Carwin and the Imp: Perversity and Atmosphere in Wieland

In one of his famous short stories, Edgar Allen Poe defined perverseness as the completion of an action for the reason that it should not be done.[1] The spirit that motivates this type of action is therefore known as the "imp of the perverse," and its presence can be found in the works of other authors as well. One predecessor of Poe's who made use of the idea of the "imp of the perverse" was Charles Brockden Brown in his novel Wieland. A person motivated by the imp of the perverse is inherently asocial and amoral, and Brown's character of Carwin the biloquist is certainly both. His irresponsible choices and decision to continue using his biloquism lead to the creation of an irrational, anarchic atmosphere which both influences Wieland's violence and has a lasting, powerful effect on the reader.

By the time he enters the story, Carwin is already well versed and in control of his "gift." Early in life, he made "this powerful engine subservient to the supply of my wants, and the gratification of my vanity" and "exercised" it with "more or less success" (Brown, 227). "Force of habit" and "temptation" encourage Carwin to use his ventriloquism the first two times that the Wieland family thinks they are hearing mysterious voices (Brown, 228-9). The language he uses when telling Clara his story proves that Carwin knew his actions were wrong but also that he does not want to take the blame for what he did. His path seemed "irrevocable," his actions "mechanical," and the impulse that led him on "infatuation" (239-40). These attempts at shaking off guilt fall especially flat near the end of the story, when Carwin seeks "some retreat in the wilderness" and then escapes to his brother's farm "in the bosom of a fertile desert, near the sources of the Leheigh" (242-4). Had Carwin bothered to do this earlier rather than

[1] Kennedy, J. Gerald, editor. The Portable Edgar Allen Poe. New York: Penguin Books. 2006. page 203.

giving in to the temptation to stay, the story may have ended quite differently. His attempt to shift blame to outside forces prove that Carwin knew his actions were wrong. This knowledge, coupled with the fact that Carwin continued to use his gift and interfere with the family as the story, proves that he was indeed motivated by Poe's imp of the perverse: he knows what he should do and does exactly the opposite, simply because he can.

Carwin's relationship with Poe's imp of the perverse is also reflected in his behavior to the Wieland family. By the time he enters their social circle, he has intimate knowledge of all of them because of his affair with Judith. He knows the small size of their family circle, the mysterious death of the elder Wieland, as well as the strange incidents which had just taken place. Rather than leave the family alone after using his gift the first two times, he enters their company and proceeds to offer opinions on the recent incidents. This decision to contribute to the family discussion about the mysterious voices is extremely perverse, as is the fact that he basically explains to the family how he tricked them with ventriloquism by professing a belief in a "human agent" attached to the voices (85). By aligning himself with Pleyel, he knows that he is encouraging Wieland to hold even more firmly to his belief in "celestial interference," as that is how the family discussions always seem to work out, as Judith would have undoubtedly explained (85). Instead of legitimizing and perhaps helping to moderate Wieland's belief in God, Carwin uses his knowledge of family dynamics and puts Wieland in the minority among the group and pushing him towards religious extremism.

Besides affecting Wieland, Carwin creates an atmosphere that negatively influences the relationship between Pleyel and Clara. His interference in this quarter

seems especially motivated by the "imp of the perverse," for he correctly guesses at their affection for one another and then takes steps to separate them. Carwin's overall interest in Clara appears perverse: he knows that she has feelings for another man and yet continues in a kind of intellectual pursuit. His fascination with Clara begins with Judith's testimony of her "perfections" and his meeting with Pleyel is staged to allow "direct intercourse" with Clara (230-4). His infiltration of the house then allows him to find and read Clara's private diary, a violation of her personal privacy and of all social codes.

It is in his deception of Pleyel, however, that Carwin is at his most amoral. Though Carwin could tell that Pleyel was a "devoted lover," his vanity is tempted at the chance to convince Pleyel of Clara's infidelity (239). By convincing the logical Pleyel that Clara is having an affair with him, Carwin experiences "the sweetest triumph" he had ever enjoyed (239). While Carwin attempts to justify this victory as "momentary," the very fact that he was tempted to deceive Pleyel and tear the potential couple apart was a blow at their happiness and social mores (239). Carwin's guilt after this incident and his long night of "conflicting fears and tumultuous regrets" prove that he knew what he was doing was wrong the whole time but had chosen to act anyway, defining his interference as perverse.

The role that Carwin plays in the murders is questionable, but his real evil in the story is the creation of a certain mood which encourages Wieland to violence. Rather than the rational debate and discourse which rule the family before Carwin's illicit arrival, the atmosphere after the voices occur is unstable and irrational. The religious mania which occupied the elder Wieland begins to take hold in his son, most likely because of the "unexplainable" voice actually cased by Carwin. Religion is Wieland's

way of dealing with the mysterious voice, and his assumption that God is speaking to him when it is actually Carwin leads Wieland down a dangerous path. The voice (Carwin) builds validity, first speaking a warning about the temple and later telling the family that Clara is unconscious outside of their door. When the voice warns Pleyel that his fiancé is dead in Europe well before he receives official news of it, it seems that it must be God speaking when it was just Carwin making a lucky guess. His interference in this conversation is especially amoral: he is well hidden in the temple and speaks out in a very private conversation simply because he can and because he knows he should not. The association of the voice with God proves deadly to Wieland's family, and Carwin's failure to step forward and acknowledge his antisocial behavior makes him culpable for aiding Wieland's mania.

Brown's portrayal of Carwin as fitting Poe's later definition of perverse makes Wieland a more powerful novel and helps it to have a much greater effect on the reader. By the time Carwin's confession comes near the end of the story, any reader familiar with Gothic tradition expects some account of a wrong done by an ancestral Wieland to Carwin's family. Gothic novels tend to relate stories of a father's or grandfather's sins being passed down to a current generation, who must pay for past mistakes. Brown does not take this path and this departure from convention helps make Wieland so memorable.

In the end, Carwin has no real motive at all: he sees that he can have power over the family by the use of biloquism and proceeds to effectively ruin their lives by creating an irrational and "unexplainable" atmosphere that negatively influences Wieland. Carwin's education, which is evident to Clara and the rest of the family when they meet him, means that he was probably somewhat aware of social norms, but chose willfully

not to follow them. This lack of motive haunts the reader, for though Clara blames herself at the end of the story for not being "gifted with ordinary equanimity or foresight," if Carwin had no motive then there was no effective way that he could have been stopped. The pointlessness of Carwin's actions and the subsequent death of Wieland's wife and children are harder for the reader to deal with than a simple motive, making Wieland even more powerful.

Wieland was written in a different age and by a far different author than "The Imp of the Perverse," yet Poe's definition holds true for Brown's creation. The idea that a person would do something simply because they know they should not do it can seem petty when practiced on a small scale, but when practiced as a type of lifestyle it can drastically affect the lives of those around the perverse person. Carwin is an essentially amoral, antisocial character who recognizes the rules of society and knows what should be done, as evidenced by his attempt to shift all blame from himself, but refuses to do it. His interference in the lives of the Wieland family leads to the creation of an illogical, disordered atmosphere which leads Wieland to turn to the religious mania of his father in an attempt to explain the universe and which almost breaks apart the relationship between Clara and Pleyel. The fact that Carwin does these things simply because he can and because he is not supposed to added to his lack of any traditional "motive" makes the story more memorable and powerful for the reader.