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“Into that material nihility”: Poe’s criminal persona as God-peer

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Case Western Reserve University, 1993

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"INTO THAT MATERIAL NIHILITY":
POE'S CRIMINAL PERSONA AS GOD-PEER

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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CASE WESTERN RESERVE UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE STUDIES

We hereby approve the thesis of

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___ ___ ___ ___

(date 3/29/93)

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Rosa Maria DelVecchio
"INTO THAT MATERIAL NIHILITY": 
POE'S CRIMINAL PERSONA AS GOD-PEER

Abstract

by

ROSA MARIA DEL VECCHIO

This dissertation classifies five of Poe's tales into a group that I call "murder narratives" -- that is, those tales narrated from the perspective of a criminal who "fancies" himself morally superior not only because he has "power" to take a life without concrete motive but also because he has power to create through tale-telling: "William Wilson," "The Tell-Tale Heart," "The Black Cat," "The Imp of the Perverse," and "The Cask of Amontillado." I argue that this narrator fears the unknown is empty of substance, thus obsessively trying to fill this void by

ii
usurping God’s role. I borrow Sarah Helen Whitman’s anagram of Poe’s name — "a God-peer" — to refer to this criminal persona.

The Introduction considers Poe’s philosophy about God’s existence in *Eureka* and also his correspondence with his stepfather, John Allan. I demonstrate an analogy between the father/son relationship in the letters and the God/man relationship in *Eureka* as relevant to Poe’s development of the God-peer persona in the murder narratives insofar as Poe perceives Allan as an inconsistent or absent father. The God-peer persona creates himself in the context of an arbitrary or absent God, just as Poe the orphan keeps alive the idea of "father" through letter writing.

Each chapter offers a close reading of one of the murder narratives. The chapters are arranged in chronological order of publication of the tales to establish a sense of Poe’s development of the God-peer persona. In each case, I focus on the narrator’s search for God and the "madness" that results from the overwhelming role he tries to play. I examine the fictional elements of each tale under the control of the tale-teller in his struggle to usurp godlike power — namely, allegory in "William Wilson," the motif of the evil eye in "The Tell-Tale Heart," allusion to beliefs
about cats in "The Black Cat," the figure of the confidence man in "The Imp," and parody in "The Cask."
The motive for murder in all these tales is the narrator's desire to usurp God's role at any cost out of fear that God does not exist.
To my brother, 
whose youthful heartbeat 
lifts my soul from out that shadow -- 
ever-more!
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ................................................................. ii
Dedication ............................................................. v
Acknowledgments ....................................................... vi
Table of Contents ...................................................... vii

INTRODUCTION

GOD THE CRIMINAL: POE’S "END" IN EUREKA ........... 1

GOD THE FICTIONAL FATHER FIGURE:
POE’S CORRESPONDENCE WITH JOHN ALLAN .......... 26

CHAPTER 1
"WITHIN THE BOUNDS OF HUMAN POSSIBILITY":
THE WHISPERINGS OF GOD IN "WILLIAM WILSON" .... 42

CHAPTER 2
"THE GROAN OF MORTAL TERROR": EVIL-EYE MOTIF
AS MOTIVE FOR MURDER IN "THE TELL-TALE HEART" .... 76

CHAPTER 3
"FASHIONED IN THE IMAGE OF THE HIGH GOD":
SHAPE-SHIFTING IN "THE BLACK CAT" ................. 102

CHAPTER 4
"DEATH BY THE VISITATION OF GOD":
DIDDLING IN "THE IMP OF THE PERVERSE" .............. 132

CHAPTER 5
"FOR THE LOVE OF GOD": SEEKING THE "IMPOSSIBLE"
IN "THE CASK OF AMONTILLADO" ............................ 156

CONCLUSION ............................................................. 180

BIBLIOGRAPHY ........................................................... 184
INTRODUCTION

GOD THE CRIMINAL: POE'S "END" IN EUREKA

"The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown."
H. P. Lovecraft opens his Introduction to Supernatural Horror in Literature with this assertion (12). Later in his chapter on Edgar Allan Poe, Lovecraft describes Poe's mind as being "never far from terror and decay, and we see in every tale, poem, and philosophical dialogue a tense eagerness to fathom unplumbed wells of night, to pierce the veil of death, and to reign in fancy as lord of the frightful mysteries of time and space" (57). I want to extend Lovecraft’s metaphysical interpretation of fear and Poe by arguing that Poe is not so much concerned with "fear of the unknown" as he is with fear that the unknown is, in fact, empty of substance and with human determination to fill this vacuum of nothingness by playing the role of "God."

To accomplish this end, I will consider Poe’s philosophical thought in Eureka, that all human beings at some point believe themselves to be their own God, in relation to what I will refer to as Poe’s "murder
narratives." The murder narratives are those tales narrated by characters who "fancy" themselves morally superior to other humans not only because they have the "power" to end a life at will and without due "human" provocation but also because they have the power of language to influence, to effect, to create through fiction. Poe has five such tales in which the narrator is a criminal recounting, in a strong first-person voice that dominates the tale, the murder he commits: "William Wilson," "The Tell-Tale Heart," "The Black Cat," "The Imp of the Perverse," and "The Cask of Amontillado."

The "mysteries of time and space" that Lovecraft says Poe is "lord of" are not as "frightful" to Poe as are the mysteries of the human psyche and human behavior in relation to beliefs or disbeliefs in a Supreme God; most frightening of all in Poe are the implications of "lordship" itself. I propose to show that Poe’s fascination with horror and terror comes from his sense of the indifference to human suffering that he perceives in the human race and the metaphysical implications of this indifference, the clearest example of which is found in Poe’s depiction of insanity and criminal behavior throughout his popular murder narratives.

Poe’s criminal narrators best lend themselves to being read in light of what I believe to be Poe’s basic
philosophical question in *Eureka*: What becomes of human beings if God does not exist?

No thinking being lives who, at some luminous point of his life of thought, has not felt himself lost amid the surges of futile efforts at understanding, or believing, that anything exists greater than his own soul. . . . that nothing is, or can be superior to any one soul -- that each soul is, in part, its own God -- its own Creator. . . .

. . . . In this view alone the existence of Evil becomes intelligible; but in this view it becomes more -- it becomes endurable. (141, ll. 8-29)

In other words, when the human self is perceived as its own God, the existence of evil is "intelligible," meaning it is "understandable" to do evil without the guidance of a good and perfect Being; and it is also "endurable," meaning it is "tolerable" or "acceptable" or "to be endured," that one who considers his or her soul supreme would, in assuming the role of God, possibly create and adopt that which has traditionally been identified as "evil" as the way of life. It is this realization of the potentially evil nature of the self, as one tries to "play" God in the absence of a Supreme Being, that Poe expresses in the murder narratives, and this that causes first exaltation, then ultimate fear in the narrator, driving him to a life of crime and insanity.

Criticism on Poe's views about human perfection includes that of Richard Fusco, who argues that Poe does
not believe in the philosophy of the "perfectibility of man." Fusco reasons that, because Poe wants to illustrate human imperfection, there is no reference to human perfection in *Eureka* -- that is, because "perhaps in his belief that the universe will ultimately collapse into God and then into nothingness, Poe finally offered his alternative theory of human history and destiny" (4). Laurence J. Lafleur alternatively points out that Poe "is quite inconsistent in his treatment of God" in *Eureka* (404) and "pictures God as attempting both successfully and vainly to increase his own perfection or happiness" (405). In essence, then, it is more accurate to conclude that Poe perceives not only human beings but also God (assuming He exists) as imperfect. In the murder narratives the narrator, in his attempt to play God, proves imperfect; and God, or Poe's understanding of a traditional Supreme God, is also imperfect by virtue of His indifference toward human sufferings.

Why Poe depicts humans in the role of God as choosing to do evil rather than good, however, is not as fully answered in *Eureka* as in Poe's tales, where his persona of man as his own God comes to life in the first-person criminal narrators. Paradoxically, *Eureka's* "perfection" (that is, coherence as a system) can be said to lie in Poe's understanding of the human self and God
alike as imperfect beings. Whether or not it is "scientific" or "poetic," no one denies that Eureka is philosophic. Specifically, it articulates the imperfections not only of human beings but of the Creator, as well as the possible ramifications for human behavior once realization of God's imperfection, or perhaps even non-existence, leads the self to play peer to God, thus both denying and acknowledging God by failing in the role or confessing. Poe shows through the murder narratives that the motivation is a human desire to prove God's existence, to invoke or invent a supernatural divine power outside the narrator's confined and miserable human existence.

As criticism of Eureka shows, this is a work that cannot stand alone. It only begins to become whole when considered in relation to Poe's other works and to the murder narratives in particular. Eureka is dependent upon fictional dramatizations of the philosophy it develops in order to make sense. Significantly, even current scholarship rarely discusses Eureka by itself but usually in relation to Poe's fiction, poetry, and criticism on unity of effect and place of audience. Much recent criticism discusses Eureka as a microcosm of the universe described in which Poe as writer parallels the
role of God as creator. In this sense, *Eureka* is also a piece about writing. For example, Joan Dayan argues,

The artifices throughout [*Eureka*] lead toward a final equation between God's 'perfection of plot' and his [Poe's] own. In declaring that he cannot, and therefore will not express -- that he must fail to sound the depths of God's ways -- Poe ends up mimicking the divine ineffability within his own compass of absolute reciprocity. (462)

Susan Manning, in passing, comments on the similarity of the narrative voice of *Eureka* to two of the tales I have identified as Poe's murder narratives:

"This voice [the narrative voice of *Eureka*] is not far from the self-justifyingly mad narrators of tales like 'The Imp of the Perverse' and 'The Black Cat'" (236). Manning also alludes to the resemblance *Eureka* bears to "The Tell-Tale Heart."¹ As Manning's argument implies and as I also argue, the meaning of *Eureka* is incomplete by itself. We must look to Poe's other works, namely the murder narratives, to complete *Eureka*'s meaning.² Poe's murder narratives are, in essence, fictional illustrations or dramatizations of questions about God's existence that Poe finally explores philosophically in *Eureka* during the last years of his life. The philosophy Poe develops in *Eureka* is the major source we have for understanding his murder narratives, and I want to explore how Poe's narrative voice and his depiction of
the "insane" criminal mind relate to the specific elements of terror and horror that Poe employs in each murder narrative.

Because connotative distinctions between the terms "terror" and "horror" have been made by writers and critics of Gothic literature, I need, first, to explore some of the meanings offered for these terms and, second, to define "terror" and "horror" as I intend to use the words in this study. In his Preface to the Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque, Poe locates "terror" in the human soul (129). In the Preface to the First Edition of The Castle of Otranto, Horace Walpole identifies terror as "the author's principal engine," which, he continues, "prevents the story from ever languishing; and it is so often contrasted by pity, that the mind is kept up in a constant vicissitude of interesting passions" (4). Quoting Anne Radcliffe's essay "On the Supernatural in Poetry," G. R. Thompson argues:

Terror "expands the soul" and "wakens the faculties to a high degree"; horror "contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them." But this is another paradox of Gothic duality; terror and horror represent complementary poles of a single continuum of perception and response. Terror, in her [Radcliffe's] terms, may be seen as coming upon us from without, engulfing us with an awful [sic] sense of the sublime in which sense of self is swallowed in immensity -- whereas horror rises up from within, with a vague consciousness of the "dreader evil" sinking downward through levels of
subconscious "uncertainty and obscurity" into a vast unconscious reservoir of primitive dread. (3-4)

Arguing that Gothic romance is characterized by an atmosphere of "dread," Thompson offers further distinctions between the terms "terror," "horror," and "mystery":

Terror suggests the frenzy of physical and mental fear of pain, dismemberment, and death. Horror suggests the perception of something incredibly evil or morally repellent. Mystery suggests something beyond this, the perception of a world that stretches away beyond the range of human intelligence -- often morally incomprehensible -- and thereby productive of a nameless apprehension that may be called religious dread in the face of the wholly other. (3)

Robert D. Hume's treatment of the differences between "terror" and "horror" is similar to Thompson's:

To put the change from terror-Gothic to horror-Gothic in its simplest terms, the suspense of external circumstance is de-emphasized in favor of increasing psychological concern with moral ambiguity. The horror-Gothic writers postulated the relevance of such psychology to every reader; they wrote for a reader who could say with Goethe that he had never heard of a crime which he could not imagine himself committing. The terror novel prepared the way for a fiction which though more overtly horrible is at the same time more serious and more profound. It is with Frankenstein and Melmoth the Wanderer that the Gothic novel comes fully into its own. (285)

Basically, Hume argues that horror is a phenomenon of the psyche, terror of the environment.
In the context of all these definitions and my own analysis of Poe, I will use the term "terror" to refer very simply to the fear generated from something that the narrator perceives as being from the natural world, and the term "horror" to refer to the fear produced from something that the narrator believes to be from the supernatural world. For it is these two types of fear -- fear of the known ("terror") and fear of the unknown ("horror") -- that Poe uses to shape his criminal narrator into the representation of the self as its own God.

The persona of Poe's murder narratives represents a specific type of character that Poe experiments with -- one who "fancies" himself in the role of God by making decisions on life and death based on his own arbitrary reasoning about the fate his victim deserves. I will borrow Sarah Helen Whitman's anagram of "Edgar Poe" to refer to Poe's criminal narrator -- that is, "a God-peer." His creation of this criminal God-peer persona for the murder narratives leads Poe to develop the philosophic voice that he uses in Eureka toward the end of his life and career as a writer.

The characteristics of Poe's criminal persona, of his God-peer, are those of a writer who has usurped moral and creative agency: While "acting" in his own story, he
uses language to indicate he is conscious of "penning" a tale, develops the motif of supernatural horror or external influence to account for his crime of terror, expresses no logical or believable motive to account for his crime, questions his own sanity while at the same time appearing to defend it, offers ludicrous explanations in the form of logical arguments to account for strange events, arbitrarily experiences feelings of guilt and fear, and is driven by uncontrolled madness to confess, in some fashion, the crime which would otherwise most likely not have been discovered. For, regardless of the superior role to which he aspires, the God-peer narrator remains "mere man," powerless over his human emotions and perhaps finally affirming forces superior to himself.

This God-peer develops a fixation on an "enemy" who "haunts" him until he becomes obsessed with planning the destruction of the victim. His paranoia represents his need to believe, an attempt at order. This obsession develops into a deep-seated fear that there is no supernatural realm, that there is only the natural world, that what lies beyond the life he knows on earth is no more than a vast nothingness --

in other words, Matter without Matter -- in other words, again, Matter no more. In sinking into Unity, it [matter] will sink at once into that
Nothingness which, to all Finite Perception, Unity must be -- into that Material Nihility from which alone we can conceive it to have been evoked -- to have been created by the Volition of God.  
(Eureka, 139, ll. 5-10)

This fear of ultimate nothingness, the fear that there will be "never-more" than human existence in this world, is the key to understanding not only Poe's concept of insanity but also his concept of ultimate horror. The persona's "madness" results from his realization, whether conscious or unconscious, that "God" is merely a fictional concept of his own imagination as he tries to usurp the role. In other words, the narrator's particular use of fiction is the central manifestation of his insanity.

A somewhat similar study along these lines has been done by Ib Johansen, who argues that the theme of madness in the tales "The Fall of the House of Usher," "Berenice," and "The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether" is also reflected in the language of the narration itself. Using Michel Foucault's essay "Fantasia of the Library," Johansen explores the symbolism of the library in the three stories, pointing out the different function of the library in each story as it parallels the madness of the particular character or characters. The main focus of Johansen's essay is "The Fall of the House of Usher" because the library
plays the most major role in this story. Rather than a peaceful and safe place where one gains knowledge, Johansen argues, the library in Poe becomes, in essence, a madhouse.

Poe obscures the line between the literal and the figurative in regard to both fiction and beliefs in God. Poe's God-peer persona is governed by the idea that, if there is no Supreme Being, then there is no difference between good and evil; if he is a God-peer creating his own logic and moral standards, then to do wrong for wrong's sake is neither illogical nor immoral because logic and morality become relative concepts, carrying only the ambiguous and arbitrary meanings attached to them by the God-peer. Taking it upon himself to play the role of his own God and, hence, to prove that evil is "endurable" under the circumstance of being a God-peer, Poe's criminal narrator discovers a more powerful horror -- that he might actually get away with murder, that it is easy, that he is indeed a God-peer, and finally that he is on his own because there is no Supreme Being keeping a watchful eye on human behavior. It is, therefore, up to Poe's fictional narrator, who both enacts and tells a certain kind of story, to create justice by his own definition of his "deed," for it is
his story that defines murder as a "crime" or as a "sin" calling for punishment.

The criminal narrator turns to shaping and controlling his world for refuge -- a world which he uses as a surrogate for the world most religions identify as "God's" world. This self-consciously created world challenges his belief in the existence and the moral character of Almighty God and primarily his fear that God is non-existent or, if existent, that He lacks concern for the human life He created. In the God-peer's heartless and "motiveless" murder of a fellow human being, Poe seeks to understand what God is (assuming He "is" anything) and what God's "plot" is. Manning discusses the significance of "plot" as Poe uses the word in relation to God in *Eureka*:

This phrase, 'The Plots of God are Perfect,' conceals a tension which amounts almost to an oxymoron. In one single verbal sleight of hand it yokes together the contradictory pulls of Platonic and Aristotelian criteria: 'God,' I take it, is an exclusively aesthetic or critical construct for Poe: absolute Unity, singleness, ideal Form -- Platonic perfection. But God is also the plot-maker, the builder of an entity with structure and extension whose singleness lies in its rhetorical effect on its reader. Together, God and God's plot make the dual unity of perfect art. (243)

That is, his protagonist in these stories arrogate to themselves absolute power expressed in unmitigated actions. To accomplish this end, Poe treats the concepts
of evil and good or the Devil and God in these texts not as fixed opposites but as relative concepts subject to constant human intervention or "revision." Therefore, it is pointless for us to characterize, for instance, the narrator of "The Black Cat" as an "evil" man and his criminal actions as "Satanic" when these are the very traditional concepts that Poe through this persona of God-peer is concerned with redefining and thus challenging. The God-peer, in effect, makes his own "plot."

Poe creates this "criminal type" of God-peer to show that the ultimate horror the self can experience is to reveal or admit the non-existence of a Supreme God. When the narrator perceives no trace (that is, no trace to his satisfaction) of God’s existence in the "real" world, he goes to great lengths to prove himself wrong. He commits a crime which either demonstrates his need for punishment from a Supreme Being or, alternatively, establishes his autonomy as his own "God." In other words, Poe’s God-peer creates the idea of God through tale-telling as he alternates between feeling godlike confidence, which detaches him from the human emotions of fear, pity, compassion, guilt and feeling human weakness, which makes the criminal narrator vulnerable to these human emotions. Each of these narrators commits a brutal murder justified
by a logic that his soul, as its own God, dictates, "evil for evil's sake," a "plot" representing an act of order not morality. At the same time, the narrator's more human half drives him to confess the crime, or at least to feel helpless as a result of the crime, thus fabricating evidence in this fashion of the existence of a true Supreme Being who distinguishes between good and evil and who favors good over evil.

A large part of what makes Poe's criminal narrator appear godlike is his conscious role of tale-teller, maker, creator of his own story, his own character, and his own religion -- essentially his own destiny. Significantly, the first American short story writer to develop a theory of composition, primarily in "The Philosophy of Composition," "The Rationale of Verse," and "The Poetic Principle" as well as in some of his critical reviews, Poe argues for a process of composition through a first-person narrator who is self-conscious of his role as story-teller and who overtly draws attention to his style of discourse. In the context of his own needs, the God-peer of the murder narratives lends himself to the study of Poe's own understanding of fiction as metafiction.

While I am concerned with Poe's understanding of the arbitrary power of tale-telling to influence and shape
belief, or disbelief, in God, in effect to "play" God, contemporary Poe scholars are also concerned with the significance of writing itself, with fiction as metafiction, with the writing style of the texts themselves shaped by the subjects Poe writes about such as death and insanity. Michael J. S. Williams, for instance, is concerned with Poe's consciousness of how a writer is bound by the words available to him; hence, the author and reader constantly struggle for authority. For example, Williams argues, Poe's use of marginal notes is his attempt to make himself the authority, so to speak, of someone else's book. Poe wants to control perception of his own works so that he is viewed as the authority. This desire for control I am arguing is also a quality Poe assigns to the God-peer narrator. Williams cites as an example Poe's statement at the beginning of Eureka (a text that rewrites the text of God) that he wants the work judged as a poem after his death. Poe replicates this "struggle for authority" in his criminal narrators in their attempts to define and control their worlds, including listeners addressed.

J. Gerald Kennedy explores Poe's writing in light of two prevailing attitudes about death: (1) that one has faith in the existence of an "afterlife" and, hence, sees death as an expected and accepted phenomenon; (2) that
one doubts and questions the existence of an afterlife and, therefore, views death as something to fight off, fear, and avoid. Because the latter attitude dominates nineteenth-century thought, Kennedy argues, Poe uses writing as a way of symbolically defeating death (a Renaissance theme too, of course). According to Kennedy, the idea throughout Poe’s works is that the text lives on after the death of the author, that the text is immortal. This is certainly the case with Poe’s voice in *Eureka*, which boldly proclaims, "it cannot die: -- or if by any means it be now trodden down so that it die, it will ‘rise again to the Life Everlasting’" (5, ll. 10-11).

Poe demonstrates belief in the manipulative power of the creative self. He emphasizes that a writer’s effect is of primary importance to good writing, and this theory is relevant to the metafictions created by his criminal persona in the role of God. Each God-peer defines in the opening paragraph a relationship between himself and the listener. The narrator is self-conscious that he is not simply telling but actually creating a story and that the success of that story depends upon the cooperation he can invoke from the listener.

Each narrator attempts to win the admiration of his listener by establishing a meaningful role for himself as one who has the ability to tell a good story of
significant action, despite the tragic events that surround him. He wants to show that he controls events -- in particular, that he has gained control of his human emotions and morals by intellectualizing them, by retaining the artistic mind to shape his own tragic, disorganized reality into something meaningful, something (life and narration) shaped into explicable fiction. In other words, he characterizes himself as a man who has risen above his human side to become a peer to God. Thus Poe challenges us through this persona to consider that there exists no God, that there exists only the "effect" of some fiction of God that characters enact and writers create as a metaphor for the process of creation in all of us.

For Poe, effect is generated more through the manner in which his God-peer persona composes the murder narrative than through the content he chooses for his story. He turns his need for control into a general theory of writing as well as acting -- the self articulating, and thus controlling, its world. As Poe states in his review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*,

A skillful literary artist has constructed a tale. If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single effect to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents -- he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived
effect. If his very initial sentence tend not to the outbringing of this effect, then he has failed in his first step. In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design. (572)

We see this writing process at work in Poe’s God-peer persona throughout the murder narratives. This criminal narrator is conscious that he must generate the crucial aesthetic effect to establish himself by word and action as God (the central force of unity and power) by any method possible.

Story-telling, in short, serves a two-fold function in Poe. On the one hand, with the narrator in the role of God-peer, story-telling functions as godlike power, a means of original creation as opposed to retelling, a means of influencing feelings and beliefs through effect, a means of controlling an entire "world" that includes listeners as well as victims. On the other hand, on the human level, story-telling functions as a quest for order, for sanity, for human compassion, and finally for a sympathetic God; when these are not found to exist in reality (that is, in the narrator’s estimation of "reality"), they are created, or at least invoked, in fiction, perhaps finally even insisted upon in their absence.

Thus far I have considered Poe’s philosophical ideas about God in Eureka and in his murder narratives. This
is not to imply, however, that Poe consistently holds only one view throughout his writing career about the existence of God but rather that the final view about God expressed in *Eureka* develops gradually and grows out of a wide range of thought, mainly his relationship with his father and his theory of composition. In his poetry and many tales besides the murder narratives, Poe often asserts belief in the existence of a conventional, traditional, all powerful, moral God who is not indifferent to human suffering.\(^5\) For example,

I pray to God that she may lie
Forever with unopened eye,
While the pale sheeted ghosts go by!
"The Sleeper," stanza 3, ll. 6-8

or

. . . I began to reflect how magnificent a thing it was to die in such a manner, and how foolish it was in me to think of so paltry a consideration as my own individual life, in view of so wonderful a manifestation of God's power.
"A Descent into the Maelstrom," 443

In "The Spirits of the Dead," an apostrophe to dead souls, Poe concludes that God is ever present in the natural world:

The breeze -- the breath of God -- is still
And the mist upon the hill
Shadowy -- shadowy -- yet unbroken,
Is a symbol and a token --
How it hangs upon the trees,
A mystery of mysteries! --
(32, stanza 5)

The same idea is also present in "Eleanora":

The margin of the river, and the many dazzling
rivulets that glided, through devious ways, into its
channel, . . . its exceeding beauty spoke to our
hearts, in loud tones, of the love and of the glory
of God. (469)

In "Sonnet--Silence," however, Poe speaks of a force
by the name of "No More" (l. 9), which he warns the
reader not to "dread" (l. 10) and which he concludes can
be defeated by clinging to faith in God:

But should some urgent fate (untimely lot!)
Bring thee to meet his shadow (nameless elf,
That haunteth the lone regions where hath trod
No foot of man,) commend thyself to God!
(77, ll. 12-15)

It is obvious from this poem that early in life Poe had
the idea that what is feared most is the non-existence or
indifference of God, for the "No More" of this sonnet
bears a striking resemblance to the fear of "never-more"
in "The Raven" and the return to "Material Nihility"
described in Eureka. Nevertheless, Poe has not fully
developed the God of Eureka yet in this poem, which ends
on a positive note in regard to God, urging the reader to
seek traditional salvation by "commend[ing]" the self to
an abstract Almighty God.
In many of Poe’s poems the narrative voice calls out "God" as an exclamation addressed to God expressing some strong emotion:

One of these fish, par excellence the beau --
God help me! -- it has been my lot to know, . . . .
("O, Tempora! O, Mores!," stanza 6, ll. 1-2)

or

If I can hope -- Oh God! I can --
Its fount is holier -- more divine --
("Tamerlane," stanza 1, ll. 9-10)

or

Our thoughts, our souls -- O God above!
("Serenade," l. 24)

"God" used as an exclamation implies that the word is an ordinary part of the speaker’s vocabulary and that the concept of God will be understood to have positive connotations.

The only direct mention of God in "The Raven," the poem that dramatically illustrates the fear of life after death collapsing into nothingness, occurs toward the end of the poem:

"Prophet!" said I, "thing of evil! -- prophet still, if bird or devil!
By that Heaven that bends above us -- by that God we both adore --"

(85)
These lines begin the stanza of "The Raven" that Poe identifies in the "The Philosophy of Composition" as the "climax" of the poem:

Here then the poem may be said to have its beginning -- at the end, where all works of art should begin -- for it was here, at this point of my preconsiderations, that I first put pen to paper in the composition of the stanza. . . .

I composed this stanza, at this point, first that, by establishing the climax, I might the better vary and graduate, . . . the preceding queries of the lover. . . . (20)

Although, like the murder narratives, it carries the theme of fear that there is no existence beyond the natural world, "The Raven" asserts very strongly in this climactic stanza the existence of a supernatural world typically made up of a heaven and a hell and inhabited by both good and evil beings and reigned over by an "adore[d]" God.

Indeed, with the exception of "William Wilson," the first of Poe's murder narratives, the God-peers of the other murder narratives also use the term "God" in its traditional exclamatory sense. The narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart," for example, uses the word as an exclamation when he is in a state of panic: "Oh God! what could I do? I foamed -- I raved -- I swore! . . . Almighty God! -- no, no! They heard! -- they suspected!" (559). The narrator of "The Black Cat" also uses the
term "God" when he is in a state of panic because his crime is close to being discovered: "But may God shield and deliver me from the fangs of the Arch-Fiend!" (606). The voice of the criminal narrator in "The Imp of the Perverse" refers to "God" in a humorous way as part of an anecdote he tells before recounting his own crime: "The next morning he was discovered dead in his bed, and the Coroner’s verdict was, ‘Death by the visitation of God’" (830). The narrator is obviously linking himself with God here since his own victim, like the victim in this anecdote, was visited by none other than the God-peer murderer himself. And, of course, there are Fortunato’s famous last words reiterated by his murderer, whose repetition reinforces their ambiguity when used as part of his vocabulary as God-peer:

"For the love of God, Montresor!"
"Yes," I said, "for the love of God!"
(854)

In the murder narratives, in fact, Poe’s purpose is different from all the other places where the word "God" occurs in his works. Here the invocation of "God" in its more or less conventional sense by the criminal narrators is ironic; it is indicative of the human assumption of the existence of a moral God because it is traditional to do so, especially when One is needed because the human
self feels helpless and unable to appeal to anyone else and has, in effect, usurped the role. In addition to the ironic moments, Poe’s God-peer persona cries out "God" in desperate moments, when he can no longer restrain his emotions toward the crime he has committed and finds he has no one else to turn to. God’s crime then, according to Poe, is His absence, His failure to assist the human lives He is believed to have created.

In general, recent Poe scholarship focuses on what Poe thought about the origin of being and the significance of death, and on what these issues share with writing. It is on such questions, in particular Poe’s exploration of God as a fiction, that I focus primarily in this study. *Eureka* is the basis for understanding the rest of Poe’s literature, and Poe’s creation of the murder narratives is a response to the nothingness he felt the traditional God offers.

Poe makes the genre of *Eureka* ambiguous by identifying it "as an Art-Product alone: -- let us say as a Romance; or, if I be not urging too lofty a claim, as a Poem" (5, ll. 7-8), that is, a creative rather than a scientific or philosophical piece of writing, and this restriction in genre has had a major impact on how critics, both early and recent, have "judged" the piece "after I [Poe] am dead" (5, l. 13). As critics, we are
limited (or, at least, directed, or, at most, controlled) in our criticism of *Eureka* for one reason only -- because the authorial voice that controls audience effect has embedded in our minds that *Eureka* is something other (a poem) than what it appears to be (a scientific or philosophical piece).

GOD THE FICTIONAL FATHER FIGURE: POE'S CORRESPONDENCE WITH JOHN ALLAN

In much the same way as his speakers in the murder narratives, Poe had little choice in his life but to both assume and test the existence of another "supreme" being -- John Allan, the man whom he tried to believe in as "Father," again in the traditional sense of that word as connoting "protector," "nurturer," "supporter," and other such positive terms. Just as Poe's creative writing expresses ultimate fear of the non-existence of a moral God, Poe's letters carry the same tone of terror arising from the failure of his relationship with his father. The indifference to human suffering in the murder narratives is also strongly present in Poe's life. Poe's own letters and biographies of Poe tell us that he was met with indifference from those whom he thought he could trust for love and support, treated as an outcast by his
peers for being a good student, loved by women who were ill and dying. Poe’s life and death, as opposed to other nineteenth-century American writers of horror, was literally filled with terror, and I submit that his correspondence with his father influenced Poe’s murder narratives insofar as the John Allan of the letters enacts the role of arbitrary, inconsistent, or absent Father.

In Poe’s letters to family, friends, and especially to his godfather and foster father, John Allan, Poe wants to control, to influence, to have a desired effect upon Allan in much the same way as his self-conscious, criminal God-peer persona wants to effect certain thoughts and feelings of listeners. Poe’s state of mind in his letters is made clear by their tone -- desperate yet controlled, passionate yet submissive, fearful yet hopeful. It is this collection of conflicting characteristics that we struggle with in trying to understand Poe’s murder narratives and, more importantly, in trying to understand Poe’s concept of horror and in its relation to God.

Poe’s letters to Allan suggest a young man who is confused not about what he wants out of life but about why his father repeatedly remains indifferent toward Poe’s requests for financial support, for family
approval, for reconciliation into the Allan family. Poe hopes in his letters to persuade his father to help him with immediate needs, but his efforts to express his desires are, in his opinion, either ignored or criticized harshly. Poe's writing is not effective on Allan, however. He perceives his pleas to his father as, for the most part, ignored or mocked. In essence, Poe's appeal to higher authority is futile, for Allan's responses, often delayed, tell Poe that there is no fatherly compassion, or, worse, Allan's failures of response tell Poe that there is no father, no being superior to himself to turn to for compassion.

The existing letters exchanged between Poe and John Allan range from 1826 to 1833 and, according to Stanard, "Study of the letters indicates that they are the only correspondence, published or unpublished, between Poe and his foster-father" (5). They total twenty-nine, twenty-seven of which are from Poe to Allan and two from Allan to his son. One of Poe's letters is missing, and much of Allan's correspondence to his son is missing. However, we know that Poe acknowledges receipt of letters from his father, and we can decipher the contents of Allan's letters and, more importantly, Poe's reactions by what Poe says in his own letters to Allan. We also have a sense of Allan's reactions to his son's letters by
private notations Allan makes on the envelopes of letters sent by Poe. The first letter we have from Allan to his son is in 1827, shortly after their initial argument caused Poe to leave the Allan household. The second letter from Allan is in 1829, a few months following the death of Poe’s stepmother, during which time father and son are believed to have called a truce (Stanard, 97). Allan dies in 1834, and Poe’s first murder narrative is published in 1838.

The first two letters written by Poe when he was only 17 years old and prior to the 1827 dispute with his father reveal Poe’s innocent and assumed expectations of what a father should be. These early letters compared with the later ones make clear the development of the voice of God-peer that, at once, so boldly speaks in justification of murder "for the love of God" and so subliminally begs for the existence of the just and almighty God he was taught in youth to believe in.

The tone of Letter #1 from Poe to Allan (University of Virginia, Charlottesville, May 1826) is affectionate. Poe shifts abruptly from one subject to the next. This indicates that he feels comfortable communicating with his father about a variety of different topics and that he does not feel self-conscious about the organization or writing style of the letter. The letter begins with
young Poe’s acknowledging receipt of the clothes his father sent. Poe is especially fond of a coat, which he says "fits me exactly"; then Poe moves directly into talking about the recent "disturbances in College" in which "the Grand Jury met and put the students in a terrible fright" (37). Next, Poe enthusiastically tells his father about "several fights" that have occurred, only one of which "excited more interest than any I have seen, for a common fight is so trifling an occurrence that no notice is taken of it." The details of this particular "scuffle" that fascinate Poe involve one boy’s being "struck . . . with a large stone on one side of his head," a boy who in turn "drew a pistol" that "miss fire[d]." Poe abruptly shifts from the dramatic conclusion of this shooting to sending his "love to Ma & Miss Nancy -- & all my friends." Although Poe’s detailed description of the uproar at the University shows he pays attention to and is fascinated by the mischief surrounding him, he is himself in the role of observer, not participant, and appears to be pleased that he now has a life of his own and interesting things to report to his father. However, the focus of his own existence is on his studies and on immediate essentials, as indicated by his concluding sentence in which Poe requests two
items from his father -- "the Historiae of Tacitus" and "some more soap" (38).

Letter #2 from Poe to Allan (University of Virginia, Charlottesville, September 21, 1826) has the same affectionate, youthful tone as the first. Poe begins by talking about an upcoming examination which all the students are worried about. He basically expresses a positive attitude about how he will do on the exam: "I have been studying a great deal in order to be prepared, and dare say I shall come off as well as the rest of them, that is -- if I don’t get frightened -- Perhaps you will have some business up here about that time, and then you can judge for yourself --" (43). At this point in his life, Poe apparently trusts and desires his father’s judgment and evaluation of his educational abilities. He seems uninhibited from expressing reservation and fear about the exam, and his statement indicates that, at least in the matter of his studies, he considers his father to be a better judge than himself. Next, Poe tells his father about the "very fine collection" in the new University library. The last paragraph details one of "a great many fights here lately" which "took place before my door" and resulted in a boy’s arm having been "bitten from the shoulder to the elbow -- and it is likely that pieces of flesh as large as my hand will be
obliged to be cut out." Following this gruesome account, Poe once again sends "love to Ma and Miss Nancy." (44)

These first two letters have the tone of youthful affection for and a healthy sort of dependence on a trusted paternal figure. In both, Poe makes reference to the last time his father visited him at the University: "Soon after you left here" (37); "when you were up here some time ago" (44). Both letters are characterized by abrupt shifts from one topic to the next; both contain anecdotes about fights between classmates that Poe finds particularly interesting and worth recounting. Most importantly, both letters demonstrate Poe's complete and unqualified trust and security in his relationship with his father. As Stanard says, "The most striking thing about these letters home is their affectionate tone and the boyish candor and confidence with which he chatters of college doings to his father" (32). There is no indication of fear or inhibition of any sort on Poe's part in communicating with his father. The delightful "chatter" of these early letters becomes the voice of desperation in the subsequent letters. Having felt this security, the subsequent letters "a tragic tale unfold," as Stanard puts it (7). And it is this tragic tale that serves as the prelude to the murder narratives and the
ultimate horror of an indifferent or absent God that Poe envisions in *Eureka*.

Beginning with Letter #3 from Poe to Allan (The Court House Tavern, Richmond, March 19, 1827), after Poe at age 18 left the Allan household "to find some place in this wide world, where I will be treated -- not as you have treated me" (55), the tone and also the writing style completely changes from the first two letters. Letter #3 has the voice of one who is self-conscious of his own power of persuasion. Unlike the first two letters, this letter has organization, smooth movement from one point to the next, and a specific purpose: to be understood, to explain his motives. He does not wish to be misunderstood and stresses that he has not acted on impulse: "You may perhaps think that I have flown off in a passion, & that I am already wishing to return; But not so -- I will give you the reasons which have actuated me, and then judge" (55). Here again we find the use of the word "judge." Poe sees his father as a person in a position to pass judgment on his behavior, and he clearly wants Allan’s verdict to be that he has done the right thing in leaving home. Apparently impatient for and in need of a reply, Poe writes another letter (#4, The Court House Tavern, Richmond, March 20, 1827) the next day in
which he summarizes the content of Letter #3. Letter #4 emphasizes not motive but Poe’s need for help.

Allan does respond to Letter #3 upon receiving it, but his response is laced with overt indifference toward Poe’s appeal for help and with mockery toward Poe’s predicament. The voice of Letter #5 by Allan (Richmond, March 20, 1827) places Poe in the role of victim in a confidence man’s game. Allan even goes so far as to parody Poe’s own writing style. In Letter #3, Poe asks for his clothes and books and for financial assistance:

... and if you still have the least affection for me, ... send me I entreat you some money immediately, as I am in the greatest necessity -- If you fail to comply with my request -- I tremble for the consequence. (56-57)

In his response to this letter, Allan closes by repeating Poe’s closing words:

... & now that you have shaken off your dependance & declared for your own Independance -- & after such a list of Black charges -- you Tremble for the consequences unless I send you a supply of money. (68)

Allan’s last words parody Poe’s last words: "tremble for the consequences." Poe uses "tremble" to let his father know that he needs help because he is alone and afraid. Allan’s echo of the word "tremble" is a mockery of Poe’s appeal that shows "fatherly" indifference toward the
needs Poe expresses, and Allan makes no acknowledgement of Poe’s appeal to whatever little affection Allan may retain for his son despite their differences.

This dialogue between Poe and his father bears a similar tone to the words exchanged between Montresor, the God-peer, and Fortunato at the end of "The Cask of Amontillado." There Fortunato’s pleas are answered with nothing more than a ridiculing echo.⁹

". . . Let us be gone."
"Yes," I said, "let us be gone."
"For the love of God, Montresor!"
"Yes," I said, "for the love of God!"

Montresor consciously ignores the meaning of Fortunato’s words, and, in essence, throws them back at him emptied of their original meaning and usurped for his own meaning, just as Allan does with his son’s "tremble." Allan divorces from the word the meaning Poe attaches to it and sends it back to his son empty of the sympathy Poe had hoped to receive when he wrote the word.

As the battle between father and son grows over the years, Poe’s voice in his subsequent letters becomes even more desperate as he struggles to keep alive the traditional image of "Father," but this image has now become almost totally an imaginative construction. It is at once Poe’s fiction of the monster he thinks his father
is and the caretaker he believes a father ought to be, just as the murder narratives unfold two fictions of God -- the feared indifferent God and the desired perfect God.

Poe begins several of his letters by expressing concern over his father's lack of response:

I wrote you shortly before leaving Fort Moultrie & am much hurt at receiving no answer. (87)

I wrote you some time ago from this place but have as yet received no reply. (99)

I have written you twice lately and have received no answer. . . . (153)

I am unable to account for your not answering. . . . (171)

Regardless of how much pain Poe feels, he never gives up trying to make Allan play the role of father:

It is a long time since I have written to you unless with an application for money or assistance. I am sorry that it is so seldom that I hear from you or even of you -- for all communication seems to be at an end; and when I think of the long twenty one years that I have called you father, and you have called me son, I could cry like a child to think that it should all end in this. (279)10

Poe continues for the rest of Allan's life to assign to his father authority and superiority over himself as son.

Significant in the last piece of correspondence from Poe to Allan11 is Poe's persistence in trying to find that much needed figure of "Father." Not finding it, he
creates it, forces it to live in the fiction of his letters. Poe’s letter is brief and to the point:

It has now been more than two years since you have assisted me, and more than three since you have spoken to me. I feel little hope that you will pay any regard to this letter, but still I cannot refrain from making one more attempt to interest you in my behalf. If you will only consider in what a situation I am placed you will surely pity me -- without friends, without any means, consequently of obtaining employment, I am perishing -- absolutely perishing for want of aid. And yet I am not idle -- nor addicted to any vice -- nor have I committed any offence against society which would render me deserving of so hard a fate. For God’s sake pity me, and save me from destruction. (313)

A hopeless hope, a cry for pity, addiction to vices, lack of employment, a question of idleness, a cry for help, too harsh a fate for the offense -- these are the very concerns dramatized in the first of Poe’s murder narratives, "William Wilson." This letter shows that, although his father has not been in direct contact for years, Poe continues to place him in the role of Father and to account for his own actions to John Allan as he believes a son should. He still seeks approval of Father, from whom he is separated physically and literally but not emotionally and figuratively. This is the case between the self and God that Poe builds in "William Wilson" and the subsequent murder narratives.

The terror generated by such emotionally painful experiences with his father is no doubt a major factor in
Poe's creation of the God-peer persona, and this terror is personified by the criminal narrators of the murder narratives in the form of some creature of horror such as an incubus, a demon, a black cat, an evil God-peer. In the end the intensity of fear makes Poe's criminal narrators cry out for the existence of a sympathetic and just God. Because the cry goes unanswered, Poe the God-peer creates "God" as a fiction just as Poe the orphan keeps alive the idea of "Father" through letter-writing.

The chapters that follow focus on the individual tales that I have identified as murder narratives, and I will consider the tales chronologically by date of publication. My aim in these chapters is to show how Poe, motivated strongly by his own "orphan" background, dramatizes appeal to supernatural explanations to account for human evils; because the narrator of each tale has an emotional need to believe in the existence of a supernatural and moral God, he places himself in the position of peer to God when he finds in the world no evidence of Almighty God. It is through this God-peer persona that Poe attempts to demonstrate that belief or disbelief in the existence of God can be controlled or enacted by some kind of willed performance.
Notes

1. In discussing Poe's reference to the "Heart Divine", Manning argues,

Eureka simply will not yield to paraphrase or summary, and if we are to make anything at all of Poe's final triumphant 'demonstration' that the 'Heart Divine,' the very principle of Being of the Universe 'is our own' . . . we shall have to accept from the beginning that this is a tell-tale heart, creating and revealing its secrets in a continual reciprocity of action and re-enactment. (237)

2. In two places, Manning explains the text of Eureka in metaphorical terms, borrowing images from "The Tell-Tale Heart" and some of the other murder narratives:

Poe's [writing] -- perhaps most triumphantly of all in Eureka -- uncovers its own floorboards, dismantles its meticulously constructed brick walls, violates its carefully sealed tombs. The tell-tale heart which discovers the secret crime is also its perpetrator. (238)

The perfect poem, the Universe, is also a kind of cosmic crime, which like the audacious plot of 'D' in 'The Purloined Letter' awaits resolution -- through reduplication -- by the ultimate detective, Dupin, or -- here -- Poe. And as in his story, it is the throbings of a tell-tale heart which gives away the crime. (245)

Other critics also make reference to the murder narratives in connection with Eureka. David Halliburton, for example, refers to the rhythm of the language in Eureka as being suggestive of a heartbeat as in "The Tell-Tale Heart": "The rhythm of Eureka, with its repetitions and reversals, its dashes and its pauses, is the rhythm of breathing, the life-sustaining process central to so many of the tales, and is dissociable from the beating of the heart that, here and in 'The Tell-Tale Heart,' is the seat of life" (410). Joseph J. Moldenhauer reviews many of Poe's tales, including the murder narratives, in light of Eureka and refers to the criminal narrators as "artful murderers" (292):
Regarded dramatically and symbolically, each of Poe's tales of terror contains no more than two characters: the protagonist and his 'victim,' 'enemy,' or 'beloved.' The death of the latter is the requirement for his own death; it precedes and foreshadows his own withdrawal from life. (294)

3. Quoting Poe's handwritten note at the end of the original edition of *Eureka*, "That God may be all in all, *each* must become God," Whitman speculates, "We confess to a half faith in the old superstition of the significance of anagrams when we find, in the transposed letters of Edgar Poe's name, the words a God-peer" (78).

4. In her study of the poetic use of the dash in *Eureka*, Dayan is convinced that the narrator of the "poem" is a reviser: "The most significant function the dash performs in *Eureka* is that of 'emendation.' Words once presented as elements to be analyzed can then be submitted to a process of alteration and correction. The writer of *Eureka* is first of all a corrector" (443). Further, to revise also means to "re-see," that is, to see in a new way, as Poe tries to envision the human self and his relationship to God in a new way in *Eureka*.

5. According to Elizabeth Wiley's 1989 concordance, there are 53 occurrences of the word "God" and three of the possessive "God's" in Poe's poetry. According to Burton R. Pollin's 1982 concordance, there are 117 occurrences of the word "God" and 15 of the possessive "God's" in Poe's fiction.

6. For example, in 1907 Frederic Drew Bond criticizes *Eureka* for its "[c]rude . . . philosophic speculations" (267) while at the same time is compelled to praise it for its "satire on the exclusive use of either the deductive or inductive methods in the search for truth" (269). In 1983 Dayan calls it a "boldly unreadable composite work" which nonetheless, she claims, "says more about poetic language than any poem Poe ever wrote" (437). To William Hand Browne back in 1869, the "poem" is a "remarkable production" that he talks about as having influenced "some of the most recent conclusions or speculations of men of science" (194), and Clayton Hoagland in 1939 makes a similar argument, claiming Poe's "theory of an expanding universe" was a poetic foreshadowing of the views of an early twentieth-century astronomer (307). Both Browne and Hoagland pretty much overlook its scientific inconsistencies because the author is a poet. Harriet R. Holman in 1969 calls it a "strange work" which "Poe must have taken ironic
pleasure" in writing (49). Lafleur in 1941 says *Eureka* is "poorly written" and "much too long" (401) but, nevertheless, is driven to the conclusion that "it is perhaps unfair to criticise Poe in detail" because "we should accept him somewhat in the spirit of poet or prophet" (405).

7. According to Poe's Letter #13, he wrote to his father June 10, 1829, in response to Allan's letter of June 8, 1829.

8. The use of the term "judge" in their correspondence after Allan and Poe are at odds becomes very significant to understanding Poe's idea of an indifferent God in his fiction and poetry. This early use of the term by Poe is straightforward and innocent. It is worth contrasting to later uses of the word, for it is the concept of judgment that occupies the foreground in the downfall of the father-son relationship.

9. Critical explanations of Montresor's echoing of his victims words are discussed in Chapter 5.

10. Letter #26, Baltimore, October 16, 1831.


CHAPTER 1

"WITHIN THE BOUNDS OF HUMAN POSSIBILITY": THE WHISPERINGS OF GOD IN "WILLIAM WILSON"

Poe's persona of "a God-peer" is conceived in "William Wilson," the longest of Poe's murder narratives and the first to be published. Although as Ruth Sullivan points out "the story lacks the consistent hair-raising concreteness of the narrator's stalking of the old man's eye in 'The Tell-Tale Heart'" (253), I still classify "William Wilson," along with the horror stories "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat," as one of the murder narratives because it is Poe's first short story narrated from the stance of a murderer who recounts his crime in the first person. This narrator is representative of the feared God figure described in Eureka who, in the long run, can only offer virtual nothingness to mankind. Poe progressively develops his God-peer persona from William Wilson, a frightened boy whose conscience haunts him in the allegorical form of a twin brother throughout his "vice-filled" life, to Montresor, an older and complex personality who requires little motivation to take the life of a "brother Freemason."

While through the God-peer persona of his tales Poe
dramatizes ultimate horror, by representing God as the indifferent, evil being he later envisions in Eureka, Poe in turn also illustrates in the tales that any vision of the Almighty God is as much a fiction as the narrator’s believing himself to be a peer to God. As contemporary criticism puts it, we experience only narratives of reality. Poe’s point in the murder narratives and in Eureka is that both God figures are fictional, that faith in a God figure of any sort (human or supernatural) is a fiction created out of human fear of abandonment, isolation and, finally, oblivion. This point of view stems in part from his real life experiences in trying to retain a father figure through letter writing.

"William Wilson" is lengthy for a Poe short story, and its setting changes often. Many years pass throughout the course of the story, which criticism traditionally breaks into four sections: first, the narrator’s introduction in which he establishes the purpose of his tale, the exposition of his childhood, and finally the description of Reverend Dr. Bransby’s school house in England (337-41); second, the introduction of Wilson’s "double" up until the narrator leaves the academy, frightened by his twin’s features (341-47); third, the narrator’s life at Eton and Oxford, where he turns to the vices of alcohol and gambling, upset by two
mysterious visits by the second Wilson (347-53); and
lastly, the narrator's travels "to the very ends of the
earth . . . in [a] vain" attempt to escape his haunting
"tormentor" (354), ending in the Wilsons' murdering of
each other, an act symbolizing (I argue) simultaneously
man's destruction of God and God's destruction of man
(353-57).¹

As is generally characteristic of Poe's God-peer
persona, the Wilson narrator is from the start of the
tale self-conscious of himself as a tale-teller in the
process of composing, and the listener in turn is alerted
that an act of narration is about to begin. For
instance, he draws attention to "[t]he fair page now
lying before me" (337), thus invoking the image of a
writer about to begin composing. This is the first clue
that what follows is not only Poe's composition but the
narrator's own report. Wilson makes a statement of his
thesis in the first paragraph: "This epoch -- these
later years -- took unto themselves a sudden elevation in
turpitude, whose origin alone it is my present purpose to
assign" (337). His thesis is loaded with suggestions of
"assign[ing]" the "origin" of creation, with suggestions
that he as a tale-teller is, like God, responsible for
creating something out of (perhaps) nothing, out of the
blank "fair page" that lies before him. The next step is
to acknowledge awareness of his audience, and Wilson, like all of Poe's criminal narrators, indeed alludes to his listeners shortly after stating his thesis. He prays that someone who is listening will view the circumstances surrounding and leading up to his horrid crime and sympathize with him, who is at once the murderer and the murdered:

I long, in passing through the dim valley [of the shadow of death], for the sympathy -- I had nearly said for the pity -- of my fellow men. I would fain have them believe that I have been, in some measure, the slave of circumstance beyond human control. I would wish them to seek out for me, in the details I am about to give, some little oasis of fatality amid a wilderness of error. I would have them allow -- what they cannot refrain from allowing -- that, although temptation may have erewhile existed as great, man was never thus, at least, tempted before -- certainly never thus fell. (337)

Like the God-peer persona who claims to be "one of the many uncounted victims of the Imp of the Perverse," the Wilson narrator here pleads that he is "the slave of circumstance beyond human control" -- in essence, that he is, if you will, a victim of the Imp of Fate but also the spokesperson for Fate. Doubling is already taking place here in the first paragraph of the tale. The narrator is "slave" to fate but master of his fiction. Fate is a god figure in itself controlling Wilson's life but is only such within the confines of the fiction the narrator as God-peer commands.
From the start, the narrator works on the effect he wants to have on his listeners. In Thomas Joswick's words, "beginning students find a good deal of satisfaction" in this tale because of Poe's ability "to tell right off what a story is all about" (225), or as Sullivan puts it, "Poe lures us, his readers, deeply into his story by disguising the narrator" (263). Like Poe, then, Wilson is conscious that as a tale-teller he must impress listeners through good writing in order to succeed as the authority figure of the story and to invoke the desired effect of "sympathy," or "pity," in the listener -- if that is indeed the effect Poe is after in the murder narratives. I hold, instead, for a more encompassing issue: that it is the significance of God, or belief in any God, as a fiction that Poe explores in the murder narratives in particular and in his other poetry and fiction in general.

The dominant motif throughout the four sections of "William Wilson" is that of "voices." That is, the narrator makes a self-conscious effort to give function and power to the various voices at work in his story. He is especially self-conscious of how his own narrative voice is used for effect, of how it is significant to establishing himself as a God-peer, as the voice to be heeded both by other characters and by listeners. While
the God-peer works to establish narrative voice as authoritative, the "namesake" he creates for his fiction is characterized by a strong whispering voice that has, like fate, an authority of its own over the narrator’s claim to authority and yet finally remains part of the narration. In other words, the narrator creates a second self that has his own voice but slightly altered into a whisper that has a powerful, subliminal sort of influence on the narrator’s behavior and, in effect, becomes part of it. The use of this subliminal voice is suggestive of the so-called word of God that believers of an Almighty God are said to hear and follow in their daily lives and to read in theological texts. By the end of "William Wilson," these two authoritative voices -- narrative voice (signifying the God-peer’s power over his fiction and his listeners) and the namesake’s whispering voice (signifying the traditional Almighty God’s "intervention" in human life), which is still part of his own -- end up merging into one voice to speak the final revelatory words of the story, which I examine in greater detail at the conclusion of this chapter.

The recurring reference to voice begins with the narrator’s description of his childhood. He claims that he was independent from a young age and that his parents allowed his voice and his will to dominate the home:
"Thenceforward my voice was a household law; and at an age when few children have abandoned their leading-strings, I was left to the guidance of my own will, and became, in all but name, the master of my own actions" (338). His voice as "household law" tells us that he sees himself, in retrospect, as having dominated home life. Looking back on his childhood then, the narrator depicts himself as having been an authority figure from the time he was a boy, his will superior to that of his parents. We must keep in mind that this is what the God-peer would have us believe is the basis of his fictional authority.

Wilson describes himself in a similarly superior role intellectually and morally in Reverend Dr. Bransby’s academy. He refers to his descriptive recollections of the academy as "rambling details. . . . utterly trivial, and even ridiculous in themselves" (338), a description which establishes the world around him and the people in it as inferior to him, as essentially under his control, part of his mind. Terms ordinarily associated with certain organized religions such as "church," "pastor," and "Christmas" (339) are passed over as incidental and treated as being separate from the concept of "God." This passing over of traditional religious terminology is all part of Poe’s attempt to create a character whose aim
is to recreate the traditional moral standards believed to be at work in "God’s" world in order to establish his place as peer to God and to illustrate that moral standards are the product of human rather than divine creativity.

The narrator concludes his description of the academy by announcing his reign as lord over his classmates:

In truth, . . . my disposition, soon rendered me a marked character among my schoolmates, and . . . gave me an ascendancy over all not greatly older than myself. . . . If there is on earth a supreme and unqualified despotism, it is the depotism of a master mind in boyhood over the less energetic spirits of its companions (341).

Wilson’s description of his alleged superiority is illustrative of the very God-peer that Poe argues for in Eureka, a person who reaches a point in his life where he believes "that nothing is, or can be, superior to any one soul -- that each soul is, in part, its own God -- its own Creator" (141, ll. 18-20). Words such as "ascendancy," "supreme," and "master" to describe himself as a boy indicate that Wilson wants us to believe that he reaches this critical point of "moral superiority" early on in life and sustains this state of mind to the point of his death. The role of evil in the life of Wilson becomes an issue after the introduction of his "namesake"
-- that is, the point at which he begins to experience and display cruel behavior marked by an air of indifference, all directed toward the being he has created.

Sullivan would have us believe Wilson is the innocent victim of "a too-harsh superego." Missing in much of the earlier criticism including that of Sullivan is the recognition that the narrator is a tale-teller in the act of inventing a fiction, a process which includes inventing not only a particular image of himself as a human God-peer but also a second allegorical self to represent the traditional God with all the shortcomings Poe perceives in Him, perceptions formed largely by Poe’s negative experiences with his stepfather. More recently, Joswick has offered a more telling reading of the Wilson narrator’s control of language:

Wilson is a snob, pure and simple, and as a snob he regards conscience as an impertinence to his self-willed mastery of social forms. His peculiar obtuseness -- that seemingly studied inability to at all recognize the conventional signs of conscience (the whispering voice, the ‘insinuated counsel,’ the ‘moral sense’), let alone heed them as claims on his attention and action -- indicates the snob’s desire to manipulate the language of society to his own ends. (227-28)

Joswick gives us a certain insight lacking in earlier criticism of the story, which tends to concern itself with various allegorical interpretations of the Wilson
namesake as symbolic of some aspect of the narrator's mind such as his conscience. However, Joswick's argument falls short in not recognizing allegory itself as one of the God-peer's literary tools, as being under the control of the narrator and, in fact, part of the narration.

Virtually all earlier criticism is psychological. It argues that this story attempts to explain Poe's doubling in terms of the human will's somehow having been divided into two parts, between which supposedly lies some sort of "tension," "struggle," or "conflict." Criticism of the past few years argues, instead, that "William Wilson" has the appearance of being simplistically allegorical and predictable but is, in actuality, far more complex than earlier critics have considered it. Tracy Ware, for example, calls the tale a "kind of 'hesitating' allegory" (44) and, quoting Todorov, concludes,

If there are "two stories" in "William Wilson," one literal and one allegorical, then it is as difficult for the reader as it is for the narrator, "at any given time, to say with certainty upon which of its two stories one happened to be." If the various "windings" of these stories in their "returning in upon themselves" are indeed "incomprehensible," then the hesitations of the narrator are less a sign of his psychological aberrations than of the undecidability of the whole narrative. In such a reading, "William Wilson" becomes what Dr. Bransby once seemed to be: "a gigantic paradox, too utterly monstrous for solution". (48)
In simpler words, the narrator’s instability is due not so much to his psychological problems as to his problems in successfully narrating a story complicated by two levels of reading. Ware implies that the tale is about the composition of a narrative and its effects on readers. Poe’s statement in his review of Hawthorne’s "Twice-Told Tales" that "the soul of the reader is at the writer’s control" (572) is nowhere in Poe more true than in the murder narratives. Joswick argues,

[I]nitiate and experienced readers alike feel a good deal of superiority toward Wilson, and they probably as well feel the urge to reprove him (or Poe, because all of the story seems so obvious) for an obtuseness bordering on cultural illiteracy in not recognizing that the other William Wilson is a representation of his conscience. And it is precisely by encouraging such feelings that the story serves up to its readers the several pleasures of mastery. (226)

Where Joswick would seem to be arguing that Poe gives readers the illusion of having control by assigning us the task from the start of "seek[ing] out for me . . . some little oasis of fatality amid a wilderness of error" (337), I argue instead that it is the God-peer’s need for creating an illusion of control that Poe aims for.

There is no denying that this tale, because of its doubling, sets itself up from the start for allegorical interpretations. However, the complexity of "William Wilson" arises out of our recognition that the narrator
is not unconscious of the allegory present in his tale. Poe turns allegory over to his narrator to use, if you will, as a literary tool "on" his listeners. "William Wilson" is an allegorical tale, but the allegory is at the narrator's command and, therefore, has a different function in this story than it ordinarily would have in a story where allegorical characters are oblivious of what they symbolize, while author and readers are aware. Here, allegory functions as a narrative method self-consciously used by the God-peer to structure reality.

Before the introduction of the Wilson "namesake," the narrator describes his behavior more as that of a conceited "bad boy" who brags about his superior intellect than as that of a fully developed God-peer. In other words, his early claims to mastery are significant but childish and without any moral dimension. With maturity comes a complex doubling. Wilson's wits are matched by no one but his "twin," who "presumed to compete with me [the narrator] in the studies of the class" (341), and with the introduction of the Wilson namesake also comes moral judgement. The narrator's introduction of this fictional alter-ego presents a challenge to his confidently established superiority up to this point in the story. It is significant that the challenge is self-imposed, created out of his human need
to invoke a God figure superior to his own human self but made in the same image. The challenge is Wilson's expression of the human need for guidance and support from a superior. In "William Wilson" the Wilson narrator creates God in his own image, an obvious but significant reversal of the traditional belief that God supposedly is the One who created humans in His guise.

The confidence with which the God-peer speaks of his superiority to other students gives way to a later, allegorical doubling in the narrator's fiction between human will (represented by William Wilson the narrator as the God-peer) and God's will (represented by the "other" William Wilson playing the traditional Supreme God figure). For example, the Wilson narrator states:

Wilson's rebellion was to me a source of the greatest embarrassment; -- the more so as, in spite of the bravado with which in public I made a point of treating him and his pretensions, I secretly felt that I feared him, and could not help thinking the equality which he maintained so easily with myself, a proof of his true superiority. (342)

Two power sources are at work in the fiction, both within the conscious control of the sponsoring self -- or so the narrative voice struggles to maintain. The God-peer talks about the other Wilson's superiority as being a personal and private matter:
Yet this superiority -- even this equality -- was in truth acknowledged by no one but myself; our associates, by some unaccountable blindness, seemed not even to suspect it. Indeed, his competition, his resistance, and especially his impertinent and dogged interference with my purposes, were not more pointed than private. (342)

That the others do not perceive a struggle between the Wilson twins is an indication that the struggle is fictional, a creative need and product of the imagination. Indeed, there is virtually no evidence that any character other than the narrator is even aware that a second Wilson exists. In fact, there is one Wilson, one fictional role which the narrator splits into two images for the purpose of exploring the entire God-peer role.

The narrator reasons that his twin is motivated to compete with him "solely by a whimsical desire to thwart, astonish, or mortify" the narrator (342), implying an external God imagined as one who takes pleasure in toying with human emotions. To understand why Poe views God in this manner, we must return to the image of Father that emerges in his letters to John Allan. This idea of God as a sort of confidence man is furthered by the narrator’s description that his twin "mingled with his injuries, his insults, or his contradictions, a certain most inappropriate, and assuredly most unwelcome affectionateness of manner" (342). As we have seen, Poe
struggles with this mixture of insult and affection in his relationship to Allan. These contradictory attitudes of insult mixed with affection with which the narrator characterizes the Wilson twin are Poe's expression of the fear that God, like Allan, is an inconsistent and unreliable authority figure. His God-peer will try to play the same ambivalent role in his usurpation of God.

The narrator characterizes himself as experiencing conflicting feelings toward his twin, feelings that show not only human conflict with God but also God's ambiguous treatment of humanity: "It is difficult, indeed, to define, or even to describe, my real feelings towards him. They formed a motley and heterogeneous admixture; -- some petulant animosity, which was not yet hatred, some esteem, more respect, much fear, with a world of uneasy curiosity" (343). This is clearly a description of Poe's conflicting feelings toward his father as seen in the letters and now central to Poe's narrative. For example, Allan and Poe continuously create exaggerated, if not false, images of each other in the letters, causing confusion and tension in the relationship.

Despite the conflicting feelings the narrator experiences toward the God figure who is, in effect, a dimension of himself, in his story man-God and God-man become what the narrator describes as "the must
inseparable of companions" (343). The narrative enacts its own version of a total world order. The Wilson counterpart is represented in the exact same physical image of Wilson the narrator, with one significant exception -- his voice: "-- my rival had a weakness in the faucial or guttural organs, which precluded him from raising his voice at any time above a very low whisper. Of this defect I did not fail to take what poor advantage lay in my power" (343). In his battle to regain superiority, then, the narrator takes advantage of his twin's weakness, thus proving himself as cruel as the God figure he describes and fears and drawing this identity even closer. More so, the battle of voices becomes symbolic of the entire range of divine, supreme power and raises the question of which "voice" should be heeded, and if indeed there is a difference between God's literal voice and the narrator's figurative ideas about God's voice. Above all, the narrator attempts to give himself the louder, or more dominant, "voice."

Each Wilson twin possesses both godlike and human qualities. The narrator enacts a willful God, boastful, loud, and cruel toward humans, but as a human he is introverted, depressed, desperate. His twin as a human is gentle, soft-spoken, morally balanced. As God, the Wilson twin is inconsistent in disposition just as Allan
is an inconsistent father figure. At times, the narrator describes his double as a John Allan type authority figure, cruelly mimicking his human counterpart:

His cue, which was to perfect an imitation of myself, lay both in words and in actions; and most admirably did he play his part. My dress it was an easy matter to copy; my gait and general manner were, without difficulty, appropriated; in spite of his constitutional defect, even my voice did not escape him. My louder tones were, of course, unattempted, but then the key, it was identical; and his singular whisper, it grew the very echo of my own. (344)

The attempt to imitate the voice is especially like Allan’s mocking echo of his son’s voice that we witness in the letters. In this sense, the Wilson twin resembles the much feared God of Eureka. When the narrator raises the question of his narrative counterpart’s "intended effect," the ridiculing manner is again present: "Satisfied with having produced in my bosom the intended effect, he seemed to chuckle in secret over the sting he had inflicted" (345). Here the twin God succeeds with his "intended effect" of "sting[ing]" the human narrator and "chuckle[s]" at his triumph. This is the type of behavior humans especially dread receiving from any authority figure and, ultimately, God.

The battle of wills grows stronger in this section of the story, as the narrator comes closer to actually "seeing" the face of "God." As he says of his double at
one point: "I have already more than once spoken of . . . his frequent officious interference with my will. This interference often took the ungracious character of advice; advice not openly given, but hinted or insinuated" (345). At this point in "William Wilson," Poe suggests through his narration that God is never literally present, that God’s help is implied rather than offered explicitly. There is much insinuation as opposed to candidness in the correspondence between John Allan and Poe. In this sense, Poe never really received literal guidance and support from his father and his anxiety grew when his father did not reply or did not promptly reply.

In "William Wilson," the narrator admits that his twin is superior to him morally -- "Yet, at this distant day, let me do him the simple justice to acknowledge . . . that his moral sense, at least, if not his general talents and worldly wisdom was far keener than my own" (345) -- and concludes "that I might, to-day, have been a better, and thus a happier man, had I less frequently rejected the counsels embodied in those meaning whispers which I then but too cordially hated and too bitterly despised" (345). The narrator comes to regret his rejection of God’s "whispers," that is, his rejection of his fictional representation of God in a traditionally
moral role. Poe may very well have strongly experienced these feelings about Allan after his father’s death. Indeed in Letter #26, Poe the son writes:

When I look back upon the past and think of every thing -- of how much you tried to do for me -- of your forbearance and your generosity, in spite of the most flagrant ingratitude on my part, I can not help thinking-yee-myself the greatest fool in existence, -- I am ready to curse the day when I was born. But I am fully -- truly conscious that all these better feelings have come too late. . . . (279)

Poe’s slip here, "thinking-yee-myself the greatest fool in existence" is significant in that there is a doubling of himself with the figure of his father as is the case in "William Wilson." Whether a cruel or compassionate God figure, the Wilson twin is never completely, fully present in the life of William Wilson even as the narrator’s creation just as Allan, at this point in Poe’s life, was available only in his son’s letters. Poe’s message is that God must come through the creative imagination, as the Poe God-peer attempts to do through tale-telling and as son creates "Father" through letter writing.

The narrator experiences hatred toward both versions of the God he has created or, more precisely, hatred that God is indeed a human creation rather than an independent, literal presence ruling coherently over the
world He is said to have created. The twin's appearance makes him think back to his own infancy and experience "wild, confused and thronging memories of a time when memory herself was yet unborn" (346). The narrator imagines that his twin was somehow associated with his creation: "I cannot better describe the sensation which oppressed me than by saying that I could with difficulty shake off the belief of my having been acquainted with the being who stood before me, at some epoch very long ago -- some point of the past even infinitely remote" (346). This "delusion" occurs on the narrator's last day at the academy. That same evening, he puts his "scheme in operation" (346). His attempt "to make him [the Wilson namesake] feel the whole extent of the malice with which I was imbued" (346) brings him face to face with what "God" is:

Assured of his being asleep, I returned, took the light, and with it again approached the bed. Close curtains were around it, which, in the prosecution of my plan, I slowly and quietly withdrew, when the bright rays fell vividly upon the sleeper, and my eyes, at the same moment, upon his countenance. I looked; -- and a numbness, an iciness of feeling instantly pervaded my frame. (347)

Upon closer inspection, he discovers that this "God" is merely a product of his own human imagination:

My breast heaved, my knees tottered, my whole spirit became possessed with an objectless yet intolerable
horror. Gasping for breath, I lowered the lamp in still nearer proximity to the face. Were these -- these the lineaments of William Wilson? I saw, indeed, that they were his, but I shook as if with a fit of the ague in fancying they were not. . . . Was it, in truth, within the bounds of human possibility, that what I now saw was the result, merely, of the habitual practice of this sarcastic imitation? (347)

In this split narrative role, the narrator is at once usurper of God and one in need of affirming His existence. He is both "godless" figure (usurper) and god figure. He can sustain in narrative what is, in fact, unbearable, self-destructive tension. The horror the narrator experiences is caused by his realization that God did not make him in His own image, as many religions maintain, but rather that he is the one who creates God in his own human image. The narrator’s human side cannot handle this realization and responsibility, so "awe-stricken, and with a creeping shudder," he runs from "the halls of that old academy, never to enter them again" (347). He escapes the academy as Poe escaped the Allan household in 1827, but neither Wilson nor John Allan’s son escapes emotionally from the need to find a higher power outside of himself to prove, some day, supreme.

After leaving the academy, the narrator moves on to Eton and emerges himself in the vices of drinking and gambling. He tries to lead a very human, "worldly" life: "The vortex of thoughtless folly into which I there
[Eton] so immediately and so recklessly plunged, washed away all but the froth of my past hours, engulfed at once every solid or serious impression, and left to memory only the veriest levities of a former existence" (347-48). The narrator leads this way of life for three years before realizing that he has not succeeded in escaping the fictional almighty God of judgement he initially created in Bransby’s schoolhouse: "Three years of folly, passed without profit, had but given me rooted habits of vice, . . . when, after a week of soulless dissipation, I invited a small party of the most dissolute students to a secret carousel in my chambers" (348). The students drink and play cards all night. This setting is not interrupted until dawn, when the group’s "delirious extravagance was at its height" (348), at which point a visitor comes to the door:

Madly flushed with cards and intoxication, I was in the act of insisting upon a toast of more than wonted profanity, when my attention was suddenly diverted by the violent, although partial unclosing of the door of the apartment, and by the eager voice of a servant from without. He said that some person, apparently in great haste, demanded to speak with me in the hall. (348)

The narrator’s other fictional God re-enters his life at a point when the narrator is behaving in a more than usually "profane" manner, in other words, at the point in his human life when his own "secular" God role becomes
inadequate and he feels the greatest need of being disciplined by God. Similarly, Poe’s letters to Allan occur at points when he cannot manage certain areas of his life on his own, so he appeals to higher authority even though he wishes to remain independent.

Unable to see the visitor clearly but enough to notice a resemblance in stature and dress, the narrator is "perfectly sober[ed] in an instant" upon hearing the stranger’s words: ". . . he strode hurriedly up to me, and, seizing me by the arm with a gesture of petulant impatience, whispered the words ‘William Wilson!’ in my ear" (348). The narrator describes "the words" as having been spoken with a "tremulous shake of his uplifted finger, as he held it between my eyes and the light" (348), clearly a parental gesture of discipline which, accompanied by the narrator’s name, has an immediate "sober[ing]!" effect on the intoxicated narrator.

During this stage of the narrator’s life, the twin God he created in childhood, who is the conventional double of his secular role, steps back into his life as a positive concept. He is, as many early Poe scholars assume, the human conscience, the superego, stepping in to guide Wilson morally at weak moments. However, Poe is not saying that conscience is a good thing. His focus remains descriptive, ultimately more metaphysical than
directly moral. The two roles coexist, but neither is complete or adequate, both always threatening to destroy each other, neither fully legitimate and stable. What the narrator discovered back in Bransby’s schoolhouse and discovers again at Eton is that the traditional God’s help, like Allan’s to his son, can only be described as "insinuated counsel" (349). The narrator describes himself as having been "violently moved" by "the pregnancy of solemn admonition in the singular, low, hissing utterance [that is, the twin’s words, "William Wilson!"]; and, above all, it was the character, the tone, the key, of those few, simple, and familiar, yet whispered syllables, which came with a thousand thronging memories of by-gone days, and struck upon my soul with the shock of a galvanic battery" (349). But then this other Wilson, this spectre of God, vanishes as quickly as it appeared to the narrator: "Ere I could recover the use of my senses he was gone" (349). Hence, the "insinuated counsel" of God, like that of Allan, does not have a long-lasting effect on the narrator. Nor does it, however, disappear as he moves on to Oxford, where he continues to live a similarly vice-filled life haunted by his twin’s voice.

The narrator asks about the Wilson twin the same questions that Poe, philosophers, and all humans ask
about "God": "But who and what was this Wilson? -- and whence came he? -- and what were his purposes?" (349). Finding that "[u]pon neither of these points could I be satisfied," the Wilson narrator "ceased to think upon the subject" and becomes "absorbed in a contemplated departure for Oxford" (349). He plunges "with redoubled ardent" even more deeply into a vice-filled existence and "spurned even the common restraints of decency in the mad infatuation of my revels" (349) in what looks like an attempt to escape but is in actuality another attempt to enact his greatest fear that God is a fiction created by "mere man," that he himself is the only "power" in his world.

The narrator makes a new set of "fellow collegians" at Oxford, and two years pass before there is any sign of the Wilson twin. The narrator re-establishes his position of authority among his "associates" and befriends one in particular, Glendinning, who, wealthy and "of weak intellect," makes "a fitting subject for my skill" (350). The narrator uses his superior power in the role of God-peer to take advantage of his opponent’s weakness. In this instance, the narrator’s "skill" refers to his ability to cheat at card games. The narrator manipulates an evening with his associates in
Mr. Preston’s chambers in which the narrator’s intention is to make Glendinning fall into debt:

I had contrived to have assembled a party of some eight or ten, and was solicitously careful that the introduction of cards should appear accidental, and originate in the proposal of my contemplated dupe himself [Glendinning].

We had protracted our sitting far into the night, and I had at length effected the manoeuvre of getting Glendinning as my sole antagonist. . . . In a very short period he had become my debtor to a large amount. . . . [T]he prey was in my toils; in less than an hour he had quadrupled his debt. . . . [H]is countenance . . . had grown to a pallor truly fearful. (350-51)

"[W]ith a view to the preservation of my own character in the eyes of my associates," the narrator is about to stop the card game. He believes Glendinning’s faltering behavior is a result of excess drinking. The narrator realizes that Glendinning’s fear results from the narrator’s having "effected his total ruin under circumstances which, rendering him an object for the pity of all, should have protected him from the ill offices even of a fiend" (351). The narrator has the upper hand at this point, and he is vague about telling us how he behaves: "What now might have been my conduct it is difficult to say." (351). The atmosphere becomes tense:

The pitiable condition of my dupe [Glendinning] had thrown an air of embarrassed gloom over all; and, for some moments, a profound silence was maintained, during which I could not help feeling my cheeks
tingle with the many burning glances of scorn or reproach cast upon me by the less abandoned of the party. (351)

The narrator's silence apparently tells us that he is about to behave worse than "a fiend" when his attempt to re-establish himself as lord over his companions is once again stopped by the haunting voice of his counterpart -- this time, to the narrator's relief: "I will even own that an intolerable weight of anxiety was for a brief instant lifted from my bosom by the sudden and extraordinary interruption which ensued" (351). Momentarily, he welcomes an alternative to his overwhelming and arbitrary power.

The Wilson twin makes a dramatic entrance this time; the doors open and the candles are extinguished "as if by magic" (352). The narrator sees "a stranger" of his own height dressed in a cloak before the candles go out, following which "we could only feel that he was standing in our midst" (352). This description suggests the narrator's fantasy of God as a presence that cannot be seen but only felt figuratively. By addressing the group of men "in a low, distinct, and never-to-be-forgotten whisper which thrilled to the very marrow of my bones" (352), the twin reveals that the narrator has been cheating at the card game with Glendinning. Following this confession, the Wilson twin "departed . . . as
abruptly as he had entered," and the narrator feels "all the horrors of the damned" (352) as he is searched, discovered, and thrown out into the cold street, feeling "[a]based, humbled to the dust" but "muffled" in the "cloak" of his God (353).

On the morning after the incident at Mr. Preston's, the narrator leaves Oxford "in a perfect agony of horror and of shame" (353). The "horror" perhaps comes from his recognition that the reason "God" is always with him is because He is nothing more than a reflection of himself, and the "shame" from his failure to accept the responsibility for his creation and, hence, for his own human actions. In other words, the narration dramatizes dual but incompatible and unreconciled God roles. Years pass as he travels to "Paris ... Rome ... Vienna ... Berlin ... Moscow ... to the very ends of the earth ... in vain," for everywhere the narrator goes his "evil destiny pursued" followed by his twin "tormentor" with "his impertinent supervision" to stop the narrator from "bitter mischief" (353-54).

The narrator continues to ask philosophical questions about the twin: "And again, and again, in secret communion with my own spirit, would I demand the questions 'Who is he?' -- whence came he? -- and what are his objects?' But no answer was there found" (354). The
narrator knows implicitly that the answer involves the fictional God who came out of his human imagination long ago, out of his human need for an authority figure separate from himself: "Could he, for an instant, have supposed that... I could fail to recognise the William Wilson of my schoolboy days, -- the namesake, the companion, the rival, -- the hated and dreaded rival at Dr. Bransby's? Impossible! -- But let me hasten to the last eventful scene of the drama" (354). Here, just as the narrator seems to be losing control at the memory of the twin Wilson, his tone immediately reverts to that of tale-teller in control of the next "scene" in his "drama," which he says will be "the last" scene and an "eventful" one. The story moves toward a resolution of sorts.

In the next phase of his life, the narrator turns to alcohol more than ever as a "resolution" to his "enslave[ment]" (355). In Rome he attends a masquerade ball in a setting much like the one Poe later uses for "The Masque of the Red Death." Making his way through the crowd toward a young married woman on the dance floor, the narrator is once again intercepted from vice by his namesake:

With a too unscrupulous confidence she had previously communicated to me the secret of the costume in which she would be habited, and now,
having caught a glimpse of her person, I was hurrying to make my way to her presence. -- At this moment I felt a light hand placed upon my shoulder, and that ever-remembered, low, damnable whisper within my ear. (355)

The narrator turns on his twin, whose face is covered by a "mask of black silk" (355), and violently "dragging him unresistingly" leads him through the crowd to "a small ante-chamber adjoining" (356) the ballroom. There is no indication that anyone is aware of the struggle the narrator describes, and the narrator claims to "drag" his twin, who is not resisting him. Such details suggest that the struggle is primarily an internal drama.

After he "plunged [his] sword, with brute ferocity, repeatedly through and through his [the twin's] bosom" (356), the narrator, for the first time, is at a loss for words to describe the reflection he sees in the mirror: "But what human language can adequately portray that astonishment, that horror which possessed me at the spectacle then presented to view?" (356). The narrator can no longer speak as a "human" because the vision he sees in the "large mirror" of "mine own image, but with features all pale and dabbled in blood" (356) proves to him, as he has feared all along, that he and God are one in the same, one person in two roles, both inauthentic, both incompatible with each other.
Just as the narrator’s voice is unable to utter "human language," his namesake’s once whispering voice also changes: "It was Wilson; but he spoke no longer in a whisper" (356). The two Wilson voices, which in life had been the distinguishing feature between Wilson the secular God-peer and Wilson the God, in death become one -- "I could have fancied that I myself was speaking while he said" (356) -- as both Wilsons speak the final words of the murder narrative:

‘You have conquered, and I yield. Yet, henceforward art thou also dead -- dead to the World, to Heaven and to Hope! In me didst thou exist -- and, in my death, see by this image, which is thine own, how utterly thou hast murdered thyself.’ (356-57)

These final philosophical words of the story are spoken by the voice of both the human self and God together, implying that each is guilty of destroying the other. The narrator discovers that he and God are one, and that in murdering God he murders himself (because God is the narrator’s own creation) and is, hence, plunged into nothingness. Neither fiction finally establishes any absolute dimension.

Unlike the other murder narratives where the victim is a fellow human being more or less defenseless in the hands of the God-peer, Wilson’s victim is a projected version of God himself represented as a kind of alter-ego
in the physical image of the narrator -- that is, the traditional "God" who punishes evil and rewards good. There is mention of religious concepts early on in the story -- "church," "pastor," "Christmas," "Reverend" (339-40) -- but no direct reference to "God."

Despite the final apocalyptic words of the tale, Wilson has not grown or developed or learned anything by the end of the story. His life is the same no matter where he goes. He is as he was in the beginning, just as Poe's last letter to his father is not much different from the first ones he wrote after severing himself from the Allan household. In the end, the Wilson narrator, as well as the voice of "son" in Poe's correspondence with Allan, still knows only of his imaginary father and his own confined existence -- "[m]erely this and nothing more" ("The Raven," 82). While hoping to find an actual God, the God he finds is merely an allegorical projection of his imagination and emotional need. Poe's point is that God exists, to the narrator's horror, only symbolically or figuratively or metaphorically -- but never literally.
1. The progression of years and the frequent changes in setting, however, do not make "William Wilson" any less focused on a single mind than is the case in the other four murder narratives, each of whose setting is more or less confined to a single point in time and location. As Richard Wilbur says, "The narrative of William Wilson conducts the hero from Stoke Newington to Eton, from Eton to Oxford, and then to Rome by way of Paris, Vienna, Berlin, Moscow, Naples, and Egypt: and yet, for all his travels, Wilson seems never to set foot out-of-doors. The story takes place in a series of rooms, the last one from the inside" (103-04).

2. Readings on the function of enclosures in this tale have focused in particular on the description of the school house, "a large, rambling, Elizabethan house, in a misty-looking village of England" (338), as a psychological aspect of the narrator's mind: As Valentine C. Hubbs argues, "The narrator's description of the school building strongly suggests the realm of the unconscious" (74). Similarly, Leonard W. Engel argues that the details of narrator's description of the school house contain "subtle suggestions of enclosure on the consciousness of the narrator" ("Identity and Enclosure in Edgar Allan Poe's 'William Wilson'," 93).

3. In the narrator's defense, Sullivan argues:

   What are William Wilson's crimes, then? He is a spendthrift, a gambler, a drinker, an adulterer (perhaps), and possibly an opium-taker . . . but nowhere does the narrator describe deeds meriting such severe condemnations as 'unpardonable crime.' Not even the climactic murder-suicide is such a deed, for it is not clear who kills whom . . .

   Every other crime attributed to William Wilson is a generalized allegation. (255)

4. As Vincent Buranelli puts it, the tale "turns on the fact that the main character is haunted and pursued by an exact double, even to the name, who is the incarnation of his own conscience" (32). Marie Bonaparte alike says "our hero [Wilson] is battling against part of himself, that which derives from the bans of those in authority
and becomes our moral conscience or super-ego" (539). Daniel Hoffman interprets the "namesake" as being "William son of his own Will. He has, that is, willed himself into being -- willed the self we meet, the one that survives its murder of its double" (209). In other words, as I also argue, the Wilson narrator creates this allegorical second self for his fiction. Sullivan argues, "Loosely, William Wilson's superego tells the story of William Wilson's id. More precisely, part of his ego dominated by the superego tells the story of the part of the ego dominated by the id" (254). Again, like Hoffman, Sullivan in essence sees the two roles as part of the fiction created by the "more dominate" self. Robert Coskren proposes that "[t]he main tensions . . . center upon this conflict of wills, of the tension between the internal and the external self, in terms of a conflict between the individual and society" (155). John W. Crawford sees "Wilson's problem" simply as "a problem of narcissism" present within "a personality of strong 'will'" (83). Even as late as 1982, Nicholas Canady, who reads the tale as "a study of twin entity: corporate and incorporate silence" in light of Poe's "Sonnet -- Silence," concludes that Wilson "has ignored and then murdered his moral sense" (29). The first publication of this sonnet was May 1839, only months prior to "William Wilson," which was first published in December of the same year.

5. Ware adopts this term from Tzvetan Todorov, whose theories on the fantastic Ware uses to help make the argument that "William Wilson" is a tale in which "we can never decide with certainty whether we are on a literal or an allegorical level" (46).

CHAPTER 2

"THE GROAN OF MORTAL TERROR": EVIL-EYE MOTIF AS MOTIVE FOR MURDER IN "THE TELL-TALE HEART"

In the remaining four murder narratives, Poe continues to develop the complex criminal mind of the God-peer persona, that is, the reincarnation of the William Wilson narrator. The God-peer’s victim is also reincarnated in the other murder narratives and continues to be vulnerable to and at the mercy of the criminal narrator, whose crime is premeditated and motivated by a fascination with arbitrary evil. In the next three murder narratives, "The Tell-Tale Heart," "The Black Cat," and "The Imp of the Perverse," the God-peer persona designs a fiction in which he creates the need for punishment from a traditional, moral God who abhors the evil deeds one human inflicts upon another and who ensures justice.

The next two murder narratives, "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat," published only months apart in 1843, are often treated together in scholarship. The narrative voice seems virtually identical, and both are horror stories that center on the influence of supernatural evil in the crime committed. In this chapter, I will focus on the God-peer of "The Tell-Tale
Heart" and concern myself in particular with the significance of the God-peer persona's insanity, his use of the horror story as the means by which he "creates" images of God in the way that the Wilson narrator creates an appropriate allegorical double, and his contrived fascination with the evil eye. The evil eye is the object of indifference that the God-peer narrator of this tale chooses as the central motif in his fiction to serve as a supernatural explanation for occurrences in the natural world and that enables him to create the fictional effect of a Supreme God.

My reading develops in part from Bynum's argument that the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" suffers from an alleged disease known as "moral insanity," which he defines as "a form of insanity . . . which perverted the sense of moral responsibility necessary to deter crime" (142). Bynum also mentions the narrator of "The Black Cat" as falling into the category of the morally insane (143). His argument can also be made for "William Wilson," "The Imp of the Perverse," and "The Cask of Amontillado," the tales that I have identified as murder narratives. According to Bynum, a person suffering from this disease is capable of flying into "a murderous rage . . . without motivation" (149). Indeed, as I argue, there is motivation for the crime in "The Tell-Tale
Heart." But because of its fundamental challenge to reality, it simply is not the kind of murder motive we are accustomed to.

That he has been afflicted medically with, in Bynum's words, "an inexplicable moral short circuit" (149) is not the problem with the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart." It is his futile search for the God from whom morality supposedly comes that drives the narrator to the role of God-peer (in my words) or to "moral insanity" (as Bynum would put it). In essence, the narrator's problem is not pathological so much as it is metaphysical. The narrator, that is, Poe's God-peer persona, tries to establish "good" by experimenting with evil. Poe's purpose in creating such a tale is to show that the concept of morality and God is a human creation, and continues to be recreated, out of fear that God may not really exist. Poe's point is that there is a human need for Almighty God; uncertain of His existence, the God-peer persona uses the power of tale-telling to lend credence to His existence or usurp His role if He is non-existent. Likewise, Poe the orphan, never completely certain of John Allan's loyalty as a father, persists in creating the image of father through letter writing, someone to whom he prays for support in his life endeavors and for judgement of his behavior.
In Poe, the greatest amount of interplay between story-teller and audience occurs in "The Tell-Tale Heart," where the narrator is most forward and passionate with his listener. The story begins with the narrator’s accusing the listener of having passed judgement on him: "True! -- nervous -- very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad?" (555). Through his overtly defensive manner, the narrator defines his own listener -- the "you" as accuser. The listener is cast as a character in the tale, the teller’s antagonist, challenged to reevaluate the narrator’s state of mind as having a wider significance than that of the insane criminal mind it appears to be on the surface.

In the letters, Poe repeatedly presents a similar challenge to his father, stressing the importance of not passing final judgement on his character until Poe has had a chance to be heard, a chance Poe never seems to have had to his satisfaction, judging by his last piece of correspondence with his father. In Letter #6, for example, in which Poe wants to convince his father to get him discharged from the army, Poe states: "I feel that within me which will make me fulfil your highest wishes & only beg you to suspend your judgement until you hear of me again" (76). Poe’s desire for his father to withhold judgement temporarily is never fulfilled, so this desire
lives on and expresses itself through the voice of God
teer attempting to play all roles, a voice more powerful
and controlling than the pleading voice Poe the orphan
uses in repeated and failed attempts to impress John
Allan.

The literal motive for murder in the tale is, of
course, the narrator’s desire to free himself from the
old man’s "evil eye." Many scholars have offered
explanations for why the narrator of "The Tell-Tale
Heart" is "disturbed" by the eye, and they usually quote
the two passages that include a description of the old
man’s eye and the narrator’s reaction to it:

One of his eyes resembled that of a vulture -- a
d pale blue eye, with a film over it. Whenever it
fell upon me, my blood ran cold (555).

and

I saw it [the eye] with perfect distinctness -- all
a dull blue, with a hideous veil over it that
chilled the very marrow in my bones (557).

What has not been fully addressed in criticism focusing
in particular on the motif of the evil eye in "The Tell-
Tale Heart" is the narrator’s introduction of the eye as
his motive for murder -- that is, the narrator’s first
reference to the eye in direct relation to motivation.
Having listed a series of commonplace motives for murder
-- passion, insult, gold -- and then rejecting them, the
narrator decides: "I think it was his eye! yes, it was this!" (555). The narrator "think[s]" the eye is his motive for murder, implying not only that he is not sure of why he is committing murder but also that the motive really does not matter because he is God's peer and can take life at random. As tale-teller, here the God-peer also means, "yes," the eye will serve as the perfect motif for his horror story, especially in light of the fact that this image is already familiar to readers of Gothic literature. He is more concerned with finding a good image for the fiction he is trying to enact than for at least trying to find rational justification to murder. The narrator rejects passion, insult, and gold as the central objects of his fiction, for these motives are not strong enough to produce the intended effect of horror. The God-peer chooses, instead, the evil eye as both motive for his action and recurrent symbol of his role -- the object of horror which mirrors the arbitrary indifference and brutal emptiness of the God role he usurps. Robert Shulman argues that the blurry eye represents to the narrator "that existence is meaningless" and, as I would agree, is also a representation of Poe's emotions toward his own father (259-60).
Most of the existing criticism that addresses the significance of the evil eye to the narrator argues that he somehow literally fears it. Contrary to these arguments, I propose instead that the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" is not disturbed by the eye in the least, for we are witnessing not so much a murder in the making as we are a fictional world in the making -- that is, someone attempting to generate a certain kind of narrative and narrative role. In other words, for the narrator the eye is more instrumental than seriously causal. For his initial notice of the eye is virtually accidental: "I think it was his eye!" As creator, the God-peer realizes that to make the eye the motive for murder is indeed a useful, creative thought: "yes, it was this!" Such a comment is an expression of the mind of a murderer obsessed with the need for some sort of motivation but also the mind of a tale-teller in ecstasy because he has used his imagination to come up with an appropriate image for his horror story -- something which will allow him to play peer to God. He realizes that the old man's eye is a fitting image for his purpose, and that purpose is to invent material for his composition which will produce his "preconceived effect," his "pre-established design" of horror at the realization of the non-existence of Almighty God. In an attempt to create
God through a tale of horror, the tale-teller needs a
cold object of indifference to use as a motif of his own
monstrous act of role-playing in (by implication) a cold
and morally inert world. He happens upon the evil eye
because it is familiar, recognizable to his listeners,
and is useful in conveying both the power to control and
the punishment he seeks in his dual God role.

The arbitrary manner in which the God-peer selects
the eye as the motive for murder not only helps to
establish the narrative voice’s indifference toward
mankind’s traditional forms of moral order as he proceeds
to describe the criminal actions but also demonstrates
his own role as God-peer and his own insistence upon a
creative order under his own control. Like Poe’s tone in
"The Philosophy of Composition," where he gives a step-
by-step rendition, which at points edges on the
ludicrous, of how he composed "The Raven," "The Tell-Tale
Heart" is Poe’s dramatization of the human mind in this
process of creation and the godlike qualities of the mind
in the "writer state."

The tone of "The Philosophy of Composition" is
similar to the tone of indifference characteristic of the
God-peer persona. The process Poe describes by which he
combines the subject of death with the object of
beautiful woman to produce the effect of terror is the
precise process the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" follows in choosing to combine the subject of evil with the object of eye. Both voices have a marked indifference and detachment from the subject matter being created because the creative process (that is, shaping and role and telling a story) becomes a way of achieving mastery and power. The narrator recreates the world from his point of view, in this case, the image of himself as God. In the murder narratives, Poe uses the mind of a tale-teller at work to enact God's state of mind toward his creation -- that is, one primarily of arbitrary power and moral indifference.

The case the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" makes to describe his own troubled state of mind is that the eye is an entity separate from the old man, that the eye is evil while the old man is good. The God-peer takes already established myths about the evil eye and uses them to rationalize his role because he needs to seize power and control. One of the common beliefs about the evil eye is that a person or animal, possessing no malice or evil thoughts, can have been born with the evil eye, oblivious of the torments his eye causes to others. The God-peer persona of "The Tell-Tale Heart" uses this belief to characterize his victim. The old man is not conscious of his evil eye, and he envies the God-peer in
no way. It is instead the narrator who is envious of the old man, more specifically, of the old man’s eye because he identifies it, for the purpose of his fiction, as a purely evil one. Particularly, it is representative of arbitrary power since it is detached from the human heart and soul of the old man. His creation of the eye as an evil one represents to the narrator the kind of power he seeks to possess in his role as God-peer -- that is, the power to be arbitrarily evil and thus fully in control of a fictional world of his own making.

The narrator demonstrates that he is well-versed in evil-eye folklore: "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." (555). "Passion," "insult," and "gold" are all common reasons to commit murder, and they are also believed to be justifiable reasons for casting the evil-eye spell on a person. But the most popular reason given in any time period or culture for casting the evil eye is envy (Maloney, vii-viii), and the narrator makes this envy a quality of his persona, which becomes significant here insofar as it suggests the narrator’s own preemptive role.

It is obvious from "The Tell-Tale Heart" that Poe is knowledgeable about evil-eye folklore -- knowledge that
he places into the mind of the tale-teller to illustrate the process of creation of self and story. Folklore holds that a person possessing an evil eye is said to become "fascinated" by another person’s possessions, material or otherwise, and his envy causes him to cast an evil eye upon his victim in hopes of taking the envied object or, at least, of causing the possessor misfortune (Foulks, 29). Poe’s narrator claims not to envy his victim’s material possessions. However, the narrator’s eye is on the old man more than the vulture eye is on the narrator, and his thoughts are focused on murder because, as envious and needy "son," he must attempt to usurp the powerful "father" role.

The narrator drops obvious hints that he himself is an evil-eye possessor, the object that "fascinates" him being his victim’s eye detached from the body and soul of the man himself. What he envies is the power of the eye. He envies the arbitrary evil of the eye and wants that power for himself. Hence, he acquires it by becoming the "evil I" of the tale; E. Arthur Robinson was the first scholar to acknowledge Poe’s implied pun on "evil eye/I" (101). As he stands at the door just before the climactic murder scene, the God-peer, the "evil I" experiences an exalted feeling of power: "Never before
that night, had I felt the extent of my own powers -- of my own sagacity" (556).

In folklore on the evil eye, there are two common beliefs about the nature of an evil-eye possessor: (1) that one is conscious of the evil power his or her eye possesses and willingly uses it against a fellow human, and (2) that one is born with the evil eye and is unconscious of the evil power his or her sight possesses (Maloney, vii-viii). The narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" uses both of these beliefs in his horror story. First, he turns the old man into victim by identifying him with the second category of evil-eye possessors so that his own crime against the old man will have a stronger impact because it is unjustified, arbitrary, yet under his control: the old man is, therefore, depicted as innocent of the harm his eye might be causing. Second, the narrator places himself as the evil "I" of the story, thus creating a personal moral code in which his crime is rationalized, or justified, when offered in the context of evil-eye folklore. But, in fact, he is enacting his own need to either play God or invoke one who will correct such evil.

The evil-eye belief is a superstition which condones murder. It is a belief which views murder as being just. To one who is a believer in the evil-eye curse -- and the
narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" certainly presents himself (for his own reasons, to be sure) as a firm believer in this superstition -- it is not out of the ordinary for the victim (as a last resort) to murder his believed tormentor as a cure (Foulks, 32). As one case study from Foulks illustrates, a man considered it his duty to murder for the welfare of his family (32); this person was, in effect, invited to invent or to create his own morality because of the circumstances he found himself in. The evil-eye curse, therefore, works well for Poe’s God-peer narrator, whose purpose is to use the curse of the evil eye in particular and superstitions about evil in general to usurp the power and authority of God.

Poe’s narrator reasons that the decision to murder the old man is based on his need to free himself from the affliction of the eye. In other words, he redefines the concept of murder to connote "cure" rather than "crime." For example, the narrator sometimes uses evasive wording when referring to the murder. In his nightly stalking attempts "to take the life of the old man," the narrator regrets that "I found the eye always closed" and concludes "and so it was impossible to do the work" (555-56), referring to the murder as "the work." On the night the narrator succeeds in murdering the old man, that is,
the eighth night, he refers to his murder scheme as "my secret deeds or thoughts" (556), and in confessing the murder to the police officers cries out "I admit the deed" (559), again referring to the murder as a "deed." Instead of using explicit terminology such as "murder," "kill," or "crime," he largely confines himself to subtle, implicit, euphemistic diction to refer to his murder of the old man. Only once does the criminal narrator use the verb "kill": "I was never kinder to the old man than during the whole week before I killed him" (555). "To kill" takes on positive connotations as that concept is conceived by the narrator for his fiction. This is an example of the God-peer’s attempt to redefine terms as he tries to redefine his moral universe -- that is, to attach new meanings to existing diction. Through careful word choice, he projects the attitude that he has acted in self-defense. In effect, he constructs a morality of his own definition.

Poe’s choice of evil-eye folklore allows his narrator much leeway in redefining concepts and behavior. A series of examples noted in Foulks illustrates that the possessor of an evil eye often shows kindness toward his victim just before striking (30). Poe’s narrator, in his usurpation of the malignant role, makes a point of boasting that he is able to deceive the old man:
And every morning, when the day broke, I went boldly into the chamber, and spoke courageously to him, calling him by name in a hearty tone, and inquiring how he had passed the night. So you see he would have been a very profound old man, indeed, to suspect that every night, just at twelve, I looked in upon him while he slept. (556)

Here the narrator is the one casting his eye upon the unsuspecting old man, and he is conscious of the power that exists in his own sight when he looks in on the old man at night with thoughts of murder. His intention is to prove his "I" more powerful, more evil than the old man’s eye and, having boarded up the pieces of the body, states "that no human eye -- not even his -- could have detected anything wrong" (558); in essence, he feels he has succeeded as Almighty I. That he specifies "no human eye" implies that it will require an eye other than a human one to discover the "wrong" hidden beneath the floor boards; here the God-peer already asks, indeed virtually hopes, for a deus ex machina to ensure divine justice.

As we have seen, part of what he does in his role as God-peer is to redefine certain common concepts. For example, in the first paragraph of the tale, the narrator introduces a new standard of power and control by which rationality and order are to be measured: "Hearken! and observe how healthily -- how calmly I can tell you the
whole story" (555). His supposition is that one is not mentally disturbed if he can tell a good tale, for only sane people can tell "the whole story." Madmen, he reasons, are not capable of telling stories "healthily . . . calmly." The narrator states that his purpose for telling the tale is to defend himself against the accusation made by the listener that he is insane: "Now this is the point. You fancy me mad. Madmen know nothing. But you should have seen me" (555). The narrator sets out to prove that he is innocent of the charge of madness. The listener as potential accuser is thus challenged to decide whether or not tale-telling is an art that only the sane can master, or, even more fundamentally, to question the whole nature of sanity itself and to reevaluate the "authority" of the text. Here, assumed power and authority define the whole nature of "sanity."

The narrator attaches alternative meanings -- his own meaning that gives positive connotations to otherwise negative terms -- to common words such as "kill" (which he uses to mean "cure" as discussed earlier in this chapter), "madness," and "disease." For example,

The disease had sharpened my senses -- not destroyed -- not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How, then, am I mad? (555)
Madness has traditionally been associated with special spiritual claims, and here the narrator aligns himself with this tradition to show that we have mistaken notions of what it means to be "insane" and to be "diseased." We do not ordinarily think of a sane person as hearing what goes on in heaven or in hell or "in" the earth. This biblical allusion implies that the narrator aligns himself with God as depicted by Christian religions in his human form of son of the heavenly Father: "That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth" (Philippians 2:10).

Here the most significant change involves the meaning of the word "disease." Rather than something that causes decay and poor health, "disease" is used by the narrator as a positive concept. For example, he says, "The disease had sharpened my senses -- not destroyed -- not dulled them" (555). He uses the word to refer to something that is creative rather than destructive. Nevertheless, it is under the influence of this disease that he murders and confesses that he has done wrong, finally giving himself over to the care of an alternative God, as Poe repeatedly gives himself over to Allan despite his belief that Allan does not fulfill the role of Father.
Robinson questions which "eye" / "I" in "The Tell-Tale Heart" is actually the "evil" one (101). I submit that the answer is neither, because the traditional concept of "evil" as defined by most religions is one of the key concepts that Poe challenges in Eureka and that the God-peer attempts to redefine in the murder narratives. The old man’s eye is frightening to the narrator because it appears isolated, cold, indifferent, detached from the rest of the human body and, hence, from the narrator, who supposedly shares a home with the old man. The eye appears to have no compassion, to offer no human warmth and, being the eye of a vulture, of a scavenger, to look upon the narrator as carrion. Vultures are noted for their strong eyesight and ability to spot carrion from great distances. Therefore, the added detail of the vulture eye intensifies the image of the evil eye already established by the narrator, thus implying that the eye seeks the dead, that the narrator whom the old man casts his eye upon is waste needing to be cleansed off the earth. This projection by the narrator reflects his own fear of what, if anything, death holds and the fear he tries to instill in the listener, the fear that there is no existence after death, no God to return to other than a role he can
himself establish with the power and mastery of usurpation.

The image the narrator creates of the old man, on the one hand, belongs to the supernatural world and is useful for the horror story he pens and, on the other hand, belongs to the natural world where the victim appears to be nothing more than a weak, harmless old man and thus easily dominated. The narrator visits the old man in his bedroom each morning instead of waiting for him to get out of bed because the old man is most likely ill and confined to his bed by both day and night. Yet the narrator’s focus is on what he considers to be a very unpleasant physical aspect of the old man because it is central to the generation of his own power as God-peer. The character of the old man is entirely a creation of the narrator’s fictional needs. The God-peer does not care one way or the other about the old man’s nature or personality. The God-peer’s evaluation of the old man is arbitrary, superficial with no attempt to create a whole human being. Hence, as "creator" of the character of the old man, the narrator reveals the disposition of the God he plays in his fiction — a vulture God who has no compassion for suffering human beings. Viewed in the role of human counterpart of a supreme God, the narrator embodies Poe’s horror of what God might be.
Just as the narrator's words rarely carry their ordinary, common meanings, his actions and reactions also contradict the ordinary, expected behavioral patterns of a human being, even of a murderer. For example, as he nears the actual murder, the narrator simultaneously experiences excitement and terror, uncontrolled joy, feelings not normally associated with murder: "... so strange a noise as this excited me to uncontrollable terror" (557). He uses the term "terror" rather than "horror" to describe his feeling because the sound he hears is human, of this world rather than the supernatural world he creates in fiction. Soon after, the narrator fears the neighbors will hear the heartbeat: "And now a new anxiety seized me -- the sound would be heard by a neighbor!" (558), and yet he makes unusually unnecessary commotion when "the old man's hour had come": "With a loud yell, I threw open the lantern and leaped into the room" (558). He enters the room "with a loud yell," which is more likely to be heard by neighbors than a heartbeat; he "threw open the lantern," which illuminates the room and risks making visible their figures to neighbors from the outside of the house; and he "leaps" into the old man's room, which arouses the old man perhaps to scream or struggle more than he normally would had the narrator simply entered the room.
inconspicuously. In essence, the narrator baits himself for capture from the start. As peer to God, he is untouchable; or, alternatively, without God, he needs to be captured in order to demonstrate His existence.

The narrator’s language in recounting the details of the crime is as cold and frightful as his description of the eye he both fears as a human and enviously usurps as a God-peer. By using the language of science, process analysis, to describe the hideous details of the murder, the narrator establishes a tone of objectivity that we would ordinarily find inappropriate or heartless for the subject matter he is dealing with:

Yes, he was stone, stone dead. I placed my hand upon the heart and held it there many minutes. There was no pulsation. He was stone dead. His eye would trouble me no more. (558)

Or again:

. . . the wise precautions I took for the concealment of the body. . . . First of all I dismembered the corpse. I cut off the head and the arms and the legs. (558)

When I had made an end to these labors, . . . . (558)

This language shows indifference, detachment toward the human being who has, in fact, suffered brutal mutilation rather than the neat, clean amputation the narrator describes. The God-peer describes no feeling of disgust
at the "dismembered" corpse; his role here enacts the detachment with which the much feared Almighty God decides when a person's "hour has come" and the narrator's complex attempt to make some kind of "meaning" out of emptiness and loss.

In addition to indifference and detachment, the God-peer also finds an element of humor in the murder: "I knew what the old man felt, and pitied him, although I chuckled at heart" (556). These feelings experienced simultaneously -- to empathize, to pity, and to laugh -- are paradoxical, reflecting his complex role. Detached empathy accompanied by humor is what the narrator tries to convey. In place of disgust, the God-peer proudly continues to express a dark kind of humor after the old man's death:

I then smiled gaily, to find the deed so far done. . . . I then replaced the boards so cleverly, so cunningly, that no human eye -- not even his -- could have detected any thing wrong. There was nothing to wash out -- no stain of any kind -- no blood-spot whatever. I had been too wary for that. A tub had caught all -- ha! ha! (558)

The God-peer "smile[s] gaily" at the murder and laughs "ha! ha!" at his statement that he has managed to catch all the blood in a "tub" so as not to leave evidence of blood stains. With this dark humor the narrator enacts
the role of a cold, indifferent God who plays games with and is amused by human emotions.

Insanity, as we know, is a major theme in Poe, and the narrator’s thesis in "The Tell-Tale Heart" is to demonstrate that he is not insane (or, perhaps, given the nature of reality, the term has no meaning), by showing us that his mind is stable enough to form a well-constructed story and that his "story" is appropriate to the nature of his world. While the narrator tells a horror story about evil eyes in which he plays a God-peer who tries to justify evil, his heart tells a different horror story. The evil eye ceases to be the dominant motif of the story after the murder and is replaced by the motif of the human heart, that beats for human compassion, for mercy, for the justice of a traditional God who abhors evil.

James W. Gargano points out that the evil eye and the heart are closely associated: "Expertly as Poe manages the 'sound images' in 'The Tell-Tale Heart,' he displays equal skill in making the old man’s 'evil eye' the external counterpart of the hidden watches and the beating heart" ("The Theme of Time," 381). On the most literal level, the old man’s heart "tells" on the narrator by beating so loudly, thus the title of the story. Scholars have suggested that the heartbeat is
actually the narrator's own heart beating fast and loud out of guilt. I suggest rather that the narrator uses the heartbeat to represent human as opposed to superhuman life, and also life in general as opposed to death. I suggest that the heartbeat returns the God-peer to the human level of his fiction. In other words, when the heart beats, the narrator relinquishes command of his role as the higher authority. Surrendering his role as God-peer, he submits instead to belief in a higher moral power outside of his own confined human existence.

Poe depicts the human heart aching for the logic of traditional justice as an aspect of a conventional religious order. For the fear that the narrator could successfully murder and go unpunished based on such arbitrary reasoning as "I think it was his eye! yes, it was this!" invokes the further horror that perhaps Almighty God's reasoning is no sounder or, even worse, that there is no such God to care one way or the other. The culmination of these thoughts drive the narrator to insanity, which paradoxically gives him the strength to confess his behavior as wrong and surrender to a power outside himself.

The narrator tells a tale of horror, focusing on the evil-eye superstition as his motif. His insistence in stressing that he has no logical reason to murder the old
man yet justified in killing him because he does not like
the appearance of the old man’s eye is his way of
developing his own philosophy, his own moral outlook, his
own world that attempts to justify crime and evil. Once
we recognize the narrator’s literary purpose or motive
for choosing the evil eye as the central image in his
fiction, the figurative or underlying motive for murder
becomes the human need both to play God and to create God
by seeking punishment.

Notes

1. See, e.g., Buranelli, 75; Paige M. Bynum, 143;
Edward H. Davison, 189-90; Aubrey M. Weaver, 317-20.

2. Bynum explains that there was much public
controversy over the existence of this "disease" of the
moral senses in the 1840’s.


4. As Manuel Aguirre points out, the eye is not a
symbol exclusive to Poe but rather a common motif in
eighteenth- and nineteenth-century horror literature,
where it is common for villains, not solely vampire
villains, to have evil eyes (22-23).

5. T. O. Mabbott reads the eye literally as an "evil"
one, arguing that the narrator is actually sane but
driven to madness by the evil effects of the eye (789).
Quoting Rush, Bynum argues that the already insane
narrator fears the eye of a sane man: "[T]he insane were
‘for the most part easily terrified, or composed, by the
eye of a man who possesses his reason’. They [the
audience of Poe’s day] would have surmised that Poe’s
narrator is terrified by, in Rush’s words, ‘the mild and steady eye’ of a sane man” (146). Allen Tate argues that “The Tell-Tale Heart” is one of Poe’s many works in which the image of eyes of fire occurs, illustrating his concern with vampirism (84). Aguirre disagrees with Tate on the grounds that vampire legends were not widespread but "still in the making" in the 1830’s, and he addresses the meaning of this common symbol of the eye in relation to Poe’s theme of insanity (222). Robert Con Davis argues that it is not so much the old man’s eye the narrator fears as the fact that he believes it is watching him; therefore, the narrator’s motive is his fear of being watched (993). B. D. Tucker denies that the narrator thinks of the old man’s eye superstitiously, on the grounds that the narrator appears to feel "hatred rather than fear" (93). John W. Canario, who reads the tale as a nightmare about death retold by the insane dreamer, interprets the old man’s eye "as an emblem of the narrator’s own mortality," the old man representing the alter ego of the narrator (195-96).

6. Scholars of evil-eye folklore who make this point include Bernard O’Neill, 5; Mahadeva Sastriar, 57; and Willa Appel, 17.
CHAPTER 3
"FASHIONED IN THE IMAGE OF THE HIGH GOD": SHAPE-SHIFTING IN "THE BLACK CAT"

The narrative voice of "The Black Cat" is virtually identical to the voice of "The Tell-Tale Heart," and the story line focuses even more directly on the subject of supernatural forces at work in the natural world. Criticism on "The Black Cat," like that directed to all of Poe's murder narratives, has focused mainly on the narrator's psychological state of mind, often arguing that the cats represent some unconscious aspect of his mind.¹ Taking a different perspective from these psychological analyses, Gayle D. Anderson reads the story strictly as a tale of horror, in which the narrator's soul literally becomes possessed by the "Devil." Anderson concentrates his study on myths surrounding the incubus nightmare, arguing that both cats are incubi who literally suck the narrator's soul from his body and replace it with a demonic one.

My own reading develops in reaction to Anderson's argument that the narrator is "a man unable to recognize that his soul is demonically possessed" (43). In fact, everything the narrator says contradicts this line of reasoning. For example, when Pluto bites him, the
narrator states, "The fury of a demon instantly possessed me. I knew myself no longer. My original soul seemed, at once, to take its flight from my body; and a more than fiendish malevolence, ginnurtured, thrilled every fibre of my frame" (598). This is the first-person narrator himself consciously describing the effect the cat’s bite has on his soul. Further, after describing the mutilation of the cat’s eye, the narrator states, "I blush, I burn, I shudder, while I pen the damnable atrocity" (599). Because the tale-teller is in the process of creating a horror story which involves, among other supernatural phenomena, demonic possession of his own soul, Poe makes it exceedingly difficult to argue that the narrator is unconscious of anything at work in his story. For this same reason, I also disagree with much of the criticism that sees demonic possession and other possible supernatural explanations for the crimes he commits as descriptions of the narrator’s unconscious defense mechanisms or aspects of his unconscious mind.2 I hold instead that these are all elements of a fiction that the God-peer consciously generates to enact his belief that God and the existence of a supernatural realm is based more on human faith (which he can control and shape) than on any absolute reality.
Immediately, he notes: "For the most wild, yet most homely narrative, which I am about to pen, I neither expect nor solicit belief" (597). In fact, from the first sentence of the tale, the narrator already "solicits" disbelief, for that which is "wild" is typically not also "homely," except as a paradox created by a tale-teller in total control of circumstances. The tale, perhaps more so than anything else, is about believability in what has been "penned." Through his God-peer persona, Poe uses conventional explanations for new purposes. Practically every occurrence, every line of reasoning, every excuse or explanation offered in "The Black Cat" is not credible or believable. The God-peer is in the process of creating an alternative picture of reality and so he redefines cause and effect. As Gargano says, the story "lacks cause and effect" ("The Black Cat," 93) but only as we understand cause and effect. The God-peer operates outside of moral boundaries, controlling and explore new meanings for cause and effect as well as other concepts.

The first paragraph of "The Black Cat" overflows with conspicuous references to the narrator's state of mind as, very simply, that of a tale-teller "about to pen" a story, and, as such, he is understandably nervous just as the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" is "nervous
-- very, very dreadfully nervous" from the start. As in
the other murder narratives, the narrator of "The Black
Cat" is himself a tale-teller, very conscious from the
start of how ("plainly, succinctly, and without comment")
and why ("But to-morrow I die, and to-day I would
unburthen my soul") he plans to tell his tale. He makes
a direct statement of his thesis, "to place before the
world . . . a series of mere household events" (597).
And he is obviously aware of an audience of listeners and
even gives direction to his them as to the role they are
to play: "Hereafter, perhaps, some intellect may be
found which will reduce my phantasm to the commonplace
-- some intellect more calm, more logical, and far less
excitable than my own, which will perceive, in the
circumstances I detail with awe, nothing more than an
ordinary succession of very natural causes and effects"
(597). In fact, several such intellects have indeed been
found, including Crisman, T. J. Matheson, and Reeder to
name a few of the critics who have offered "rational"
explanations for the narrator’s "phantasm." In essence,
he too, like the God-peer of "The Tell-Tale Heart,"
creates a role for the listener as well as himself. He
suggests that our business is exegesis, the explication
and interpretation of mysteries, the exploration of the
possible meanings implicit within the text. He suggests
the listener might be able to solve the mystery that his own "human" state of mind, much like the narrator of "William Wilson," renders him incapable of doing logically enough, so he claims, for us to believe him. Thus, we are involved both with his own powers and mysterious forces beyond the self. We are, as it were, in the role of religious believer faced with mysteries.

That he asks for an "ordinary," "natural" explanation for those "events" which "have presented little but Horror" to him implies that he is prepared, even expects, to have these events perceived as being something other than "ordinary" or "natural," perhaps "supernatural," especially in light of the fact that he calls the tale a "phantasm" which he regards "with awe."

The narrator deliberately attempts to convince the listener that a horror story will follow by requesting that we look for the opposite. The true "horror" of his fictional world, however, as he discovers, lies in own attempts to replace the role of infinite God with his finite human self. His attempt to manipulate audience response is similar to how the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" would lead us to pass a verdict of insanity by all too persistently pleading sanity as the God-peer defines those terms.
The narrator of "The Black Cat" reasons that, though he regards as mere superstition the magical, and often evil, powers popularly associated with black cats, his endeavors to weave the events into a logical pattern of causes and effects have proven futile. Hence, the only explanation which will account for the strange occurrences appears to be a supernatural one. I propose to show that the narrator himself points to the supernatural as the cause of his "perverse" behavior in an attempt to establish the existence of himself as peer to God or, alternatively, invoke (by implication) a supreme, just God, who will identify his "events" as being "evils," crimes that call for punishment. Through his God-peer persona, Poe proves that concepts of God are based on the human imagination and need for a supreme authority figure to dictate right from wrong.

Poe establishes the essential religiosity of "The Black Cat" by using various superstitions and also religious beliefs associated with cats, mainly (1) the witch, believed either to have the ability to change herself into the form of a cat or to have at her command a demon-familiar who has taken the shape of a cat, (2) the incubus, said in the Middle Ages to visit and disturb sleeping victims often in the form of a large black cat,\(^3\) and (3) the sacred Egyptian goddess Bast, typically
depicted either as a black cat or as a creature with the body of a human woman and the head of a human-size black cat.\(^4\)

As exposition to his horror story, the narrator gives a brief, but rather telling, description of his childhood. He is a gentle child, whose friends tease him because of his overt "tenderness of heart." He is fond of animals, and all we learn about his parents is that they "indulged" him "with a great variety of pets." He passes the majority of his time with the animals and derives much happiness from "feeding and caressing them." He is a boy who is gentle and affectionate with pets: "To those who have cherished an affection for a faithful and sagacious dog, I need hardly be at the trouble of explaining the nature or the intensity of the gratification thus derivable." Unlike William Wilson, who brags about his superiority as a boy, the narrator of "The Black Cat" describes himself as a rather timid, powerless child who later shifts into the fictional character of God-peer as an adult.

After his reference to "the paltry friendship and gossamer fidelity of mere Man" (already deemphasizing any "human" role and giving way to becoming a "controlling" God figure), the narrator introduces his marriage incidentally, with more emphasis on the pets they own
than on his wife. As Hoffman points out, the wife’s character does not come to life for us in the way that most of Poe’s other female characters do (231). This woman is presented rather as a stock representation of a patient and compatible wife. That she "procures" animals "of the most agreeable kind" to satisfy her husband’s "partiality for domestic pets" makes her character similar to that of the narrator’s cooperative parents, who "indulge" their son "with a great variety of pets."

The narrator forms an attachment to the cat that parallels his childhood attachment to his pets. His wife is not mentioned again until after his change in disposition, but his relationship with Pluto we are told "lasted, in this manner for several years" (598). This statement sounds as if it ought to be made in reference to the state of his marriage, which is as new to us as Pluto this early in the story. Affection for an animal in place of, or instead of, a human shows the nature of the God-peer to be less concerned with human beings. The narrator is preoccupied with Pluto’s feelings and holds off mistreating the cat longer than he restrains himself from abusing his wife with "intemperate language" and "personal violence." In essence, he at first treats the black cat with the kind of respect one would expect him to afford a human being, especially a spouse. This
treatment intensifies our awareness of the narrator's arbitrary moral world, where he draws his own slim line between his feelings for a woman who ought to be dear to his heart and his feelings for a domestic pet.

The narrator's disposition changes after he has been married for several years, during which time his relationships with Pluto and his wife have had a chance to grow. The narrator relates his childhood, his marriage, his attachment to Pluto, and the change in his character as exposition to the narrative which begins on the night he cuts out Pluto's eye (the turning point of the fiction in which he fully shape-shifts into God-peer), and which ends on the day the police discover the wife's corpse.

In "The Black Cat," Poe the God-peer merges the ordinary, or what he refers to as "mere household," with the supernatural. On the one hand, either cat can be seen as a typical finicky domestic pet that tasks its owner's nerves. On the other hand, the narrator hints that the cat may be any one of several supernatural creatures in disguise. Likewise, the wife at some points appears to be a stereotypical subservient "housewife," catering to her alcoholic husband's moods with little sense of her own self worth, while, at other points, she appears to be mysteriously in league with supernatural
forces, manipulating the ordinary course of events in her husband’s life. Either image the narrator paints is extreme and unbelievable in empirical terms.

On the one hand, Poe creates a male narrator who experiences "mere household" problems with alcoholism, his spouse, their pets, and the loss of their home. On the other, the narrator wills or imagines that the "mere household" shape-shifts into a parallel dimension, the world of supernatural, in which the narrator’s home becomes a haven cursed by the "Devil" who comes in various forms -- a witch, an incubus, an Egyptian goddess, and a black cat named Pluto. Pluto, at the very least, brings bad luck and continues to be reincarnated and, at the very most, snatches the narrator’s humane soul and replaces it with the changeling I have termed "God-peer." As the narrator invents himself to heroic dimensions, he dramatizes his two roles: playing peer to God and generating or invoking God. As is typical in all the murder narratives, the images of horror the narrator creates are from the traditional hell, with Pluto in the role of Devil and the narrator in the role of God, or God-peer, and, ironically, little difference between the two.

Allusion is the God-peer’s primary literary tool in this murder narrative. He alludes to several myths
attached to cats in order to form his horror story and thus, at least inferentially, invoke a universe of mysterious powers. As Bonaparte points out, Pluto "bear[s] the name of the god who rules the underworld" (460). The narrator gives the cat a diabolical name, associating it with the underworld, but perhaps not so much to prove that the cat is demonic as to invoke belief in an "other" world. The narrator introduces Pluto as "a remarkably large and beautiful animal, entirely black, and sagacious to an astonishing degree" (598). Two features in the narrator's description of Pluto -- his size, "remarkably large," and its color, "entirely black" -- are reemphasized when the narrator creates the second cat: "It was a black cat -- a very large one -- fully as large as Pluto, and closely resembling him in every respect but one. Pluto had not a white hair upon any portion of his body" (601). Pluto's double possesses one feature which distinguishes him from his predecessor and which torments the narrator in his newfound role of God-peer, as another of Poe's doubles is tormented -- William Wilson, whose whispering voice distinguishes him from his more vocal counterpart and serves to threaten the Wilson narrator's position as God-peer.

According to Philippa Waring, the significance of a black cat's color is derived from Egyptian myth: "It is
always stressed by those with most implicit faith in the black cat's powers that it must be totally black, that even a fleck or hair of white disqualifies it. The origin of this superstition dates back to the ancient Egyptians who greatly revered cats in general, one of the most important Goddesses being Bast, a black female cat" (36). The fleck of white makes the cat an "impure" black cat. In this regard, the second cat would appear to be less representative of pure evil than Pluto, and thus it poses a threat to the narrator's own power, which is perhaps why he cannot bring himself to abuse the second cat as easily as he does Pluto. The fleck of white hair later takes the shape of the gallows and "foreshadows his [the narrator's] own death" as Frushell points out (44). This reveals the God-peer's ambivalent purpose, which in this case is to suggest the human desire to have faith in a traditional God who will ensure punishment and divine justice.

The superstition regarding the large size of the cat, though not as commonly known as that pertaining to the blackness of the cat, is derived from medieval belief in the incubus. R. E. L. Masters explains that an incubus or succubus appearing in the form of a cat is "the size of a large dog, or of a goat" so that it can better torment its human victim (77). As Anderson's
reading shows, the nightmare in which the cat, again with its "vast weight" emphasized, sits upon the narrator’s heart can allude to none other than the medieval belief in incubi. The narrator of "The Black Cat" describes himself as being completely helpless beneath the "incarnate Night-Mare": ". . . I started, hourly, from dreams of unutterable fear, to find the hot breath of the thing upon my face, and its vast weight -- an incarnate Night-Mare that I had not power to shake off -- incumbent eternally upon my heart!" (603).

After describing Pluto as a large black cat, the narrator mentions the most important supernatural power attributed to both the witch and the incubus -- that is, shape-shifting: ". . . my wife . . . made frequent allusion to the ancient popular notion, which regarded all black cats as witches in disguise" (598). Hence, the large size of the cat, its color, and shape-shifting work together along with all the other demonic implications and allusions in the tale; all are held by the narrator to characterize the common household pet as a supernatural creature, a characterization which significantly generates a supernatural world.

Having first implanted the suggestion in our minds that the cat is a witch, the narrator then concludes matter-of-factly: "Not that she [his wife] was ever
serious upon this point -- and I mention the matter at all for no better reason than that it happens, just now, to be remembered" (598). After the horror he describes in the first paragraph, the narrator pretends to expect us to believe he accidentally recalls his wife's allusion to witchcraft, when it is in actuality a central image of himself and his role. Thus, the God-peer attempts to make believable that which is commonly perceived as unbelievable.

In his introduction of both cats, the narrator alludes to witchcraft, incubus beliefs, and ancient Egyptian beliefs about black cats. Having established a supernatural basis for his cruel behavior in mutilating Pluto, the God-peer forges links between the disasters which follow -- the hanging of the witch, the fire in which he loses his home, the discovery of the second cat, the nightmares that haunt him, the murder of his wife, and his attempted murder of the second cat -- by expanding upon these allusions until he has created enough evidence to make possible a "superstitious" reading of the events he experiences.

Just as the narrator leaves out pertinent information about his youth, he also uses the idea that he is an alcoholic as a diversion from the real nature and cause of his problems, which is his inability to
surrender his human existence to a higher authority. His abusing the cat while he is under the influence of alcohol calls to mind the stereotype that people relieve their frustrations on their pets -- as Ambrose Bierce alludes to in his definition of "cat": "A soft, indestructible automation provided by nature to be kicked when things go wrong in the domestic circle" (35). However, that the husband has no confrontation with his wife on this night is questionable, for the stereotype also exists, though Poe chooses not to use it, of an alcoholic beating his spouse every night when he comes home. The narrator would have us believe in relation to the role he is creating that he becomes "possessed" by the "fury of a demon" upon being bitten by the cat. This demonic bite of a *striga*, "originally a blood-drinking night spirit" that came to be identified with witches long before Poe’s time (Russell, 53), along with the alcohol already in his system, is evidence he offers to suggest that he has no control over his actions -- "I knew myself no longer" (598). In other words, the "spirits" are to blame, whether it be the spirit of alcohol or a demonic spirit, both of which he self-consciously invites and then projects as part of his power.
The narrator depicts himself as a being who enjoys doing evil and being sadistic, not because he is really out of control but because this is the code of morality which he wants to generate in his fictional role of God-peer. For example, just before cutting out the cat’s eye, the narrator experiences an elevated state of excitement in both body and soul: "My original soul seemed, at once, to take its flight from my body; and a more than fiendish malevolence, ginnurtured, thrilled every fibre of my frame" (598). Far from Bonaparte’s "castration theory," I see the narrator’s abuse of the cat as his way of playing God-peer, of doing evil for the sake of arbitrary control and power.

Shortly before the intoxicated narrator grabs Pluto because he "fancied that the cat avoided my presence," we learn that Pluto "was now becoming old, and consequently somewhat peevish" (598). This description could very well apply not only to a cat tired of its master but also to a woman dissatisfied with her husband after being married "for several years." I am suggesting not (as so many other critics have) that the black cat and the wife are the same being -- neatly summarized in Hoffman’s often quoted equation, "witch=wife. Ergo, black cat=wife" (231) -- but rather that the narrator responds to the changes in the cat in place of his wife in order
to dramatize his own supra-human nature, perhaps a way of distorting reality to see how far he can make it his own. The change in the narrator from a gentle, loving man to a violent alcoholic may be caused by his inability to face his marital problems (as many have argued), but is more likely a dramatization of one human’s attempt to usurp the role of God, to enact power at any cost.

In the first paragraph of the story the narrator states that he will make a confession to cleanse his soul before meeting death: "But to-morrow I die, and to-day I would unburthen my soul" (597). His narrative reveals his major crimes or sins to be the mutilation and murder of Pluto and the murder of the wife. In the first paragraph, he states, "Mad indeed would I be to expect it [i.e., belief by the listener], in a case where my very senses reject their own evidence" (597). To admit he finds his own narrative unbelievable is his way of manipulating the listener (not to mention himself) into possibly believing the unbelievable; he creates a role that is a wish fulfillment. Following the scene in which the cat is deprived of its eye, the narrator urges us to believe that which is rationally unbelievable: Further identifying "the damnable atrocity" as "the crime of which I had been guilty," he then claims that "the soul remained untouched" (599). How he can think his soul
"untouched" when he perceives the act as being criminal and damnable is only believable when recognized as a paradox.\textsuperscript{11} Again, the narrator establishes a role which tries to set forth as plausible that which is contradictory if not impossible in rational terms. That is, he generates a realm of supernatural, of "mystery."

With terminology such as "soul" and "damnable," Poe steers us to the Bible for an explanation about how the narrator, who describes his own behavior as that of a beast, might try to justify himself (in his God-peer role) in the crimes he commits, just as in evil eye folklore the God-peer of "The Tell-Tale Heart" finds justification for murder. There are four references to bestiality in the Bible (Horner, 74-75), all of which condemn the act.\textsuperscript{12} All four references indicate that the human is to be punished for the sin of bestiality, mainly by death, and Leviticus specifies that the animal is also to be punished by death. The Biblical references are indeed prescriptive of the subsequent steps the narrator of "The Black Cat" takes.

He does not simply "slay the beast." He murders it in such a manner that will assure either his unmitigated power or the damnation of his own soul, that is, assuming there is a Supreme Being to pass such a judgment: ". . . hung it because I knew that in so doing I was committing
a sin -- 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" (599-600). The other two reasons the narrator gives for hanging the cat further the illogic of his motive: "... because I knew that it had loved me, and because I felt it had given me no reason for offence" (599). The God-peer's reasoning here is much like his reasoning in "The Tell-Tale Heart," where the old man is innocent but marked for murder anyway. The God-peer murders "the unoffending brute," and his inner feelings do not coincide with the actions he takes: "I ... hung it with the tears streaming from my eyes, and with the bitterest remorse at my heart" (599). His soul is cold, while his heart is warm. Again, as in "The Tell-Tale Heart," the heart carries on the human quality of compassion, while the soul, engaged in the act of generating the role of God-peer, must condone evil to establish supremacy or generate punishment.

Because a crowd of people, uttering words such as "strange" and "singular," is gathered near the bedroom wall which has somehow managed to survive the fire, we accept that the impression of the cat with the noose around its neck is literally there. The words "strange"
and "singular" can appropriately refer to the "strange" fact that a "singular" wall remains standing while the rest of the house has fallen. Other than these two words, there is no indication that the crowd sees what the narrator sees on the wall: "I approached and saw, as if graven in bas relief upon the white surface, the figure of a gigantic cat. The impression was given with an accuracy truly marvellous. There was a rope about the animal's neck" (600). We see this image strictly from the point of view of the narrator, and this "phantasm" (601), we are expected to believe sends, the narrator in search of another black cat to carry on the curse that so causes him pain.

The narrator reasons that because he sees the image of the black cat with a noose around its neck "as if graven in bas relief upon the white surface" among the ashes of his house, his killing of the cat must somehow have been the cause of the fire. He offers a "logical" explanation so full of unbelievable assumptions that his listeners, unable to provide a sounder rational argument, virtually have no choice but to consider the whole incident of the fire as a supernatural occurrence beyond the narrator's comprehension yet generated by him. In either case, he has empowered himself as God. As always, he invokes a world of magic and ritual. Besides the
well-known superstition that to kill a black cat is bad luck (Waring, 36), an old Egyptian belief about domestic cats might also account for why the God-peer chooses to include the fire as one of the events in his story: "... the cat was from the outset a sacred animal. ... as the centuries passed, the petted and domesticated animal was the object of worship that became fanatical. Herodotos maintains that when a house took fire the Egyptians of his time thought only of preserving the cats" (Sayce, 144). Contrary to saving the cat from the fire, the God-peer kills the sacred animal and is, hence, punished and cursed: "The destruction was complete. My entire worldly wealth was swallowed up, and I resigned myself thenceforward to despair" (600).  

Having destroyed the black cat, the supposed cause of his problems, the narrator deliberately seeks another cat (who brings him terrible nightmares) as a replacement to continue the self torture. The murder of the black cat is the beginning of a curse on the narrator which lasts until the end of the story and which drives him to his own death. The punishment for bestiality noted in Deuteronomy, as we have seen, is that the human be "cursed." A curse is characterized by a repetition in the victim’s life of some specific evil object or occurrence. The victim is tormented over and over again
just as the narrator is haunted with the reappearance, which he creates, of the black cat in various forms — the impression on the wall after the fire, the black and white stray he finds, and the ghastly image of the cat merged with the wife’s decayed corpse. The narrator brings this curse, which eventually leads to the destruction of both his body and soul, down upon his fictional self as punishment for his bestiality and sadism — as presumably some sign of absolute "justice."

When he first finds the black cat with the white splotch on its breast, the narrator behaves affectionately, as he used to do with the black cat prior to his having lost his "original soul." But shortly after the new cat is welcomed into his home, the narrator develops a loathing for it, again, as with Pluto, because the cat loves him: "... its evident fondness for myself rather disgusted and annoyed" (601).

He avoids the cat because it has good qualities that he used to have but gave up when he decided to play peer to God. He represents the beast as being more tender than the man. "Whenever I sat, it would crouch beneath my chair, or spring upon my knees, covering me with its loathsome caresses. If I arose to walk it would get between my feet and thus nearly throw me down, or, fastening its long sharp claws in my dress, clamber, in
this manner, to my breast" (602). The cat behaves as any
domestic pet would toward its owner — as a "mere
household" pet. It is the narrator who interprets the
cat's behavior as being something other than natural, as
being something supernatural — an incubus, a tormentor.
The narrator's control of his paranoia about the new cat
is a punishment to himself in that he suffers, all the
while, to restrain himself from hurting this cat as he
had done Pluto.

The acquisition of his new pet cat only brings the
narrator a new set of nightmares, in effect, new
fictional materials with which to shape his horror story.
There are three scenes in which the narrator is in bed,
and his wife seems to be nowhere in sight. On the night
of the fire, "I was aroused from sleep by the cry of
fire. The curtains of my bed were in flames" (600). The
next time we find the narrator in his bed, he is having a
nightmare and he mentions that his cat is in bed with him
but not his wife (603). The last time we see the
narrator in bed is after he has murdered his wife; he
sleeps "tranquilly" (605). Rather than a wife, the woman
seems more like a young sister to the narrator, retaining
for him "that humanity of feeling which had once been my
distinguishing trait, and the source of many of my
simplest and purest pleasures" (602). She symbolizes his
childhood innocence, all hope of retrieving which is lost once he destroys her.

In the murder of his wife, the narrator enacts his own destruction for his sin of bestiality, that is, of being beast-like in his role of God-peer. Intercepted by the cat in an attempt to descend the stairs with his wife, the narrator loses restraint: "The cat followed me down the steep stairs, and nearly throwing me headlong, exasperated me to madness" (603). But his innocent childhood love of animals, represented by his wife’s presence, stops him from violence: "But this blow was arrested by the hand of my wife." Therefore, he kills the wife, his childhood innocence, so that he will be guilty of yet another sin. And this is a sin so horrible that it will ensure the destruction of his soul (because the murder lacks a logical motive) and the destruction of his body (because the discovery of his wife’s corpse will send him to the gallows): "Goaded, by the interference, into a rage more than demoniacal, I withdrew my arm from her grasp and buried the axe in her brain. She fell dead upon the spot, without a groan" (603). The murder is not premeditated the way it is in "The Tell-Tale Heart." He appears to have acted spur of the moment, but his calm manner is more unbelievable than the murder itself because he shows no emotional reaction that we would
ordinarily expect of a human. This is the God-peer persona once again displaying indifference toward his victim and the crime in the name of some "higher" end.

After the wife's death, the cat also disappears from the narrator's life, and there is a sense that the narrator "breathed as a freeman" (605) only on a temporary basis because his obsession is a necessary condition of his spiritual survival. For the remembrance of the gallows, the white image, highlighted by the blackness of the cat, lingers to let us know that the curse of the black cat is not completely dead in the narrator's mind; that is, the tale-teller is not finished with his self-creation. The "phantasm" returns, one last time, in the climactic final scene to "consign" him, once and for all, "to the hangman." This time, however, the bodies of the woman and the cat are united into an image suggestive of the Egyptian goddess Bast: "The corpse, already greatly decayed and clotted with gore, stood erect before the eyes of the spectators. Upon its head, with red extended mouth and solitary eye of fire, sat the hideous beast whose craft had seduced me into murder, and whose informing voice had consigned me to the hangman" (606). The willed union between the wife and the cat, now "incarnate," forces him to view these two creatures together as one being -- human and animal -- and this
hideous image serves as a reminder of the side of himself that has taken over -- a god who is bestial and must "surely be put to death," both body and soul. As Frushell puts it, the "cat is emblematic of that diabolical brute passion which has fed upon the head (reason) of man" (44). But at least some sort of absolute may have been established.

Like the fire and the nightmares, the circumstances surrounding the murder of his wife also call to the realm of the occult for explanation. The narrator constructs a story in which the cat is an evil force which drives him to murder his wife. Bast is typically "represented as a cat or a cat-headed woman, whose rituals and processions were rather licentious" (Kaster, 29-30). According to Robert Graves, Bast was a protector of men against evil spirits (37). One of this goddess's roles was as the guardian of marriage (Cirlot, 39). Either of these roles is fitting to the narrator's purpose, which is to use a perverted Bast as the final image in his horror story.

The narrator creates a horror story in which a supernatural cat creature supposedly takes control of him. He -- "a man, fashioned in the image of the High God" -- is at the mercy of a mere "brute beast." Certain critics have obliged him. Interpreted supernaturally as Anderson does, the man is helpless against the evil -- "I
had not power to shake off" -- and, hence, innocent of whatever evil or crimes he is allegedly influenced into by the demon. But it is important to keep in perspective, as Anderson fails to do, that the images of the cats as evil creatures are more the deliberate characterizations than the random and arbitrary "projections" of a madman. Because he is a tale-teller creating the image of an incubus, the God-peer is not so much insanely trying to justify his crime as rather, illustrating his own power to generate truth. Frushell reasons, "In murder the narrator has presumed to the power, in his words, of the 'Most Terrible God'. . . . The narrator's inability or unwillingness to recognize that he is 'mere man' and not God is the cause of his demise" (44). Indeed, the narrator knows that he is "merely man" with a desperate need to invoke a higher power at the same time that he attempts to usurp the divine role. Davidson also argues, as I do, that the narrator places himself in the role of God, passing an overly cruel judgment on his own crimes: "No other god but the self as god can wreak such vengeance as when the criminal is his own judge and executioner" (190). Further, however, the narrator is trying not so much to punish the criminal as he is trying to create some sort of faith in the word. The only "craft" at work in his tale is the
craft of self-creation. The God-peer is not, as Gargano says, in "denial of a moral order" ("The Black Cat," 91); rather he is in the process of creating a new way of looking at morality and challenging listeners to accept or respond to his belief system about God.

Notes

1. See, e.g., Bonaparte; Harry Levin; Gargano, "The Black Cat"; Richard C. Frushell; Hoffman; Roberta Reeder; and William Crisman.

2. Reeder, for example, who attributes the cause of the events to the narrator’s "lack of psychological insight into the nature of the instinctual part of man’s personality" (21), fails to consider that as tale-teller he forms those same personalities about which Reeder claims the narrator is shortsighted.

3. Beliefs in the incubus would have been familiar enough to Poe, if not through the English Romantics, especially Sir Walter Scott with his publication of the ballad "The Demon Lover," then through art. Likely, Poe was familiar with the painting "The Nightmare" by Henry Fuseli, whom Poe mentions in "The Fall of the House of Usher": "For me at least -- in the circumstances then surrounding me -- there arose out of the pure abstractions which the hypochondriac contrived to throw upon his canvass, an intensity of intolerable awe, no shadow of which felt I ever yet in the contemplation of the certainly glowing yet too concrete reveries of Fuseli" (325).

4. Poe’s familiarity with Egyptian mythology is evident from stories such as "The Gold Bug" and especially "Some Words with a Mummy."
5. As Hoffman argues, in the narrator's mind, the cat becomes a displacement of his wife, of whose terror he wants to rid himself (233).

6. Poe also alludes to the classical god in his diabolical role in "A Tale of Jerusalem" when a Roman soldier shouts "in a hoarse, rough voice, which appeared to issue from the regions of Pluto" (149).

7. Although the second cat would appear to bring self control to the narrator while Pluto brings out his violent nature, the names he uses to refer to Pluto -- "my favorite pet and playmate," "the cat," "the poor beast," "creature," "the unoffending brute," and "the animal" -- are far less fiendish and demonic than those he attaches to the black and white cat -- "the very creature," "the animal," "the creature," "the beast," "this cat," "the monster," "brute beast," "the thing," "the crafty animal," "the detested creature," "my tormentor," and "the hideous beast." As Levin argues, Pluto represents the narrator's "pointless cruelty" and the second cat acts as the "agent of retribution" or the narrator's conscience (145). Therefore, the narrator's labels for the cats are reversed from what we would typically expect. That is, Pluto, who is more overtly evil, is labelled with more complimentary names than is the second cat, who, like William Wilson's double, acts as the God-peer's conscience, helping him to create a world in which "right" is distinguishable from "wrong."

8. Jeffrey Burton Russell's description of succubi's role in the early thirteenth century is useful here:

The witches enter people's houses in the course of these nocturnal journeys. They disturb sleepers by sitting on their chests and causing nightmares of suffocation and falling. They have sexual relations with sleeping men. They suck blood, steal infants from their beds, and rummage through baskets and bins for food. They take the form of cats, wolves, or other animals at will. (64)

9. The details of this passage are suggestive of Fuseli's "The Nightmare." Although in the original painting a demon with a somewhat human-looking face sits upon the woman's stomach, Fuseli was later commissioned to paint other versions of the picture, one of them depicting a large black cat-like creature seated directly upon the woman's chest, looking down with an evil grin into her disturbed, sleeping face (Shulman, 129). Also see footnote 3 above.
10. Poe makes this same point in his essay "Instinct vs. Reason -- A Black Cat": ". . . for it will be remembered that black cats are all of them witches" (Quinn, 371).

11. In Letter #7, Poe proposes a similar paradox to his father, "You believe me degraded -- but do not believe it -- There is that within my heart which has no connection with degradation -- I can walk among infection & be uncontaminated" (88).

12. "Whosoever lieth with a beast shall surely be put to death" (Exodus 22:19); "Neither shalt thou lie with any beast to defile thyself therewith: neither shall any woman stand before a beast to lie down thereto: it is confusion" (Leviticus 18:23); "And if a man lie with a beast, he shall surely be put to death: and ye shall slay the beast. / And if a woman approach unto any beast, and lie down thereto, thou shalt kill the woman, and the beast: they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them" (Leviticus 20:15-16); and "Cursed be he that lieth with any manner of beast" (Deuteronomy 27:21). In light of these references, I would say that Poe is using the concept of "bestiality" in "The Black Cat" in reference to a person behaving against his own nature, behaving in a beast-like manner, symbolically "lying with" a beast, but, most important, invoking deliberately one of the greatest moral crimes in an attempt to ensure his damnation. To be damned is to, after all, affirm God's power.

13. James Hillman, in his book The Dream and the Underworld, points out that "Pluto" also carries the meaning "wealth" or "riches" (28). To destroy Pluto, then, is indeed to lose his wealth.

14. See Reeder, who argues, "Though there is nothing necessarily evil in the cat's behavior, the narrator's projections make it appear so" (21).
CHAPTER 4
"DEATH BY THE VISITATION OF GOD":
DIDDLING IN "THE IMP OF THE PERVERSE"

We have been told that the tall tales of the Bible are "revealed truth" (Graham, 7).

"The Imp of the Perverse" consists of two sections, and Poe employs a separate persona for each part. The first section (826-29) -- that is, the introductory material to the actual story about the crime -- is much like Eureka in tone as well as subject matter. It is a philosophical preface to the murder narrative that follows, narrated by the persona of Poe the philosopher. The second section (830-32) -- that is, the actual murder narrative itself -- employs the narrative voice of Poe the God-peer. This second voice is once again the reincarnation of William Wilson and the narrators of the horror stories "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat."
Unlike his three predecessors, however, the persona of the murder narrative in "The Imp of the Perverse" has a strong sense of humor and chooses the genre of the tall tale for his (once again) fictional creation of God.

One indication that the voice of Eureka and the introductory material of "The Imp of the Perverse" are one and the same -- that is, the persona of Poe the
philosopher -- is the liberal use of the word "God" in these works. The persona of Poe the God-peer in "William Wilson" makes no direct mention of "God" and uses the word in "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat" only as an emotional appeal to the existence of a higher authority when the narrator’s crime is about to be uncovered and his position as God-peer falters, whereas the philosophical voice of "The Imp of the Perverse" liberally uses the term "God" and other synonymous words such as "Jehovah," "Deity," and "Creator" in the introductory material to the actual murder narrative. Likewise Poe’s voice in Eureka, of course, speaks directly about his subject matter, referring explicitly to a Supreme God and questioning His "plot."

Poe’s primary concern in all the murder narratives, that is, belief or disbelief in the existence of God, is insinuated in the narratives rather than addressed directly. As I discussed more fully in my Introduction, the God-peer persona rarely uses the word "God," whereas the term is used liberally in many of Poe’s other fictional and poetic works. The absence, or at least the rareness, of the occurrence of the word "God" in the vocabulary of the God-peer persona is perhaps meant to suggest the human fear (1) that no such word exists because no such Supreme Being exists, (2) that God’s
presence is only rarely or implicitly felt, and (3) that God’s role has been usurped by a human performer who questions the existence of the supernatural Almighty God.

"The Imp of the Perverse" is the only one of the five tales under discussion that is prefaced by words from the Poe persona of philosopher. Halfway through the tale, the voice changes to that of God-peer and never reverts to that of Poe the philosopher. The preface discusses the type of person who "fancies" himself a peer to God and thus functions to prepare the listener for the criminal narrator who will later take over the story. This type the philosopher persona describes as follows:

"The intellectual or logical man, rather than the understanding or observant man, set himself to imagine designs -- to dictate purposes to God" (826). This "intellectual or logical man" is a description not only of Poe’s God-peer persona but also theologians and philosophers, whose writings are for the most part responsible for human perceptions about God’s nature. Poe’s criminal narrator presumes to be God’s peer and to speak, as it were, for Him. Here the philosopher persona explicates the character of a God-peer as an "intellectual or logical man" rather than an "understanding or observant man." He holds that imagination is a phenomenon of the intellect and of logic
and does not necessarily imply true "understanding" of the reality of what God is. Poe, in effect, both ironically limits his own narrative persona and suggests, by extension, that this persona's role has widespread significance insofar as we try to describe or "create" God.

The philosopher persona argues that humans tend to define human behavior according to how we imagine or assume God expects us to behave rather than how humans actually behaves: "It would have been wiser, it would have been safer to classify, (if classify we must,) upon the basis of what man usually or occasionally did, and was always occasionally doing, rather than upon the basis of what we took it for granted the Deity intended him to do" (827). This narrator makes a distinction between God's "visible works" -- for example, His creation of human beings and how we witness humans actually behaving -- and His "inconceivable thoughts" -- that is, God's intentions for how His human creation ought to lead his life: "If we cannot comprehend God in his visible works, how then in his inconceivable thoughts, that call the works into being?" (827). The narrator questions how someone can claim to reach into the mind of God when that person has not even been able to interpret his or her own self as a creation of God and hence a part of God: "If
we cannot understand him [i.e., God] in his objective creatures [i.e., humans], how then in his substantive moods and phases of creation [i.e., God’s thought process]?

(827). This is a rhetorical question, the implied answer being that one can never fully understand God but believes himself or herself to have this power anyway, a power Poe will demonstrate through the God-peer narrator, representing one of God’s "objective creatures."

As I have noted about the first three murder narratives and will argue in regard to "The Imp of the Perverse" and "The Cask of Amontillado," the narrator rejects God as a supernatural being and makes every attempt to personify Him as a being with thought processes like humans. In other words, we assign human characteristics to God, but where most humans lose sight of the fact that they have created the personification, Poe’s God-peer either relishes his usurpation or suffers and is driven to madness because he is all too aware that God so invoked is merely his own figurative creation in fiction and must needs be something more. I have traced the God-peer’s struggle with this issue from Poe’s first full characterization of this criminal narrator in "William Wilson." The God-peer dramatizes directly what
Poe the philosopher argues here in the preface of "The Imp of the Perverse" and throughout *Eureka*.

The philosopher persona, in effect, provides an analysis of the God-peer's "perverse" actions, arguing that "perverseness" is the desire to act "without motive" -- that is, to demonstrate the human potential to usurp the role of God by acting freely outside the context of a moral universe (thus, without "rational" cause). As he says of perverseness:

Through its promptings we act without comprehensible object; or, if this shall be understood as a contradiction in terms, we may so far modify the proposition as to say, that through its promptings we act, for the reason that we should not. In theory, no reason can be more unreasonable; but, in fact, there is none more strong. With certain minds, under certain conditions, it becomes absolutely irresistible. (827)

The God-peer of the tall tale that follows is of the "certain mind . . . under certain conditions" who cannot resist "this overwhelming tendency to do wrong for the wrong's sake" (827), that is, as a free and uncontrolled (and potentially limitless) extension of self.

Through his philosopher narrator, Poe explores the idea of doing evil for its own sake and goes beyond the traditional concept of the demonic as having the effect of "horror" to another definition of horror -- that is,
the desire to experience feelings of fear willingly in an attempt to experience the unknown:

But out of this our cloud [i.e., the fear of falling] upon the precipice’s edge, there grows into palpability, a shape, far more terrible than any genius, or any demon of a tale, and yet it is but 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. (829)

Here is a full description of the free-falling self: In his or her willingness to experience the unknown, the human self gains godlike power by gaining knowledge unknown to other human beings. Having gained this knowledge, the mind of the God-peer believes himself to have come closer to the ultimate unknown (God), perhaps even himself a version of that unknown. The phrase "chills the very marrow of our bones" that the philosopher persona uses here also occurs in Poe’s first two murder narratives. William Wilson is "thrilled to the very marrow of my bones" (352) by the voice of his whispering counterpart, and the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" says the evil eye of his victim "chilled the very marrow in my bones" (557). In this passage from "The Imp of the Perverse," the philosopher submits a paradox -- the feeling of being "delighted" by "horror." This paradox involves the human desire to experience
"sensations" aroused by that which has customarily been considered dangerous or evil -- all of this "resulting solely from the spirit of the Perverse" (829) -- that is, the drive in some humans to experience the unknown, no matter what the risk, in order to feel superior to others, to become, in some sense, superhuman (or God). This tendency explains why the voice that whispers in "William Wilson" and the eye that is evil in "The Tell-Tale Heart," both objects of horror created by Poe the God-peer, become the very vehicles through which the narrator of these stories lays claim to the status of God-peer: The narrator chooses to explore that which is feared rather than to retreat from the horror as a "rational" and ordinary human being might do.

The image of the cloud that Poe the philosopher uses in "The Imp of the Perverse" also appears in Poe’s poem "Alone." In the beginning eight lines of the poem, the first-person speaker describes his existence and his sight as being different from that of others ever since childhood:

From childhood’s hour I have not been
As others were -- I have not seen
As others saw -- I could not bring
My passions from a common spring --
From the same source I have not taken
My sorrow -- I would not awaken
My heart to joy at the same tone --
And all I lov’d -- I lov’d alone --
(60)
This claim is also made and developed further by the God-peer persona in "William Wilson" and "The Black Cat."

The rest of the poem is a description of a childhood revelation, "[t]he mystery which binds me still" (l. 12), that the persona has during a storm in which he watches a cloud shape-shift into a demon:

Then -- in my childhood -- in the dawn
Of a most stormy life -- was drawn
From ev’ry depth of good and ill
The mystery which binds me still --
From the torrent, or the fountain --
From the red cliff of the mountain --
From the sun that ’round me roll’d
In its autumn tint of gold --
From the lightning in the sky
As it pass’d me flying by --
From the thunder, and the storm --
And the cloud that took the form
(When the rest of Heaven was blue)
Of a demon in my view --
(60)

First published in 1829 when Poe was only twenty years old, five years before John Allan’s death, ten years before his first murder narrative, this poem already explores the idea of being "delighted" by "horror," thus making way for the association of God with demonic powers in the murder narratives in which Poe takes this paradoxical idea one step further.

The last statement the philosopher persona makes before "The Imp of the Perverse" switches voices to the God-peer implies that there is a slim line between good
and evil and that the distinction between the two is recognized only by the definition that any particular person attaches to each term: "And we might, indeed, deem this perverseness a direct instigation of the Arch-Fiend, were it not occasionally known to operate in furtherance of good" (829). In a traditional sense, that which is "of the Devil" is separate from that which is "of the Supreme God." Traditionally, evil and goodness are for the most part distinct, opposite concepts. But, in the hands of Poe the God-peer, the "evil" and the "good" become, at the very least, ambiguous and, at the very most, synonymous. The issue becomes not so much God’s morality as the question of his very existence. The criminal narrator uses the tall tale to create the need for God and illustrates how "perverseness . . . operate[s]" in the tale "in furtherance of good," that is, as the force generating our super-humanity.

The first part of "The Imp of the Perverse" serves as a preface to the murder narrative that follows, just as I believe Eureka, Poe’s last work, read first, serves as a preface to the murder narratives. However, by distinguishing between the two voices in "The Imp of the Perverse," I do not mean to imply that these personas have nothing in common. Indeed, they are complementary, one articulating in essay form what the other enacts in
story form. Both are concerned with the concept of God. Pertinent to understanding the tale as a parody of belief systems insofar as it questions the existence of an Almighty God is the sense of humor that both voices employ. This humor is found, for example, in the philosopher persona's commentary on "circumlocution":

There lives no man who at some period, has not been tormented, for example, by an earnest desire to tantalize a listener by circumlocution. 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 restrains himself from giving it flow; he dreads and deprecates the anger of him whom he addresses; yet, the thought strikes him, that by certain involutions and parentheses, this anger may be engendered. (828)

Here, the philosophical narrator uses the very round-about language he is himself discussing. He is at the same time aware that the choice to use language in certain ways enables him to produce an effect in his "listener." He commits, if you will, the very "language crime" that he would seem to be speaking against and uses it because he thinks he should not -- in other words, because he has been "possessed" by the imp of the perverse:

We have a task [i.e., to tell a story] before us which must be speedily performed [i.e., in order to be read in one sitting as Poe would have it]. We know that it will be ruinous [i.e., ineffective on
the readers] to make delay. . . . and yet we put it off until tomorrow [i.e., take long to tell the tale]: and why? There is no answer, except that we feel *perverse*, using the word with no comprehension of the principle. (828)

The persona says he uses the word "perverse" without understanding its meaning. In this sense, he is much like Poe's criminal narrator, who also uses familiar words or concepts such as "evil" but attaches new meanings to them because redefining and recreating is part of what makes the narrator a God-peer. In this role, he has the power to influence listeners into accepting things on faith for which there is little, if any, basis in fact. Here the philosopher persona again employs a kind of dark and ironic humor. He teases or manipulates listeners while talking about manipulation itself. He stalls in getting to the point of the story by talking about why humans stall in carrying out actions, just as later in the murder narrative the God-peer persona says that he hesitates for months before going through with the murder, and just as the whole preface in "The Imp of the Perverse" can be read as a stalling tactic to put off telling the murder. Although humor is found in all of Poe's murder narratives, it is the most prominent in "The Imp of the Perverse" because the genre for the murder "confession" is the tall tale.
Primarily, the humor adds to the characterization of the God-peer. Because a humorous tone is not ordinarily used to recount a murder, it adds to the God-peer’s distanced coldness insofar as it suggests how he feels about inflicting death on another. Furthermore, the humor contributes to the characterization of the narrator as God-peer in that it suggests he has the power to decide that an otherwise inappropriate tone is, in fact, appropriate for a murder "mystery."

To some extent, all the God-peer narrators have qualities of one central figure of American fiction (especially the tall tale), the confidence man, a figure who usurps power and uses it against weaker humans. As Susan Khulmann points out, Wilson’s manipulations in the gambling scenes are such an example (5). In the two horror stories, there is the narrator’s inconspicuous behavior toward the old man during the daytime in "The Tell-Tale Heart" and the God-peer who makes the unbelievable horror story about demonic cat creatures appear believable. The second part of "The Imp of the Perverse" is in the form of the tall tale, indicated by the brevity with which the murder is retold as an anecdote, the exaggerated ease with which the murder is carried out, and the incredible method used to murder.
By creating a God-peer persona with a sarcastic sense of humor in regard to murder, Poe implies the human fear that God makes fun of His creations, that God is a confidence man, that humans are the gullible victims in God’s confidence game, allowing themselves to be duped and to believe the unbelievable. "The Imp of the Perverse" -- that is, the second half of the story narrated by the God-peer -- is the shortest of Poe’s murder narratives and reads the fastest, like a tall tale. The humor of the situation is also always present, unlike "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat" where the humor is more or less subliminal or is dominated by the terror or the horror, whichever level the listener is aware of. The narrator of the tall tale is in the role of confidence man with the listener as his victim. The murder in "The Imp of the Perverse" is far from clear, logical, and believable because the tale is "tall" necessarily as an illustration of perversity. The preface is slow reading, while the murder narrative is fast reading. The action of this tale moves fast also in comparison to the other murder narratives, "William Wilson" being, as we have seen, the longest and most complicated in terms of plot, time and setting. All of these details point to the genre of the tall tale.
In "The Imp of the Perverse," the narrator’s use of the genre of the tall tale is the primary means through which he illustrates the need to create God and to reassure himself of the existence of God by constantly recreating Him. But by placing himself as his own God within the genre of the tall tale (a genre in which we expect the narrator to exaggerate character and events), the narrator sets himself up for failure in this role from the start. The selection of the genre of the tall tale to set forth a philosophical idea about the existence of God ensures the narrator’s failure to succeed as God-peer, the failure to get away with murder so that the "one true" *deus ex machina* can intervene like "some invisible fiend" to make certain the evil deed-doer is "consigned . . . to the hangman, and to hell" (831). This intervention is the narrator’s way of relinquishing his role as God-peer and submitting to belief in the existence a power outside of himself.

The narrative voice of the story changes from Poe the philosopher to Poe the God-peer at the point that the murder narrative begins. The voice consistently remains that of God-peer until the end of the story: "I have said thus much, that in some measure I may answer your question, that I may explain to you why I am here, that I may assign to you something that shall have at least the
faint aspect of a cause for my wearing these fetters, and for my tenanting this cell of the condemned" (830). This is clearly the narrative voice of the God-peer all too familiar to us from the earlier murder narratives. Here, as in "The Tell-Tale Heart," the God-peer involves the listener as a character with a specific function in the tale, the role of questioner. He implies that whoever is listening to his tale has asked why he has been imprisoned, just as the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" places the listener in the role of questioning his sanity: "... but why will you say that I am mad?" (555). Thus, in "The Imp of the Perverse," the God-peer once again creates not only his own role within the tale, that of a condemned man, but also the role of his listeners as those who will seek to solve the mystery which he himself has generated. That is, on the literal level, the listener's "assign[ment]" is to figure out the "cause for my wearing these fetters" (830), and, on a figurative level, it is a challenge to the listener to seek (or create) meaning beyond the literal.

The narrator reminds us that he is aware the listeners will respond to how he tells the tale: "Had I not been thus prolix, you might either have misunderstood me altogether; or with the rabble, you might have fancied me mad" (830). This statement reminds us of the God-
peer's past life in "The Tell-Tale Heart," where he himself raises the issue of madness from the start of the story. In "The Imp of the Perverse," the narrator justifies the "prolix" preface as being helpful to the listeners in making the transition from one voice to the next, from the philosopher to the God-peer who will "confess" murder. The narrator reassures the listener that his intention is not to mislead, and he reminds listeners of the philosophical introduction to the tale, which he claims is intended to help the listeners understand the tale.

He goes on to say that he will make it easy for us to understand his nature as belonging to the "perverse" that the prefatory philosophical voice discusses: "As it is," -- that is, as the story has been prefaced -- "you will easily perceive that I am one of the many uncoun ted victims of the Imp" (830). His peer role has both active and passive dimensions, part of which is the role of mysterious "actor" or force. Significantly, he places himself in the role of both human (the victim) and God (the criminal) in order to challenge neat assumptions about God’s goodness made by confidence men who know what "true believers" need to hear about "God’s" nature. Indeed, figuring out the literal "cause" of his imprisonment does prove an easy task because the narrator
recounts the murder swiftly and in full by the end of the second paragraph.

This paragraph of the narrative is a condensed version of the three-page description of "The Tell-Tale Heart" murder. Having "[f]or weeks, for months, . . . pondered upon the means of murder," the narrator comes across his solution through reading. He gives an anecdote to explain how he came up with the method of murder: "At length, in reading some French Memoirs, I found an account of a nearly fatal illness that occurred to Madame Pilau, through the agency of a candle accidentally poisoned. The idea struck my fancy at once" (830). The anecdote is, of course, the most common form of the tall tale. Poe's short story "Diddling Considered as One of the Exact Sciences," for example, consists of a series of anecdotes. The narrator of "The Imp of the Perverse" recounts the murder he commits in the form of an anecdote as well. He describes the victim as a man living alone who is in the habit of reading in bed in a "narrow and ill ventilated" apartment (830). In other words, the victim is an easy target -- too easy -- because he is, like the old man in "The Tell-Tale Heart," in bed and vulnerable when killed. The narrator chooses to give no explicit details of the murder: "But I need not vex you with impertinent details. I need not
describe the easy artifices by which I substituted, in his bed-room candlestand, a waxlight of my own making, for the one which I there found" (830).

The murder is recounted quickly and comically in one paragraph, which abruptly concludes: "The next morning he was discovered dead in his bed, and the Coroner's verdict was, 'Death by the visitation of God'" (830). This crime is cleaner, better than the "Tell-Tale" murder because the body does not need to be hidden; death appears to be "act of God." Eugene R. Kanjo argues that "there has been a 'visitation,' if not by God, then by the Imp who, like Mephistopheles, is God's secret agent" (62). Even more directly for our purposes, "the Coroner's verdict" ironically acknowledges the narrator's role as a peer to God, for he is the one who pays the "visitation" that causes the victim's "death." And he is amused by his own wit and ingenuity, for we hear at this point Halburton's Sam Slick or Cooper's Simon Suggs, "diddlers" as Poe calls tellers of tall tales: "Diddling, rightly considered, is a compound, of which the ingredients are minuteness, interest, perseverance, ingenuity, audacity, nonchalance, originality, impertinence, and grin" (607). This is an accurate description of the God-peer of "The Imp of the Perverse,"
who swiftly brags about his resourcefulness and does so with a "grin" by employing humor in the face of crime.

That the narrator inherits the victim's estate is a hint of a murder motive for material gain, a common, traditional motive for murder, but the philosopher persona states that perverse actions are not so easily explained away: "We perpetrate them [perverse actions] merely because we feel that we should not. Beyond this or behind this [i.e., this motive], there is no intelligible principle" (829). A long period of time passes in which the narrator gets what he refers to as "real delight" from his "security" that his crime is beyond "detection": "Having inherited his estate, all went well with me for years" (830).

"But there arrived at length an epoch, . . ." when the narrator is seized by the "haunting and harassing thought" of confessing his "sin" (830). This is an indication that he longs for a less traditional "delight": he wants to experience the "delight" of "horror" that the philosopher describes in the preface. The God-peer compares this haunting to being haunted by a song or parts of opera (830-31). He starts talking to himself, "repeating, in a low, undertone, the phrase, 'I am safe’" (831). Kanjo argues that "[i]n repeating 'safe,' the narrator is playing on the word ‘saved’ in
its religious sense of salvation" (63). In this sense, the God-peer is surrendering to belief in the traditional Almighty God. In talking aloud in the street, the narrator feels "an icy chill creep to my heart" (831). Here, the narrator suggests that a higher power outside himself is at work, guiding him in the fictional world he creates. As in all the murder narratives, he falters in the role of peer to God and succumbs instead to a belief in a higher power outside of himself. "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" (831). By invoking the murder victim's ghost, the narrator implies the existence of an afterlife where evil is punished by a higher power outside of this world and beyond human control.

Like the narrator of "The Black Cat" who awakens to "an incarnate Night-Mare that" he has no "power to shake off" (603), the narrator of "The Imp of the Perverse" also refers to the experience of being chased by his victim's ghost as a "nightmare of the soul" that he cannot "shake off" (831). He loses control of his position as God-peer in order to illustrate that he allows himself to be controlled by already existing
belief systems about right and wrong: "I still quickened my pace. I bounded like a madman through the crowded thoroughfares" (831). In terms of being physically, visibly agitated, the narrator compares most closely with the narrator of "The Black Cat." His being chased through the streets suggests that he is relinquishing control of his fictional world to outside influence that takes control of his speech: "Could I have torn out my tongue . . ." (831). He hears that "a rough voice resounded in my ears" and then "a rougher grasp seized me by the shoulder" (831). Literally, a police officer grabs him, but symbolically it is some external force or power that he submits to on blind faith: "then, some invisible fiend, I thought, struck me with his broad palm upon the back" (831). He refers to the force that is making him confess the crime as "fiend." Whether "fiend" refers to God or the Devil is relative in Poe, for either way, the criminal ends up being punished through the agency of some higher power.

He describes himself suffocating from thoughts of confessing the truth: "I gasped for breath. For a moment, I experienced all the pangs of suffocation; I became blind, and deaf, and giddy." The suffocation reminds him that he is human and not a peer to God. His description shows that he is able to speak clearly and
quickly once he confesses the truth: "They say," meaning that he does not remember himself, "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" (831). His "dread of interruption" is a fear that the new code of morality or immorality that he has invented in his fiction will succeed (and leave him with no sense of the existence of Almighty God) if he does not confess the truth.

This turn in the tale takes us back to the last statement the philosopher persona makes before the voice of God-peer takes over the story -- the question of how "perverseness" can be said to "operate in furtherance of good." The tale illustrates that the narrator creates circumstances that call for justice, that God is created out of the mysteries of iniquity; further, that there is only a need for God when evil exists, when the narrator is able to distinguish between evil and good and perceive them as separate concepts.

The narrator ensures his own punishment: "Having related all that was necessary for the fullest judicial conviction, I fell prostrate in a swoon" (832). He has accomplished his end. This panic is a result of the
narrator's realization that he could indeed have gotten away with the crime, that there is no God other than one that he invokes to intervene. His panic results from realization that he usurped a role outside of human limitations. The madness is not from guilt that he murdered but from the horror that God might be a figment of his own creative imagination.

The murder narrative, which begins with the narrator's answering a question put to him by the listener (why he is a condemned man in prison), ends with a question raised by the narrator: "But why shall I say more? To-day I wear these chains, and am here! To-morrow I shall be fetterless -- but where?" (832). The narrator knows "why," for his whole tale answers this question. However, there is a larger question which the tale addresses but cannot answer fully. What he does not know is "where," and that is a more frightening question and the question all the narrators who make up the Poe persona of God-peer are concerned with. For the feared answer is "no where," "never-more," "into . . . nihility."
CHAPTER 5
"FOR THE LOVE OF GOD": SEEKING THE "IMPOSSIBLE" IN "THE CASK OF AMONTILLADO"

The necessity there is for the exertion of brotherly regard among masons in the lodge, is obvious to every one: -- PEACE, REGULARITY, and DECORUM are indispensible duties here: -- all the fire of resentment, and remembrance of injuries, should be forgotten (Hutchinson, 202).

Poe’s parody of Masonic and Catholic symbolism in "The Cask of Amontillado" has been long recognized in scholarship. It represents Montresor’s distortion of an organized cult or religion in his attempt to create a world of arbitrary morality. Through his God-peer persona, Poe suggests here as elsewhere that God is essentially a fiction like any other and that the "reality" of such a fiction is based on human faith and willingness to believe. Although traditionally there exists a positive image of a single Creator as a supreme being who sets down rules of moral behavior for humans to follow, neatly contrasted by a negative image of the Devil, Poe also envisions a single Creator but one who embodies qualities of both the traditional God and Devil, a role which results in little if any distinction between good and evil but clearly demonstrates arbitrary power.
and control.

In "The Cask of Amontillado," just as in all the murder narratives, the God-peer also defines a role for the listener. Montresor addresses the listener in the second person and asserts that the listener already shares a personal relationship with him prior to the start of the tale: "You, who so well know the nature of my soul, will not suppose, however, that I gave utterance to a threat" (848). He presupposes his listener to be one who is personally familiar with his nature and who is aware of and admires the narrator’s power of reason and control over his emotions -- his authority in general. Listeners who recognize Montresor as the God-peer persona from Poe’s first four murder narratives -- or, in Gargano’s words, as one in "Poe’s gallery of morally blind murderers" ("‘The Cask’," 126) -- know that "the nature of [his] soul" is such that a story about murder without concrete motive will follow and that the narrator’s victim will not suspect his life is in danger until it is too late. The listeners Montresor defines are supposed to be able to second guess his actions because he assigns us familiarity with "the nature of [his] soul."

The God-peer of "The Cask of Amontillado" makes the fullest characterization of his victim. That is,
individuality of character and human suffering are more prominent and dramatic here than in any of the murder narratives. For instance, in the other tales, there is no dialogue to speak of between murderer and victim. There are instances prior to "The Cask of Amontillado" in which the God-peer persona makes certain references to conversations that have taken place, but they are not recorded in the story first hand so that we can be the judge of their value.

The victims in the other four murder narratives are virtually subliminal. William Wilson’s victim, for example, has usually been read by critics not as a whole person but as a psychological aspect of his murderer’s mind. He effects his murderer through soft-spoken monologues, but we never get an exchange of words between victim and murderer that would constitute actual dialogue. The victim in "The Tell-Tale Heart" is a sickly old man confined to his bed, characterized primarily in terms of his single eye. In "The Black Cat," the victimized woman is a stock characterization of a "housewife," with hints of possessing a sinister cat-like, witch-like nature, but she never has a conversation with her husband that is recounted to us through direct discourse. And, of course, the victim in "The Imp of the Perverse" is completely distant to the listener.
Virtually all we know about the victim is that he is in the habit of reading in bed.

The existence of the victim as a realistic human being is subordinate in the first four murder narratives not only because of the narrator’s powerful presence but also because of the narrator’s choice to limit his depiction of the victim -- a logical extension of his domineering role. The victim is merely an instrument to his "higher" purpose. Montresor, on the other hand, is involved with direct dialogue, thus the listener has more to go on in evaluating the victim’s character.

"The thousand injuries of Fortunato" Montresor bears, but once the injuries give way to "insult," Montresor swears a vow of "revenge" (848). This vow is destructive rather than constructive. It is neither the vow of a true Mason nor the vow of a true Catholic. Therefore, "The Cask of Amontillado" is either a story about a lapsed Catholic and/or a Mason or a story about parodying one or both of these organizations, for the actions of neither Fortunato nor Montresor are acceptable to the Masonic order or Catholicism or any religion that firmly holds God to be a good, moral being. Instead the story describes the vow of Poe’s criminal God-peer setting forth, defining, creating his own law or "moral" code: "I must not only punish, but punish with impunity."
A wrong is unredressed when retribution overtakes its redresser. It is equally unredressed when the avenger fails to make himself felt as such to him who has done the wrong" (848). This is a vow of destruction that parodies those vows to good behavior taken by persons supposedly devoted to a Masonic or Catholic way of life. But it, nevertheless, insists on a moral order, albeit an inverted one.

As is characteristic of Poe's God-peer persona, Montresor gives Fortunato no reason to suspect anything is amiss: "It must be understood, that neither by word nor deed had I given Fortunato cause to doubt my good will" (848). It is Fortunato's faith, belief and trust in Montresor's character as one who brings no harm to his fellow man that enables Montresor to manipulate his victim so well. Like the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart," who behaves normally in front of his victim during the day, leading him to suspect nothing is wrong (556), Montresor, a well-developed confidence man, continues "to smile" in the victim's "face, and he did not perceive that [Montresor's] smile now was at the thought of his immolation" (848).

Like William Wilson who takes advantage of his victim's weakness, the inability to raise his voice above a whisper, Montresor pinpoints his victim's weakness --
Fortunato's "connoisseurship in wine" -- and uses it in his plot. Montresor offers a stereotypical characterization of Fortunato as belonging to the Italian culture that prides itself on expertise in wine and describes Fortunato as "a man to be respected and even feared" (848), also stereotypical qualities that Italian men are said to aspire to. Stereotyping characters is a consistent quality of Poe's God-peer persona -- for example, Wilson's gambling associates and his allegorical representation of God in his own image, the old man with the evil eye, and the wife who is a "witch." Stereotyping intensifies the God-peer's cruelty toward his creations because it shows his lack of interest in the individual and enhances the rationalization of his role as seekers of arbitrary and overwhelming power.

Montresor is Poe's last and strongest depiction of the God-peer persona. There are some marked differences between him and all of Poe's other criminal narrators. Mainly, Montresor comes across as being mentally stable during the murder and also fifty years after he has gotten away with it. Gargano points to some of these differences:

'The narrator [Montresor] does not, like the protagonist in 'The Tell-Tale Heart,' loudly and madly proclaim his sanity; unlike the main characters in 'The Imp of the Perverse,' 'The Black Cat,' and 'The Tell-Tale Heart,' Montresor never
suffers the agonizing hallucinations that lead to self-betrayal; moreover, he does not rant, like William Wilson, about his sensational career of evil. . . . Instead, he tells his tale with outward calm and economy; he narrates without the benefit of lurid explanations; he states facts, records dialogue, and allows events to speak for themselves. ("The Cask"," 120)

Montresor's coldness and harsh indifference toward his victim is dragged out and made more dramatic. He seems to narrate his story with far more control and ease, almost as if, fifty years after the crime, he can tell it by rote and with emotional detachment.

Montresor introduces Fortunato "one evening during the supreme madness of the carnival season" and paints a loathsome picture of his intoxicated victim: "The man wore motley. He had on a tight-fitting parti-striped dress, and his head was surmounted by the conical cap and bells" (348). Montresor characterizes his victim, in Gargano's words, as "an extremely vulnerable human being whose nature is revealed by his costume, that of a fool or jester" ("The Cask"," 122). This image is confirmed in the first dialogue between the two. Fortunato states it is "impossible" that Montresor should have a pipe of Amontillado "in the middle of the carnival!" That is, Fortunato knows it to be the improper time of year for anyone to have acquired Amontillado. Knowing as a wine expert that this is "impossible," Fortunato nevertheless allows himself to believe that which he finds
unbelievable, simply because he is told it is so by a very convincing spokesman. Here Montresor uses Fortunato to suggest human susceptibility to belief in the "impossible" based solely on the human ability to persuade.

Further, instead of Montresor's leading his victim, Fortunato leads his own death figure (that is, Montresor in his black mask), as if willingly submitting himself to the God-peer's will, even though he has expressed doubt about the probability of acquiring Amontillado at this time: "Fortunato possessed himself of my arm. Putting on a mask of black silk\(^3\) and drawing a roquelaire closely about my person, I suffered him [the victim] to hurry me [the aggressor] to my palazzo" (849). They find the home empty because Montresor has tricked the servants into leaving, another example of Montresor's manipulation of people in order to further play the God figure. From this point on, the action moves steadily toward death. There is the literal descent into "the catacombs of the Montresors" (850), the decline in Fortunato's health, and finally the victim's death.

Harris suggests that the Amontillado they seek is symbolic of the blood of Christ and that Montresor is under some sort of fanatic religious devotion which drives him to sacrifice Fortunato "for the love of God"
(334-35). I would describe it more as an obsessive spiritual perversion that Poe’s God-peer persona suffers from. Montresor, like the other criminal narrators, is obsessed with the idea that he, as a mere human, can be peer to God. The "Christian" aspects of the tale that Harris and others have recognized are the God-peer’s distortions of traditional religious beliefs. For example, one detail which repeatedly occurs after the descent into the catacombs is the ringing of Fortunato’s bells. Kate Stewart argues that the bells represent Montresor’s madness (54-55). Elaborating upon Harris’s reading, I propose, instead, that the bells might have significance in relation to the Catholic consecration of the host ritual. Since the Middle Ages, bells are jingled in a Catholic mass to signal the point at which the priest eats the so-called body of Christ, symbolized by bread, and also the point at which the priest drinks the "blood of Christ," symbolized by wine. There are three references in "The Cask of Amontillado" to the bells on Fortunato’s cap jingling. The first reference occurs when the two arrive at the catacombs ("The gait of my friend was unsteady, and the bells upon his cap jingled as he strode," 850), followed by an ironic argument in which Montresor insists they turn back for the sake of Fortunato’s health and agrees that Fortunato
"shall not die of a cough" (850). Montresor gives Fortunato a drink of Medoc to warm him, and the victim's gestures here appear to be meant as a vicious parody of a Catholic priest's actions when "transforming" the literal bread and wine into the symbolic body and blood of Christ: "He raised it to his lips with a leer. He paused and nodded to me familiarly, while his bells jingled" (850). At this point in a Catholic mass, the priest raises the chalice to his lips, bows his head, and drinks the wine as bells are jingled.

Fortunato drinks to the "buried that repose around us," while Montresor drinks "to your long life" (850). Both toasts are an insult, a deception, followed by Fortunato's claim that he cannot remember Montresor's arms: "A huge human foot d'or, in a field azure; the foot crushes a serpent rampant whose fangs are imbedded in the heel," (851), the motto of the arms being: "Nemo me impune lacessit" Stepp argues the image of Montresor's family arms is one of "mutual destruction" (448). I agree with Stepp's conclusion; however, the destruction is not of one man by another but rather the symbolic destruction of Montresor's belief in God, as I have argued is the case in "William Wilson."

Montresor again repeats that the bells on Fortunato's cap jingle as he drinks: "The wine [the
Medoc] sparkled in his eyes and the bells jingled" (851). They have another ironic argument about turning back, and Montresor gives his victim more drink: "I broke and reached him a flacon of DeGrave. He emptied it at a breath. His eyes flashed with a fierce light. He laughed and threw the bottle upwards with a gesticulation I did not understand" (851). Here begins the much debated issue of Masonry in "The Cask of Amontillado," which like Christianity is parodied by the God-peer as part of his "new world order." Fortunato repeats the sign, and Montresor sees it as "a grotesque one." The dialogue about whether or not Montresor is a Mason occurs after this sign. Fortunato initiates the discussion by asking, "You do not comprehend?" Fortunato is asking whether or not Montresor is a Mason, meaning Fortunato has no prior knowledge of Montresor’s belonging to a lodge. Yet he makes a secret sign in front of one who he suspects is not a Mason and also reveals it as being a secret Masonic sign. The dialogue continues:

"Not I," I replied.
"Then you are not of the brotherhood."

Note that Fortunato’s reply is not a question by intonation but an indicative statement. In other words, he is not questioning whether Montresor is "of the
brotherhood" but rather asserting that Montresor is not. The dialogue continues:

"How?"
"You are not of the masons."

Montresor’s question would seem to indicate that he is not certain to what "brotherhood" Fortunato refers, leading Fortunato to specify and to assert (not to question) once again that Montresor is not a mason. Montresor responds in the affirmative to Fortunato’s statement:

"Yes, yes," I said, "yes, yes."
"You? Impossible! A mason?"

Montresor’s reply is ambiguous. By answering "yes," either he is agreeing with Fortunato that he (Montresor) is not a mason or he is taking Fortunato’s statement as a question by intonation and responds by saying that he is indeed a fellow Mason. In any case, Fortunato understands Montresor’s affirmative response to mean that Montresor claims to be a Mason. The question then becomes: Why does Fortunato reveal a Masonic sign to a man whom Fortunato seems certain is not a Mason? In fact, he asserts that it is "impossible" for Montresor to be a Mason. Here again, Fortunato submits to belief in that which he thinks unbelievable or "impossible" as he
does earlier when he doubts that Montresor has a pipe of Amontillado but allows himself to believe it enough to descend into the damp catacombs in his poor physical condition. The dialogue about Masonry continues, showing that Fortunato is willing to believe the "impossible" given a "sign" as proof:

"A mason," I replied.
"A sign," he said.

Fortunato means he wants to see Montresor make a secret sign such as a hand movement that would be recognized strictly between Masons but that would go unnoticed to someone not of the brotherhood. In this exchange between power-seeking criminal and vulnerable victim, Poe dramatizes human doubt in the "word" of God on faith alone and Fortunato’s desire for a sign as proof.

Fortunato’s request for proof takes us into an examination of the literal versus the spiritual level of Masonry. Fortunato refers to "Mason" as a person who belongs to a lodge that practices the spiritual principles of Freemasonry, while Montresor refers to "mason" as a person, a laborer, who literally builds structures, as we see when, in response to Fortunato’s request for a sign, Montresor "produc[es] a trowel from beneath the folds of [his] roquelaire" (851). Here, Montresor responds with the most basic, literal symbol of
Masonry, known to everyone not just to Masons. Significant is Fortunato’s response to this "sign": "'You jest,' he exclaimed, recoiling a few paces. 'But let us proceed to the Amontillado'' (851). Fortunato accepts the trowel as a "sign" and drops the subject of Montresor’s Masonic associations in order to proceed to the "impossible." Rather than the disbelief we might expect of the Italian wine lover, Fortunato thinks Montresor is "jest[ing]" and "recoil[s]" from him, changing the subject back to the wine, the "literal" reason they are there.10 As credulous victim, he cares more about finding the wine (that is, the "impossible") than about whether Montresor is, in reality, a brother Mason or merely trying to pass himself off as one. Fortunato allows himself to believe, or at least to pass over as possibly true, two things that he asserts with conviction are "impossible!" -- first, that Montresor has acquired a pipe of Amontillado during the carnival season and, second, that Montresor is a brother Mason. As peer to God, Montresor controls events to the point that he can make believable to Fortunato that which would otherwise seem "impossible."

Montresor’s response to Fortunato’s statement is equally ambiguous: "'Be it so,' I said, replacing the tool beneath the cloak, and again offering him my arm.
He leaned heavily on it" (851; my italics). The "it" of "Be it so" is ambiguous, for the pronoun could refer to Montresor’s agreeing to drop the subject of Masonry and continue on to the Amontillado (which in itself has two different meanings as Steele argues); that Montresor agrees he is jesting about being a Mason; or, more generally, that Montresor is humoring Fortunato by allowing the conversation to end as Fortunato requests -- that is, to end the dialogue and proceed with the action. In this last sense, the confidence man humors his gullible victim, who would seem to be leading himself into the God-peer’s trap, "lean[ing] heavily on it [Montresor’s arm]" -- that is, trusting Montresor’s word. Like Poe’s criminal narrators, the confidence man is also a type who takes on a godlike role by gaining people’s trust for his own ends of personal exploitation and control.

Whether Fortunato or Montresor belong to a Masonic order seems to remain a mystery. It is possible that both men are Masons but that, because Fortunato is too intoxicated to sign accurately, Montresor does not recognize Fortunato’s "grotesque" gesture as a secret Masonic sign. Alternatively, Fortunato is a Mason and Montresor is not, resulting in a power struggle. If this is the case, then Fortunato has strayed somewhat from the
Masonic vow of secrecy by signing to one who is "not of the brotherhood." Finally, perhaps neither man is a Mason, but each lays claim to the position in an attempt to assume a superior social status. The issue of who is or is not a Mason seems to remain purposely unsolved in the story. Whatever the case may be, Montresor has, as usual, the upper hand in the conversation because he succeeds in securing Fortunato’s trust in the "impossible."

When the argument about whether Montresor is a Mason comes to an end, the two men continue their search for the Amontillado with Fortunato walking in front of Montresor, who "followed immediately at his [the victim’s] heels." Thomas Pribek argues that "Montresor loses his mastery of the situation and becomes a follower rather than a leader" and concludes that Montresor is in the role of the serpent who is crushed by guilt (22). From the start, however, victim has "led" murderer. Fortunato has been the one to insist they continue the search. Montresor’s major "con man" technique has been to allow Fortunato to believe that he is leading, that Montresor is only following Fortunato’s desire to taste the Amontillado. In other words, contrary to Pribek’s argument, Montresor consistently makes Fortunato believe that he is the controller, the leader in their search.
The instance Pribek points to is not exceptional but merely one of many examples of the God-peer’s tendency to twist reality into his own purposeful design.

When the two descend and arrive at the crypt, Montresor describes the catacombs as if unfamiliar to him, and even his description of the wall and chain reads as if he is seeing them for the first time (852). He has, in essence, entered the realm of the dead and these surroundings are mysterious to him, for the answer to whether a supreme God exists or whether humans are met with "nothingness" after death seems to haunt the catacombs. All he knows for certain is where his masonic tools are hidden beneath the bones of his ancestors (853), the tools he will use to play peer to God. Stewart argues that the bones, like the ghosts in Elizabethan tragedy, represent Montresor’s ancestors beckoning him to seek revenge (52). Though not stated directly, her reading would imply that Montresor has belief in the supernatural and, in particular, the afterlife, but it is his disbelief, his doubt that drives him to take a life and thus play peer to God.

Once he chains Fortunato, they echo the word "Amontillado":

‘The Amontillado!’ ejaculated my friend, not yet recovered from his astonishment. ‘True,’ I replied; ‘the Amontillado.’ (852-53)
That is, Fortunato’s faith in the existence of the Amontillado which Montresor leads him to believe in falters, but at this point Montresor is firmly in control as master of events.

The building of the wall is not Masonic building symbolic of creating in a positive sense. Pointing out that Montresor pauses from his work three times, Engel argues that, in all three instances, Montresor is reassured by enclosure ("Victim and Victimizer," 27). Rather, the wall represents a blockade which stands between God and the human self — that is, a barrier Montresor creates in usurping the role of God in place of accepting his role as a human being. "I replied to the yells of him who clamored. I re-echoed -- I aided -- I surpassed them in volume and in strength. I did this, and the clamorer grew still" (853). Here the God-peer out-shouts his victim as William Wilson does in order to dominate, to show that "His" word carries more strength, more power than his victim’s pleas for help. At midnight, when he has one more stone to go before completing the wall, Montresor hears "a low laugh that erected the hairs upon [his] head." There is a role reversal here that shocks Montresor. Rather than Montresor being the one to laugh, it is the victim who laughs. But it is the laughter of a desperate human
making one final plea for his life, a plea that, like Poe’s final plea to John Allan, goes unanswered. The laughter is "succeeded by a sad voice, which I had difficulty in recognising as that of the noble Fortunato" (853).

Thus, the most monstrous of Poe’s God-peer narrators is Montresor, who, in the guise of a Freemason, hears the cries of human suffering and does nothing to ease the pain; indeed, he has enacted this suffering. The last dialogue between the two -- "good joke" "excellent jest" (854) -- implies (in Montresor’s enactment of God’s role) that God plays a joke on human beings by giving and taking life at random and not offering assistance along the way. Fortunato is led to believe something exists that he has "doubts" about: on faith, he follows the God-peer on a path in search of the "impossible." From the beginning, Fortunato believes Montresor’s word that the pipe of Amontillado exists when he originally doubts its existence. It is Montresor’s skill with the language of persuasion that leads Fortunato to have literal faith in that which he originally deemed "impossible!" But then Montresor experiences fear after Fortunato makes no response from behind the cellar wall and rejects his role of moral superiority.\textsuperscript{12}
No answer still. I thrust a torch through the remaining aperture and let it fall within. There came forth in return only a jingling of the bells. My heart grew sick -- on account of the dampness of the catacombs. I hastened to make an end of my labor. I forced the last stone into its position; I plastered it up. Against the new masonry I re-erected the old rampart of bones. For the half of a century no mortal has disturbed them. In pace requiescat! (854)

It is significant that Montresor specifies "no mortal," acknowledging perhaps belief in the existence of something other than mortal -- alternatively, an immortal being -- but still persisting in the power of his own will. William Wilson murders himself and the other criminal narrators all ensure their own execution by human means. Montresor does not. He continues in the obsession that he is peer to God, even though his instinct tells him otherwise.

Unpunished by human law, Montresor is the last God-peer Poe creates and also the most horrifying version of this persona because he distinguishes neither between good and evil nor between humans and God, and he shows himself weakened by moral doubts only for a brief moment after Fortunato makes no response from behind the cellar wall. Like the other God-peers, Montresor adopts evil as his philosophy and inflicts a slow, heartless death upon a fellow human being, but, unlike the other narrators, he does not ensure his own punishment (thus ensuring conventional justice) by death. Engel argues
convincingly that perhaps the reason Montresor does not end up confessing his sin as the others do is because he has imposed a harsher punishment on himself -- that is, to keep reliving the story obsessively year after year for fifty years since the murder: "Montresor’s rest has surely been troubled" ("Victim and Victorizer," 28). He does not ensure punishment for the crime. Instead, his self-inflicted punishment is for persisting in the idea that he, "mere man," is peer to God. Perhaps finally, the cost of maintaining this role is even higher than that of abandonment.

Assuming the guise of a friend, Freemason, and brother to his victim, Montresor creates a world in which his arbitrary behavior is the norm. When he reiterates to his victim the words "Yes, ... for the love of God,"¹⁴ he does indeed speak ironically. However, the irony is not that he is performing an act that God would not love (as the irony of this phrase is usually interpreted) but that Montresor, in fact, reflects precisely the role he has seized upon and played out. In doing so, he announces that his purpose for murdering Fortunato is not, as Harris argued in 1969, to make a human sacrifice "for the love of God" (335) but to confirm his role as a peer to God.
"But to these words I hearkened in vain for a reply. . . . No answer still. . . . My heart grew sick. . . ."
(854). Here the God-peer's worst fear is confirmed. Hence, is never able to "in pace requiescat!" To hear the word "God" used in its traditional sense is what frightens Montresor because he has, of all Poe's characters, generated God most elaborately as his own personal role. The other criminal narrators reject their role as God-peer, acknowledge to themselves and other human beings that they have done wrong, and give their human lives over to an almighty God, albeit they still fear that power might be non-existent. Because Montresor never admits to the fear, he is doomed to live the rest of his life at one point in time in the past when he committed a crime for which he never makes amends.

Notes

1. See, e.g., Kathryn M. Harris; Gargano, "'The Cask'"; and Stuart Levine.

2. George E. Woodberry refers to "The Cask of Amontillado" as "a tale of Italian vengeance, in the traditional style."

3. From the start, the image of Montresor is, of course, that of the all too familiar "masked figure" of death in "The Masque of the Red Death" (488) and the William Wilson double in his "mask of black silk" (355).
4. Stewart reads "The Cask of Amontillado" as an Elizabethan tragedy in which Montresor's motive is "revenging an insult to a family member" (51).

5. Walter Stepp argues that there is a subtle insult intended here -- that Fortunato is implying Montresor's family is not important enough for one to remember Montresor's family arms (447).

6. This image is taken from Genesis 3:15. It is part of God's curse on the serpent for having tempted Eve:

   And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.

7. Quinn translates, "No one can provoke me and get away with it" (1396, 851.4n). Levine translates, "No one insults me with impunity," and explains this was "the national motto of Scotland" as well as "the motto of the Richmond Rifle Rangers and was painted on their flag." The flag "was on exhibit at the Masonic Museum in Alexandria, Virginia" throughout Poe's life time (22), a fact which suggests that Poe would have associated this particular motto with Masonry (23).

8. Alternatively, Patricia Robertson sees three interpretations of Montresor's arms in relation to the possible analogies of the symbols to Montresor and Fortunato: "first, ... Montresor is symbolized by both the foot and the serpent as he struggles within himself, with his psychological problems, and fails; second, ... Fortunato is done in by the subtle, crafty Montresor; and third, ... Montresor is symbolized by the foot and Fortunato by the serpent as Montresor gets revenge for Fortunato's past acts, but his own subtle revenge boomerangs" (39-40). She concludes that Montresor represents the heel of the foot crushing the serpent and that Fortunato represents the serpent biting the foot.

9. As Charles W. Steele points out, "Poe was an inveterate punster; already a grim pun on 'mason' is surely recognizable in the story" (item 43).

10. Fortunato is correct from the start that Montresor has no literal Amontillado. Steele argues that the Spanish word amontillado (the wine) is a pun on the Italian words ammonticchiat o and ammonticellato, which he translates "collected or formed into little heaps." Hence, the two men do find the "amontillado" -- that is,
"the pile of bricks he hastily threw together to wall in Fortunato" (item 43). Steele's interpretation supports my argument that, as God-peer, Montresor attaches new or alternative meanings to common words.

11. As Engel points out, the three points at which Montresor stops working are: 1) when the chain rattles, Montresor wants to listen because he enjoys the "horrors of enclosure" and plots to make it more "terrifying," 2) when Fortunato screams and Montresor screams back, and 3) when Montresor's "heart grew sick" because of Fortunato's silence ("Victim and Victimizer," 27).

12. Engel argues that "confinement" in Poe influences characters to act as they otherwise would not and that the "enclosures" in "The Cask of Amontillado" parallel the "narrator's neurosis" ("Victim and Victimizer," 26).

13. Stewart argues that Montresor has a "divided self" and makes a comparison to "William Wilson," and she cites Davidson, who argues Montresor commits suicide (53).

14. Gargano points out that the two men use the same sentences to express completely different meanings. Gargano cites this dialogue between Montresor and Fortunato at the end of the story as evidence. For example, when Fortunato cries, "let us be gone," he means that they should both leave, but when Montresor echoes Fortunato's request, it comes to mean the exact opposite -- that one will live and the other will die. When Fortunato cries, "for the love of God," he really means it as an exclamation -- that Montresor should please not go through with the crime, but when Montresor repeats the same statement, he means that he is killing him for the love of God. ("'The Cask',' 123-24)
CONCLUSION

The "death of God" is, in its various forms, a commonplace modernist theme. Likewise, the creation of a character who aspires to a "godlike" role beyond normal moral conventions, rejecting humanity and belief in the existence of an Almighty God, is, of course, not exclusive to Poe. Raskolnikov shares a kinship with Poe’s criminal narrators, and had Dostoevsky chosen to make him a tale-teller, someone trying to craft his role in language as well as action, I would classify Crime and Punishment as a murder narrative in the style of Poe. In the case of Raskolnikov, we witness the criminal’s struggle with the "morality" of his crime both before and after he murders. Questioning good versus evil, Raskolnikov has a moral dilemma with himself that is missing in Poe’s God-peer, who controls how his criminal act is told in story form and attempts to shape his listener’s perception. Like Raskolnikov, Poe’s God-peer struggles to aspire to moral superiority. However, unlike Poe’s God-peer who is the central character of his own story, Raskolnikov is the product of someone else’s story, over which he has no control. What is novel in Poe’s treatment of this idea is that he places the God-peer figure in charge of telling his own tale in his own
manner, free of conventional moral contexts. Where Dostoevsky would seem to have firm religious views in shaping his characters, Poe is fundamentally more ambiguous, essentially more subversive.

Poe chooses a rare perspective (although perhaps this suggests a major link with modernism) in placing the criminal as the one telling the tale. "Criminal" values threaten to remain unfurled. Like Poe, Hawthorne and Melville are equally fascinated by the "demonic" as is evident in their self-destructive characters who detach themselves from humanity and take pride in their self-imposed exile in an attempt to reach for spiritual knowledge. Ethan Brand, for example, discovers what he refers to as the "unpardonable sin" in his own heart; this ultimate sin that he searches for is the human self in a state of exaltation and manipulative control that rejects humanity and God. Ethan Brand is described as the puppeteer of other humans, and that role drives him, like Poe’s William Wilson, to suicide. Perhaps Hawthorne more than Poe finally keeps his characters under firm moral control. Captain Ahab still more obsessively pursues to his own death the massive white vision that "tasks" and "heaps" him, the meaning of his fate finally ambiguous.
Poe’s murder narratives are perhaps most closely
told in the spirit Chaucer had in mind for the Canterbury
Tales, to allow his characters to come to life by having
them tell their own tales. At the start of their
"pilgrimage," Chaucer’s pilgrims agree to a game which
places each of them in the role of tale-teller competing
for a prize. Chaucer shapes character by giving each
pilgrim control over his or her own prologue and tale;
the type of tale chosen as well as how the tale is told
reflects the manner of person speaking. Some are better
than others at the tale-telling game, but there is one
pilgrim who believes himself master of the craft because
of the success his sermons have had on converting his
listeners from the very vice he himself admits he is
guilty of -- "avaryce." The Pardoner, the conventional
hypocrite of Christian moral values, aspires to moral
superiority and, like Poe’s God-peer, brags about his
ability to tell a good tale.

Poe’s God-peer does not deny conventional morality.
Instead, he is driven by fear of essential nothingness to
create a new way of looking at morality, challenging his
listeners to accept or somehow respond to his proposed
belief system about God. In Poe selfhood is the
individual’s own enemy; yet, paradoxically, self is all
that the criminal narrators believe they have in their
loss of belief in God. Poe presents simultaneously escape from humanity as conventionally defined and escape to humanity as our only alternative. His focus is on the individual mind and, as I have tried to show in this study, on the search for a God that he fears only exists within his own human self. The snow white vision at the end of *Arthur Gordon Pym*, though impressively "very far larger in its proportions than any dweller among men," is nonetheless defined as nothing more than "a shrouded human figure" (1179; emphasis added).
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