

Maury Povich's audience was making a fascinating distinction between degrees of evil: Jeffrey Dahmer killed and ate his dates. But those who hawk Dahmer trading cards were somehow worse.

lake she didn't want to go on living, she says. "I was an absolute mental case!" She first considered killing herself, but ruled that out because it would be cruel to leave her children motherless.

Less cruel, more beneficent, she decided, was to kill them. How could she arrive at that conclusion?

"I love my children with all my ♡," she writes at one point in the rambling, childish scrawled confession document. "My children deserve to have the best, and now they will."

My children deserve to have the best. What could she have meant by "the best"? Sending them screaming and choking to the bottom of a lake, dying with the knowledge that their mother abandoned them? No, she probably didn't mean that. She probably meant they'll have the best now because they're with God in heaven. She seems to have convinced herself that child murder was an act of self-sacrificing maternal benevolence, akin to, say, an Upper East Side socialite who, after her divorce, gives up her in-home personal trainer in order to afford the tuition at a more expensive private school: "My children deserve to have the best."

Susan Smith did even better for her children, better than getting them into Dalton: she got them into heaven.

It's hard to imagine someone in her right mind taking this logic literally (which must give her lawyer some hope for an insanity plea). But that's the beauty of Satan's beautiful presentation, the rough draft of which I found right there on the shore of John D. Long Lake.

I arrived at the lakeshore in the late afternoon after a heavy shower had done some damage to the homemade shrines to little Michael and Alex. Down close to the water's edge at the foot of a sign that said "No Boating After Dark" was an almost druidic worship circle.

A 10-foot circle of ground entirely carpeted in flowers; red, blue and silver heart-shaped balloons; a thick herd of mostly powder blue stuffed animals — little teddy bears, lions and tigers, along with little cards and handwritten poems addressed to the two dead boys.

People had been coming for days since the car and the bodies had been dragged out of the lake to deposit these tokens of their bereavement and bewilderment. For some of the couples I met down by the lake, it seemed Michael and Alex had become, in the nine days when they were presumed kidnapped but not dead, their own substitute children or grandchildren; when they turned out to have died it was almost as if they felt the loss personally. Michael and Alex were the perfect idealized children they never had.

There was something touching about the shrine, but also, on that afternoon, something particularly depressing: today all the little teddy bears and toys had been crushed into the mud by the pelting rains, the flowers' petals crushed into the mire, making the shrine scene even more immensely desolate, almost as if the heavens were declaring their disdain for all these well-meaning but pitifully inadequate efforts to explain or understand the evil deed and the deaths.

The rain had also caused some of the ink to run on the little notes and poems that pilgrims had painstakingly penned and left for the dead boys, but one poem in particular caught my eye. Handwritten in a neat, schoolmarmish style and stapled to a little wooden stake in the midst of the powder blue teddy bears, it may have caught my eye because earlier I found a slightly different version of it in a smaller shrine-circle higher up on the embankment. The fact that it appeared in two different versions suggests that the poem is a standard work of consolatory literature, perhaps even a staple of sympathy cards.

In any case, the poem was a primal work of theodicy, which is the attempt to reconcile the persistence of evil with the existence of an all-powerful and benevolent God. This poem, in particular, seemed an earnest (if, to my mind, monstrous) attempt to explain why God had permitted an apparent triumph of evil, the murder of two innocent children — but an attempt that makes it sound more like God had committed the murder.

The gist of the poem was this: God looked around heaven one day and found it a bit dreary. He thought the place could use some floral accents to

brighten it up. So He looked down at Earth and saw two lovely little "rosebuds" He fancied — the unblemished souls of Susan Smith's two boys. He liked the look of them so much He had to pluck them for His own garden. That is — although the poem doesn't make this explicit — kill them and install them in heaven to perk the place up.

It is meant to be an image of sugary piety: the little boys are with God in His beautiful heavenly abode because He loved them so much; He took them because the innocence of their souls was so precious and beautiful to Him, because, as the poem concludes, "angels are so hard to find." They're free now from the harsh realities of the world He saved them from, the muck of the lake bottom, the mud of the earth smearing the fluffy coats of their powder blue teddy bear totems. But beneath the sugary piety is an image of absolutely sickening cruelty. A picture of God as an irritable, demonic esthete so easily bored with His décor that He arranges the murder of two young children in order to add a dash of color to His abode.

It's meant to be consoling, but in fact it's one of the most terrifying depictions of the deity I can imagine, far more genuinely blasphemous than anything Salman Rushdie has invented.

And yet there it is, this cute little poem, among the flowers and the heart-shaped balloons and the stuffed animals, posing as just another fluffy piece of sentimentality.

Who could possibly want people to believe in a God like that? Who but Satan? It struck me then that perhaps *this* was Satan's beautiful presentation to Susan Smith: *You're not murdering your children for your own convenience, you're giving them a precious gift, a shortcut to heaven.* "My children deserve to have the best, and now they will." What could be better than an honored place in God's little garden?

It seemed to me that the same culture of unthinking, insulting piety ("don't feel bad that your children were murdered; it's all for the best because it cheers God up and that's what's important") that produced sentiments like this can be held accountable in part for the act itself. If Newt Gingrich can blame the Great Society, etc., I can blame this simpering greeting-card theodicy. It's a more persuasive solution to the mystery of what was going through Susan Smith's mind — and it shows up dramatically in her confession as the motive for her act: "My children deserve to have the best," so I killed them to install them in God's garden.

I'm sure there's something irrational and excessive about my antipathy to this poem. The pious insistence that everything was O.K., everything was for the best, that there's no Problem of Evil to resolve, isn't *meant* to insult the dead or diminish their suffering. But it does. I suspect my inclination to locate the evil in the case in the poem was a kind of displacement from a reluctance to locate the evil in either of the other alternatives: Susan Smith or God.

IN WHICH A HIT MAN DEFINES THE ETHOS OF AN AGE: 'I CAN EXPLAIN THAT, MAURY'

THE MORNING AFTER MY VISIT TO JOHN D. LONG LAKE, WHILE packing for the flight home from South Carolina, I found myself watching an edition of the Maury Povich show on my hotel-room TV. And catching a moment that somehow seemed to sum up in a single line an entire culture, the culture of the excuse, of explanation as exoneration. Talk-show culture has tended to suggest that we can trace all our problems to past abuse of one kind or another, and that once explained, we are absolved. Talk-show culture has been the last refuge of the Enlightenment belief that to understand all is to forgive all.

This particular show featured various participants in a sordid murder-for-hire plot. The details have faded somewhat but I recall there being a hit man who'd been hired by an ambitious yuppie type to kill his mistress because she was pregnant and wouldn't have an abortion, and he felt the prospect of babies (she was expecting twins) would cramp his lifestyle and flatten his career trajectory.



Now it seemed that the hit man had been caught and, in turn, ratted on the yuppie who'd hired him — although it also seemed from some of the testimony, which a shocked Maury was reading to his studio audience, that the hit man was pretty gung-ho about the hit until he'd been caught.

In one passage Maury read, the hit man was bragging to the yuppie about how thorough he was going to be, promising that he'd make sure to shoot the pregnant girlfriend through the stomach to be certain both babies died. As I recall, Maury stopped at this point and confronted the hit man about his coldblooded barbarity.

His response: "I can explain that, Maury."

Talk shows like Maury's have become the American equivalent of the Athenian agora, where citizens, sophists and philosophers bat around questions of behavior. They can be barometers of public feeling on questions of good and evil. It occurred to me that a talk-show host like Maury has probably examined far more bad behavior than most philosophers, heard more explanations than any shrink and might have something to say about current attitudes toward evil.

When I got back to New York I put in a call to Maury and asked him about that memorable line — "I can explain that, Maury." Did it sum up the contemporary approach to evil?

"Absolutely," he told me. But something's changed, he went on to say. "Audiences are not buying it anymore. They never bought it from the

hardened criminal but now they're not buying it from the ordinary person who hadn't been in trouble but gets in trouble and then has some kind of, well, let-me-tell-you-what-happened-to-me-as-a-child defense."

Given that talk-show audiences are the barometer of national sentiment, Maury feels he can pinpoint the moment when the needle on the dial of national consciousness shifted from permissive green to angry red:

The moment Lyle reloaded.

The moment in the course of the Menendez brothers' double murder when Lyle and Erik had emptied their shotguns into the bodies of their parents, but realized their mother was still alive, crawling around in the blood. The moment when the supposed threat to their lives from the Big Bad Abusing Daddy was over. He was dead as a doornail but Mom was alive and whimpering and, as Maury puts it, poor-little-rich-boy Lyle "went out of the house and then came back in to blow away the mother."

In doing so, Maury believes, and then asking for our sympathy, Lyle and Erik blew away the delicate fabric of empathy that talk-show confessionals had woven around those who excused their crimes with tales of childhood abuse.

"That was the crushing blow for the whole abuse defense," he said. "That jolted audiences. There's been a backlash. Abuse defenses are now looked at cynically, and audiences are falling back on the old beliefs in good and evil." They are, moreover, capable of making subtle philosophic distinctions between modes of evil, a fact that becomes apparent in Maury's recollection of one of