has done and is simply trying to explain it to his listener, who obviously cannot comprehend why a murderer would confess years after successfully getting away with his crime. What Cleman does in labeling these confessions as self-defense is exactly the same thing the narrators in the first two stories are doing—that is, they (and Cleman) attempt to explain their actions in a way that is comfortable with them. Perversity, as it is defined in these tales—and even when fully explained—makes no logical sense. No one wants to believe that there is a part of him that seeks to do himself harm. Perversity as an explanation is a very unsatisfactory answer, so the narrators, and here Cleman as well, attempt to come up with a more satisfactory response.

3 While the narrator of “The Black Cat” does mention and attempt to explain perversity at work within him, he is unable to satisfactorily and fully explain it, and he soon forgets it, leaving the reader wondering why it is mentioned at all.

4 By invoking the name of Luchesi, Fortunato’s rival, Montresor is appealing to Fortunato’s sense of pride, which combines with his innate sense of perversity. This force causes him to continue down the vaults, even though his poor health should persuade him to stop.
Works Cited


