

Guilty Pleasure

By Jeffery Greb

I'm hoping you can tell *me* exactly what happened and why.

On this peculiar December evening, I had just split more kindling with a silver-bladed hand-axe, stoked the fire, and ensconced myself on the chaise whereby to enjoy the flames, as well as a delicious slice of pie, whilst reading a particularly loved tome of the works of E. A. Poe. After being thus occupied for some time, I found I had finished my pie and soon craved more. Pie is an especial favorite of mine, and as such it proves difficult for me to resist; however, I had been trying, with the help of my wife, to rid myself of excessive sweets. Still, the craving persisted.

This point grew all the more aggravating in light of my reading. By chance, amongst the tales I had chosen to reread that evening were “The Black Cat” and “The Imp of the Perverse”. In both of these, Poe describes that which he considers “one of the indivisible primary faculties, or sentiments, which give direction to the character of Man” – the spirit of perverseness. In the latter story, Poe defines this spirit

. . . as an innate and primitive principle of human action, a paradoxical something, which we may call *perverseness*, for want of a more characteristic term. . . . Through its promptings we act without comprehensible object; or, if this should 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*.

He describes perverseness as an irresistible impulse to do wrong *because* we know it to be wrong driven by an “unfathomable longing of the soul *to vex itself* – to offer violence to its own nature – to do wrong for the wrong’s sake only . . .”

I feel certain at this point in following the thoughts and actions of the evening the reader must be finding my desire for a second piece of pie to be at best slimly connected to this spirit of perverseness. After all, in one story this spirit causes the narrator to commit a hideous murder by burying an axe in the brain of his wife, whereby “[s]he fell dead upon the spot, without a groan”, and in the other it causes a murderer who has successfully escaped punishment to confess his actions. Compared with these, wanting more pie seems inconsequential; a fact which I noted for myself at the time. However, as I considered these objects, their connection appeared less and less fantastical. If eating more pie is simply indulging in a guilty pleasure, one must ask *why* “*guilty*”? Wherefore this guilt? The guilt is there because acquiescence in such indulgence

should not be accepted precisely because to do so is to do damage to oneself. The damage is gradual, rather than immediate, and may take an obscured form, like Type-2 diabetes or heart disease, difficult to trace in a direct line back to the instance in question, yet the line is there. Furthermore, once the notion took hold, it became impossible to shake and grew ever-stronger, just as Poe describes.

From my place on the chaise by the fire, I could see the pie clearly lighted on the counter, framed by the open doorway to the kitchen. The wife of my bosom could be heard hum-singing as she puttered about that room, and even occasionally moved into view traversing back and forth whilst engaged in the menial task of clean-up as she passed between me and the pie. Her marching her post before the pie was not merely metaphorical; if I advanced in her presence to procure another slice, she would hector me mercilessly. She would remind me over and over – as she did time and again – of unpleasant facts about my physical self which I had no desire to remember. She would accuse me, quite rightly, of going back on yet another commitment I had made to her and to myself, of once again giving in to baser impulses I should control, and she would treat me henceforth as a child until I could prove myself worthy of her trust. Such emasculation was neither new nor rare, and I could see and hear in my head the entire scenario play-out as described. Why should I be forced to forebear such derision? Why suffer such inequity and humiliation? Such ignominious insult? I am a grown man! If I want more pie, I shall have pie! If I choose to damn the consequences, then she shall have nothing to say of it!

I stood and moved around the occasional table toward the fireplace. I stared at the glistening pie crying to me through the doorway, the calls of which nearly drowned out by the insipid mewlings of my wife's feeble attempts at song. Strange, I thought, that things should come to a head over something as banal as this, as pie, but I believe once you begin a gesture, it is fatal to fail to complete it. With resolution, I picked up the implement and the empty plate and advanced to the kitchen.

Poe's brilliance about the human mind is indisputable. His exercises in ratiocination, applications of inductive reasoning, dramatization of Roderick Usher's hypochondriasis, as well as myriad other examples, all point to a deep understanding of human motives and actions. However, Poe died more than 25 years before William James taught the first class entitled "Psychology" at Harvard; much has been learned about these subjects since Poe's time. So I ask: Do *you* have a better explanation for what happened? And if not you, who might?