

ANONYMOUS

Certain crimes draw our attention because they have inspired enduring literary works and films. Examples include the Chester Gillette–Grace Brown murder that supplied the source material for Theodore Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy*; the Ruth Snyder–Judd Gray murder, the model for James M. Cain’s *Double Indemnity*; the atrocities of Edward Gein that, by way of Robert Bloch’s novel, inspired Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho*; and the case of Charles Schmid, the ineffably disturbing “Pied Piper of Tucson,” who lurks behind Joyce Carol Oates’s famous story “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” Perhaps the earliest example of such a crime in our cultural history is the domestic murder described in the newspaper article below. The subject of the story, identified in the text only by his initials, is James Yates, a farmer residing in the frontier village of Tomhanick in upstate New York. In December 1781, Yates slaughtered his wife and four children in a paroxysm of religious mania. He was declared insane and confined to a dungeon in Albany.

Fifteen years later, identical accounts of this sensational crime were reprinted in *The New-York Weekly Magazine* and the *Philadelphia Minerva*. The latter caught the attention of Charles Brockden Brown, our nation’s first professional man of letters, who drew on key elements of the Yates case for *Wieland* (1798), a Gothic tale of a religious fanatic who slaughters his wife and children in obedience to a “divine voice.” In the preface to his book Brown observes that “most readers will probably recollect an authentic case, remarkably similar to that of Wieland.”

An Account of a Murder Committed by Mr. J— Y—, Upon His Family, in December, A.D. 1781

The unfortunate subject of my present essay, belonged to one of the most respectable families in this state; he resided a few miles from Tomhanick, and though he was not in the most affluent

circumstances, he maintained his family (which consisted of a wife and four children,) very comfortably.—From the natural gentleness of his disposition, his industry, sobriety, probity and kindness, his neighbours universally esteemed him, and until the fatal night when he perpetrated the cruel act, none saw cause of blame in him.

In the afternoon preceding that night, as it was Sunday and there was no church near, several of his neighbours with their wives came to his house for the purpose of reading the scripture and singing psalms; he received them cordially, and when they were going to return home in the evening, he pressed his sister and her husband, who came with the others, to stay longer; at his very earnest solicitation they remained until near nine o'clock, during which time his conversation was grave as usual, but interesting and affectionate: to his wife, of whom he was very fond, he made use of more than commonly endearing expressions, and caressed his little ones alternately:—he spoke much of his domestic felicity, and informed his sister, that to render his wife more happy, he intended to take her to New-Hampshire the next day; “I have just been refitting my sleigh,” said he, “and we will set off by day-break.”—After singing another hymn, Mr. and Mrs. J—f—n departed.

“They had no sooner left us (said he upon his examination) than taking my wife upon my lap, I opened the Bible to read to her—my two boys were in bed—one five years old, the other seven;—my daughter Rebecca, about eleven, was sitting by the fire, and my infant aged about six months, was slumbering at her mother’s bosom.—Instantly a new light shone into the room, and upon looking up I beheld two Spirits, one at my right hand and the other at my left;—he at the left bade me destroy all my *idols*, and begin by casting the Bible into the fire;—the other Spirit dissuaded me, but I obeyed the first, and threw the book into the flames. My wife immediately snatched it out, and was going to expostulate, when I threw it in again and held her fast until it was entirely consumed:—then filled with the determination to persevere, I flew out of the house, and seizing an axe which lay by the door, with a few strokes demolished my sleigh, and

running to the stable killed one of my horses—the other I struck, but with one spring he got clear of the stable.—My spirits now were high, and I hasted to the house to inform my wife of what I had done. She appeared terrified, and begged me to sit down; but the good angel whom I had obeyed stood by me and bade me go on. “You have more idols, (said he) look at your wife and children.” I hesitated not a moment, but rushed to the bed where my boys lay, and catching the eldest in my arms, I threw him with such violence against the wall, that he expired without a groan!—his brother was still asleep—I took him by the feet, and dashed his skull in pieces against the fire-place!—Then looking round, and perceiving that my wife and daughters were fled, I left the dead where they lay, and went in pursuit of the living, taking up the axe again.—A slight snow had fallen that evening, and by its light I descried my wife running towards her father’s (who lived about half a mile off) encumbered with her babe; I ran after her, calling upon her to return, but she shrieked and fled faster, I therefore doubled my pace, and when I was within thirty yards of her, threw the axe at her, which hit her upon the hip!—the moment that she felt the blow she dropped the child, which I directly caught up, and threw against a log-fence—I did not hear it cry—I only heard the lamentations of my wife, of whom I had now lost sight; but the blood gushed so copiously from her wound that it formed a distinct path along the snow. We were now within sight of her father’s house, but from what cause I cannot tell, she took an opposite course, and after running across an open field several times, she again stopped at her own door; I now came up with her—my heart bled to see her distress, and all my *natural feelings* began to revive; I forgot my duty, so powerfully did her moanings and pleadings affect me, “Come then, my love (said I) we have one child left, let us be thankful for that—what is done is right—we must not repine, come let me embrace you—let me know that you do indeed love me.” She encircled me in her trembling arms, and pressed her quivering lips to my cheek.—A voice behind me, said, “This is also an idol!”—I broke from her instantly, and wrenching a stake from the garden fence, with one stroke levelled her to the earth!

and lest she should only be stunned, and might, perhaps, recover again, I repeated my blows, till I could not distinguish one feature of her face!!! I now went to look after my last sublunary treasure, but after calling several times without receiving any answer, I returned to the house again; and in the way back picked up the babe and laid it on my wife's bosom.—I then stood musing a minute—during which interval I thought I heard the suppressed sobbings of some one near the barn, I approached it in silence, and beheld my daughter Rebecca endeavouring to conceal herself among the hay-stacks.—

At the noise of my feet upon the dry corn stalks—she turned hastily round and seeing me exclaimed, “O father, my dear father, spare me, let me live—let me live,—I will be a comfort to you and my mother—spare me to take care of my little sister Diana—do—do let me live.”—She was my darling child, and her fearful cries pierced me to the soul—the tears of *natural pity* fell as plentifully down my cheeks, as those of terror did down her's, and methought that to destroy *all* my idols, was a hard task—I again relapsed at the voice of complaining; and taking her by the hand, led her to where her mother lay; then thinking that if I intended to retain her, I must make some other severe sacrifice, I bade her sing and dance—She complied, terribly situated as she was,—but I was not acting in the line of my duty—I was convinced of my error, and catching up a hatchet that stuck in a log, with one well aimed stroke cleft her forehead in twain—she fell—and no sign of retaining life appeared.

I then sat down on the threshold, to consider what I had best do—“I shall be called a murderer (said I) I shall be seized—imprisoned—executed, and for what?—for destroying my idols—for obeying the mandate of my father—no, I will put all the dead in the house together, and after setting fire to it, run to my sister's and say the Indians have done it”—I was preparing to drag my wife in, when the idea struck me that I was going to tell a *horrible lie*; “and how will that accord with my profession? (asked I.) No, let me speak the truth, and declare the good motive for my actions, be the consequences what they may.”

His sister, who was the principal evidence against him, stated—that she had scarce got home, when a message came to Mr. J——n, her husband, informing him that his mother was ill and wished to see him; he accordingly set off immediately, and she not expecting him home again till the next day, went to bed—there being no other person in the house. About four in the morning she heard her brother Y—— call her, she started up and bade him come in. “I will not (returned he) for I have committed the unpardonable sin—I have burnt the Bible.” She knew not what to think, but rising hastily opened the door which was only latched, and caught hold of his hand: let me go, Nelly (said he) my hands are wet with blood—the blood of my Elizabeth and her children.—She saw the blood dripping from his fingers, and her’s chilled in the veins, yet with a fortitude unparalleled she begged him to enter, which—as he did, he attempted to sieze a case knife, that by the light of a bright pine-knot fire, he perceived lying on the dresser—she prevented him, however, and tearing a trammel from the chimney, bound him with it to the bed post—fastening his hands behind him—She then quitted the house in order to go to his, which as she approached she heard the voice of loud lamentation, the hope that it was some one of the family who had escaped the effects of her brother’s frenzy, subdued the fears natural to such a situation and time, she quickened her steps, and when she came to the place where Mrs. Y—— lay, she perceived that the moans came from Mrs. Y——’s aged father, who expecting that his daughter would set out upon her journey by day break, had come at that early hour to bid her farewell.

They alarmed their nearest neighbours immediately, who proceeded to Mrs. J——n’s, and there found Mr. Y—— in the situation she had left him; they took him from hence to Tomhanick, where he remained near two days—during which time Mr. W——tz——l (a pious old Lutheran, who occasionally acted as preacher) attended upon him, exhorting him to pray and repent; but he received the admonitions with contempt, and several times with ridicule, refusing to confess his error or *join* in prayer—I say *join* in prayer, for he would not

kneel when the rest did, but when they arose he would prostrate himself and address his "father," frequently saying "my father, thou knowest that it was in obedience to thy commands, and for thy glory that I have done this deed." Mrs. Bl——r, at whose house he then was, bade some one ask him who his father was?—he made no reply—but pushing away the person who stood between her and himself, darted at her a look of such indignation as thrilled horror to her heart—his speech was connected, and he told his tale without variation; he expressed much sorrow for the loss of his dear family, but consoled himself with the idea of having performed his duty—he was taken to ALBANY and there confined as a lunatic in the goal, from which he escaped twice, once by the assistance of Aqua Fortis, with which he opened the front door.

I went in 1782 with a little girl, by whom Mr. Bl——r had sent him some fruit; he was then confined in dungeon, and had several chains on—he appeared to be much affected at her remembrance of him, and put up a pious ejaculation for her and her family—since then I have received no accounts respecting him.

The cause for his wonderfully cruel proceedings is beyond the conception of human beings—the deed so unpremeditated, so unprovoked, that we do not hesitate to pronounce it the effect of insanity—yet upon the other hand, when we reflect on the equanimity of his temper, and the comfortable situation in which he was, and no visible circumstance operating to render him frantic, we are apt to conclude, that he was under a strong delusion of Satan. But what avail our conjectures, perhaps it is best that some things are concealed from us, and the only use we can now make of our knowledge of this affair, is to be humble under a scene of human frailty to renew our petition, Lead us not into temptation."

May, 27, 1796.