

# **The Imp of the Perverse Study Guide**

## **The Imp of the Perverse by Edgar Allan Poe**

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# The Imp of the Perverse

## The Imp of the Perverse Summary

The narrator begins by discussing a theory that all phrenologists and metaphysicians have overlooked. He explains that man has organized things in such a way as to "dictate purposes to God" (pg. 222), for example, we decided that God wants us to eat, so we assigned purpose to an organ that we believe God uses to compel us to eat. He feels it would have been wiser to "classify ... upon the basis of what man usually or occasionally did ... rather than on the basis of what we took it for granted the Deity intended him to do" (pg. 223). He feels that if we are not even able to understand God in simple areas, there is no way we can understand God in important matters.

He feels that phrenology has failed to account for a characteristic of human nature that, for lack of a better word, he calls "perverseness." This is, basically, the propensity of man to act simply because he should *not*. For example, we may have something extremely significant to do, something so life-altering and of the utmost consequence, even something we may be ready and eager to do - and yet, we put it off until it is too late.

After explaining his theories in more detail, the narrator says that he has said all he has said thus far as a way of explaining his current condition, which is apparently that he has been jailed. He admits that he had spent months planning the means by which he would commit a certain murder, settling finally on an undetectable poison candle due to his victim's habit of reading in bed at night. The murder went completely undetected and the narrator inherited the victim's estate. He was very proud of the thoughtful execution of his plot, and gained more satisfaction from this than he did from his inherited wealth. For years, everything went well.

After many years, the narrator notices something that he likens to a ringing in the ears, or to getting a piece of a song stuck in one's head. He would catch himself muttering the phrase "I am safe" under his breath. This eventually evolved into "I am safe - I am safe - yes - if I be not fool enough to make open confession!" (pg. 229)

As soon as he says this, he begins to worry that he will confess, a victim of the "perverse" urge he had spoken of earlier. Thinking about it only makes it worse and he begins to panic, running aimlessly through the streets. Finally, he confesses everything and faints.

He has been sentenced to hang.

## The Imp of the Perverse Analysis

In this tale, Poe again uses the unreliable narrator technique, much like in *The Tell-Tale Heart*. Here, however, his focus is not so much on the crime itself, but on the urges that



compel him to confess. Though this is a story of murder, Poe seems to use it as a sort of essay about his theories on the mind; the plot is almost an afterthought. The story does not even seem like a story until 3/4 of the way through. Poe seems intent on examining the idea of what he calls "perverseness," which is the compulsion of man to do exactly the opposite of what he knows he should do. He accomplishes this by devising a plot in which the narrator is compelled to confess to murder.

## Characters

The last of this collection's unreliable narrators. Again, he is a murderer, but here, unlike stories such as *The Tell-Tale Heart* or *The Cask of Amontillado*, he is not intent on proving his sanity. This narrator gets around to telling his story at the end, spending most of the tale in explanation of his theories on the workings of the mind.



## Objects/Places

Idea that one will act exactly as he or she should not for the fact that there is an undeniable compulsion to do so, simply because it is what one should not do. For example, when standing at the side of a cliff, there is a compulsion to jump, simply because we should not; the narrator feels that without someone to pull us back, we would probably jump.



# Themes

## Sanity and Insanity

Poe uses the theme of insanity vs. insanity, and all the nuances in between, in many of his short stories, often charging his insane narrators with the futile task of proving that they are not mad. Often, in stories such as *The Tell-Tale Heart* and *The Imp of the Perverse*, though the respective narrators of each claim they are of sound mind and seem completely unremorseful, they are driven to confess by a persistent reminder of their crime. In other tales, such as *The Cask of Amontillado*, the narrator is unquestionably insane, and yet there is no remorse *and* no confession, and though his *actions* are insane, he is very levelheaded when it comes to their execution. Crime is not the only indicator of insanity, however. In *Ligeia*, the narrator commits no crime that is spoken of, yet there is an air of instability to his narrative. He does admit to heavy opium use, but it is his overwhelming grief and obsessive love for Ligeia that cast a questioning light on his state of mind. All this mental instability leads to a stable of unreliable narrators; Poe was a master at creating believable, unreliable narrators, so much so that many historians have cast him as much less stable than he was, instead of recognizing his skill at crafting first-person narration.

## Death and Mortality

In almost all of Poe's works, death is a central issue. Whether a tale of murder (*The Cask of Amontillado*, *The Tell-Tale Heart*), a tale of horror (*The Fall of the House of Usher*), a Gothic horror romance (*Ligeia*), or an allegory (*The Masque of the Red Death*), Poe's stories, by nature of his preferred genres, are full of death. Though many of his stories deal with either the murder of someone, the solving of a murder, or the supernatural resurrection of someone who has died, it is his allegorical look at mortality, *The Masque of the Red Death*, which most clearly sums up Poe's themes of death. Here, very simply, death is seen as inevitable, something that can be avoided by no one, no matter what precautions they take or how wealthy they are. Poe used death to terrify people, as he was a writer of horror stories and most people are afraid of death. Yet he seemed fascinated by it, and with his use of dark and Gothic elements seemed to embrace it.

## Isolation and Confinement

Throughout many of Poe's short stories, characters are placed in stifling, claustrophobic settings that add to the overall feeling of panic and fear. In some, such as *Ligeia* and *The Fall of the House of Usher*, most of the action occurs in one room or one house, closing off the characters to any outside influence. *The Pit and the Pendulum* takes this idea a step further, imprisoning the narrator in a dungeon. Poe highlights this theme in *The Cask of Amontillado*, in which the murderous narrator literally encloses his victim in



a tomb. In *The Masque of the Red Death*, the castle is completely cut off from any means of entrance or exit. The most intense confinement, however, can be found in the minds of Poe's narrators. While we as readers experience physical isolation (i.e. one, room, one house, one walled-up vault), the intensity of the confinement is exacerbated by the point of view of the narrators. We see the world through one set of eyes, and the thoughts of these narrators, often thoughts that are unstable at best, imprison us in a non-physical "prison" of panic and fear.





# Style

## Point of View

This is another unreliable first-person narrator, again detailing a seemingly motive-less murder. For most of this story, however, the narrator seems like a professor or an essayist.

## Setting

This story is set primarily in the narrator's mind, as he spends most of the story expounding on his theories of the human mind and "perverseness."

## Language and Meaning

For most of this story, Poe's narrator seems to be writing a treatise on the workings of the mind rather than a piece of fiction. Even the sentence which follows seems to be a type of thesis statement.

*"In the consideration of the faculties and impulses — of the prima mobilia of the human soul, the phrenologists have failed to make room for a propensity which, although obviously existing as a radical, primitive, irreducible sentiment, has been equally overlooked by all the moralists who have preceded them."* (pg. 193)

Poe also uses his command of language to concisely describe what he calls "perverseness," using its definition to explain what he feels is an inevitable human compulsion.

## Structure

The story is divided into three distinct sections: the essay-like section in which the narrator offers his thoughts on human nature, the short section describing his crime, and the end, in which his theories on "perverseness" are proven true as he confesses, proving his position that one will do exactly what one should *not*, precisely because it is not in one's best interests.



## Quotes

*These quotes are taken from the Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe.*

"True! - nervous - very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why *will* you say that I am mad?" (*The Tell-Tale Heart*, pg. 13)

"'Villains!' I shrieked, 'dissemble no more! I admit the deed! - tear up the planks! - here, here! - it is the beating of his hideous heart!'" (*The Tell-Tale Heart*, pg. 21)

"As the strong man exults in his physical ability, delighting in such exercises as call his muscles into action, so glories the analyst in that moral activity which *disentangles*." (*The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, pg. 22)

"'The riddle, so far, was now unriddled.'" (*The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, pg. 57)

"Of my country and of my family I have little to say. Ill usage and length of years have driven me from the one, and estranged me from the other." (*MS. Found in a Bottle*, pg. 77)

"When I look around me I feel ashamed of my former apprehensions." (*MS. Found in a Bottle*, pg. 92)

"The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could ; but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge." (*The Cask of Amontillado*, pg. 94)

"*For the love of God, Montressor!*" (*The Cask of Amontillado*, pg. 104)

"There was an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart - an unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime. What was it - I paused to think - what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher ?" (*The Fall of the House of Usher*, pg. 106)

"For a moment she remained trembling and reeling to and fro upon the threshold - then, with a low moaning cry, fell heavily inward upon the person of her brother, and in her violent and now final death-agonies, bore him to the floor a corpse, and a victim to the terrors he had anticipated." (*The Fall of the House of Usher*, pg. 133)

"While I gazed, this fissure rapidly widened - there came a fierce breath of the whirlwind - the entire orb of the satellite burst at once upon my sight - my brain reeled as I saw the mighty walls rushing asunder - there was a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters - and the deep and dank tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the *House of Usher*." (*The Fall of the House of Usher*, pg. 133)



"Arousing from the most profound of slumbers, we break the gossamer web of some dream. Yet in a second afterward, (so frail may that web have been) we remember not that we have dreamed." (*The Pit and the Pendulum*, pg. 156)

"Amid the thought of the fiery destruction that impended, the idea of the coolness of the well came over my soul like balm. I rushed to its deadly brink. I threw my straining vision below. The glare from the enkindled roof illumined its inmost recesses. Yet, for a wild moment, did my spirit refuse to comprehend the meaning of what I saw. At length it forced — it wrestled its way into my soul — it burned itself in upon my shuddering reason. — Oh! for a voice to speak! — oh! horror! — oh! any horror but this!" (*The Pit and the Pendulum*, pg. 136)

"The 'strangeness,' however, which I found in the eyes, was of a nature distinct from the formation, or the color, or the brilliancy of the features, and must, after all, be referred to the expression." (*Ligeia*, pg. 163)

"That she loved me I should not have doubted; and I might have been easily aware that, in a bosom such as hers, love would have reigned no ordinary passion. But in death only, was I fully impressed with the strength of her affection." (*Ligeia*, pg. 168)

"I trembled not — I stirred not — for a crowd of unutterable fancies connected with the air, the stature, the demeanor of the figure, rushing hurriedly through my brain, had paralyzed — had chilled me into stone." (*Ligeia*, pg. 182)

"The scarlet stains upon the body and especially upon the face of the victim, were the pest ban which shut him out from the aid and from the sympathy of his fellow-men." (*The Masque of the Red Death*, pg. 184)

"But the Prince Prospero was happy and dauntless and sagacious. When his dominions were half depopulated, he summoned to his presence a thousand hale and light-hearted friends from among the knights and dames of his court, and with these retired to the deep seclusion of one of his castellated abbeys." (*The Masque of the Red Death*, pg. 185)

"There are chords in the hearts of the most reckless which cannot be touched without emotion. Even with the utterly lost, to whom life and death are equally jests, there are matters of which no jest can be made." (*The Masque of the Red Death*, pg. 191)

"And the flames of the tripods expired. And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all" (*The Masque of the Red Death*, pg. 193)

"The intellectual or logical man, rather than the understanding or observant man, set himself to imagine designs — to dictate purposes to God." (*The Imp of the Perverse*, pg. 195)

"Through its promptings we act without comprehensible object; or, if this shall be understood as a contradiction in terms, we may so far modify the proposition as to say,



that through its promptings we act, for the reason that we should not." (*The Imp of the Perverse*, pg. 196)

"They say that I spoke with a distinct enunciation, but with marked emphasis and passionate hurry, as if in dread of interruption before concluding the brief, but pregnant sentences that consigned me to the hangman and to hell." (*The Imp of the Perverse*, pg. 209)



## Topics for Discussion

*These topics concern the general works of Edgar Allan Poe.*

Explain what is meant by the term "unreliable narrator." How does Poe use this technique in different ways with different stories?

Poe has been called "the father of the detective story" - but does he go too far out of the realm of possibility by making an orangutan the killer? Defend your answer.

Are the crewmen on the "Discovery" ghosts? Is there another explanation as to why they do not acknowledge the narrator?

How does Poe portray the doppelganger, or character double, in *The Fall of the House of Usher*?

How does Poe use a closed setting in *The Pit and the Pendulum*, *The Cask of Amontillado*, and *The Fall of the House of Usher*?

What is the role of history in *The Pit and the Pendulum*? How does the reality of the action contribute to the story's terror?

Compare and contrast the narrator of *The Imp of the Perverse* with the narrator of *The Tell-Tale Heart*.

Do you believe Poe meant for us to believe in the resurrection of Ligeia as a means of proving her strength of will and the great love between herself and the narrator, or as a sign of how far the narrator's mind has slipped?

Did Ligeia poison Rowena, or did the narrator?