

The Cask of Amontillado Study Guide



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Summary

Told in the first person by an Italian aristocrat, “The Cask of Amontillado” engages the reader by making him or her a confidant to Montresor’s macabre tale of revenge. The victim is Fortunato, who, the narrator claims, gave him a thousand injuries that he endured patiently, but when Fortunato dared insult him, he vowed revenge. It must be a perfect revenge, one in which Fortunato will know fully what is happening to him and in which Montresor will be forever undetected. To accomplish it, Montresor waits until carnival season, a time of “supreme madness,” when Fortunato, already half-drunk and costumed as a jester, is particularly vulnerable. Montresor then informs him that he has purchased a pipe of Amontillado wine but is not sure he has gotten the genuine article. He should, he says, have consulted Fortunato, who prides himself on being an expert on wine, adding that because Fortunato is engaged, he will go instead to Luchesi. Knowing his victim’s vanity, Montresor baits him by saying that some fools argue that Luchesi’s taste is as fine as Fortunato’s. The latter is hooked, and Montresor conducts him to his empty palazzo and leads him down into the family catacombs, all the while plying him with drink. Through underground corridors with piles of skeletons alternating with wine casks, Montresor leads Fortunato, whose jester’s bells jingle grotesquely in the funereal atmosphere. In the deepest crypt there is a small recess, and there Montresor chains Fortunato to a pair of iron staples and then begins to lay a wall of stone and mortar, with which he buries his enemy alive. While he does so, he relishes the mental torment of his victim, whom he then leaves alone in the dark, waiting in terror for his death.

Summary

“The Cask of Amontillado” is one of the clearest examples of Poe’s theory of the unity of the short story, for every detail in the story contributes to the overall ironic effect. The plot is relatively simple. Montresor seeks revenge on Fortunato for some unspecified insult by luring him down into his family vaults to inspect some wine he has purchased. However, Montresor’s plot to maneuver Fortunato to where he can wall him up alive is anything but straightforward. In fact, from the very beginning, every action and bit of dialogue is characterized as being just the opposite of what is explicitly stated.

The action takes place during carnival season, a sort of Mardi Gras when everyone is in masquerade and thus appearing as something they are not. Montresor makes sure that his servants will not be at home to hinder his plot by giving them explicit orders not to leave, and he makes sure that Fortunato will follow him into the wine cellar by playing on his pride and by urging him not to go. Every time Montresor urges Fortunato to turn back for his health’s sake, he succeeds in drawing him further into the snares of his revenge plot.

Moreover, the fact that Montresor knows how his plot is going to end makes it possible for him to play little ironic tricks on Fortunato. For example, when Fortunato says he will not die of a cough, Montresor knowingly

replies, “True, true.” When Fortunato drinks a toast to the dead lying in the catacombs around them, Montresor ironically drinks to Fortunato’s long life. When Fortunato makes a gesture indicating that he is a member of the secret society of Masons, Montresor claims that he is also and proves it by revealing a trowel, the sign of his plot to wall up Fortunato.

The irony of the story cuts much deeper than this, however. At the beginning, Montresor makes much of the fact that there are two criteria for a successful revenge—that the avenger must punish without being punished in return and that he must make himself known as an avenger to the one who has done him the wrong. Nowhere in the story, however, does Montresor tell Fortunato that he is walling him up to fulfill his need for revenge; in fact, Fortunato seems to have no idea why he is being punished at all. Furthermore, the very fact that Montresor is telling the story of his crime some fifty years after it was committed to one who, he says, “so well know[s] the nature of my soul,” suggests that Montresor is now himself dying and confessing his crime to a priest, his final confessor.

That Montresor’s crime against Fortunato has had its hold on him for the past fifty years is supported by another detail in the story, the Montresor coat of arms—a huge human foot crushing a serpent, whose fangs are embedded in the heel; the accompanying motto translates as “No one harms me with impunity.” If the foot is a metonymic representation of Montresor crushing the metaphoric serpent Fortunato for his bite, then it is clear that, even though Montresor gets his revenge, the serpent continues to hold on.

The ultimate irony of the story then, is that, although Montresor has tried to fulfill his two criteria for a successful revenge, Fortunato has fulfilled them better than he has. Moreover, although Montresor now tells the story as a final confession to save his soul, the gleeful tone with which he tells it—a tone that suggests he is enjoying the telling of it in the present as much as he enjoyed committing the act in the past—means that it is not a good confession. Thus, although the story ends with the Latin phrase “rest in peace,” even after fifty years Montresor will not be able to rest in peace, for his gleeful confession of his story damns him to Hell for all eternity.

Although “The Cask of Amontillado” seems on the surface a relatively simple revenge story, it is, in fact, a highly complex story riddled with ironic reversals. Every detail in the story contributes to this central effect, and it is the overall design of the story that communicates its meaning—not some simple moral embedded within it or tacked on to the end.

Additional Summary: Extended Summary

“The Cask of Amontillado” was first published in 1846. The first-person narrator, Montresor, is unreliable and is attempting to explain his actions of 50 years before. The story begins with Montresor addressing someone familiar, who knows the “nature of my soul.” He explains that he had borne “the thousand injuries of Fortunato,” but finally Fortunato went too far, and he devised a plan for revenge.

Fortunato does not suspect Montresor’s plan. In fact, when they meet in the street during carnival, Fortunato is very glad to see him. Fortunato is dressed like a jester, and has been drinking. Throughout the story, Montresor exploits Fortunato’s interest in wine. First, he tempts Fortunato by claiming he has purchased a cask of Amontillado, which is a dry sherry, but he is unsure if its authentic. Instead of asking Fortunato directly to examine the Amontillado, Montresor says he will ask another because Fortunato is busy, thereby playing upon both Fortunato’s pride and greed.

Fortunato agrees to accompany Montresor home, where the servants have all gone to enjoy the festivities. Montresor grabs two torches and leads the way into the family catacombs, which are lined with nitre and cause Fortunato to cough. Montresor says they will go back, but Fortunato wants to see the Amontillado,

claiming, "I shall not die of a cough," to which Montresor replies, "True—true."

While they walk deeper into the catacombs, Montresor describes his family's coat of arms and motto, which is "Nemo me impune lacessit," or "No one insults me with impunity." They also consume more wine. When Fortunato makes a secret sign of the masons, Montresor does not understand. Fortunato asks him for a sign he is of the masons, and Montresor produces a trowel from his cloak. Although Fortunato seems to be confused, he still wants to see the Amontillado, and they continue deeper into the tombs.

At the end of the crypt, there is a room lined with bones, with a pile of bones on one side. Fortunato, looking for the cask, steps into a small interior recess, and Montresor quickly chains him to the wall, taunting him with all the opportunities he had allowed for Fortunato to back out. Fortunato, in shock, can't comprehend what is happening as Montresor uses the trowel and stone and mortar buried under the pile of bones to wall up the crypt.

Fortunato comes to his senses and begins to moan and test the chains. Montresor waits until Fortunato stops shaking the chains, then continues boarding up the crypt. He raises the torch to look inside, and Fortunato begins screaming. Montresor is shocked, and unsheathes his sword, afraid Fortunato's screams will be heard. But reassuring himself of the solid walls of the catacombs, he also begins to yell, louder than Fortunato. After this, "the clamourer grew still."

Nearing midnight, Montresor is nearly finished the wall. When there is only one more stone to be added, Fortunato begins to laugh, and says in a sad voice that he has enjoyed Montresor's joke, but it is time to be getting back to the palazzo, where his wife and others are waiting. "Let us be gone," Fortunato says, and Montresor repeats, "Yes...let us be gone." At this, Fortunato realizes Montresor is serious, and says, "For the love of God, Montresor!" Again, Montresor repeats, "Yes...for the love of God." Fortunato grows quiet at this. Although Montresor calls out to him, he hears only the sad jingling of the bells on Fortunato's jester's cap. Montresor says his heart grew sick at that sound, but explains the "dampness of the catacombs made it so." He hurriedly finishes the wall, placing the pile of bones in front. Lastly, he states, "For the half of a century no mortal has disturbed them," ending with, "In pace requiescat," or "May he rest in peace."

Alternate Summary

As the story opens, an unnamed narrator explains, "The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as best I could; but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge." There is no hint as to whom the narrator is speaking or writing, and the "thousand injuries" and the "insult" committed by Fortunato are never described. Nevertheless, the narrator contemplates his desire for revenge and his plan to "not only punish, but punish with impunity"; that is, to punish Fortunato without being caught or punished himself. Furthermore, he is determined not to act in secrecy, for Fortunato must know that his pain is handed to him by Montresor.

Fortunato has no idea that Montresor is angry with him—Montresor has given no hint of it. When Montresor encounters his "friend" on the street one evening during the carnival season, Fortunato has no reason to be suspicious. Montresor asks Fortunato to come with him and sample a large cask of Amontillado, a type of wine, which Montresor has just purchased. Fortunato is justifiably proud of his ability to recognize good wines, and he is already drunk. He is easily persuaded to follow his friend, especially when Montresor assures him that if Fortunato cannot sample the wine for him, another man, Luchesi, will surely do it.

Montresor and Fortunato, who is dressed in his carnival costume of striped clothing and a conical jester's cap with bells, go to Montresor's palazzo. Conveniently, the servants are away enjoying the carnival, and no one sees them enter. They descend a long, winding staircase to the wine cellar and catacombs, the dark and damp tunnels and caverns beneath the palazzo where generations of Montresors have been laid to rest. As they walk on, they pass piles of bones and piles of wine casks, intermingled in the passageways. Montresor fusses over Fortunato's health and his schedule, knowing that the more he suggests Fortunato give up the quest, the more

his companion will be determined to see it through.

As they walk along, the men converse in an idle way, about the potentially hazardous nitre forming on the walls, and the coat of arms of the Montresor family. To protect Fortunato from the damp, Montresor gives him drinks of two wines that are stored in the catacombs. When Fortunato reveals himself to be a member of the Masons, Montresor pulls a trowel from beneath his cape and declares that he, too, is a mason. Always Fortunato is pulled forward by the promise of the Amontillado.

Eventually they reach the last chamber, a crypt nearly full of piled bones with only a small alcove of empty space within. When Fortunato steps to the back to look for the Amontillado, Montresor quickly chains him to two iron staples fastened to the wall. He uncovers a pile of building stones concealed beneath some of the bones and begins to build a wall, sealing Fortunato in. As Fortunato recovers from his drunkenness and becomes aware of what is happening to him, he cries out for mercy, but Montresor pays no attention. He still refuses to speak of the offenses that have brought him to the point of murder, and Fortunato does not ask why Montresor is ready to kill him. Montresor finishes his wall and piles bones up against it, leaving Fortunato to die.

In the last lines, Montresor the actor is replaced again by Montresor the narrator, who began the story. Now he reveals that the murder happened fifty years before. In Latin he speaks over Fortunato's body: "Rest in Peace."

Additional Summary: Summary

"The Cask of Amontillado" was first published in the November 1846 issue of *Godey's Lady's Book*, a monthly magazine from Philadelphia that published poems and stories by some of the best American writers of the nineteenth century, including Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Harriet Beecher Stowe. The story next appeared in the collection *Poe's Works*, edited by Rufus W. Griswold, Poe's literary executor, in 1850. By the time Poe wrote this story, he was already nationally known as the author of the poem "The Raven" and of several short stories collected in a book called, simply, *Tales* (1845). These earlier stories were widely reviewed and debated by critics who found them brilliant and disturbing, and their author perplexing and immoral. Although "The Cask of Amontillado" was not singled out for critical attention when it appeared, it did nothing to change the opinions of Poe's contemporary admirers and detractors. Like Poe's other stories, it has remained in print continuously since 1850.

The story is narrated by Montresor, who carries a grudge against Fortunato for an offense that is never explained. Montresor leads a drunken Fortunato through a series of chambers beneath his palazzo with the promise of a taste of Amontillado, a wine that Montresor has just purchased. When the two men reach the last underground chamber, Montresor chains Fortunato to the wall, builds a new wall to seal him in, and leaves him to die. Several sources for the story have been suggested in the last century and a half: Edward Bulwer-Lytton's historical novel *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1843); a local Boston legend; a collection of *Letters from Italy*; and a real quarrel Poe had with two other poets. Wherever Poe got the idea and the impetus for "The Cask of Amontillado," this story and Poe's other short fiction had an undisputed influence on later fiction writers. In the nineteenth century Poe influenced Ambrose Bierce and Robert Louis Stevenson, among others. Twentieth-century writers who have continued in the Poe tradition include the science fiction writer H. P. Lovecraft and the horror author Stephen King.

According to Vincent Buranelli, Poe's short stories also influenced the music of Claude Debussy, who was "haunted" by the atmosphere of Poe's tales, and the art of Aubrey Beardsley, as well as the work of other composers and artists in the United States, Great Britain, and Europe. Poe was criticized in his own time for depicting a crime with no apparent motive and a murderer with no apparent remorse. For 150 years these

themes have continued to challenge readers, who are both attracted to and repulsed by Poe's creation.

As the story opens, an unnamed narrator explains, "The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could; but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge." There is no hint as to whom the narrator is speaking or writing, and the "thousand injuries" and the "insult" committed by Fortunato are never described. Nevertheless, the narrator contemplates his desire for revenge and his plan to "not only punish, but punish with impunity"; that is, to punish Fortunato without being caught or punished himself. Furthermore, he is determined not to act in secrecy, for Fortunato must know that his pain is handed to him by Montresor.

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In the last lines Montresor the actor once again becomes Montresor the narrator, who began the story. Now he reveals that the murder happened fifty years before. In Latin he speaks over Fortunato's body: "Rest in peace."

Like most short stories published in locally distributed magazines, "The Cask of Amontillado," when it appeared in *Godey's Lady's Book* in 1846, attracted no special critical attention. A year earlier Poe had published a collection of tales, which were widely reviewed. Most of these reviews were favorable, praising Poe's powers of imagination and control of language. George Colton's review in the *American Whig Review* was typical in heralding the volume's "most undisputable marks of intellectual power and keenness; and an individuality of mind and disposition, of peculiar intensity." A few were not only negative but scathing; in his review in the *Brook Farm Harbinger*, Charles Dana described Poe's stories as "clumsily contrived, unnatural, and every way in bad taste." Significantly, the collection of tales was read and reviewed in all parts of the country and helped bring Poe to a much larger audience than he had previously enjoyed.

After Poe's death in 1849, his literary executor, Rufus W. Griswold, wrote an obituary in the *New York Tribune* in which he slanderously exaggerated Poe's weaknesses. He described Poe as a "shrewd and naturally unamiable character" who "walked the streets, in madness or melancholy, with lips moving in indistinct curses." The following year Griswold published an edition of *Poe's Works*. In response to the two Griswold projects came a flurry of writing about Poe, much of it praising the writing but condemning the writer. Typical was an unsigned 1858 review in the *Edinburgh Review*: "Edgar Allan Poe was incontestably one of the most worthless persons of whom we have any record in the world of letters." Over the next fifty years negative writing about Poe focused on his moral character, as presented by Griswold, more than on his work. Critics seemed unable to move beyond the general observation that Poe led a troubled life and wrote troubling stories. Although critics and scholars continued to read and examine Poe's short stories, and although French and German writers continued to admire Poe, his reputation and importance declined throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century.

By the beginning of the twentieth century much of the public's distaste had subsided and critics were able to write more objectively about Poe's achievements. In the early third of the century Poe was widely praised for his poetry, but Gothicism had fallen out of favor and his stories were dismissed by such writers as T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden. Though the poem "The Raven" had been closely analyzed from its first publication, "The Cask of Amontillado" was not singled out for examination until the 1930s. In the 1930s and 1940s critics focused on tracing Poe's sources, arguing that Poe borrowed his plot from other nineteenth-century writers, a murder case in Boston, a literary quarrel from his own life, or other sources. Writers in the 1990s returned to the question of sources as a way of revealing Poe's intentions. Richard Benton is among those who suggest that the story can be read as historical fiction, based on real historical figures and addressing social class issues of interest to nineteenth-century Americans.

Other critics at mid-century were concerned with exploring the significance of details in the story that readers might not be expected to understand without explanation. Kathryn Montgomery Harris in *Studies in Short Fiction* (1969) and James E. Rocks in the *Poe Newsletter* (1972) analyzed the conflict in the story between the Roman Catholic Montresor and Fortunato, a Mason. Rocks concluded that Montresor kills Fortunato because "he must protect God's word and His Church against His enemies." Other writers in the same period explored the significance of the names "Montresor," "Fortunato," and "Amontillado."

The largest body of criticism of the story has examined Montresor's remorse or lack of remorse for his crime. Daniel Hoffman, in his *Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe*, agrees with many others that Montresor is consumed by guilt. "Has not Montresor walled up himself in this revenge? Of what else can he think, can he have thought for the past half-century, but of that night's vengeance upon his enemy?" Others find no hint of guilt in Montresor, leading some early readers to reject the story as immoral. Bettina Knapp places "The Cask of Amontillado" among Poe's "shadow tales," which do not "offer values. No judgmental forces are at work. Crime is neither a negative nor a positive act. Poe's psychopaths do not distinguish between good and evil, nor do they usually feel remorse or guilt." This issue has become the central critical question for "The Cask of Amontillado."

Themes: Themes and Meanings

Edgar Allan Poe himself seems to have had a morbid fear of premature burial; it is a theme he dealt with repeatedly in such stories as "The Premature Burial," "The Fall of the House of Usher," "Berenice," "Ligeia," and "Morella," all of which reverberate with a claustrophobic terror. He also turned again to walling up a victim in "The Black Cat." The fear was that the buried person would still be conscious, aware of the enveloping horror.

“The Cask of Amontillado” belongs to the Romantic movement in art; it is part of the Romantic subgenre of the gothic, a tale of horror with the gothic paraphernalia of dungeons, catacombs, and cadavers. At his best, though, Poe transcends the genre. As he observed, his horror was not of Germany (meaning gothicism) but of the soul. To the extent that this is true, Poe was a pioneer in writing psychological fiction, often of extremely neurotic, if not abnormal, personalities. He also was an early advocate of art for art’s sake; unlike his contemporary, Nathaniel Hawthorne, he did not write moral allegories. In “The Cask of Amontillado,” the murderer gets away with his crime. Whatever meaning the tale offers lies in the portrait of Montresor, contained in his own words. D. H. Lawrence, in *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923), says that Montresor is devoured by the lust of hate, which destroys his soul just as he destroys Fortunato. By this token, Montresor resembles Hawthorne’s unpardonable sinners, who suffer from an intellectual pride and monomania that destroys their humanity. His revenge echoes (whether consciously or not) a passage from Thomas Nashe’s Renaissance novel *The Unfortunate Traveller* (1594):

Nothing so long of memorie as a dog, these Italians are old dogs, and will carrie an injurie a whole age in memorie: I have heard of a boxe on the eare that hath been revenged thirtie yeare after. The Neopolitane carrieth the bloodiest mind, and is the most secret fleering murdrer: whereupon it is growen to a common proverbe, Ile give him the Neopolitan shrug, when one intends to play the villaine, and make no boast of it.

Themes

Revenge

The force that drives Montresor to commit the horrible murder of Fortunato is his powerful desire for revenge. His first words in the story speak of it: “The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as best I could; but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge.” The idea of revenge is repeated several times in the opening paragraph. Montresor will not rush to act, he says, but “at length I would be avenged”; he is determined to “not only punish, but punish with impunity.” The terms of the revenge are quite clear in Montresor’s mind. He will not feel fully revenged unless Fortunato realizes that his punishment comes at Montresor’s hand; a wrong is not redressed “when the avenger fails to make himself felt as such to him who has done the wrong.” In seeking revenge, Montresor is acting out the motto of his people, as it appears on the family coat of arms, *Nemo me impune lacessit* (“No one wounds me with impunity”).

As countless critics have pointed out, the nature of the injuries and offenses is never revealed. Montresor appears to be telling or writing his story to someone who has more knowledge than Poe’s reader (“You, who so well know the nature of my soul”), and who may be assumed to know something of Fortunato’s conduct before the fateful night. Unlike Montresor’s audience, however, Poe’s audience/reader has no basis for judging the extent to which Montresor’s actions are reasonable. The focus, therefore, is not on the reason for revenge, but on the revenge itself, not on why Montresor behaves as he does but only on what he does.

Just as Montresor does not reveal his motive for the crime, other than to identify it as a crime of revenge, neither does he share with his audience his response when the deed is done. Does Montresor feel better once Fortunato has paid for his insult? Does he feel vindicated? Does he go back to his rooms and celebrate the death of his enemy, or smile inwardly years later when he remembers how he was able to “punish with impunity”? He does not say. Nineteenth-century audiences scanned the story for hints of negative feelings. Is Montresor sorry for committing murder? Does he regret his actions? As he nears the end of his life does he look to God for forgiveness? Again, there is no hint or perhaps only the barest of hints. Poe’s intention is to focus his story tightly. He does not explore the events leading up to the crime, nor the results of the crime, but focuses the story narrowly on the act of revenge itself.

Atonement and Forgiveness

Although the action of the story revolves almost entirely around the deception and killing of Fortunato, the

questions in readers' minds have revolved around Fortunato's thoughts and deeds before the crime, and Montresor's thoughts and deeds afterward. While the time between their chance meeting and the laying of the last stone would have taken only five or six hours, the fifty years following are perhaps more intriguing. Is Montresor deceiving himself or his audience when he attributes his momentary sickness to "the dampness of the catacombs"? What has happened to Montresor over the intervening years, and why is he telling the story now? Is he hoping for forgiveness?

For forgiveness to occur, there must first be guilt and then atonement or remorse. Of course, there is no question of Montresor asking forgiveness of Fortunato, or reconciling with him, and no mention is given of Montresor's paying any reparations to Lady Fortunato. Atonement, if there is to be any, must be with God alone. At the time of the murder, however, Montresor hears and rejects Fortunato's appeal that he stop "For the love of God, Montresor!" The murderer replies, "Yes, for the love of God!" but he does not stop building his wall. Surely he does not mean that he is acting for the love of God; instead, he is blatantly and defiantly rejecting it.

In other ways Poe keeps the idea of the Christian God in the foreground. Fortunato is chained to the wall in a standing position that some critics have compared to the posture of the crucified Jesus. His narrow space behind the wall echoes Jesus's placement in a tomb. The story's last words, *In pace requiescat* (Rest in peace), are taken from the Roman Catholic funeral ritual spoken in Latin. Critic John Gruesser believes that Montresor tells the story of his crime "as he presumably lies on his deathbed, confessing his crime to an old friend, the 'You' of the story's first paragraph who is perhaps his priest." Clearly Montresor's guilt is established as not just an earthly legal guilt, but guilt in the eyes of a God that both victim and murderer recognize. The question remains: Was Montresor ever sorry for what he did? Poe does not appear interested in answering the question, although he surely knew that he was raising it, and knew that he had placed the answer tantalizingly out of reach.

Characters

Montresor

Montresor narrates "The Cask of Amontillado," relating the story of Fortunato's death fifty years earlier. Montresor's profession is unspecified, but it is clear that he is educated and wealthy, with a taste for fine things. Montresor holds a grudge against his "friend" Fortunato, claiming to have borne Fortunato's insults to the best of his ability before deciding to seek revenge. Montresor reveals himself to be a skilled manipulator as he exploits Fortunato's pride to lure him deep into the catacombs. Montresor's conversation with Fortunato (who is drunk) reveals his ironic and darkly humorous nature: when Fortunato asks him if he is "of the masons," Montresor pulls out the trowel that he will soon use to bury Fortunato alive. Once he lures the unsuspecting Fortunato into the deepest catacombs, Montresor mercilessly chains him up and walls him into a small alcove, leaving him to die. After Montresor has successfully walled Fortunato in, he appears to feel a momentary pang of regret but quickly attributes the feeling of sickness in his heart to the dampness of the catacombs.

For some readers, Montresor's vague description of the "injuries" he has suffered at the hands of Fortunato brings into question his reliability as a narrator. Could Fortunato truly have offended Montresor so terribly, or is the offense only in Montresor's head? On the other hand, Montresor's cool, detached narration and his methodical planning of Fortunato's demise suggest that though he is ruthless, he may be quite sane. As Montresor's story is addressed to an unidentified person (who, presumably, knows things that the reader does not), readers cannot be certain to what extent Montresor's revenge is justified. Just as we cannot be sure of Montresor's motives, Poe leaves us in the dark as to Montresor's feelings about the crime; is his exclamation "in pace requiescat!" (rest in peace) sarcastic or sincere? Some readers have speculated that Montresor's

decision to relate the story after all these years is a form of confession or an admission of guilt. Others interpret the retelling of his perfect crime as a form of bragging. By focusing on the events of the murder itself rather than the motive or aftermath, Poe leaves the reader guessing as to the true nature of the characters.

Fortunato

In “The Cask of Amontillado,” Fortunato is Montresor’s wealthy Italian “friend” and the object of his revenge. Fortunato’s name means “blessed” in Italian though, in an ironic twist, he ends up being the victim of murder. The story takes place during an Italian carnival, and Fortunato is dressed in a jester costume complete with bells that jingle. It is an appropriate outfit and reinforces Fortunato’s foolish nature. Montresor’s well-thought-out crime shows a deep understanding of Fortunato’s temperament and personality. Believing himself to be a connoisseur of fine wine, Fortunato is easily lured into Montresor’s catacombs by the promise of Amontillado. Though his drunkenness renders him especially foolish and incautious, it is his strong sense of pride that makes him exceptionally vulnerable to Montresor’s flattery. For example, to encourage Fortunato to follow him, Montresor suggests taking another wine expert, Luchesi, to see the Amontillado instead, knowing that Fortunato cannot bear being second to Luchesi. Fortunato follows Montresor deeper and deeper into the catacombs, his inebriation preventing him from picking up on several ominous clues as to his fate. Indeed, Montresor suggests multiple times that they turn back, knowing that the stubborn and single-minded Fortunato will insist on pressing forward.

Though it seems likely that Fortunato’s murder is undeserved, the story suggests that he is somewhat oblivious or even insensitive. We see from their conversation that Fortunato often subtly insults Montresor, casually mentioning that he has forgotten Montresor’s family arms and expressing incredulity at the thought of Montresor belonging to the same exclusive brotherhood as himself. Throughout their conversation, Montresor’s sycophantic and friendly comments to Fortunato are not reciprocated. Indeed, it is worth noting that Fortunato only addresses Montresor by name once he has realized that Montresor means to trap him. It is perhaps this insensitivity that prevents Fortunato from recognizing Montresor’s grudge in the first place. Through the character of Fortunato, Poe dramatically illustrates how weaknesses of character can lead to one’s demise.

Luchesi

Though he is not seen, Luchesi is the only other character in “The Cask of Amontillado.” Like Fortunato, he is a connoisseur of fine wines—a fact Montresor exploits to convince Fortunato to leave the carnival. Fortunato evidently believes that Luchesi’s expertise cannot match his own: “And as for Luchesi, he cannot distinguish Sherry from Amontillado.” Cleverly combining his knowledge of Fortunato’s pride with reverse psychology, Montresor tells Fortunato that he will probably go consult Luchesi about the Amontillado. Just as Montresor expects, Fortunato’s response is to insist that he be shown the Amontillado first.

Characters

Fortunato

Fortunato is an Italian friend of Montresor's, and his sworn enemy, whom Montresor has planned to “punish with impunity”. Although Montresor explains that Fortunato has committed a “thousand injuries” and a final “insult,” no details of these offenses are given. Fortunato displays no uneasiness in Montresor's company, and is unaware that his friend is plotting against him. Fortunato, a respected and feared man, is a proud connoisseur of fine wine, and, at least on the night of the story, he clouds his senses and judgment by drinking too much of it. He allows himself to be led further and further into the catacombs by Montresor, stepping past piles of bones with no suspicion. He is urged on by the chance of sampling some rare Amontillado, and by his unwillingness to let a rival, Luchesi, have the pleasure of sampling it first. His singlemindedness, combined

with his drunkenness, leads him to a horrible death.

Luchesi

Luchesi is an acquaintance of Montresor's and Fortunato's, and another wine expert. He never appears in the story, but Montresor keeps Fortunato on the trail of the Amontillado by threatening to allow Luchesi to sample it first if Fortunato is not interested.

Montresor

Montresor is the "I" who narrates the story, telling an unseen listener or reader about his killing of Fortunato fifty years before. Montresor is a wealthy man from an established family, who lives in a large "palazzo" with a staff of servants. He speaks eloquently and easily drops Latin and French phrases into his speech. He has been nursing a grudge against his friend Fortunato, who has committed several unnamed offenses against him, and has been coldly planning his revenge. Meeting Fortunato in the street one evening, Montresor takes this opportunity to lure his friend into the deepest catacombs beneath his palazzo, and there he chains Fortunato to the wall of a small alcove, seals him in behind a new brick wall which he builds even as Fortunato begs for mercy, and leaves him to die. Montresor's coldness sets him apart from many murderous characters and many Poe protagonists. Even as he tells the story fifty years later, he reveals no regret for his actions, and no real pleasure in them. This lack of feeling made Poe's early readers uncomfortable, and led some to accuse Poe of immorality in creating such a character.

Characters: Themes and Characters

Revenge is the main theme of the story and the force that drives Montresor to commit the horrible murder of Fortunato. His first words in the story speak of it: "The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could; but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge." The idea of revenge is repeated several times in the opening paragraph. Montresor will not rush to act, he says, but "*at length* I would be avenged"; he is determined to "not only punish, but punish with impunity." The terms of the revenge are quite clear in Montresor's mind. He will not feel fully revenged unless Fortunato realizes that his punishment comes at Montresor's hand; a wrong is not redressed "when the avenger fails to make himself felt as such to him who has done the wrong." In seeking revenge, Montresor is acting out the motto of his people, as it appears on the family coat of arms, *Nemo me impune lacessit*.

As countless critics have pointed out, the nature of the injuries and offenses is never revealed. Montresor appears to be telling or writing his story to someone who has more knowledge than Poe's reader ("You, who so well know the nature of my soul"), and who may be assumed to know something of Fortunato's conduct before the fateful night. Unlike Montresor's audience, however, Poe's audience/reader has no basis for judging the extent to which Montresor's actions are reasonable. The focus, therefore, is not on the reason for revenge, but on the revenge itself, not on why Montresor behaves as he does, but only on what he does.

Just as Montresor does not reveal his motive for the crime, other than to identify it as a crime of revenge, neither does he share with his audience his response when the deed is done. Does Montresor feel better once Fortunato has paid for his insult? Does he feel vindicated? Does he go back to his rooms and celebrate the death of his enemy, or smile inwardly years later when he remembers how he was able to "punish with impunity"? He does not say. Nineteenth-century audiences scanned the story for hints of negative feelings. Is Montresor sorry for committing murder? Does he regret his actions? As he nears the end of his life, does he look to God for forgiveness? Again, there is no hint or perhaps only the barest of hints. Poe's intention is to focus his story tightly. He explores neither the events leading up to the crime nor the results of the crime, but focuses the story narrowly on the act of revenge itself.

Although the action of the story revolves almost entirely around the deception and killing of Fortunato, the questions in readers' minds have revolved around Fortunato's thoughts and deeds before the crime and Montresor's thoughts and deeds afterward. While the time between their chance meeting and the laying of the last stone would have been only five or six hours, the fifty years following are perhaps more intriguing. Is Montresor deceiving himself or his audience when he attributes his momentary sickness to "the dampness of the catacombs"? What has happened to Montresor over the intervening years, and why is he telling the story now? Is he hoping for forgiveness?

For forgiveness to occur, there must first be guilt and then atonement or remorse. Of course, there is no question of Montresor asking forgiveness of Fortunato, or reconciling with him, and no mention is made of Montresor paying any reparations to Lady Fortunato. Atonement, if there is to be any, must be with God alone. At the time of the murder, however, Montresor hears and rejects Fortunato's appeal that he stop "*For the love of God, Montresor!*" The murderer replies, "Yes, for the love of God!" but he does not stop building his wall. Surely he does not mean that he is acting for the love of God; instead, he is blatantly and defiantly rejecting it.

In other ways Poe keeps the idea of the Christian God in the foreground. Fortunato is chained to the wall in a standing position that some critics have compared to the posture of the crucified Jesus. His narrow space behind the wall echoes Jesus' placement in a tomb. The story's last words, *In pace requiescat* ("Rest in peace"), are taken from the Roman Catholic funeral ritual spoken in Latin. The critic John Gruesser believes that Montresor tells the story of his crime "as he presumably lies on his deathbed, confessing his crime to an old friend, the 'You' of the story's first paragraph who is perhaps his priest." Clearly Montresor's guilt is established as not just an earthly legal guilt, but guilt in the eyes of a God that both victim and murderer recognize. The question remains: Was Montresor ever sorry for what he did? Poe does not appear interested in answering the question, although he surely knew that he was raising it and knew that he had placed the answer tantalizingly out of reach.

Only two characters appear in "The Cask of Amontillado." Montresor is the "I" who narrates the story, telling an unseen listener or reader about his killing of Fortunato fifty years before. Montresor is a wealthy man from an established family who lives in a large palazzo with a staff of servants. He speaks eloquently and easily drops Latin and French phrases into his speech. He has been nursing a grudge against his friend Fortunato, who committed several unnamed offenses against him, and he has been coldly planning his revenge. Meeting Fortunato in the street one evening, Montresor takes the opportunity to lure his friend into the deepest catacombs beneath his palazzo, and there he chains Fortunato to the wall of a small alcove, seals him in behind a new brick wall, which he builds even as Fortunato begs for mercy, and leaves him to die. Montresor's coldness sets him apart from many murderous characters and many Poe protagonists. Even as he tells the story fifty years later he reveals no regret for his actions, and no real pleasure in them. This lack of feeling made Poe's early readers uncomfortable and led some to accuse Poe of immorality in creating such a character.

The victim, Fortunato, is an Italian friend of Montresor's and his sworn enemy, whom Montresor has planned to "punish with impunity." Although Montresor explains that Fortunato has committed a "thousand injuries" and a final "insult," no details of these offenses are given. Fortunato displays no uneasiness in Montresor's company and is unaware that his friend is plotting against him. Fortunato, a respected and feared man, is a proud connoisseur of fine wine, and at least on the night of the story, he clouds his senses and judgment by drinking too much of it. He allows himself to be led further and further into the catacombs by Montresor, stepping past piles of bones with no suspicion. He is urged on by the prospect of sampling some rare Amontillado and by his unwillingness to let a rival, Luchesi, have the pleasure of sampling it first. His single-mindedness, combined with his drunkenness, leads him to a horrible death.

A third character is mentioned but never seen. Luchesi, another wine expert, is an acquaintance of Montresor's and Fortunato's. Montresor keeps Fortunato on the trail of the Amontillado by threatening to allow Luchesi to sample it first if Fortunato is not interested.

Critical Essays: Critical Discussion

"The Cask of Amontillado" is a story of revenge, but the reader is never told exactly what Fortunato did to warrant such vengeance. In fact, throughout the story, the reader gradually realizes that Montresor is an unreliable narrator; that whatever insult Montresor believes Fortunato committed is probably imagined or exaggerated. It's certain that Fortunato has no idea of Montresor's anger, and this makes the story even more tragic and frightening. The seemingly happy jangling of the bells on the top of Fortunato's cap become more and more sad the deeper the two venture into the catacombs.

In the beginning of the story, Montresor defines revenge. He says he must "punish with impunity." He states if the avenger is caught, or does not make the punishment known to he who committed the wrong, the wrong goes unavenged.

With this in mind, he sets the trap for Fortunato. He gives Fortunato numerous opportunities to back out, using the tricks of classic conmen by playing on Fortunato's greed and pride. In fact, it is Fortunato who insists they carry on to find the Amontillado, and this will no doubt torture him as he is buried alive. Montresor also provides hints as to what he plans to do with Fortunato. He seemingly miraculously comes up with a cask of Amontillado during carnival, which Fortunato can scarcely believe. He tells Fortunato, "You are a man to be missed," and after Fortunato says he won't die of a cough, Montresor agrees. His family motto is "No one insults me with impunity" and he is carrying a trowel. Yet Fortunato suspects nothing, and is so shocked when Montresor chains him to the wall, he doesn't even try to fight.

The structure of the story places the events 50 years in the past. Montresor, perhaps on his own deathbed, is telling someone, perhaps a priest, the story, but not with any remorse. He still believes Fortunato wronged him, and at the end eerily says "In pace requiescat," or "May he rest in peace."

Criticism: The Single Effect, Section 1

"The Cask of Amontillado" and the Single Effect

A skilful 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. And by such means, with such care and skill, a picture is at length painted which leaves in the mind of him who contemplates it with a kindred art, a sense of the fullest satisfaction. The idea of the tale has been presented unblemished, because undisturbed; and this is an end unattainable by the novel. Undue brevity is just as exceptionable here as in the poem; but undue length is yet more to be avoided. (1)

The way to analyze a story by Poe—and possibly to analyze any modern short story, since Poe is credited with being the father of the genre—is by starting at the very end with a consideration of the story's "single effect." A single effect is not necessarily a *simple* effect. The complex effect of "The Cask of Amontillado" is not easy to describe, although most readers probably experience it in a similar way. Since Montresor interprets

and relishes his victim's feelings, the preconceived effect might be described as a combination of shock, horror, pity, delight, satisfaction, compassion, and closure.

Adhering to his rationale, Poe combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect. For example, Montresor lures Fortunato underground with a cask of Amontillado. It would have to be an imported wine to tempt Fortunato, since excellent domestic wine would be readily available to a wealthy Italian. Both men refer to the cask as a "pipe." It would not have seemed unreasonable to Fortunato that he should have to accompany his host a considerable distance to reach a space large enough for a cask containing 126 gallons of wine.

Criticism: The Single Effect, Section 2

Why Did Poe Choose Amontillado?

The word *Amontillado* appears no less than sixteen times in Poe's story. One reason for that choice may have been to keep reminding the reader of Fortunato's motivation. The reader him- or herself would like to see a pipe of the finest Spanish sherry and perhaps even savor a glass in imagination. No doubt many people over the years have actually purchased a bottle of Amontillado to satisfy their curiosity or to pay homage to Poe. The story originally appeared in *Godey's Lady's Book* in 1846, and sherry was one of the few alcoholic beverages genteel ladies in that distant era allowed themselves to drink.

Poe's choices were limited. The wine could not be Italian because it would not tempt Fortunato. French wine is famous, but Montresor is French himself. He could hardly pretend ignorance on that subject. He twice offers Fortunato gourmet French wines in his vaults. The only other possibility was Spain, a country noted for exporting fine Sherries, the finest of which is Amontillado. Poe had yet another good reason for choosing Amontillado, as will be explained later.

Criticism: The Single Effect, Section 3

Why Did Poe Give Montresor a French Name?

Few Italians have the true virtuoso spirit. For the most part their enthusiasm is adopted to suit the time and opportunity, to practise imposture upon the British and Austrian *millionaires*. In painting and gemmary, Fortunato, like his countrymen, was a quack, but in the matter of old wines he was sincere. (2)

Poe emphasizes Montresor's foreignness early on. Montresor does not consider himself an Italian. But why French, when the Montresors, judging from their accumulated bones, have been living in Italy for centuries? The narrator is an outsider. He may be able to trace his lineage in Italy back for generations but is still, in comparison to Fortunato, an upstart. No doubt, being frequently reminded of his parvenu status, his fallen fortunes, and even being referred to as "that Frenchman" are among the "thousand injuries" Montresor has suffered. Fortunato is indeed fortunate in having money and family connections. By contrast, Montresor tells his guest, "The Montresors were a great and numerous family." The word *numerous* helps explain the large accumulation of skeletons in a relatively few centuries. The quoted passage also shows that Fortunato deals in paintings, gemmary, and probably also in wine, which would explain his strong interest in the Amontillado that Montresor says he has just acquired at a bargain price.

Here Poe, whose name and ancestry were also French, reveals his personal feelings. Montresor tells Fortunato: "You are rich, respected, admired, beloved; you are happy, as once I was. You are a man to be missed. For me it is no matter." Montresor's name further suggests that his letter, which is what Poe's story purports to be, may have been written in French and sent to a friend in France. This would make his confession more plausible. In fact, the letter might have been found among his papers posthumously. Montresor may have remained a heavy drinker all his life, especially if suffering from guilt or fear. He may have written the confession when drunk and decided not to send it when sober.

Poe highlights the protagonist's French background in multiple ways. Montresor is wearing a "roquelaire," a French garment named after the Duc de Roquelaure. He offers his guest Medoc, a French wine, than a flagon of another Bordeaux called De Grève. He uses the French word *flambeaux* to describe their torches. He is armed with a *rapier*, a French word for a French weapon. He speaks of "puncheons" of wine (from Old French *poinçon*). The fact that Montresor is not wearing a costume is another indication of his outsider status. He would feel awkward participating in a festival among folk with whom he has no sympathy.

It is impossible to read "The Cask of Amontillado" without sensing Poe's hypersensitivity about his own insecure financial and social position. Poe had no friends and many enemies. The facts that he married a thirteen-year-old girl, that he was a notorious alcoholic, that he had been expelled from West Point, that he was deeply in debt, and that he had been disowned by his foster father hardly enhanced his reputation. He had good cause to fantasize about taking revenge on more than one person.

Criticism: The Single Effect, Section 4

Limited Exposition

Poe avoids unnecessary exposition by leaving it to the reader to guess the location of the story. But the word *palazzo* suggests Venice, where such mansions have existed since the thirteenth century. The Carnival of Venice is the most famous of all carnivals and still a great tourist attraction. The crime would have to take place in a major city. Otherwise, Fortunato and Montresor would be recognized by too many people. At one point Montresor says: "We are below the river's bed." The largest river in Italy, which empties into an estuary near Venice, is named—very suggestively—the Po.

Many details serve dual or multiple purposes. For instance, Montresor writes:

It must be understood that neither by word nor deed had I given Fortunato cause to doubt my good will. I continued, as was my wont to smile in his face, and he did not perceive that my smile *now* was at the thought of his immolation.

The pretense of strong friendship not only keeps Fortunato off guard but insures that no one will suspect Montresor after the "immolation" he has planned. If the two were known to be enemies, the authorities would question Montresor and even search his premises. Like any good liar, Montresor knows he must first convince himself. For years he has lived with the lie that Fortunato is still his friend. By continuing to call Fortunato his good friend in spite of many injuries, Montresor is virtually inviting the haughty Italian to "venture upon insult."

Criticism: The Single Effect, Section 5

Is Montresor Insane?

If Montresor is insane, as some critics have claimed, then his insanity consists of having a split personality. One half is able to think of Fortunato as his friend and speak of him as such at every opportunity, while the dark half is plotting murder. Without this long-established friendship, Montresor could not have enticed Fortunato into his catacombs. The reputed friendship of the two men obviates any need for Poe to deal with the inevitable future inquiry into Fortunato's disappearance. Montresor and Fortunato may have indeed been good friends in the past. Their relationship must have deteriorated over a number of years as Fortunato's fortunes rose and Montresor became like the [raven](#):

...unhappy master whom unmerciful Disaster
Followed fast and followed faster till his songs one burden bore—
Till the dirges of his Hope that melancholy burden bore,
Of 'Never—nevermore'.

There is no point in analyzing Montresor as though he had ever existed in the flesh. He is given exactly the attributes needed, including envy, pride, cunning, motivation, patience, duplicity, cruelty, caution, and even some experience with masonry. His outstanding characteristic is that he is a [Machiavellian](#) liar. He has formed the habit of talking about his "friend" at every opportunity to guard against future suspicion. He has actually forced himself to think of Fortunato as his good friend because this is the only way in which he could interact with his enemy in a totally friendly manner for all the world to see. Montresor could not drop his mask of friendship after disposing of his victim. People would be inquiring about the uncanny disappearance for years, and Montresor would have to remain as baffled and distressed as his victim's closest relatives.

Montresor has grown so used to thinking of his enemy as a friend that he cannot help calling Fortunato his "friend" as he is leading Fortunato to his doom, and even fifty years later, when perhaps he has actually come to believe that Fortunato really was still his friend. It is a sad thought that Montresor may have been so alone in the world that his worst enemy was his best friend.

Criticism: The Single Effect, Section 6

Other Economies of Exposition

Other details with dual or multiple purposes are more subtle, such as the repeated references to the dampness of the catacombs. Why does Poe provide his character Fortunato with a bad cough?

"How long have you had that cough?"

"Ugh! ugh! ugh!—ugh! ugh! ugh!—ugh! ugh! ugh!—ugh! ugh! ugh!—ugh! ugh! ugh!"

My poor friend found it impossible to reply for many minutes.

Montresor considers Fortunato a genuine connoisseur as well as "a man to be respected and even feared." Poe invented the cough to prevent Fortunato from asking many obvious questions, such as the following:

- Who sold you this Amontillado?
- How much did you pay for it?
- Is more of the shipment available for purchase?
- When did it arrive?
- How did it arrive? By ship or overland?
- Why have I heard nothing about it?
- Has anyone else tasted it?

- Have you told anyone else about it?

Without being hampered by his cough, Fortunato might eventually demand to know:

- What is this?
- Where are you taking me?
- Why should you store your best wine so far from the bottom of the stairs?

Drunks can be obstinate, argumentative, unpredictable, intractable. Montresor uses these traits to urge Fortunato onward by reverse psychology, constantly advising him to turn back.

Criticism: The Single Effect, Section 7

The Story's Basic Conflict

Montresor's biggest problem from beginning to end is to maneuver his victim off the streets and down into his catacombs, then into a dark and narrow recess, and finally to bind him with a chain. Thereafter, Poe maintains dramatic tension by describing Fortunato's efforts to break free, his screaming for help, and his attempt to frighten Montresor into releasing him.

Fortunato's cough also gives Montresor an excuse to suggest a draft of Medoc to keep his enemy intoxicated. Poe could not keep Fortunato coughing, although it was artistically necessary to dramatize it at least once. Instead of urging his friend onward, instead of assuring him that they are nearing the goal, Montresor urges Fortunato to turn back. Montresor repeatedly points to the nitre and dripping water as signs of the unhealthy atmosphere and uses these as plausible reasons for his guest to forget the Amontillado and allow Luchesi to render judgment. Montresor's expressions of concern will allay any suspicions that might arise in his friend's inebriated brain. Montresor thus understands the power of reverse psychology and the streak of obstinacy in human nature that psychologists call *reactance*.

After manipulating Fortunato into insisting on accompanying him to his vaults, Montresor relates:

There were no attendants at home; they had absconded to make merry in honor of the time. I had told them that I should not return until the morning, and had given them explicit orders not to stir from the house. These orders were sufficient, I well knew, to insure their immediate disappearance, one and all, as soon as my back was turned.

A small, overworked, underpaid, and disrespectful domestic staff is all Montresor can afford. The fact that there is no one in the palazzo shows that Montresor is alone in the world. His palazzo, like the [House of Usher](#), is in decay. He is the last of the Montresors. Another subtle indication of his poverty is contained in the following phrase:

...I was skilful in the Italian vintages myself, and bought largely whenever I could.

He does not mean whenever they were available. There would always be plenty of Italian wine in Italy. What he means is that he bought largely whenever he could *afford* to do so. The fact that Montresor owns a palazzo does not mean he is wealthy. The roquelaire indicates that the story takes place in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century when that style was in fashion. The palazzo could be in decay. In [The Aspern Papers](#) published in 1888, Henry James has Mrs. Prest explain:

If she didn't live in a big house how could it be a question of her having rooms to spare? If she were not amply lodged you'd lack ground to approach her. Besides, a big house here, and especially in this *quartier perdu*, proves nothing at all: it's perfectly consistent with a state of penury. Dilapidated old palazzi, if you'll go out of the way for them, are to be had for five shillings a year. And as for the people who live in them—no, until you've explored Venice socially as much as I have, you can form no idea of their domestic desolation. They live on nothing, for they've nothing to live on. (3)

The fact that Montresor buys wine in such quantities shows that he, like his friend Fortunato, is a heavy drinker. Their relationship may be based on being "drinking buddies." It is probably when they are tipsy that Fortunato becomes most offensive: in vino veritas. No doubt Montresor is already somewhat intoxicated when he finds his intended victim carousing in the streets. After sharing wine with him in his vaults, Montresor naturally becomes more intoxicated. Only this can explain his strange behavior when he claims to be a Mason and audaciously shows Fortunato the trowel with which he intends to finish his entombment. Montresor is inebriated and also exuberant. He has successfully accomplished the most difficult and dangerous part of his intricate plan: he has gotten Fortunato off the streets without being recognized and has him at his mercy. Montresor has a rapier, while Fortunato in his "tight-fitting parti-striped dress" must be unarmed. A sword would be inappropriate with a court jester's costume.

By stating that he "bought largely" whenever he could, Montresor explains why his vaults are so full of barrels and bottles that he is forced to lead his friend a considerable distance. It is possible, however, that many barrels are nearly empty. If Fortunato is aware that Montresor, in spite of his poverty, buys wine liberally when he can afford to, then it will not seem implausible that his host has acquired 126 gallons of Amontillado. Neither will it seem implausible that the Amontillado should have been offered to Montresor first.

Criticism: The Single Effect, Section 8

Timing of the Murder

The fact that Montresor has gotten rid of his household servants proves he has decided to enact his revenge that night if possible. More proof is that he is carrying the trowel under his cloak. The final example of proof is the cask of Amontillado itself. If it does not really exist, then Montresor is taking a risk in telling Fortunato he has just bought it.

Why does Poe give such stress to the dampness? He refers to it no less than six times, as in the following:

"My friend, no. It is not the engagement, but the severe cold with which I perceive you are afflicted. The vaults are insufferably damp. They are encrusted with nitre."

Henry James wrote: "The only obligation to which in advance we may hold a novel without incurring the accusation of being arbitrary, is that it be interesting." That is also the only obligation to which we may hold a short story—except of course that it be short. A story cannot be interesting unless it is dramatic. It cannot be dramatic without sustained conflict. The only conflict in Poe's story is created by the many dangers and logistical difficulties the narrator must overcome. Montresor's method of luring his friend underground and murdering him *is* the story.

Montresor has no redeeming character traits, with the exception of a sense of humor, and yet we emphasize with him because of his motivation, his problems, and because we are kept in his point of view from start to finish. We can only imagine Fortunato's point of view from Montresor's description of the sounds—and even

the silences—that occur after the victim has been trapped. First there is "a low moaning cry from the depth of the recess," and then there is "a long and obstinate silence." Montresor considers it "obstinate" because he would prefer to hear screams of horror and pleas for mercy.

The reader knows very well what is going on inside the recess. Fortunato is trying to determine how securely the bolts are fastened to the granite wall. Then he is checking the rusted chain itself to judge whether there are any weak links. Finally, he is testing the padlock to guess whether there is any possibility of prying it open. He does all this in silence because it would be foolhardy to try to break free before his captor had departed. His "long and obstinate silence" is proof of his insincerity when he pretends to take the entrapment as a practical joke. But here Fortunato is betrayed by the "tight-fitting" jester's costume bestowed upon him by his creator. If he cannot be carrying a concealed weapon, then he cannot be carrying any kind of tool that would enable him, even with infinitely patient effort, to file through the chain or pick the padlock.

When the silence ends, Montresor hears "the furious vibrations of the chain." Poe's choice of the word *vibrations* shows that the chain is too tight to rattle. Fortunato is now overcome with blind panic as the wall grows taller. He is trying to free himself either by breaking a link or pulling the chain out of the wall. Finally, he resorts to shrill screams for help but gives up when his host's echoing screams make him realize that no one could hear him. Montresor's screams are not intended to characterize him as a madman, as some critics have suggested; he is screaming to show Fortunato, as well as to reassure himself—and most importantly for Poe to show the reader—that nobody can hear anything taking place so far beneath the surface of the earth.

Criticism: The Single Effect, Section 9

Fortunato's Motivation

Fortunato is not primarily motivated by the challenge to his connoisseurship, nor is he motivated by an urgent desire to sample the delicious sherry. He is motivated by avarice. He deals with British and Austrian millionaires in paintings, gemmery, and presumably wines. Montresor has just obtained a whole pipe at a "bargain" price. Fortunato must not allow Luchesi to find out. His rival might buy up whatever quantity was still available, but the first step is to verify that it really is the true Amontillado. This is why, in spite of his bad cold and in spite of being inadequately clothed, Fortunato is so insistent upon sampling it that very night.

How fortunate for Fortunato that he encountered Montresor before Luchesi! Otherwise, his rival would have done the same thing to him that he plans to do to Luchesi. Poor Montresor could probably only afford to buy a single cask, but Fortunato could buy the entire shipment and drive an even better bargain. No doubt the many occasions on which he has been beaten out of lucrative transactions by his richer, better connected friend are among the thousand injuries Montresor himself has suffered.

Meanwhile, Poe's description of cobweb-covered human bones dripping moisture and nitre plays on the reader's imagination and emotions, and Fortunato's fate will thus seem all the more horrible. This place is suitable only for dead men. The reader, however, is drawn along by curiosity, just as Fortunato is drawn along by avarice.

Criticism: The Single Effect, Section 10

The Cold and Dampness

There is yet another reason—and it is the most important reason—for Poe's repeated references to the cold and dampness of the underground vaults, another proof that there is "no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design." With Fortunato chained to the wall, Montresor

recounts:

...I busied myself among the pile of bones of which I have before spoken. Throwing them aside, I soon uncovered a quantity of building stone and mortar. With these materials and with the aid of my trowel, I began vigorously to wall up the entrance of the niche.

The cold and dampness serve to explain why the mortar has remained soft enough to work with. Without the unusual dampness, the mortar would have turned as hard as cement. The covering of dripping bones would also have helped keep the mortar from hardening. It is remarkable how Poe deals so effortlessly with the complex procedure of building a wall from ground to ceiling, plastering it over, and re-erecting "the old rampart of bones." By having the mortar and stones in readiness (for who knows how long?), Poe avoids a dead spot in his story during which Montresor would have to mix his mortar with water and prepare his other materials. By actual count, Poe devotes only 147 words to describing the construction of the wall. These words are scattered over two pages of action and dialogue intended to keep the situation dramatic. Exposition and explanation slow a story, whereas action and dialogue tend to keep it interesting.

Criticism: The Single Effect, Section 11

Montresor's Foresight

The fact that Montresor happens to have a trowel under his cloak on the fateful night he encounters Fortunato may seem like too much of a coincidence. At some earlier date he must have used a shovel for mixing the mortar, but he would need a first-class mason's trowel for completing his masterpiece of revenge. The plastered wall had to look like part of the natural side of the catacombs. He does not say he met Fortunato by accident on the night of the carnival but that he "encountered" him. He was out hunting Fortunato down.

He could not leave a steel trowel with the stones and mortar because it would rust quickly in that dampness. He has been waiting patiently for an opportunity to lure Fortunato underground. He had to keep the trowel somewhere up above, but Poe does not wish to waste words describing how Montresor goes to retrieve it after getting Fortunato to his palazzo. Montresor shows the trowel to Fortunato, but Poe is showing it to the reader. The frequent stress on the dampness is not a waste of words but necessary to explain the fresh condition of the mortar as well as the fact that Montresor is carrying the trowel on his person. A roquelaire, incidentally, is not a full-length cloak but one that comes only to the wearer's knees, thus allowing Montresor plenty of freedom for his exertions.

The underground dampness does more than create a Gothic atmosphere. It does more than provide an excuse for the deviously cunning Montresor to urge his victim to turn back. It expedites the denouement by explaining why the mortar is fresh. The construction of a stone wall is hardly a simple matter, and Poe needed to provide some minimal description of the process. This is why he uses the words "throwing aside," "soon," "vigorously," and "hastened" in describing the construction of the wall.

Assuming that the Amontillado is nonexistent, this is yet another proof that Montresor has decided to enact his revenge that very night. Otherwise, Fortunato would certainly make inquiries and learn that Montresor could not have purchased a pipe of Amontillado. If Fortunato had in fact had an "engagement" that night, Montresor would have aborted his plan. But Fortunato might never again accept Montresor's "friendship" at face value. It might dawn on the overbearing Fortunato that his snubs and jibes had not gone unfelt or unresented.

Criticism: The Single Effect, Section 12

Is the Amontillado Real?

Poe has tried to protect his protagonist from being exposed by having Montresor suggest that the Amontillado may not in fact be genuine:

...But I have received a pipe of what passes for Amontillado, and I have my doubts.

"How?" said he. "Amontillado? A pipe? Impossible. And in the middle of the carnival!"

"I have my doubts," I replied, "and I was silly enough to pay the full Amontillado price without consulting you in the matter. You were not to be found, and I was fearful of losing a bargain."

"Amontillado!"

"I have my doubts."

"Amontillado!"

"And I must satisfy them."

"Amontillado!"

"As you are engaged I am on my way to Luchesi. If any one has a critical turn, it is he."

The very fact that Montresor is seeking an expert's opinion suggests that the wine he supposedly purchased may prove to be only an inferior sherry. If Fortunato eludes Montresor's trap for any reason, he is sure to ask for a sample of the Amontillado later. Montresor can bring an unlabeled bottle of ordinary sherry for his good friend to taste. When Fortunato dismisses it with disdain, that may put an end to the matter.

Enveloped in a black roquelaire and wearing a mask of black silk, Montresor must look like the personification of Death leading yet another mortal to his predestined grave. Wearing a fool's costume complete with cap and bells, Fortunato must look like the personification of Life with its vanities and illusions. Poe's story depends on risks and coincidences. Fortunato's cold and cough are a coincidence without which he might ask too many penetrating questions. But the coincidences, rather than fighting against verisimilitude, actually strengthen it by making it seem that Fate has decreed this to be the night of nights when Fortunato must meet his doom. Montresor would not be describing the incident in such detail if his risky plan had not been a success.

Criticism: The Single Effect, Section 13

The Perfect Revenge

Poe needed Fortunato to be drunk when Montresor first encounters him but sober by the time Fortunato is trapped. Fortunato must be able to understand what is happening to him, why it is happening, and the identity of the person who is making it happen. Poe provides abundant evidence that the drunken Fortunato has become completely sober:

I had scarcely laid the first tier of the masonry when I discovered that the intoxication of Fortunato had in a great measure worn off. The earliest indication I had of this was a low moaning cry from the depth of the recess. It was not the cry of a drunken man. There was then a long and obstinate silence.

Less than a page later—almost at the end of the tale—Montresor offers convincing proof that Fortunato recognizes Montresor as the avenger. Fortunato addresses Montresor by name only once in the entire story. This occurs when the wretched man cries, "For the love of God, Montresor!", dispelling any doubt that the avenger might have failed "to make himself felt as such to him who has done the wrong." Montresor is not mocking Fortunato when he echoes, "Yes, for the love of God!" He is saying, in effect, "Yes, that is exactly what I anticipated. It is your last attempt to escape." He is affirming his expectation that the arrogant Fortunato would end up begging for mercy. Montresor may also be accepting eternal damnation as the price of revenge.

Criticism: The Single Effect, Section 14

Fortunato: A Man to Be Respected and Feared

But now there came from out the niche a low laugh that erected the hairs upon my head. It was succeeded by a sad voice, which I had difficulty in recognizing as that of the noble Fortunato. The voice said—

"Ha! ha! ha!—he! he! he!—a very good joke indeed—an excellent jest. We will have many a rich laugh about it at the palazzo—he! he! he!—over our wine—he! he! he!"

"The Amontillado!" I said.

"He! he! he!—he! he! he!—yes, the Amontillado. But is it not getting late? Will they not be awaiting us at the palazzo, the Lady Fortunato and the rest? 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!"

This passage is absolutely essential. In the first place, it serves to characterize Fortunato as something more than a boor, a souse, a jester, and a dupe. Montresor describes him as "a man to be respected and even feared," but this has yet to be shown. The sober Fortunato reveals some of the craftiness that makes him dangerous. He does not for a moment believe that this horrible entrapment is a practical joke. He suddenly realizes that Montresor is not the simpleton, masochist, toady he has taken him for, but an enemy whose hatred and cunning are unfathomable. His only hope is that Montresor might be frightened into opening the padlock. He claims that the Lady Fortunato and a number of other people are expecting his arrival, which suggests that friends, relatives, and servants will be out with torches. They will be asking everyone for a man wearing a harlequin costume complete with jingling bells. Fortunato understands that Montresor would prefer that his victim's absence should go unremarked until at least the following day.

The fact that this is a season during which the wildest behavior is licensed gives Fortunato a slender pretext for taking Montresor's elaborate entrapment as a clever prank. Fortunato himself, dressed as a jester, can pretend to be a connoisseur of jests. If Montresor could be frightened into giving up the project, then he could

probably avoid retribution by maintaining that it was all in fun. In manifold ways, the sober Fortunato displays his cunning:

- He pretends to believe Montresor is playing an excellent practical joke.
- He pretends that he will be praising Montresor's cleverness to all their acquaintances.
- He pretends to be amused, although his voice and forced laughter betray his terror and insincerity.
- He pretends to believe that Montresor plans to release him.
- He pretends to believe that he and Montresor are still good friends.
- He not only pretends that he is expected at home but that they are *both* expected by his wife, relatives, and numerous guests. By asking, "Will not they be awaiting us at the palazzo, the Lady Fortunato and the rest?" he is trying to plant seeds of doubt. The implication is that many people have recognized the two as companions and assumed the good friends were en route to Fortunato's palazzo.
- He invites Montresor to join his intimate circle—something he may have rarely done in the past—implying that he may be of greater use to him socially and in practical matters in the future.
- He pretends to believe that the cask of Amontillado actually exists and is to be found somewhere in the vicinity. Even if it never existed, that should not deter Montresor from releasing him, since that could have been part of the "excellent jest."

Like a cornered tiger, eyes gleaming in the torchlight, Fortunato is still "to be respected and even feared." He would exact the fullest revenge if he could somehow manage to escape.

Criticism: The Single Effect, Section 15

Why the Jester's Costume?

Fortunato's flamboyant costume serves many purposes. It characterizes Fortunato as a prosperous exhibitionist and a prankster. It suggests the wearer's ancient lineage, going back to an era when court jesters existed. Being unique and specially tailored for the carnival, it is a sign of conspicuous consumption. The costumes people choose for masquerades often reveal what they would like to be. Jesters were encouraged and licensed to make fun of other people for the general amusement. Some of the "thousand injuries" felt by Montresor have been hurtful jests made either in his presence or behind his back. In fact, Poe did not dress his Fortunato in motley to characterize him as a fool. He intended to characterize him as a jester, which would suggest an explanation of some of the "thousand injuries."

The adjective "tight-fitting" also suggests that Fortunato is corpulent, not surprising because of all the wine he consumes. The size of the drunken reveler only makes him more conspicuous and harder for the smaller man to handle. His colorful costume presents serious problems for Montresor, but human problems—always created by human motivations—are the heart and soul of drama. Montresor must patiently steer a big, strong, boisterous, drunken man through crowds of revelers while the intended victim is dressed in the most conspicuous possible costume and keeps shouting, "Amontillado!"

Another reason for providing Fortunato with a tight-fitting costume was so that the chain itself would fit snugly when Montresor shut the padlock on the link that would make it tightest. Poe describes the interior recess as about four feet deep. Fortunato would have to be pinned against the wall with the "short chain" across his waist in order to prevent him from reaching out and interfering with the wall-building. The mortar will take a long time to dry in that dank atmosphere, and Fortunato could break down a portion of the wall even if he could not escape. If he had been wearing a looser-fitting costume, and even a cloak, or if he had been less corpulent, he might have a hope of slipping free.

Poe's description of the trap is minimal. The iron staples are only about two feet apart. Evidently Montresor draws a short chain across Fortunato's waist and attaches a padlock at whichever link makes the chain like a tight belt. Montresor does not say he heard the chain rattle. That would suggest some slack. He says he heard the "furious vibrations" of the chain.

Poe foresaw the possibility that people could be searching for Fortunato but was so confident of his technical virtuosity that he gratuitously provided Fortunato with a unique costume complete with bells. The costume was intended to make Fortunato as conspicuous as possible. If enough people had noticed the man in the "tight-fitting parti-striped dress," the searchers could conceivably trace him to the doors of Montresor's palazzo—but only if the search was initiated that very night. By morning the littered streets would be empty. Repentant sinners would be recovering from hangovers. The man in the harlequin costume would be remembered, if at all, as a fleck of color amidst what Poe might have called the "phantasmagoria of the carnival orgy." The costume would certainly attract attention, but it would also *detract attention* from the harlequin's companion, who would be no more than a shadow in his black cloak and black mask. The more conspicuous the costume of the one man, the more inconspicuous would be the apparel of the other.

Still another reason for dressing Fortunato in a clown's costume was to guard against the reader's identifying with him. The costume dehumanizes him. Poe wants the reader to identify exclusively with Montresor until the very end. He does so by providing Montresor with a strong motive, by remaining entirely in his point of view, and additionally by making his protagonist the narrator. The reader must rely on Montresor to find out what happens. Poe demonstrates that a reader can be induced to empathize with a fiend. The reader is relieved to learn that Montresor's terrible crime was a complete success. Like Dante, Poe has taken his reader into the depths of hell and brought him safely back.

Criticism: The Single Effect, Section 16

Logistical Problems

Poe heightens the dramatic suspense by increasing Montresor's logistical difficulties. Surely many people will notice Fortunato and a companion in a black cloak. Poe ingeniously deals with this weak plot point by making it weaker. When Montresor opens his cloak and shows his guest the trowel after they are safely underground, it indicates that the critical stage is past. They have not encountered any common acquaintance. Montresor has not been recognized. One way or another, Fortunato is doomed. Montresor is armed with a rapier. He could kill his guest on the spot, although he would prefer to lure him to the narrow niche and take plenty of time in order to feel assured that Fortunato would be sober enough to understand what was happening to him and why.

Montresor has foresight. When he first encounters Fortunato, he says, "As you are engaged, I am on my way to Luchesi. If anyone has a critical turn, it is he." A few lines later, not having gotten the information he needs, he says, "I perceive you have an engagement. Luchesi—" To which Fortunato responds: "I have no engagement;—come." No doubt Fortunato has often stayed away from home overnight, and, after all, this is "the supreme madness of the carnival season." If his intended victim had in fact had an engagement that evening, the infinitely patient Montresor would have postponed the execution. Many people will be searching for Fortunato eventually, but the executioner will be safe if he can leave a cold trail. If Fortunato fails to put in an appearance the next day, his wife will assume he is sleeping it off on someone's couch or in someone's bed.

Fortunato will not die of thirst. Poe establishes that there is enough water dripping down the walls for the victim to quench his thirst by licking the stones—a poor substitute for Amontillado. He may not die of suffocation either. There ought to be enough oxygen seeping into the recess to enable him to keep breathing. Montresor would have wanted his victim to survive as long as possible and might have even left some narrow

spaces in the newly built wall for air to get through. The “effect” is less powerful if the reader does not imagine Fortunato suffering a long, lingering death, such as was suffered by countless wretches in medieval dungeons. The fact that so much water leaks into these catacombs indicates there must be spaces to admit oxygen as well. Poe makes a great many references to the nitre. He uses the word five times and also refers to “the white web-work which gleams from these cavern walls.” This cannot be purely for atmosphere. Nitre (KNO_3) contains more oxygen than any of its other components.

We passed through a range of low arches, descended, passed on, and descending again, arrived at a deep crypt, in which the foulness of the air caused our flambeaux rather to glow than flame.

The captive will have to breathe foul air, but he should at least be able to breathe. He will be most likely to die of starvation, which will take longer; and he will have to remain upright, befouling his fancy costume. His torment will only be augmented by his longing for someone to rescue him, by imagining that the dripping water is the sound of approaching footsteps, or by hoping against hope that his friend may have a change of heart or may actually have intended this atrocity as a practical joke.

Criticism: The Single Effect, Section 17

Closure

The perfect revenge Montresor prescribes should culminate in the avenger's perfect satisfaction. It should also result in what today's journalists so often describe as “closure.” There would be no point in seeking revenge if it did not extinguish the hatred that led to the desire in the first place. When Montresor concludes his letter to his unknown correspondent with the words “In pace requiescat!” he is not being ironic. He has cleansed himself of his hatred and satisfied his desire for retribution. He can now feel pity for his fellow mortal, a feeling the reader shares.

The “preconceived effect”—that is, the emotional effect upon the reader—is “brought out” after Montresor succeeds in chaining Fortunato to the wall. It is Fortunato who experiences the sobering shock, the disbelief, the horror of his situation; but those feelings are interpreted by the narrator Montresor, who is experiencing them vicariously and mingling them with his own satisfaction and relief.

According to Montresor's letter:

The noise [of the “furious vibrations of the chain”] lasted for several minutes, during which, that I might hearken to it with the more satisfaction, I ceased my labors and sat down upon the bones.

The furious vibrations of the chain serve the dual purpose of representing Fortunato's emotions and assuring the reader that the victim is a moth in a web. Poe does nothing to create any sympathy for the victim until this point. Then the reader finds himself identifying with Fortunato, whose nightmare is only intensified by the fact that Montresor is enjoying it.

Poe's story retains its fascination from generation to generation because of the technical brilliance of its preconceived single effect. It leaves some readers with feelings they remember for years. And yet it is a work of pure imagination. Even the cask of Amontillado is imaginary—doubly imaginary, in fact, because it was created in the imagination of Montresor, the character created in the imagination of Poe.

The man who writes the confidential letter fifty years after the deed is not the same as the man who committed it. Montresor has grown very old. He has often thought about the unfortunate Fortunato decaying into a skeleton while his costume turned to rags. Montresor refers to his victim as his friend throughout the letter. This is not necessarily ironic. By the time the murderer pens his confidential confession he has forgotten his old hatred, which should further explain why he does not feel a need to itemize any of "the thousand injuries of Fortunato." He has buried his old enemy among his own ancestors and has made him, in a sense, a part of the family. No doubt he often revisited the scene of his crime. He had been the custodian and will soon join Fortunato among all the other dead men's bones.

Criticism: The Single Effect, Section 18

Why Did Poe Write This Story?

The fact that Poe may have been venting real hatred against contemporary enemies is inconsequential. His personal feelings, transformed by his imagination, served to create a masterpiece. He has been called the father of the modern short story. His paternity, like a tiny cell, is essentially contained in the epigraph to this essay. The modern short story is designed to achieve a single effect. Analyzing a short story "with a kindred art" by starting with its effect leads to a better appreciation of the craftsmanship involved: there is no word written of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design.

Any creative writer has the option to disregard Poe's definition, but most short story writers all over the world appear to have been satisfied with such a precise and logical guideline. Not only that, but Poe's story serves as the perfect illustration of his own rationale. It is not the gruesome ending that makes his story a classic, nor is it the suggestion of a mystery involving long-forgotten Literati. Instead, it is the creative virtuosity and the strict economy in the execution of artistic design that assure the story's longevity.

Many scholars have argued about the "meaning," the "message," or the "point" of Poe's story. A work of art does not have to have a meaning, a message, or a point. A work of art that is not a work of propaganda is intended to convey an emotion experienced by the artist himself. This emotion is what Poe always refers to as an "effect." It is the feeling left with the reader (or the hearer or the viewer) that constitutes the purpose of art.

Here is [Leo Tolstoy](#)'s sensible and succinct definition:

To evoke in oneself a feeling one has once experienced, and having evoked it in oneself, then, by, means of movements, lines, colors, sounds, or forms expressed in words, so to transmit that feeling that others may experience the same feeling—this is the activity of art. (4)

Criticism: The Single Effect, Section 19

Poe's Legacy

Poe was unique in literature. He is remembered for his stories and poems, but he earned his living—such as it was—as an editor and critic. He was a critic who could function as a creative writer, a creative writer who was an acute critic. His emphasis on the macabre reflects the understanding of popular taste that made him a notably successful editor. Any newspaper will show that modern readers still have an insatiable appetite for human depravity. Poe's stories have had a worldwide influence because readers recognize their own secret emotions and fantasies. We want to see Montresor murder Fortunato in the cruelest possible way, and we want to see him get away with it. The avalanche of mystery and horror novels since Poe's seminal creations is glaring proof of this interest. The creative and analytical faculties—so often at odds—were joined in Poe. He gave the literary world the most succinct, the most practical, and the most self-evident working definition of

the modern short story, and then provided the prototype.

If Poe was not concerned with a meaning, a message, or a point, why did he write "The Cask of Amontillado"? He did it to rid himself of painful feelings. In this respect he was not different from many other creative writers. For example:

If he wrote it he could get rid of it. He had gotten rid of many things by writing them.

—Ernest Hemingway, ["Fathers and Sons"](#)

Now, I happen to be the kind of author who in starting to work on a book has no other purpose than to get rid of that book.

—[Vladimir Nabokov](#)

To me alone there came a thought of grief.

A timely utterance gave that thought relief,

And I again am strong.

—[William Wordsworth](#)

"The Cask of Amontillado" was Poe's "timely utterance" of pent-up emotions. He places his story in a distant land and a different era, but it is his own feelings that give it force. We have all had our thousand injuries. The most painful often come at the hands of our "good friends," people we loved and admired and trusted.

End Notes

1. Edgar Allan Poe. Review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*, *Graham's Magazine*, April 1842. Reprinted in *Edgar Allan Poe: Essays and Reviews* (New York: The Library of America, 1984) 572. Emphasis added.
2. Edgar Allan Poe. "The Cask of Amontillado" in *Edgar Allan Poe: Poetry and Tales* (New York: The Library of America, 1984) 848. Subsequent citations of this story refer to this text.
3. Henry James. "The Aspern Papers," in *The Turn of the Screw, The Aspern Papers and Two Stories* (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2003) 25-26.
4. Leo Tolstoy. *What Is Art?* Translated by Almyer Maude. (Indianapolis, Indiana: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1960) 51.

Critical Essays: Critical Overview

When it appeared in the monthly magazine *Godey's Lady's Book* in 1846, "The Cask of Amontillado," like most short stories published in locally distributed magazines, attracted no special critical attention. A year earlier, Poe had published a collection of Tales, which had been widely reviewed. Most of these reviews were favorable, praising Poe's powers of imagination and control of language. George Colton's review in the *American Whig Review* was typical in heralding the volume's "most undisputable marks of intellectual power and keenness; and an individuality of mind and disposition, of peculiar intensity." A few were not only

negative but scathing, including Charles Dana's review in the *Brook Farm Harbinger* in which he describes Poe's stories as "clumsily contrived, unnatural, and every way in bad taste." Significantly, the collection of tales was read and reviewed in all parts of the country, and helped bring Poe to a much larger audience than he had previously enjoyed.

After Poe's death in 1849, his literary executor Rufus W. Griswold wrote an obituary in the *New York Tribune*, in which he slanderously exaggerated Poe's weaknesses. He described Poe as a "shrewd and naturally unamiable character" who "walked the streets, in madness or melancholy, with lips moving in indistinct curses." The following year, Griswold published an edition of *Poe's Works*. In response to the two Griswold projects came a flurry of writing about Poe, much of it praising the writing but condemning the writer. Typical was an unsigned 1858 review in the *Edinburgh Review*: "Edgar Allan Poe was incontestably one of the most worthless persons of whom we have any record in the world of letters." Over the next fifty years, negative writing about Poe focused on his moral character, as presented by Griswold, more than it focused on his work. Critics seemed unable to move beyond the general observation that Poe led a troubled life and wrote troubling stories. Although critics and scholars continued to read and examine Poe's short stories, and although French and German writers continued to admire Poe, his reputation and importance declined throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, much of the public's distaste had worn off, and critics were able to write more objectively about Poe's achievements. In the early third of the century, Poe was widely praised for his poetry, but Gothicism had fallen out of favor and his stories were dismissed by such writers as T.S. Eliot and W.H. Auden. Though the poem "The Raven" had been examined individually from its first publication, "The Cask of Amontillado" had to wait until the 1930s to have critical articles devoted to it. In the 1930s and 1940s, critics focused on tracing Poe's sources, arguing that Poe borrowed his plot from other nineteenth-century writers, a murder case in Boston, a literary quarrel from his own life, or other sources. Writers in the 1990s returned to the question of sources as a way of revealing Poe's intentions. Richard Benton is among those who suggest that the story can be read as historical fiction, based on real historical figures and addressing social class issues of interest to nineteenth-century Americans.

Other critics at mid-century were concerned with exploring the significance of details in the story that readers might not be expected to understand without explanation. Kathryn Montgomery Harris in *Studies in Short Fiction* (1969) and James E. Rocks in the *Poe Newsletter* (1972) analyzed the conflict in the story between the Roman Catholic Montresor and Fortunato, a Mason. Rocks concluded that Montresor kills Fortunato because "he must protect God's word and His Church against His enemies." Other writers in the same period explored the significance of the names "Montresor," "Fortunato," and "Amontillado."

The largest body of criticism of the story has examined Montresor's remorse or lack of remorse for his crime. Daniel Hoffman, in his *Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe* agrees with many others that Montresor is consumed by guilt. "Has not Montresor walled up himself in this revenge? Of what else can he think, can he have thought for the past half-century, but of that night's vengeance upon his enemy?" Others find no hint of guilt in Montresor, leading some early readers to reject the story as immoral. Bettina Knapp places "The Cask of Amontillado" among Poe's "shadow tales," which do not "offer values. No judgmental forces are at work. Crime is neither a negative nor a positive act. Poe's psychopaths do not distinguish between good and evil, nor do they usually feel remorse or guilt." This issue has become the central critical question for "The Cask of Amontillado."

Essays and Criticism: Religious Imagery and Ritual in The Cask of Amontillado

Edgar Allen Poe, the master of the macabre, understood the fine line between good and evil, between the holy and the profane. He knew how to penetrate the subconscious of his readers by subtly playing off of their most deeply held beliefs. In “The Cask of Amontillado”, Poe brilliantly interweaves religion into a dark tale of revenge. The effect is a once profound and haunting.

The story is told as a first-person confession, possibly to a priest “who so well knew the nature of my soul.” The language is ripe with religious overtones. The action implies a death march, a procession to death designed to avenge insults suffered by Montresor and his ancestors. The drinking of wine, the ringing of bells, and the lighting of candles are all part of Montresor’s “black mass”. Fortunado, the unwittingly victim, becomes the sacrifice in a wholly un-Christian ceremony.

Poe carefully selects language that resounds of sacramental rites. Montresor admits that when he first smiles at Fortunado’s arrival, it “was at the thought of his immolation.” (A Latin-derived word, immolation means to kill as a sacrifice and carries strong religious connotations.) Montresor’s language designates him as the executor of divine punishment or retribution. His motivation, which can be interpreted as a heavy-handed perversion of the Golden Rule, is clear: “[A wrong] is equally unredressed when the avenger fails to make himself felt as such to him who has done the wrong.”

Poe often uses foreign expressions with religious overtones. As is common in Roman Catholic masses, Montresor utters Latin phrases: “In pace requiescat!” (Rest in peace) and “Nemo me impune lacessit.” (No one punishes me with impunity.) The wine that lures Fortunado to his death, Amontillado (which means from the mountain in Italian) recalls Moses’ trek up Mt. Sinai and the God-given laws that came to be as a result.

The primary action of the story recalls Jesus Christ’s procession to Calvary, the place of his crucifixion. We follow Fortunado on his long and arduous procession down through Montresor’s family’s catacombs. The journey into darkness passes by the bones of Montresor’s ancestors, as Christ had done when he passed Golgotha (place of skulls) before his death. The walk is slow, deliberate and difficult for Fortunado as was Christ’s walk through Jerusalem. Fortunado leans on Montresor desperately as he walks down the narrow passageways. We are reminded of the times when Christ required assistance along the route to meet his pre-ordained fate.

The centrality of wine to the story directs the reader again to a religious theme. The very title of the story expresses the importance of the sometimes-sacred beverage. In fact, Montresor explicitly says Fortunado’s weakness is that, “He prided himself on his connoisseurship in wine.” Montresor depends on this hubris to lure Fortunado into what would eventually become his tomb. When Fortunado toasts Montresor over a draught of Medoc wine it becomes a Last Supper-like toast before a crucifixion. Poe twists the ordinarily sacred significance of wine to consecrate a sadistic ritual celebrating Montresor’s cruel revenge.

As they do during the blessing of the Holy Communion in a Christian mass, bells ring at key points throughout the story. They take on a sinister and ghostly tone as Montresor nears the completion of the ritual. “I thrust a torch through the remaining aperture and let it fall within. There came forth in return only a jingling of the bells.” This critical moment comes near the end of the story and precedes what may be considered Montresor’s only inclination of guilt “My heart grew sick.” Though he quickly attributes this feeling to the dampness of the vault, it clearly indicates the finality that the jingling of the bells symbolize.

Poe also skillfully fills the story with allusions to darkness and light. The vault has presumably become a place of such evil that no amount of light can penetrate its darkness. The flambeaux are themselves reminiscent of the lighting of candles at Catholic masses. When they come to the end of the catacombs Montresor notes: “The foulness of the air caused our flambeaux rather to glow than flame.” The flickering light, usually symbolic of the presence of the Holy Spirit, instead burns more like the eerie fires of hell.

Montresor's ritual of revenge is performed with the careful deliberation of a sacred mass. Poe perverts every holy ritual into a macabre ceremony of death. Even the apparently benign relationship between Montresor and Fortunado is entirely ironic and saccharine sweet. Like Judas kissing Christ at the Last Supper, Montresor ventures to betray Fortunado while acting as a friend. The parody of religious ritual coils around the story and threads each word together into a pattern of demonic significance. No matter the insult suffered by Montresor, there can be no doubt that he is the architect of a cruel revenge and the priest of a wicked black mass.

Essays and Criticism: Irony in The Cask of Amontillado

There has never been any doubt or disagreement about the fact that Edgar Allen Poe is a master of the short story form. His painstaking word selection, his attention to every detail, his obsession over creating a single powerful effect—these qualities have all justifiably contributed to this reputation. Nowhere is his craftsmanship, or his expert use of irony as a unifying element, more apparent than in his short masterpiece, “The Cask of Amontillado.”

Unity in theme, plot, and structure are all elements that were impeccably incorporated in *The Cask of Amontillado*. In the first sentence we are given the singular and simple theme: Montresor's revenge. The plot of the story revolves tightly around the execution of his betrayal and retribution against Fortunado. And ultimately, all of these elements are sewn together and given their final meaning through the pervasive use of irony.

There are two categories of irony in *The Cask of Amontillado*, the ironies that Montresor manipulates and controls in the story, and the ironies that the author creates. As the story progresses we come to realize that, though Montresor is the main voice in the story, Poe subtly provides clues that bring us closer to understanding the truth behind Montresor's words.

The first obvious irony is the fact that Montresor made sure that his servants would be gone by ordering them to stay. The use of reverse psychology is rampant throughout the story and demonstrates how perverted and backwards all of the relationships in the story have become. Because Montresor is the narrator, we are aware of the duplicity between what he is thinking, versus what he says: “Come, we will go back; your health is precious. You are rich, respected, admired, beloved; you are happy, as I once was.” Montresor is obviously biting his tongue as he says these words, but does so amiably. He also drops a subtle hint (“as I once was”) about his true feelings of humiliation that are at the root of his vengeance.

Montresor has carefully planned this elaborate ceremony, which has elements of a Christian mass, but is macabre and evil. He toasts to Fortunado's good health and long life over a glass of wine, which is usually a blessing. However Montresor and the audience are well aware that his intentions couldn't be further from his words. Every word of discourse between the two men is given a grave double meaning with the knowledge of Montresor's intent. He reassures Fortunado that he “will not die of a cough”, and is continually urging Fortunado not to go down into the vaults. Every plea to go back is actually a prodding downwards into the crypt.

Montresor understands he will go in spite of those pleas and, in fact counts on Fortunado's hubris in his connoisseurship of wines to lure him into his tomb. Montresor baits him by asking him whether a “pipe of Amontillado” sherry he had recently purchased is the genuine article. But we find out early on that Montresor opportunistically views Fortunado's love of wines as a “weakness” to be exploited.

While Montresor is quite pleased with his clever plan, he has left himself open for criticism by candidly sharing his intimate thoughts. He incidentally provides us with two main criteria by which to judge the success or failure of his revenge.

The first criterion is: "I must not only punish but punish with impunity." Impunity is defined as "exemption from punishment." Montresor has to punish Fortunato without condemning himself. He retells the story with a tone of pride, but given that it is fifty years after the murder, it seems likely that the monologue is a more of a confession than a boast. Furthermore, if he is confessing to repent for the sin, the pleasure he takes in the relating the details of the crime contravenes the confession. So either way, he has not punished with "impunity".

The second criterion is: "[A wrong] is unredressed when the avenger fails to make himself felt as such to him who has done the wrong." To successfully attain retribution, Montresor must make Fortunato understand the nature of the wrong he perpetrated. But Fortunato never knows why he is walled up, and even thinks it's a joke. He certainly dies quickly after being entombed and since one cannot further harm the dead, Montresor has failed to avenge the insult he had suffered.

The greatest irony in *The Cask of Amontillado* is the dramatic irony created by the fact that Montresor is telling, or retelling, the story to someone "who so well knows the true nature of my [Montresor] soul." The structure of the story seems to be a confession, told fifty years after the actual event. Though we are told the story through Montresor's voice, the use of irony provides us with insight to the double meanings behind the tale.

Essays and Criticism: Duplicity and Doubling in "The Cask of Amontillado"

When Montresor decides that it is time to seek revenge for the "thousand injuries of Fortunato," he does not make his feelings known. Although the honor code of the day might have called for a public challenge and a duel to the death, Montresor decides that he will not give "utterance to a threat." Instead, while he waits for his opportunity, he behaves as though nothing is wrong: "It must be understood, that neither by word nor deed had I given Fortunato cause to doubt my good-will. I continued, as was my wont, to smile in his face, and he did not perceive that my smile *now was at the thought of his immolation.*"

The word for Montresor's behavior is "duplicious." It means that he is concealing his true motives and feelings beneath a deceptive exterior, that he is being two-faced. The word, of course, is related to "duplicate" and "duplex" and "double." Montresor is behaving as his own opposite in his dealings with Fortunato. As the story progresses, however, it will become clearer that the other side of Montresor's personality is not the smiling face he offers to Fortunato.

The story is filled with twins and opposites. The characters' names, for example, bounce off each other, two echoes of the same idea. The name "Montresor" carries the idea of "treasure," and "Fortunato" implies "fortune." Two sides of the same coin, as it were. As the two men walk along the damp passageway, Montresor offers Fortunato two bottles of wine: Medoc, thought to have medicinal powers and promising to "defend us from the damps," and De Grave, a wine whose name means "of the grave." Just afterward, Fortunato makes a "gesticulation," a secret gesture that demonstrates that he is a member of the Free and Accepted Masons, a secret fraternal order. In a scene that calls to mind nothing so much as Harpo Marx, Montresor produces a trowel from beneath his cloak, a sign that he, too, is a mason but of a different, deadly variety.

As the story opens, the men seem more different than alike. Montresor is cold, calculating, sober in every sense of the word. Fortunato greets him with "excessive warmth, for he had been drinking much." Montresor wears a black mask, a short cloak and a rapier or sword, the very image of a distinguished gentleman. Fortunato, on the other hand, is dressed for "the supreme madness of the carnival season" in motley, the jester's costume, complete with "tight-fitting parti-striped" clothing and a pointed cap with jingling bells at

the tip. A drunken man with bells on his hat seems no match for Montresor, and it is hard to imagine Fortunato as “a man to be respected, and even feared” as he sways and staggers and fixates on the prospect of tasting more wine, the Amontillado.

Montresor continues his duplicity. He suggests that Luchesi could taste the wine instead of Fortunato, knowing that the suggestion will make Fortunato all the more eager to taste it himself. He repeatedly fusses over Fortunato's health, proposing that they ought to turn back before the foul air makes his "friend" ill, when in fact he intends that Fortunato will never leave the catacombs alive. He emphasizes the ways in which they are opposites: “You are rich, respected, admired, beloved; you are happy, as once I was. You are a man to be missed. For me it is no matter.”

Up to this point, even the conversation between the two establishes their different purposes. Looking over Montresor's shoulders, the reader is aware of the irony when Fortunato says, "the cough is a mere nothing; it will not kill me. I shall not die of a cough” and Montresor replies, “True true.” Although Montresor's plans have not yet been revealed, the reader knows with growing certainty that Fortunato will die. When Montresor and Fortunato share the therapeutic Medoc, Fortunato drinks “to the buried that repose around us,” and Montresor replies, "And I to your long life."

From this point, things begin to change. Montresor's determination to hold himself as unlike Fortunato slips, and he becomes more like him with every step, as the wine works its effect on both of them. "The wine sparkled in his eyes and the bells jingled. My own fancy grew warm with the Medoc.” Previously, Fortunato has twice taken Montresor's arm to steady himself as they walk. Now Montresor returns the gesture, "I made bold to seize Fortunato by an arm above the elbow.” When they reach the end of the final passageway, Poe presents a flurry of twos: two men in “the interval between two of the colossal supports” confronted with “two iron staples, distant from each other about two feet.” But as soon as Montresor fastens the padlock on the chain around Fortunato's waist, the two are one.

Now, when Fortunato speaks, Montresor echoes his words. "The Amontillado!" Fortunato cries out, and Montresor replies, “True, the Amontillado.” "Let us be gone,” says Fortunato, and Montresor replies, "Yes, let us be gone." "For the love of God, Montresor!" cries Fortunato. "Yes," Montresor says, “for the love of God!” Montresor becomes unnerved when Fortunato abruptly stops the game, when he refuses to speak any more. "I hearkened in vain for a reply. I grew impatient.” Why does Montresor wish Fortunato to keep speaking? Why does he shine his torch inside, hoping for a response? It is when he gets no answer except "only ajingling of the bells" that his heart grows sick.

The most chilling moment in the story happens, surely not coincidentally, at midnight (the time when the two hands of the clock are in one place), when the two men transcend human speech and communicate their oneness in another voice. Fortunato begins it with "a succession of loud and shrill screams, bursting suddenly from the throat of the chained form.” At first, Montresor does not know how to respond to this communication. He moves “violently back,” hesitates, trembles. He waves his rapier around, fearing that Fortunato is coming for him, but is reassured at the touch of the solid walls. “The thought of an instant,” the realization that Fortunato is tightly bound, makes Montresor feel safe, and his reaction is dramatic and bizarre: "I reapproached the wall. I replied to the yells of him who clamored. I reechoed I aided I surpassed them in volume and in strength.” It is difficult to imagine the sounds produced by two men, enemies and opposites, hundreds of feet underground howling at midnight in a damp stone chamber. Surely the volume and the echoes would not yield two distinct voices, but one grotesque sound. For that moment, the two are one.

After the wall is completed, fifty years pass before Montresor tells the story. What has he learned in the intervening years? Has he felt remorse? For most of the story, Montresor's language is clear and direct, although the formality of nineteenth-century speech may seem difficult to modern readers. In the story's opening paragraph, told fifty years after the crime, the language is uncharacteristically convoluted and

opaque: "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." Most readers pause over these lines, stopping to sort out the redresser and the redressed from the redressee. If the roles are confusing, it is because in Montresor's mind the lines between avenger and victim are no longer distinct. When Montresor speaks the story's last line, "In pace requiescat" ("rest in peace"), is he speaking of Fortunato or of himself? By the end of the story, the two are so connected that it is all the same.

If Poe did intend the two men to be read as twins or doubles, what can he have meant by it? Critics have been pondering this question for over a century and a half. Daniel Hoffman, in *Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe*, explores Poe's theme of "the fate of the man haunted by his own double, his anima, his weird." When one of Poe's protagonists is wrestling with guilt, Hoffman explains, he sometimes "doubles his character and then arranges for one self to murder the other by burying him alive. In repeatedly telling stories of murderous doubles ("The Tell-Tale Heart," "William Wilson," and others), Poe was attempting to deal with his own demons, his own repressed guilt. Poe biographer William Bittner claims that Montresor and Fortunato "are two sides of the same man Edgar Poe as he saw himself while drinking." For Betina Knapp, author of a study titled *Edgar Allan Poe*, the "shadow figure emerges as a personification of the narrator's hostile feelings and thoughts, symbolizing the repressed instincts of the personality." In his criticism and his daily life, Poe "felt himself striking back, at those forces in society or particularly individuals who might have wronged him."

Characters encountering and slaying their doubles are found throughout history and throughout the world, from Aristotle's story of a man who could not go out without meeting his "double" to *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* to Luke Skywalker meeting Darth Vader in Yoda's cave, killing him, and seeing that the face beneath the mask is his own. The Germans have a name for the phenomenon doppelgänger, meaning "double walker" and psychiatrists have recorded thousands of accounts of people who believe that they have actually encountered mirror images of themselves, usually late at night. Like other archetypal images, the encounter with the double, the other side of oneself, is a powerful image that has attracted and repelled for centuries. Poe anticipated modern psychology with its id, ego and superego by showing through his stories that the monsters outside are nothing compared to the monsters we carry within us.

Source: Cynthia Bily, for *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2000. Bily teaches English at Adrian College in Adrian, Michigan.

Essays and Criticism: Victim and Victimizer: Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado"

Edgar Allan Poe used the enclosure device, whether an actual physical enclosure or an enclosure alluded to on the level of image and metaphor, in a highly artistic way. In much of his fiction, and specifically in "The Cask of Amontillado" (1846), the device helps to focus the action, assists in plot development, and has a profound impact on the main character, often affecting his personality. In his essay "The Philosophy of Composition" Poe remarked, "A close *circumscription of space* is absolutely necessary to the effect of insulated incident—it has the force of a frame to a picture." A "circumscription of space," that is, an enclosure, I consider to be any sort of physical confinement that restricts a character to a particular area, limiting his freedom. That Poe intended this confinement to have a certain power over narrative action is indicated by the phrases "insulated incident" and "the force of a frame to a picture." But confinement in Poe's fiction, I will argue, also has power over a character and often causes him to do things he would not ordinarily do. Such is the case, I believe, with the tale "The Cask of Amontillado."

Montresor, the narrator, it will be remembered, unlike the narrators in other tales (such as "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat") who have murdered their victims and then tried to conceal their bodies, does succeed in concealing his crime, but it has so obsessed his memory and imagination that fifty years after the

act, he is able to render an exact, detailed description as though it occurred the previous day. Like the narrator in "The Black Cat," Montresor uses an enclosure to conceal his victim, but Poe places more emphasis on it in "The Cask of Amontillado" by making it a vault which Montresor fashions himself, within his own family catacombs under the city—an enclosure within a series of enclosures. One might argue that Poe uses the same device in "The Black Cat," for the narrator in that tale conceals his wife's body within a wall of his cellar. The main difference lies in the fact that in "The Cask of Amontillado" Poe centers the entire plot on the journey through the catacombs and into the vault in which Fortunato is finally walled up. In the former tale, Poe, while concentrating on the narrator's neurosis throughout the tale, dramatizes the main enclosure at the climax. In "The Cask of Amontillado," the enclosures are more directly related to the narrator's neurosis.

The journey of Montresor and Fortunato through the catacombs becomes gloomier and more ominous with each step. Montresor relates: "We had passed through walls of piled bones, with casks and puncheons intermingling, into the inmost recesses of the catacombs... 'The nitre!' I said; 'see, it increases. It hangs like moss upon the vaults. We are below the river's bed. The drops of moisture trickle among the bones. Come, we will go back ere it is too late. Your cough—"It is nothing," he said; 'let us goon.'"

Furthermore, Montresor's language in the following passage emphasizes the enclosure:

We passed through a range of low arches ... and ... arrived at a deep crypt.... At the most remote end of the crypt there appeared another less spacious. Its walls had been lined with human remains, piled to the vault overhead, in the fashion of the great catacombs of Paris. Three sides of this interior crypt were still ornamented in this manner. From the fourth the bones had been thrown down, and lay promiscuously upon the earth, forming at one point a mound of some size. Within the wall... we perceived a still interior recess, in depth about four feet, in width three, in height six or seven.

When Fortunato, at Montresor's urging, enters this tiny "interior crypt" in search of the Amontillado, Montresor quickly chains him to the granite wall and begins "to wall up the entrance of the niche."

Montresor's last comment and his description of the enclosures indicate a certain relish for the plan, its locale, and the task of walling up his victim. He even pauses at one point to hear more precisely Fortunato's clanking the chain and to take pleasure in it: "The noise lasted for several minutes, during which, that I might hearken to it with the more satisfaction, I ceased my labors and sat down upon the bones." As the narrator in "The Pit and the Pendulum" is the victim of the enclosure, greatly fearing the pit and its unknown horrors, Montresor in this tale is the homicidal victimizer, fully aware of the horrors of enclosure, enjoying them, and scheming to make them as terrifying as possible.

In spite of his quick and effective work, Montresor pauses twice more before he finishes. The first pause occurs when Fortunato releases a "succession of loud and shrill scream." "For a brief moment I hesitated—I trembled. Unsheathing my rapier, I began to grope with it about the recess: but the thought of an instant reassured me. I placed my hand upon the solid fabric of the catacombs, and felt satisfied. I reapproached the wall. 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 clamor grew still." The frantic screams of Fortunato momentarily disturb Montresor, until he is reassured by the thought of the locale—the enclosures—and "the solid fabric of the catacombs."

The second disturbance comes when he is nearly finished. He thrusts the torch through the remaining aperture and lets it fall: "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." At this crucial instant, Montresor tells us, his "heart grew sick"; of course, he is quick to assure us it is because of "the dampness of the catacombs." Although Montresor is obviously fascinated by

the deadly enclosure, and uses it with satisfaction in walling up Fortunato, he also experiences moments of horror while within it.

In this story, then, enclosure has a dual aspect. While it is Montresor's main source of delight in planning his revenge, it does create momentary flashes of panic which almost disrupt his carefully planned revenge. One wonders if on a subconscious level Montresor is not trying to isolate, and enclose, a part of himself and a neurosis he hates—symbolized by Fortunato: Once his victim is walled up and Montresor's neurosis is in a sense buried and out of sight, he believes he will probably regain some measure of sanity. But, of course, Poe does not allow him this luxury, for the conclusion of the tale clearly indicates that even though the long dead Fortunato may be buried, Montresor is still obsessed with the details of the crime and can recite them complete and intact after half a century.

Like the narrators of “The Tell-Tale Heart” and “The Black Cat,” Montresor buries his victim on his premises. But Montresor goes much deeper than the other two narrators, deeper than his cellar, deeper even than his family's subterranean burial ground, though he passes through it to reach the tiny crypt he has prepared for Fortunato. It seems as if he is reaching deep into the past, into his ancestral heritage, to deal with his current problem, Fortunato's insult. Like the other two narrators, he could have disposed of his victim in any number of ways having nothing to do with an enclosure, but he used burial and chose his family's catacombs, even his ancestors' bones, to conceal Fortunato's body: “Against the new masonry I re-erected the old rampart of bones.” His act indicates that though he wants to be rid of his victim, he wants him to remain within reach, that is to say, among the bones of his ancestral past.

Fortunato, as a character, has little importance; he becomes significant as the object of Montresor's self-hatred, of the projection of his guilt for his aristocratic family's decline. Montresor says at one point, when his unwitting victim remarks on the extensiveness of the vaults, that “the Montresors . . . were a great and numerous family,” implying that they once were but no longer are; and Poe is careful not to mention any immediate family of Montresor.

Like the other two narrators, Montresor, while taking pains to conceal his crime, must needs be found out. However, unlike the other narrators, whose crimes are discovered shortly after they are committed, Montresor's is not found out until he informs the reader of it fifty years afterward. So, although the crime appears successful, the revenge is not, because Montresor has not freed himself from guilt—a fact indicated by his rendering of details which have no doubt obsessed him through every day since the deed. His final words, “In pace requiescat!”, underscore Poe's irony. Montresor's rest has surely been troubled. Why he has preferred anonymity, while sustaining this obsession during those years, might well be explained by his unconscious fear of the guilt he would, once it was found out, consciously have to accept. And having to accept it might drive him insane, as it does the narrator at the conclusion of “The Tell-Tale Heart,” or it might force him to acknowledge the depth of his evil and truly repent—something Montresor is loath to do—as it does the narrator of “The Black Cat,” who reveals to the reader that he “would unburthen [his] . . . soul” before he dies.

It appears, then, that Montresor is making Fortunato a scapegoat and symbolically enclosing Fortunato, his own identity, in a hidden crypt deep within his own soul—out of sight but certainly not forgotten. A similar view has been expressed by Charles Sweet: “Montresor's premature burial of his mirror self in the subterranean depths of his ancestral home (house equals mind in Poe) paints a psychological portrait of repression; the physical act of walling up an enemy in one's home duplicates the mental act of repressing a despised self in the unconscious.” Montresor, Sweet continues, “buries alive his scapegoat.... In Montresor's unconscious mind he is not murdering Fortunato, but burying/ repressing that dilettantish side of himself he can no longer endure, that side symbolized by Fortunato.” The enclosure Poe uses in “The Cask Amontillado,” in addition to being the focal point of the plot, providing a journey through a series of enclosures, and adding a sense of pervasive gloom and oppression to the tale, also becomes the central symbol

in my interpretation. These enclosures and the crypt in which Montresor buries Fortunato are metaphors for Montresor's obsessive mind and the complex relationship between the reality of his disturbed inner self and his controlled, rational outer appearance. They emphasize his neurosis and symbolize the guilt he wishes to bury. Thus, Poe's enclosures in this enigmatic tale provide it with a thematic unity and an artistic integrity it might not otherwise have.

Source: Leonard W. Engel, "Victim and Victimizer: Poe's 'The Cask of Amontillado,'" in *Interpretations: A Journal of Idea, Analysis, and Criticism*, Vol. 15, No. 1, Fall, 1983, pp. 26-30.

Essays and Criticism: "The Cask of Amontillado": Some Further Ironies

Although readers of "The Cask of Amontillado" have long been aware of the ironies that operate throughout to give special intensity to this tale, an awareness of its Roman Catholic cultural and theological materials adds to the irony and transforms clever trick into an episode of horror.

Throughout the entire episode—its planning, its execution, and its confession—Monsieur Montresor made self-conscious use of cunning, plotting, and irony to wreak his revenge. The French nobleman tells his story of the calmly calculated murder of his Italian aristocratic friend Fortunato. The crime had been perfectly executed; for fifty years now the act has gone undiscovered. Every smallest detail had been so carried out as to satisfy the criminal's two-fold purpose: Montresor would have revenge without himself getting caught; and, as the avenger, he would make quite sure "to make himself felt as such to him who has done the wrong." Thus he followed the motto on his coat of arms: "Nemo me impugne lacessit."

In the course of the narrative we learn how Montresor used the cutting edge of irony to give a surgeon's neatness to his work and to secure the greatest possible delight for himself. With consummate evil he chose the carnival season for his crime. The carnival in question was *Carnevale*, a three days' festivity ending at midnight on Ash Wednesday, during which time, in Catholic cultures, people have one last fling of merriment before beginning the somber Lenten fast. The season afforded a perfect setting for murder: servants were out of the house celebrating, the noise and frenzy of the crowds allowed the murderer to go about his work unnoticed, the high spirits of the season provided an appropriately ironic background for Montresor's playful antics with his victim, and the somber, religious quiet that settled upon the city at midnight was just the right mood for Fortunato's final hour. How appropriate that the victim go to his death in a catacomb while devout Christians were about to gather in churches above to receive blessed ashes, symbol of their mortality, and to hear the warning, "Remember man, you are dust and to dust you will return."

But overlying the story is another irony that Montresor is not conscious of, an irony that the reader is only vaguely conscious of, although its presence is felt quite strongly in several places. Basic to appreciating this irony is a correct understanding of sacramental confession. When Montresor killed Fortunato, he counted upon the judgment of God as the final instrument of revenge. He killed his enemy by leading him into sins of pride, vanity, and drunkenness; and without a chance for confession, Fortunato presumably would have been damned with no capacity for striking back in time or eternity. Moreover, to assure his own salvation, Montresor relied upon the power of sacramental confession for himself. For Montresor is not simply speaking to a sympathetic friend; he is also making his deathbed confession to a priest.

Montresor misses the irony of the phrase at the beginning of his confession, "You, who so well know the nature of my soul," with its implication that the penitent had been confessing to this priest for some time, but had not been confessing all his sins. In theological terms these were bad confessions because the efficacy of the sacrament hinges upon the sincere disposition and sorrow of the penitent for all his sins. When this is lacking, the sacrament, instead of being an instrument of salvation, becomes an instrument of damnation.

Such confessions were sins of sacrilege. Montresor, therefore, has been confessing in vain.

And even now, when on his deathbed Montresor confesses all his sins, he is deluded in thinking himself forgiven. He seems to be unaware, but the reader is not, of the gleeful tone of his confession. Montresor is taking delight in the very telling of his crime—hardly the disposition of a truly repentant sinner. Thus, the "In pace requiescat" with which he finishes his confession is ambiguous. We can see it as a superficial expression of sorrow or a quiet satisfaction in the lasting, unchallenged completeness of his revenge. Here, surely, is the irony of a confession without repentance, an irony that makes the entire plan double back upon the doer.

Finally, Montresor's most serious miscalculation was his total failure to understand the ineffable power of God's mercy. Apparently he had forgotten a fundamental lesson of his catechism, that a person in serious sin—even without sacramental confession—can turn to God, out of love, and in an instant make an "act of contrition" that can win immediate pardon. Fortunato's plea, "For the love of God, Montresor," was directly addressed to his murderer, but implicitly it was a prayer expressing faith in the power of God's loving-kindness. To this, Montresor was deaf; and when the prayer received a merciful hearing in heaven, Montresor's stratagems backfired. Fortunato, lucky as his name suggests, was saved; Montresor, damned. The final effect is one of horror. The ultimate irony is that of a puny creature playing games with God.

Source: James F. Cooney, "'The Cask of Amontillado': Some Further Ironies," in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. XI, No. 2, Spring, 1974, pp. 195-6.

The Cask of Amontillado Edgar Allan Poe: Introduction

"The Cask of Amontillado" Edgar Allan Poe

See also "The Tell-Tale Heart" Criticism and "The Fall of the House of Usher" Criticism.

Regarded as the originator of the modern short story and a master of the form, Poe established a highly influential rationale for short narrative art, which emphasizes the deliberate arrangement of a story's minutest details of setting, characterization, and structure in order to impress a unified effect on the reader. In his own work he demonstrated a brilliant command of this technique—often eliciting "terror, or passion, or horror" from his readers—as well as an uncommon imagination suffused with eerie thoughts, weird impulses, and foreboding fear. Renowned for cultivating an aura of mystery and a taste for the ghastly in his fiction, Poe relied on his imagination and literary skills to animate the disconcerting effects of his so-called "tales of horror," especially those dealing with crime and moral depravity. Among the latter kind, "The Cask of Amontillado" ranks as one of Poe's finest stories. Originally published in November 1846, in *Godey's Lady's Book*, "The Cask of Amontillado" has since become a classic tale of revenge, distinguished by the subtle irony that pervades many levels of the story and by Poe's uncharacteristic use of dialogue between the protagonist and antagonist as the principal structural device of the narrative.

Plot and Major Characters

Set in an anonymous city somewhere in the Mediterranean region of Europe during the pre-Lenten festivities of the carnival season, "The Cask of Amontillado" recounts the last meeting between two aristocratic gentlemen, the narrator Montresor and the wine connoisseur Fortunato. As the story begins, Montresor plots complete and perfect revenge for "the thousand injuries" instigated by Fortunato, who once again has insulted him, although the particulars are never indicated. Montresor encounters the obviously tipsy Fortunato dressed in fool's motley and informs him that a recently acquired cask of amontillado sherry awaits his discriminating palate in Montresor's underground cellars. Eager to taste the wine, Fortunato follows Montresor to his palazzo and into the vaults. Although Fortunato has a cough that is aggravated by the damp air and potassium nitrate

hanging in the tunnels through which they pass, he is spurred onward after he learns that his rival Luchresi may be permitted to taste Montresor's new wine. Engaging Fortunato in dialogue ripe with irony, Montresor lures his victim deep into the family catacombs, urging him to try other wines along the way. As Fortunato grows impatient to sample the amontillado and assess its quality, he is easily directed into a crypt at the end of a passage where Montresor promptly shackles him in chains to the wall. With both a trowel and fresh mortar nearby, Montresor begins to entomb Fortunato brick by brick. Sobering quickly, Fortunato cries in vain for release. As Montresor finishes his task, the bells on Fortunato's costume jingle faintly. Montresor then hides his handiwork behind a pile of his ancestor's bones. He concludes that no one has disturbed them for fifty years.

Major Themes

Themes of betrayal and revenge clearly inform "The Cask of Amontillado," but the pervasive irony of Montresor's narration complicates attempts to understand his motives and other conflicts at the heart of the tale. At the same time, layers of irony also contribute to the story's tone of horror. While Fortunato remains blissfully ignorant of Montresor's true intentions for most of the story, the evident pleasure Montresor takes in relating his story, proudly recalling every detail fifty years after the fact, suggests a state of mind free of remorse and detached from any sense of conscience. The ironic connotations of the story also inspire darkly comedic moments and evince Poe's satiric sense of humor. Montresor's pursuit of revenge against Fortunato represents the enactment of an elaborate ritual that resembles the profane rites of the "Black Mass" or a parody of archetypal events, such as the conflict between good and evil, replete with biblical echoes; the implications of the story's last line, "*In pace requiescat*" ("may he/it rest in peace"), which derives from the Roman Catholic funeral rite, proliferate in the ironic context of the narrative. Likewise, the proper nouns in the story—Amontillado, Montresor, Fortunato, Luchresi—demonstrate Poe's disposition toward puns and fascination with the multiple meanings of foreign words. The traditional aristocratic code of personal honor and social obligation shapes other aspects of the tale. Although violations of the code were usually redressed in the form of the duello, here insults are expressed by a duel with words in form of Montresor's dialogue with Fortunato. Other thematic concerns involve the prevalence of masonic imagery in the story, perhaps gesturing toward the Masonic-Catholic conflict that swept the United States at the time of the story's composition, as well as the thematic device of enclosure, which Poe used in many other stories, although its presence in "The Cask of Amontillado" may allude to the popularity of live-burial literature in Poe's era.

Critical Reception

Regarded as one of Poe's greatest and most famous tales, "The Cask of Amontillado" has attracted a broad range of commentary representing a wide spectrum of perspectives. Critics generally agree that "The Cask of Amontillado" exemplifies Poe's theory of short fiction, in which every narrative detail of a successful story contributes to a single intense effect. However, a consensus opinion about specific details remains elusive. Some scholars have disputed the time and place of the action in Poe's story as well as the national origins of the principal characters, while other commentators have suggested that the tale reflects Poe's personal bitterness in the so-called "War of the Literati," which resulted from a series of critical articles entitled "The Literati" that Poe published in *Godey's Lady's Book* just before "The Cask" appeared. Psychoanalytic readings have emphasized the macabre and pathological elements in the work, ranging from the psychological implications of Montresor's "motiveless evil" and a perceived division within the psyche of Montresor, or even Poe, to personality transference between the characters. Others have focused on "The Cask of Amontillado" as a practical application of Poe's theory of perversity, which hinges on apparent irrelevancies. The final line of the story has troubled many commentators: some feel that it indicates a guilty motivation for Montresor's story, while others detect sarcasm or alternative figures to whom it is addressed. Francis J. Henninger concluded that Poe "had been writing tales with startling endings, but [in *The Cask of Amontillado*] he writes one guaranteed not to startle. When it does, the effect is so delightfully jarring and puzzling that it is not easily forgotten. Why else should this story . . . bear the weight . . . of the scrutiny of so

many years of reading?"

Criticism: Joseph S. Schick (essay date 1934)

SOURCE: "The Origin of 'The Cask of Amontillado,'" in *American Literature*, Vol. 6, No. 1, March, 1934, pp. 18-21.

[In the following essay, Schick traces incidental similarities between Poe's tale and Joel Tyler Headley's *Letters from Italy* (1845).]

Although many questions of literary indebtedness are open to discussion, still we can be reasonably certain that the origin of Poe's tale, "The Cask of Amontillado," was not wholly inspirational. Professor Killis Campbell has suggested that portions of the work may possibly be traced to certain incidents in *The Last Days of Pompeii* and in Balzac's "La Grande Brèche."¹ It is true that Montresor's method of tricking Fortunato into the underground chambers is not unlike that of Bulwer-Lytton's Arbaces in leading a priest to imprisonment. But in the immurement which marks the climax of "The Cask of Amontillado" and which Poe again used in the tale of "The Black Cat," both Bulwer-Lytton and Balzac may be disregarded as possible sources. Instead, we must turn to an American contemporary of Poe, the Reverend Joel Tyler Headley (1814-1897) and to his *Letters From Italy*² (1845) in a study of the composition of "The Cask of Amontillado."³

Headley was one of the most popular writers of his day, for up to 1853 over two hundred thousand copies of his works had been sold.⁴ But Poe did not join the public in its common acclaim. In fact, the one review that he wrote of Headley, on *The Sacred Mountains*, may be regarded as typical of the *Norman Leslie* school of criticism. Poe was bitter, harsh, and ruthless. In this review he gives evidence of knowing other works by Headley, for he writes that "a book is a 'funny' book and nothing but a funny book, whenever it happens to be penned by Mr. Headley."⁵ Now the only literary production of Headley that Poe could have had in mind in making this statement was the *Letters From Italy*, for it was the only publication of Headley prior to *The Sacred Mountains*.

Although there is no exact evidence to show that Poe had read the *Letters From Italy* entire, there were other possibilities which might have brought one of Headley's letters containing the germ of "The Cask of Amontillado" to his attention. The letter in question was printed separately in two publications well known to Poe under the title, "A Sketch, A Man Built in a Wall," in *The Columbian Magazine* and *The New York Evening Mirror*. The letter appeared in the former in the issue of August, 1844, which also contained Poe's article on "Mesmeric Revelation." Poe sent copies of this issue to Lowell and to Chivers, a fact which may indicate that the magazine was actually in his possession.⁶ Thus we can be reasonably certain that Headley's article came to his attention. One year later, on July 12, 1845, Headley's letter was again printed in *The New York Evening Mirror*. At this time Poe was no longer on the staff of the *Mirror*, but no Poe scholar will deny that he was in daily contact with the paper, so far as that was possible, throughout his later career. His connection with the *Mirror* was especially sympathetic in the year 1845, which marked the first appearance of "The Raven" in its columns. In view of these facts, it is not likely that Headley's letter describing an immurement was unknown to him. Nothing is more eloquent of this than his subsequent use of the material.

The letter by Headley may be summed up briefly. He and his companion enter the little town of San Giovanni, in Italy. They are shown through the church of San Lorenzo. In the wall of the church is a niche covered with "a sort of trap-door," containing an upright human skeleton. This ghastly spectacle had been discovered by workmen some years previous to Headley's visit, but it had not been disturbed. Headley describes the skeleton in detail and concludes that the victim had died of suffocation after having been walled-up alive. The history of the immurement is not known, but Headley gives an account of his retrospective view of the event: the

victim was walled-up by his enemies in a spirit of revenge. He had been bound securely and the niche prepared for him. When the opening was large enough he was placed in it. The walling-up process began. Gradually, it neared completion: the last stone was fitted in and revenge was satisfied. "A stifled groan . . . and all was over."

We find more than an echo of this account in Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado." It will be recalled that here, too, the scene is laid in Italy, and the action is motivated by a spirit of revenge. Further, the characters involved in the plot are of the nobility. Headley writes, "men of rank were engaged in it [the torturing of their enemies], for none other could have got the control of a church, and none but a distinguished victim would have caused such great precaution in the murderers." Poe makes use of a similar tradition of nobility, for he speaks of the Montresors as a "great and numerous family" and describes their armorial bearings. When the actual immurement proceedings begin, the similarities in the two accounts are best observed in the following parallel passages:

Headley

In a dark night. . . . The workman began at the feet, and with his mortar and trowel built up with the same carelessness he would exhibit in filling any broken wall. The successful enemy stood leaning on his sword . . . and watched the face of the man he hated, but no longer feared. . . . At length the solid wall rose over his chest repressing its effort to lift with the breath, when a stifled groan . . . escaped the sufferer's lips, and a shudder ran through his frame that threatened to shake the solid mass, which enclosed it, to pieces. . . . With care and precision the last stone was fitted in the narrow space—the trowel passed smoothly over it—a stifled groan, as if from the center of a rock, broke the stillness—one strong shiver, and all was over.

Poe

With these materials [building stone and mortar] and with the aid of my trowel, I began vigorously to wall up the entrance of the niche. . . . The wall was now nearly upon a level with my breast. . . . A succession of loud and shrill screams, bursting suddenly from the throat of the chained form, seemed to thrust me violently back. For a brief moment I hesitated—I trembled. Unsheathing my rapier . . . but the thought of an instant reassured me. I placed my hand, upon the solid fabric of the catacombs, and felt satisfied. . . . It was now midnight . . . there remained but a single stone to be fitted and plastered in. I struggled with its weight; I placed it partially in its destined position. But now there came from out the niche a low laugh. . . . I forced the last stone into its position; I plastered it up.

The similarities in the accounts of Poe and Headley may be summed up briefly: The scenes are laid in Italy; the characters involved are of the nobility; the deeds of murder are incited by revenge; the same method of immurement is resorted to; and there are similar descriptive details.⁷

A study of literary origins is important in revealing a writer's method of composition. In "The Cask of Amontillado" Poe drew from two widely different sources—Bulwer-Lytton and Headley—and combined his findings so deftly that a plot of great unity and expression was achieved.

Notes

This paper was first presented to the Edgar Allan Poe Society of the University of Iowa, February 15, 1932. Since that time certain additions have been made to it.

Some time after Mr. Schick had submitted his article to the editors of *American Literature*, Mr. James T. Pole, a graduate student at Columbia University, submitted an article on the same source for Poe's tale. Certain paragraphs from Mr. Pole's manuscript article are given as a footnote at the end of Mr. Schick's article.

¹ Killis Campbell, *The Mind of Poe and Other Studies* (Cambridge, 1933), pp. 170-171.

² The letters comprising this volume were written in 1844; certain of them were published in this year.

³ "The Cask of Amontillado" first appeared in *Godey's Lady's Book*, vol. XXXIII (Nov. 1846).

⁴ Allibone, *A Critical Dictionary of English Literature* (Philadelphia, 1859), I, 812.

⁵ Poe, *Works*, ed. J. A. Harrison (New York, 1902), XIII, 203.

⁶ Hervey Allen, *Israfel: The Life and Times of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York, 1927), II, 616.

⁷ The identities and similarities that this sketch and Poe's tale have in common will be seen readily. The locale of both is Italy; the motive behind both crimes is revenge for some unmentioned wrong; the method of accomplishing the crime is the same in both cases; the pervading atmosphere of both is strikingly similar. The two features of Italian life that seem to have been most attractive to American writers of the middle of the last century were the church and the carnival. For the setting of his tale Poe merely substituted the one for the other. A further similarity may be seen between the references to the passage of time at the ends of both pieces, and between Headley's evangelical ending and Poe's concluding "In pace requiescat."

Provided that this sketch can be accepted as the immediate source for "The Cask of Amontillado," the light thrown on Poe's creative methods is interesting. Several details in Headley's sketch were retained as in keeping with the Poe manner and technique; notably, the romantic indefiniteness of the victim's offense and the equally romantic cold detached air of the murderer. Poe's additions to the earlier piece are chiefly, I think, the results of his desire to emphasize the atmosphere of horror. This is largely accomplished by the diabolically clever setting and springing of the trap, which Poe substituted for the prosaic beginning of Headley's sketch, and by the murderer's cat-like dalliance with his prospective victim. The originality of Poe's treatment is well illustrated by his unconventional handling of the conduct of the victim, which Headley made so tritely stoical. James T. Pole.

Criticism: Marvin Felheim, Sam Moon, and Donald Pearce (essay date 1954)

SOURCE: "The Cask of Amontillado," in *Notes & Queries*, Vol. 1, No. 10, October, 1954, pp. 447-49.

[In the following essay, each critic focuses on the structure of Poe's tale. In the first part, Felheim explains two requisites for Montresor to perfect his revenge; in the second part Moon accounts for Montresor's failure to exact revenge; and in the third part, Pearce compares Poe's story to a profane rite, or scriptural parody.]

In "The Cask of Amontillado" there are two parts, equally important, to Montresor's revenge: "I must not only punish, but punish with impunity"; and "the avenger [must] make himself felt as such to him who has done the wrong." If the story is aesthetically self-contained, our reading must be governed by these two requirements.

That Montresor accomplishes the first half is evident; his crime has not been detected "for the half of a century." Working out the second half of his requirement is more complicated, for Fortunato must become fully aware of what his "wrong" was before he can comprehend his punishment. He is a distinguished

individual, "rich, respected, admired, beloved," and he has a title (his wife is "Lady"); his status makes the injury more serious. Fortunato's taunt is our first hint about the nature of this longstanding insult. Deep in the vaults he laughs and throws a bottle "upwards with a gesticulation," a "grotesque" movement. The action, admits Fortunato, indicates that he is "of the brotherhood," "of the Masons." Here is insult enough to the proud Montresor, member of "a great and numerous" Italian (presumably Catholic) family, a family whose vaults include catacombs; here, indeed, is not personal injury (which could be "borne") but insult (which required "revenge").

If being a Mason is Fortunato's crime, does he comprehend the enormity of his deviation and the consequent punishment? When the reality of the situation penetrates the consciousness of the now sober Fortunato, he first assumes that Montresor is joking. But on this score, he is quickly undeceived by Montresor's calm irony in carefully repeating Fortunato's phrase, "Let us be gone." Fortunato immediately and dramatically shouts (note Poe's use of italics at the climax): "*For the love of God, Montresor!*" These are, significantly, Fortunato's last words. Again, with deliberate emphasis, Montresor echoes him. After that, Fortunato does not speak. There is no need to. He understands. *In pace requiescat!* This final phrase of Montresor's is significant, too. Now, indeed, the "old rampart of [family] bones" can rest in peace.

By this reading, the story now becomes Montresor's enactment of an elaborate ritual. From the outset he conceives of Fortunato's death as an "immolation," a sacrificial act in which Montresor himself assumes a perverted priestly function. The vaults and the wine become sacramental properties which give a blasphemous significance to the ritual murder. And Fortunato, besides being the snake in Montresor's family arms, takes on all the qualities of a serpent, traditional religious symbol of evil. His immolation enables Montresor to accomplish a fitting act of revenge, complete even to the benediction.

II

The interpretation of "The Cask of Amontillado" in which Montresor succeeds in his revenge is required as a mirror which will reflect the ironic sense in which Montresor fails. For Poe has here taken a tale of revenge and reversed the whole thing by a pervasive irony; he has set up a problem of requirements and their fulfilment with mathematical precision, and he has solved it as a poet. His method is to establish in great detail an ironic parallel between Fortunato and Montresor, so that by the end they are virtually identified. In the beginning Fortunato, in motley, mimics Montresor with his repeated "Amontillado!" but by the end the roles are reversed and Montresor plays the mimic. As Fortunato approaches the edge of madness, the mad Montresor re-echoes his yells and the identification is complete. This carefully built ironic parallel points to the crucial irony—the profound failure of the revenge.

First, Montresor does not really fulfil the requirement of explaining his motive to Fortunato. Such a deed as Montresor's is incredible to him except as some monstrous joke, but this hope is killed by Montresor's mockery. Finally Fortunato makes his ultimate appeal, "*For the love of God, Montresor!*" but Montresor's reply of cold Godless mockery is so profoundly irrational that it drives him mad. The only further sound which Montresor can provoke from the crypt is "a jingling of the bells"; Fortunato has escaped to the haven of the fool. By his silence and by his death, it is he who leaves Montresor, and he has gone "for [because of] the love of God."

Montresor also fails in a real sense to "punish with impunity"; the half-century during which Montresor has kept the secret to himself is Fortunato's retribution. In the light of the accumulated ironies, one has only to read the conclusion of the story to see this. Montresor understands by Fortunato's silence (broken only by the bells) that he is gone, "My heart grew sick," he says, and the retribution begins which will continue ("*At length*") "for the half of a century." Montresor does not rest in peace as Fortunato does until he has confessed. Then, the story told, his benediction applies to both of them.

III

The ambiguity to which the above two readings of "The Cask of Amontillado" bear witness is inherent in Poe's strategies of composition; his best poems and stories have not only melodic, but close structural, analogies with musical form (it was probably the latter feature as much as tonal virtuosity that made his work directly relevant to the aesthetic preoccupations of the French symbolists). "The Cask" might be regarded as an *étude*, employing the theme of inflicted torture, in the form of betrayal and revenge, in the "key" of Sadism. Its "single effect" is undoubtedly revenge, precisioned and remorseless; but this does not prevent it from being double-edged (Montresor has had to live with the crime—and evidently not *in pace*—for half a century). Paradox, bitter irony, or in musical terms the thrust of theme and counter-theme, are the *modi operandi* of this story and, in fact, the structural effect Poe was seeking.

But technical effectiveness is not meaningful by itself. The word "ritual" has been mentioned and it suggests still a third interpretation. The tale has a strong flavour of a profane rite, a sort of Black Mass, or parody of archetypal events and themes in holy scripture. Fortunato's cry, "*For the love of God*" (he is chained in a quasi-crucified posture when he utters it), tolls back through the story drawing together several grotesque images: Montresor's costume is distinctly Mephistophelean; his coat of arms (doubtless invented on the spot) contains a human foot being bruised at the heel by a Satanic serpent (*cf.* Genesis, 3: 15); his procedure with Fortunato is temptation by appeal to Pride. Elements reminiscent of Christ's passion are introduced: Fortunato is taken on the night of the Carnival (*cf.* the night of the Passover, John 19: 14-16); the mode of "capture" is intimate betrayal, closely resembling the kiss of Judas; he is led through the streets, the ancestral catacombs, to Golgotha (trans.: "place of skulls") for his final agony, where he is mocked. Fortunato wears, we will say, a crown of bells for a crown of thorns; he belongs to the mystic (Masonic) brotherhood—Montresor's trowel ironizing and mocking the point. The wine they seek has sacred connotations (Amontillado = "from the mountain") and sacrificial overtones; its non-existence parodies by inversion the ritual significance of the communion service; and with the discovery of its non-existence the light of the world flickers out for the entombed Fortunato—as equally, in another sense, for Montresor, who, having lived for fifty years with the crime in his mind, displays vague affinities with the Wandering Jew. Obviously Poe's story is not a systematic symbolization of these things; we are not in the presence of Hawthornean allegory. The elements of scriptural parody wind throughout the tale demoniacally, as the mottled striations in a slab of black marble, suggesting powerful but indeterminate patterns that have a mythic feel.

Criticism: John H. Randall III (essay date 1963)

SOURCE: "Poe's 'The Cask of Amontillado' and the Code of the Duello," in *Studia Germanica Gandensig*, Vol. V, 1963, pp. 175-84.

[In the following essay, Randall demonstrates how Fortunato's violations of the aristocratic code of honor motivate Montresor's revenge.]

All critics agree that Edgar Allan Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado" is an almost perfect short story. Few, however, seem to have much to say about how Poe manages to achieve his extraordinary effect. I would like to propose a possible interpretation which might help explain the undeniable power which the story exerts on readers generation after generation.

A review of the relevant scholarship on the subject may furnish a starting point. George E. Woodbury calls it "a tale of Italian vengeance."⁽¹⁾ Arthur Hobson Quinn develops the idea a little by describing it as "a powerful tale of revenge, in which the interest lies in the implacable nature of the narrator."⁽²⁾ This gives us a hint, particularly by his use of the word "implacable." Edward Davidson, in his indispensable study of Poe's mind and art, says of the story:

"The Cask of montillado" . . . is the tale of another nameless [*sic*] "I" who has the power of moving downward from his mind or intellectual being and into his brute or physical self and then of returning again to his intellectual being with his total selfhood unimpaired. . . . In short, he descends from one faculty to another and then returns to his former condition, all the while having suffered no detection from society or the world around him.⁽³⁾

Professor Davidson analyses the incident but does not try to explain its motivation.

A further clue is provided by N. Bryllion Fagin, professor of English and drama at Johns Hopkins University, in his study of Poe as a histrionic artist. He writes:

There can be no doubt . . . that in "The Cask of Amontillado" [Poe] plotted carefully and skilfully. The very opening sentence—"The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as best I could, but when he ventured upon insult I vowed revenge"—gives us both the cause and outcome of the action planned. Moreover, it is an excellent exemplification of his own dictum that a good beginning must arrest attention . . . The plausibility of every move is tightly, though unobtrusively, safeguarded. The victim must have no suspicion of the avenger's designs—"neither by word nor deed had I given Fortunato cause to doubt my good will"; he must be met casually—at a carnival; he must have a weak point—his pride in his connoisseurship in wine—allied to this weakness must come another, to induce him to follow Montresor—jealousy of a rival connoisseur; the carnival can also serve to explain why Montresor's home—a "palazzo"—is without attendants—their master had told them that he did not expect to return until morning; the trowel in the hands of the avenger—the first hint of the nature of the revenge—must not betray the design too soon: it is passed off jocularly as a Masonic sign. . . . The ironic jingling of bells which marks the end of "The Cask of Amontillado" is as perfect a curtain as could be devised. It is the inevitable touch which conveys the whole spirit of the piece.⁽⁴⁾

This suggests that it is not only Edgar Allan Poe who had a histrionic sense but Montresor as well. Montresor is indeed not only the principal actor but also the director of his little drama. He is a dramatist-actor, much as Dupin is an artist-scientist.⁽⁵⁾ The essence of his story is that he conceives his little play, stages, plays the principal part, and at the same time directs it toward a purposeful end. But what is the end? We do not even know how Fortunato has offended him. What then is the meaning of the story?

I would like to suggest that the story is about an extreme version of the gentleman's code, that ethic which finds its most intense expression in the duello but also may be revealed in other forms equally dangerous. In its extreme form it requires that the personal honor of an individual gentleman be held as an absolute value. It holds that any slight on that honor demands sure redress and that the redress must be personal, since no gentleman is supposed to seek recourse to the law (law is for tradesmen and others beyond or below the pale). When held as an absolute value (which, for the most part, it was not), it comes into conflict with all the most deeply held values of Western civilization, including, as in this story, love of man and love of God. This code could only be held by a little band of undisputed aristocrats historically descended from the feudal nobility of the Middle Ages. It depended not only on birth but on personal bravery and coolness. Anyone lacking either of these credentials and attempting to espouse the code was regarded as not only ridiculous but contemptible, and was considered fair game for all comers who legitimately espoused the code.

This I believe is what "The Cask of Amontillado" is about. Montresor thinks himself a true aristocrat and bases his life on the code; Fortunato, however high his birth may be, merely aspires and presumes to, and thus deserves the fate he meets. In the story Poe takes an idea and carries it through to its logical conclusion (a habit which may have contributed to his great influence in France). The method is that of irony and understatement, the tone is carefully controlled, and the control mirrors Montresor's careful aristocratic

control over himself, his actions, his blood, and his nerves. Montresor the true aristocrat gulls and exposes Fortunato the false aristocrat. The lesson so administered leads to the latter's death, but the point is made.

The story's initial paragraph states the theme of the gentleman's code: revenge for insult. The nature of Fortunato's offense is never given; from the aristocrat's point of view it is unimportant; what is important is that the stain on his honor should be expunged. We are told:

You, who so well know the nature of my soul, will not suppose, however, that I gave utterance to a threat. *At length* I would be avenged; this was a point definitely settled—the very definitiveness with which it was resolved precluded the idea of risk. I must not only punish but punish with impunity. A wrong is unredressed when the avenger fails to make himself felt as such to him who has done the wrong.⁽⁶⁾

Thus the punishment must be extralegal, personal, and recognized by the culprit as both just and appropriate. The rest of the story derives as inevitably from the first paragraph as does the punishment meted out by Montresor from the aristocratic code. We now begin to understand the dramatic and histrionic nature of the story, in which Montresor is dramatist, stage-setter, protagonist, director, judge, and executioner, all rolled into one. The plot of his little drama resolves into a series of test situations devised by Montresor to determine whether or not Fortunato is a true gentleman. As we shall see, he proves to his own satisfaction that Fortunato is not.

Montresor continues:

It must be understood that neither by word nor deed had I given Fortunato cause to doubt my good will. I continued, as was my wont, to smile in his face, and he did not perceive that my smile *now* was at the thought of his immolation.⁽⁷⁾

No true gentleman would give offense—no matter how innocently—without recognizing that he had done so and showing a willingness to abide the consequences. Fortunato, of course, does not realize this and fails the test as he does all subsequent ones.

The action of the story begins in the fourth paragraph:

It was about dusk, one evening during the supreme madness of the carnival season, that I encountered my friend. He accosted me with excessive warmth [not aristocratic coolness], for he had been drinking much. The man wore motley. He had on a tight-fitting partistriped dress, and his head was surmounted by the conical cap and bells. I was so pleased to see him that I thought I should never have done wringing his hand.⁽⁸⁾

By his wearing of motley Fortunato demeans himself below the level of a gentleman; no true aristocrat would ever willingly consent to make himself appear ridiculous. Montresor is pleased, apparently because it confirms his previous opinion of the man; also it clarifies what his future role shall be: he will not vindicate his honor against the slight of an equal but administer a deadly rebuke to an insolent pretender. Much of the power of the tale derives from its lyric expression of the aristocratic disdain of the gentleman for the non-gentleman. There are analogies to be found in the letters of Byron and in Jake Barnes' contempt for Robert Cohn in *The Sun Also Rises*.

Next, Montresor swiftly baits the trap and prepares to spring it. He appeals to his victim's vanity as a winetaster, he appeals to his jealousy of Luchresi (a rival connoisseur). He cold-bloodedly plays on his weakness in order to lure him to his death.

Ironically, Fortunato makes the same judgment about Luchresi that Montresor makes about him. Because he dislikes him as a rival he considers him incompetent and beneath sympathy ("And as for Luchresi, he cannot distinguish sherry from Amontillado"). Both victor and victim accept the code, although the one lives up to it and the other merely tries to.

Part of the story's brilliance lies in the series of ironic reversals it sets up. When Montresor takes Fortunato into his family vaults, he ironically treats him as a member of the Montresor family by burying him there. Actually, Montresor does not even consider him a member of the human family. Similarly, Fortunato thinks he is a gentleman masquerading as a fool, when actually he is a fool masquerading as a gentleman.

A gentlemanly revenge involves giving the victim repeated warnings of his impending fate, so that if he were wise and subtle enough to understand them he could act on the hints thrown out and thus avoid his doom. (But a victim who deserved this fate would be of precisely the kind who would remain oblivious to such warnings.) Montresor warns Fortunato when he tells him "The vaults are insufferably damp. [Fortunato has a bad cold.] They are encrusted with nitre."⁽⁹⁾ Apparently he regards this as a sufficiently clear notice of his intentions. A true gentleman is not fool enough to go into a cellar with a man he has repeatedly injured. A little later on Montresor plays cat-and-mouse with him, making fullest possible use of dramatic irony:

"Come," I said, with decision, "we will go back; your health is precious. You are rich, respected, admired, beloved; you are happy, as once I was."⁽¹⁰⁾ You are a man to be missed. For me it is no matter."⁽¹⁰⁾ We will go back; you will be ill, and I cannot be responsible. Besides, there is Luchresi—"

"Enough," he said; "the cough is a mere nothing; it will not kill me. I shall not die of a cough."⁽¹¹⁾

The next scene involving complex ironic reversals comes when the inebriated Fortunato looks longingly around his host's wine cellar:

I broke and reached him a flagon of De Grève. He emptied it at a breath. His eyes flashed with a fierce light. He laughed and threw the bottle upward with a gesticulation I did not understand.

I looked at him in surprise. He repeated the movement—a grotesque one.

"You do not comprehend?" he said.

"Not I," I replied.

"Then you are not of the brotherhood."

"How?"

"You are not of the masons."

"Yes, yes," I said; "yes, yes."

"You? Impossible! A mason?"

"A mason," I replied.

"A sign," he said, "a sign."

"It is this," I answered, producing from beneath the folds of my *roquelaire* a trowel.

"You jest," he exclaimed, recoiling a few paces. "But let us proceed to the Amontillado."⁽¹²⁾

Fortunato is, it seems, a Mason, and belongs to what he considers a very exclusive club, an elite within the elite of the aristocracy. But to Montresor, old-guard aristocrat that he is, the Masons would be an even more submerged group within a group already low: the pseudo-aristocracy. Fortunato the false gentleman probably considers the Masons to be a potent and dangerous political force.⁽¹³⁾ But Montresor the true aristocrat is a real and far more dangerous mason.

The narrator brings his guest to the small inner crypt beyond the wine cellars and fetters him to the granite:

"Pass your hand," I said, "over the wall; you cannot help feeling the nitre. Indeed it is *very* damp. Once more let me *implore* you to return. No? Then I must positively leave you. But I must first render you all the little attentions in my power."⁽¹⁴⁾

He exults over his victim's helplessness, pointing up his plight by himself pretending to be helpless. By this time Fortunato has become aware of what is going on:

I had scarcely laid the first tier of the masonry when I discovered that the intoxication of Fortunato had in a great measure worn off. The earliest indication I had of this was a low moaning cry from the depth of the recess. It was *not* the cry of a drunken man. There was then a long and obstinate silence. I laid the second tier, and the third, and the fourth; and then I heard the furious vibrations of the chain. The noise lasted for several minutes, during which, that I might hearken to it with the more satisfaction, I ceased my labours and sat down upon the bones.⁽¹⁵⁾

This shows an awakening awareness on Fortunato's part, then a stoic fortitude followed by an arousal of the instinct for self-preservation:

A succession of loud and shrill screams, bursting suddenly from the throat of the chained form, seemed to thrust me violently back. For a brief moment I hesitated, I trembled . . . I placed my hand upon the solid fabric of the catacombs, and felt satisfied . . . I replied to the yells of him who clamoured. I re-echoed, I aided, I surpassed them in volume and in strength. I did this, and the clamourer grew still.⁽¹⁶⁾

Montresor has reduced his foe to an animal level, the ultimate in degradation. Then he taunts his victim by imitating him in his debased condition.

. . . There remained but a single stone to be fitted and plastered in . . . But now there came from out the niche a low laugh that erected the hairs upon my head. It was succeeded by a sad voice, which I had difficulty in recognizing as that of the noble Fortunato. The voice said—

"Ha! ha! ha!—he! he! he!—a very good joke, indeed—an excellent jest. We will have many a rich laugh about it at the palazzo—he! he! he!—over our wine—he! he! he!"

"The Amontillado!" I said.

"He! he! he!—he! he! he!—yes, the Amontillado. But is it not getting late? Will not they be awaiting us at the palazzo, the Lady Fortunato and the rest? Let us be gone."

"Yes," I said, "let us be gone."⁽¹⁷⁾

Fortunato makes one final attempt at the pretense that this is all a gentlemanly jest rather than dead earnest. But it is belied by his voice.

"For the love of God, Montresor!"

"Yes," I said, "for the love of God!"⁽¹⁸⁾

The code of the duello, when carried far enough, goes against the highest values the Western world has believed in, the values upon which our civilization is built. Even an appeal couched in these terms glances off the bright adamant armor of Montresor's inviolable egoism. Such, Poe seems to be saying, is the result of personal honor when held as an absolute.

But to these words I hearkened in vain for a reply. I grew impatient. I called aloud—

"Fortunato!"

No answer. I called again—

"Fortunato!"

No answer still. I thrust the torch through the remaining aperture and let it fall within. There came forth in return only a jingling of the bells⁽¹⁹⁾

Fortunato has fallen into despair. Montresor's response to this is grossly sadistic.

My heart grew sick; it was the dampness of the catacombs that made it so.⁽²⁰⁾

He will do anything rather than reveal to us a feeling of human pity. And the crime never is discovered.

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!*⁽²¹⁾

It is all the more horrible to realize that the narrator must now be a very old man, and that the thought that he might have done anything wrong has never even crossed his mind.

Poe has, I think, made it impossible for us to sympathize very much with either of the story's characters. He has made one of them a sadist, the other a clown. If this is a fair sample of the world of affairs, he seems to imply, we would do well to turn our backs on the active life and passively contemplate the creation of absolute beauty. Victor and vanquished, assassin and victim, are equally repulsive. Only the artist-creator, by a masterstroke, can turn all this sordidness into the timeless beauty of art.

The concept of honor carried to an insane length has broad implications. Although the story is laid in Italy, the honor-revenge *motif* is not unlike a fanaticized version of the pre-Civil-War Southern gentleman's code⁽²²⁾, which appears in much of the best Southern literature, past and present. Two modern examples may suffice. In Robert Penn Warren's *World Enough and Time*, Jeremiah Beaumont insists on making himself known to the fatherly Colonel Fort before knifing him for the alleged seduction of the girl who later became Jerry's wife.

He muses:

For if I set lead in him from the dark, he would die and never know, except by the voice of conscience, what will had winged that little stinger. No, if he died thus in ignorance, Justice would not sup her fill. I was determined, at whatever risk, to do my full obeisance to that unsmiling goddess and glut her to sleep. Therefore with his last pang Fort must see my face.⁽²³⁾

The same idea is seen in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* in the imaginative reconstruction made by Shreve McCannon and Quentin Compson of the events leading up to Henry Sutpen's murder of his part-Negro half-brother Charles Bon. But Faulkner makes more subtle use of recognition-before-death by means of an ironic reversal: Instead of the avenger making himself known to his victim, the victim tries to make the avenger know himself. "You are my brother," Henry says. Bon has been trying to make him see that all mankind are brothers, but by this Henry merely means blood-kinship. Bon replies, "No, I'm not. I'm the nigger that's going to sleep with your sister. Unless you stop me, Henry,"⁽²⁴⁾ trying to make clear to him what he really feels. Charles Bon knows all it is necessary to know about himself and his slayer. In total contrast to "The Cask of Amontillado," here it is the victim who is in full command of himself and the situation and the avenger who is murderous but helpless and ultimately impotent. It is from the reversal of roles of slayer and slain that this section of the story derives much of its tragic power.

The concept of honor also has affinities with certain characters in Shakespeare: one thinks of Hotspur and Fortinbras. Hamlet himself is of course strongly concerned with personal honor, but what a difference between him and Montresor! The personal honor of one is involved with political, moral, and religious considerations which affect the very fabric of society, while that of the other is divorced from all sense of *noblesse oblige* which was traditionally the concern of the aristocracy. Professor Davidson is right in observing that "The difficulty with Poe's gentlemanly protagonists is that . . . they are required to conform to a code . . . from which any meaning or purpose has long been lost,"⁽²⁵⁾ but what he says is historically accurate as well, as the English civil wars, the French Revolution, and the Revolution of 1917 amply attest.

One other more personal consideration should perhaps be mentioned. Professor Davidson writes:

All his life Poe considered himself an outcast; from the beginning he was the child of strolling actors and therefore of mean origin; he could feel that he belonged neither in the Richmond society in which he was reared nor in the larger worlds of Philadelphia or New York . . . Thus in a way he tried to get his revenge, a revenge which took several forms. One was his setting up of the gentleman-hero who should be not so much in revolt against society as contemptuous of it.⁽²⁶⁾

Besides this social revenge there may have been a still more personal vengeance. Much has been made of the significance of names, including the sinister antecedents of the name of Montresor.⁽²⁷⁾ The name Fortunato may have significance as well. He is one of the world's fortunate ones, which Poe obviously was not, however great his genius.⁽²⁸⁾ The story may also deal with Poe's revenge on those more fortunate, but in his opinion more foolish, than he.⁽²⁹⁾

Notes

(1) George E. Woodbury, *The Life of Edgar Allan Poe*, (Boston and New York, Houghton Mifflin, 1909), II, 231.

(2) Arthur Hobson Quinn, *Edgar Allan Poe*, (New York and London, D. Appleton Century, 1942), 499-500.

- (3) Edward H. Davidson, *Poe: A Critical Study*, (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1957), 201-202.
- (4) N. Bryllion Fagin, *The Histrionic Mr. Poe*, (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Press, 1949), 169-204.
- (5) Cf. Davidson, *op. cit.*, 213-222.
- (6) *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, James A. Harrison, ed. (New York, Thomas Y. Crowell, 1902), V, 167.
- (7) *Loc. cit.*
- (8) *Ibid.*, 168.
- (9) *Ibid.*, 169.
- (10) These last words are perhaps an artistic flaw in which the romantic artist in Poe momentarily overcomes the formal ironist. The mysterious hero of unknown origin who has been scarred for life by past calamity is a staple of romantic literature of the early nineteenth century.
- (11) Poe, *op. cit.*, 170.
- (12) *Ibid.*, 172.
- (13) The putative time of the action of the story is about 1796; the story was published in 1846 and fifty years are supposed to have elapsed between the occurrence of the events described and the telling of the tale. The Masons were thought at the time to have been instrumental in bringing about the French Revolution.
- (14) Poe, *op. cit.*, 173.
- (15) *Ibid.*, 173-174.
- (16) *Ibid.*, 174.
- (17) *Loc. cit.*
- (18) *Ibid.*, 175.
- (19) *Loc. cit.*
- (20) *Loc. cit.*
- (21) *Loc. cit.*
- (22) Poe accepted and tried to live up to this code himself (cf., Davidson, *op. cit.*, 209-210). This does not mean that he approved of Montresor's actions. The internal evidence of the story clearly indicates that he did not.
- (23) Robert Penn Warren, *World Enough and Time*, (New York, Random House, 1950), 230-231.
- (24) William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York, Modern Library, 1951), 357-358.

(25) Davidson, *op. cit.*, 210.

(26) *Loc. cit.*

(27) "In one of the earliest American novels, *Charlotte Temple*, the perfidious lover was John Montresor; again, 'Montresor' was a British officer who left the only surviving eye-witness account of the hanging of Nathan Hale and the dramatic words, 'I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country.'" Edward H. Davidson, ed., *Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe*, (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1956), 502-3.

(28) Montresor too evidently does not consider himself one of the world's fortunate ones. See footnote 2, page 179.

(29) The writing of this article was made possible by a grant from the American Philosophical Society.

Criticism: J. Rea (essay date 1966)

SOURCE: "Poe's The Cask of Amontillado," in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. IV, No. 1, Fall, 1966, pp. 57-69.

[In the following essay, Rea interprets Montresor's actions in terms of Poe's theory of perversity.]

The critics say that the theme of "The Cask of Amontillado" is revenge. Hardin Craig says that the first paragraph of the story presents this theme.¹ Dorothy Norris Foote finds that revenge is not only the motive for Montresor's burying Fortunato alive but also his motive in telling the story, since he failed to make sure that Fortunato understood at the time that he was the victim of revenge and since revenge is not revenge "when the avenger fails to make himself felt as such to him who had done the wrong."² Robert H. Fossum seems to think that Montresor acts out of revenge for a wrong he thinks Fortunato had done him and that his sense of guilt sickens him and finally brings him, after fifty years, to tell his story.³

But the critics may be wrong. It may be that Montresor tells his listener about his revenge in order to divert attention from the real reason for his crime, and Montresor's exaggeration in the first sentence, "The thousand injuries of Fortunato," makes us aware that he may not be telling the truth in the first paragraph. In the Foote argument, the proof disproves itself: if Fortunato did not understand that he was a victim of revenge, telling a listener fifty years after Fortunato is dead will not make Fortunato understand it. And Mr. Fossum seems to make the same mistake that the Prefect of the police makes in "The Purloined Letter," who imagines how he himself would have hidden the letter. Montresor's saying that his heart grew sick after he had walled up Fortunato in the catacombs does not necessarily mean that he had a guilty conscience that would make him later confess. It is an easy but dangerous mistake for the reader to measure Montresor by himself.⁴ Instead of thinking that Montresor must have been haunted with guilt for fifty years because we would have been, we must identify our intellect with Montresor's, not with ours. To penetrate another intellect is, as Montaigne says, impossible; but, as Poe says, it is the only way in which we can find out something about Montresor. We must, Poe says, penetrate his intellect the way a boy guesses which hand holds marbles. "When I wish to find out how wise, or how stupid, or how good, or how wicked is any one, or what are his thoughts at the moment, I fashion the expression of my face, as accurately as possible, in accordance with the expression of his, and then wait to see what thoughts or sentiments arise in my mind or heart, as if to match or correspond with the expression."⁵ Montresor's face wears a smile: "I continued, as was my wont," he says, "to smile in his face, and he did not perceive that my smile now was at the thought of his immolation."⁶ If one fashions his face into a smile in order to find whether Montresor is wise or stupid, he will find, I think, that he feels stupid. When Maria in *Twelfth Night* wants to make Malvolio look as stupid as he is, she has him smile. The measurement of Montresor as stupid is more accurate, I think, than the measurement of him as sickened with guilt over

revenge.

The critics support their theme of revenge by making analogies with other of Poe's stories. Mr. Craig makes an analogy between Poe's theory of atoms rushing back to oneness in *Eureka* and what he calls the rushing back of the details in "The Cask of Amontillado" to the theme of revenge in the first paragraph.⁷ Others make an analogy between "The Cask of Amontillado" and "Hop-Frog." Vincent Buranelli says that the one is realistic revenge and the other unrealistic revenge.⁸ Philip Van Doren Stern says the revenge in both stories shows that Poe "indulged in daydreams of revenge."⁹ These analogies seem forced or are too general or are not point by point. Montresor, for instance, is not explicit about the insult for which he seeks revenge, but Hop-Frog on the other hand is precise about the insult that he had endured.

To find out why Montresor kills Fortunato and why he confesses after fifty years, we may dismiss, I think, the apparent relevancy of revenge and look for apparent irrelevancies. In "The Mystery of Marie Roget," Dupin says: "Experience has shown, and a true philosophy will always show, that a vast, perhaps a larger, portion of all truth has sprung from the seemingly irrelevant."¹⁰ The killings in Poe's stories spring from apparent irrelevancies. They are not killings of revenge.

Montresor kills Fortunato because Fortunato has been good to Montresor, and Montresor knows this. For all he says of revenge and insult in the first paragraph, Montresor many times speaks of Fortunato as his friend. The details that Montresor gives us of the carnival night show that Fortunato is Montresor's friend. That Fortunato is held in high regard is further suggested by his name. Montresor admits this when he says to Fortunato: "You are rich, respected, admired, beloved." Montresor, explaining to the listener and to us, says that Fortunato "was a man to be respected and even feared." Fortunato greets Montresor with excessive warmth, which Montresor attributes to Fortunato's drinking, but which can also be attributed to his good nature. It is Fortunato's idea, not Montresor's, that they go into the vaults. Montresor intends for us to think that Fortunato proposes that they go into the vaults because he loves to drink, but Montresor hits upon the true reason for Fortunato's proposal when Montresor says: "My friend, no: I will not impose upon your good nature." Montresor also means for us to think Fortunato a fool with his fool's motley and conical cap and bells. But fools for Poe seems to be what Shakespeare's fools were for him: good men who can make associations and distinctions. Poe's Hop-Frog wears motley with cap and bells and is always "ready with sharp witticism." Montresor's true opinion is that Fortunato is a good and noble man, for at the end he forgets that he wants his listener to think that he has had his revenge on a drunken fool. "But now there came from out the niche a low laugh that erected the hairs upon my head. It was succeeded by a sad voice, which I had difficulty in recognizing as that of the noble Fortunato."

A part of Poe's theory of perversity is that we want to hurt or to kill or to bury alive someone because he has been good to us. It is an unbelievable desire. "We have suffered its existence to escape our senses, solely through want of belief—or faith. . . . The idea of it has never occurred to us."¹¹ The desire is nevertheless very strong. "In theory, no reason can be more unreasonable, but in fact, there is none more strong."¹² Matthew Arnold later said much the same thing when he said that people turn against those from whom they learn. We see this in the relation between parents and children. But the desire is so unbelievable that only the philosophers will admit that it exists. The ordinary man refuses to believe it and seeks what he thinks is a more reasonable excuse to account for what he has done.

Thus Poe's narrators seek reasonable excuses. The narrator in "The Tell-Tale Heart" gives the Evil Eye as his excuse, but he admits that he smothers the old man to death without reason other than that the old man had been good to him and had given him the run of the house. The narrator in "The Imp of the Perverse" tries to make us think that he murdered his friend for his money: "Having inherited his estate all went well with me for years." And in "The Black Cat" the narrator seeks a reasonable excuse in the irritation produced by the cat's evident dislike of him after he had cut out its eye, and seeks a further excuse in the possibility that the cat had bewitched him. But he admits that he kills the cat in cold blood, without reason other than it had loved

him and given him no cause for offense. Because of his partiality for domestic pets, his wife had procured many of them for him. He made no scruple of "maltreating the rabbits, the monkey, or even the dog, when, by accident, or through affection, they came in his way." He loved his cats until his dislike of being loved led him to disgust, annoyance, and finally hatred. He kills the first cat. And of the second cat he says:

I soon found a dislike of it arising within me. This was just the reverse of what I had anticipated; but—I know not how or why it was—its evident fondness for myself rather disgusted and annoyed me . . . With my aversion to this cat, however, its partiality for myself seemed to increase. It followed my footsteps with a pertinacity which it would be difficult to make the reader comprehend.

He wants to kill the second cat, but, instead, he kills his wife. His reasonable excuse is his irritation when the cat gets between his legs on the stairs. He is irritated to madness, picks up an axe to kill the cat, but kills his wife instead. However, his talk of the cats hides from himself and from the reader the unbelievable truth that he kills his wife because of her affection for him. It is the wife more than the cat that loves him. A cat's invariable disdain could not have touched the love that his wife has for him. But she, like the cats, has through affection gotten in his way. The name of the story might have been "My Wife," for she is the real victim.

I have shown that Montresor knew that Fortunato had been his friend. It follows, according to Poe's theory of perversity, that Montresor did what he did because Fortunato had been good to him. Montresor, of course, does not admit this, but seeks the reasonable excuse that he wanted revenge. Mr. Buranelli uses Iago to explain Montresor's commitment to revenge, but we should rather use Montresor to explain Iago. If Montresor explains Iago, then Iago did what he did because Othello had been good to Iago. Iago says to his wife—and I think he believes what he says—that no man would do such a thing. Both Montresor and Iago offer the excuse of revenge, and each one believes in his excuse. We see that Montresor makes excuses when he starts to say that burying Fortunato alive makes him sick, but he changes it and says that the dampness of the catacombs makes him sick.

One is at first at a loss to explain how the narrators of "The Tell-Tale Heart," "The Black Cat," "The Imp of the Perverse," and "The Cask of Amontillado" come to have a knowledge of the theory of perversity when they do not believe the theory and seek instead reasonable excuses. But the theory of perversity is analysis on Poe's part and simple ingenuity on the part of the narrators. Poe says that analytical power should not be mistaken for ingenuity.¹³ Ingenuity is manifested by the constructive or combining power. The narrator in "The Black Cat" thinks of several ways for the disposing of his wife's body, the narrator in "The Imp of the Perverse" goes over a thousand schemes before he settles on one that strikes his fancy, and the narrator in "The Tell-Tale Heart" is so good at thinking of everything that he thinks to get a tub to cut up the body in so as to get no blood on the floor. Montresor in "The Cask of Amontillado" is still more constructive and not only thinks of something to preclude the idea of risk, but to make Fortunato know what is happening to him. The victims of the other narrators do not know what is happening to them. Montresor wants his friend Fortunato to know how he, Montresor, repays friendship as he walls him up. This is perversity, not revenge. If he had cared about revenge, instead of echoing Fortunato, his last words would have been something about the insult that he says Fortunato had given him.

For Poe *ingenuity* is a synonym for *stupidity*. In "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," he says, "The ingenious man is often remarkably incapable of analysis. The constructive or combining power, by which ingenuity is usually manifested . . . has been so frequently seen in those whose intellect bordered otherwise upon idiocy, as to have attracted general observation among writers on morals." And in "The Purloined Letter" G., the stupid Prefect of the Parisian police, exhibits a remarkable constructive power. We were right to measure the constructive Montresor as stupid by his smile.

According to Poe, the ingenious man, who constructs, does so by looking inside himself. G. in "The Purloined Letter" looks inside himself, thinks of the places where he would have hidden the letter, and looks in those places. The narrators of "The Black Cat" and "The Imp of the Perverse" look inside themselves and see perversity. They give a very good discussion of the theory of perversity, admitting that they kill people because these people are good to them and admitting that they confess their crimes because they know that they should not. And the ingenious man, looking inside himself and constructing theories and measuring others by what is inside himself, almost always denies what he sees inside himself. Dupin in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" speaks of the way the ingenious G. has "de nier ce qui est, et d'expliquer de qui n'est pas." The narrators of "The Black Cat" and "The Imp of the Perverse" discuss and admit perversity and then deny it. Montresor looks inside himself and sees perversity and then plays, or tries to play, on the perversity that he suspects is in the other person because it is in him. He tells the servants not to leave the house. They all leave. He tells Fortunato not to go into the catacombs, certain that the perversity in Fortunato will force him to do the opposite thing. But Montresor inaccurately measures Fortunato's intellect and succeeds in his plan only through the accident of the similarity of perversity and courtesy. Perversity always makes one do what he should not; courtesy often makes one do what he should not. It is the courtesy of the uncomplaining Fortunato, insisting that his cough is nothing, that makes him go on. Montresor, unable to analyze someone who is not like him, mistakes courtesy for perversity. But they are not the same thing.

The knowledge of perversity on the part of the narrators comes from ingenuity, but Poe's knowledge of perversity comes from analysis. Poe does not construct his narrators by identifying their intellect with his own, as Hemingway does, but tries to identify his intellect with theirs in order to measure their intellect accurately. Poe is like the analyst in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue": "The analyst throws himself into the spirit of his opponent, identifies himself therewith."¹⁴ In this way he is able to analyze the spirit of perverseness, something that he could not have done by looking inside himself. Mr. Buranelli overlooks Poe's distinction between analysis and ingenuity and says that Poe did learn about perversity by looking inside himself. Of "The Imp of the Perverse," he says: "If Poe was not speaking autobiographically here, he should have been, for he had more than a nodding acquaintance with the Imp of the Perverse," and again says, "From himself he drew the understanding of compulsions that enabled him to write not only 'The Imp of the Perverse' but also 'The Black Cat' and 'The Tell-Tale Heart.'"¹⁵ He gives as an example Poe's reading "The Raven" instead of a promised new poem to a Boston audience. But for this to be perversity Poe needed to have thought that he should not do this. For another example, Mr. Buranelli gives Poe's drunkenness. But drunkenness and perversity are not the same thing. Mr. Stern also says that Poe had "a malicious and wanton desire to hurt others for the perverse satisfaction it gave him." This cannot be. The narrators who kill those who love them and are good to them cannot be drawn from Poe. Poe can be safely loved, for he says in the preface of *Eureka* that he loves those who love him. That anyone would be irritated by another because he loved him Poe had to learn from someone beside himself. Poe does the impossible in identifying his intellect with someone unlike himself who does not love those who love him, and he does this enough times to arrive at a generalization or law that all men have the impulse of the perverse in them. The induction can explain the look on Poe's face. Paul Elmer More says it is the mark of defeat and broken self-control,¹⁶ but it is the look of despair. In *Marginalia* Poe says that to be able to analyze man thoroughly is a lesson in despair.

Poe says that "perverseness is one of the primitive impulses of the human heart—one of the indivisible primary faculties, or sentiments, which give direction to the character of man."¹⁷ That character is not something fixed but something which can be given direction suggests that Poe's narrators are good creatures after all. "But he is a good creature after all," says Dupin of G. in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue." A good creature with a stupid mind under the ordinary conditions of not being loved can, like G., become a prefect of police. But put this same creature in the extraordinary conditions of being loved and cared for, the impulse to hurt and destroy the person that cares for him can become irresistible and direct his character into that of a criminal. If the narrator in "The Black Cat" had married a woman who would not have let him have a cat no matter how much he liked them, there would have been no murder. If Fortunato had told Montresor the story of Abernethy, he would be alive today.¹⁸ The narrators are not paranoics, as Mr. Fossum says Montresor is,

nor madmen, as T. O. Mabbott suggests, but good men who have become victims of the imp of the perverse.

How men whose small intellect or stupidity makes them yield to the imp of the perverse under such conditions as that of being loved can have enough intellect to succeed in their crimes seems impossible to explain, but Poe explains it. Crime, he says, like chess, does not demand much intellect but does demand the power of attention and concentration:

Where the pieces have different and bizarre motions, with various and variable values, what is only complex, is mistaken (a not unusual error) for what is profound. The *attention* is here called powerfully into play. If it flags for an instant, an oversight is committed, resulting in injury or defeat. The possible moves being not only manifold, but involute, the chances of such oversights are multiplied; and in nine cases out of ten, it is the more concentrative rather than the acute player who conquers.¹⁹

According to Poe, the small or ordinary intellect has a greater power of attention and concentration than does the superior intellect. In "The Purloined Letter" Dupin says that inferior intellects notice things more quickly than do the superior intellects:

The principle of the *vis inertiae*, for example, seems to be identical in physics and metaphysics . . . intellects of the vaster capacity, while more forcible, more constant, and more eventful in their movements than those of inferior grade, are yet the less readily moved, and more embarrassed, and full of hesitation in the first few steps of their progress.²⁰

It is the power of attention and concentration that gives the small intellect its force. The small mind conquers by making a victim of the superior mind that does not readily notice details. The victim in "The Tell-Tale Heart" fails to notice the narrator's excess of kindness, but the narrator gives one whole hour to the detail of opening a door. The victim in "The Imp of the Perverse" does not notice that the room is ill-ventilated, but for the narrator it is an "impertinent detail." The wife in "The Black Cat" does not notice the ax in the cellar. And in "The Cask of Amontillado" Fortunato does not notice that Montresor says in one sentence: "How remarkably well you are looking to-day!" and in another: "I perceive you are afflicted . . . with a severe cold." If Montresor explains Iago, Fortunato may explain Othello, who with his superior intellect, does not notice that Iago had picked up, from Othello's preceding conversation with Desdemona, the information that Cassio has known of the love affair all along. In this way the small intellect with its attention to details conquers the superior intellect with its higher powers of reflection.

The theory of perversity covers anything a person does because he feels he should not. Telling what they should not is characteristic of Poe's four narrators who kill those that are good to them. The time it takes for the impulse to tell to become irresistible varies. The narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" confesses within two or three hours after the crime and within about thirty minutes after he has had the impulse to tell. The narrator of "The Black Cat" sleeps soundly for four days after he has killed his wife; but the minute he feels the burning desire to tell, he raps on the wall where he had hidden the body. The narrator of "The Imp of the Perverse" goes for years before he feels the impulse to confess his crime; but once he feels it, he resists the impulse not longer than what must be an hour. Montresor in "The Cask of Amontillado" goes fifty years without telling. But he had the impulse to tell even before he committed the crime. When Fortunato says that he will not die of a cough, Montresor replies: "True—true." And when Fortunato asks him for the sign of a mason, he shows Fortunato his trowel, hidden in his roquelaure.

The more we think about an impulse, the more quickly we give in to it;²¹ but the more we do not think about it, the more we tell when we confess. The narrator in "The Black Cat" confesses, not with words, but by rapping on the brickwork. The narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart," after a little delay, confesses in one sentence: "I admit the deed, tear up the planks!" The narrator in "The Imp of the Perverse," after a longer

delay, confesses more than the other two narrators. And Montresor's confession is long and detailed, for all that it seems to be told rapidly and with no interruption, for he has put it off for fifty years.

Poe says that the impulse of the perverse seems like conscience, but is not. It is not the narrator's heart, but the heart of the dead man, in "The Tell-Tale Heart" that leads to the confession. Here, and in "The Imp of the Perverse," the narrators are haunted by a ringing in the ears as one speaks of being haunted by conscience. The narrator in "The Black Cat" talks of a feeling "that seemed but was not remorse." Montresor's getting heartsick sounds so much like a guilty conscience that some critics know it is.

The difference between conscience and impulse is that conscience has to do with force and impulse has to do with delight. There is the force of conscience in "William Wilson." And in "Thou Art the Man" Charley Goodfellow confesses only because of the force of apparent proof when the dead body jumps out of the box. But for the narrator in "The Imp of the Perverse" the thought of doing what he should not chills the marrow of his bones "with the fierceness of the delight of its horror." This fierce delight comes to him from thinking about what it would feel like to fall into an abyss; and the longer he can delay the fall, the longer will his delight last. He says: "For a very long period of time I was accustomed to revel in this sentiment. It afforded me more real delight than all the mere worldly advantages accruing from sin"; and he finds that the more he thinks about it, the more "the pleasurable feeling" grows until he cannot resist the delight of telling what he should not tell. For the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" confession to the police is not enough, and he confesses to another his feeling of delightful triumph and chuckles at the idea of killing the old man. In "The Black Cat" the delighted narrator burns "to say, if but one word, by way of triumph." His confession to the police is not enough, and he writes out another: "I blush, I burn, I shudder." In "The Cask of Amontillado" Montresor seizes Fortunato by the arm above the elbow. This is a grasp I have seen taken only by policemen and lovers, who feel triumph and delight in the possession of the person whom they have in their grasp. After Montresor has laid the fourth tier of masonry, and Fortunato makes a noise with the chain, Montresor stops to enjoy this noise. "The noise lasted several minutes, during which, that I might hearken to it with the more satisfaction, I ceased my labors and sat down upon the bones." And later, when Fortunato starts screaming, Montresor stops his work to echo and re-echo the yells of the unfortunate Fortunato. Montresor's fierce delight is much like that of Oscar Wilde's Gwendolyn's gentle delight when she says, "The suspense is terrible. I hope it will last." Finally, when all but the last stone is in position, there comes from the niche a laugh that makes the hair stand up on Montresor's head.

Poe's stories, then, are not so much horror stories as stories of the commonplace, of the natural impulse to do the opposite of what we think we should do. The narrator of "The Black Cat" says:

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.

Where Poe learned about the spirit of the perverse is not beyond conjecture. He found the impulse in enough men to make the deduction that all men have it and to see by induction that he as a man had this frightening impulse within himself likewise. Having seen it in other men, he looked inside himself and found the impulse of the perverse there also. But in him, it must have been slight and he must have checked it, since he was able to say that he loves those who love him. Professor T. O. Mabbott suggests that Poe may have first learned about perversity from the heroine in Lady Georgina Fullerton's *Ellen Middleion*.²² But Poe may have learned of it from German books, as the narrator in "MS. Found in a Bottle" reads the German moralists for the practice of detecting falsities. Or he may have taken it from Pascal. Poe writes admiringly of Pascal in *Eureka*, and in "The Colloquy of Monos and Una" one of them says to the other that Pascal is "a philosopher whom we both love." Poe's pattern for perversity is much like Pascal's *pensée* in which man is continually rushing into an abyss. A conflict is set up within us that may delay indefinitely our taking any action; but at last the

delay is over, and we stand on the edge of an abyss, where, despite our reason, which would draw us back, we fall and destroy ourselves. Baudelaire, to whom Poe was "mon frère, mon semblable," derived his theory of perversity in part from Pascal and in part from Poe. The dread that the narrator in "The Black Cat" says is "not exactly a dread of physical evil" is Baudelaire's *horreur sympathétique* or fear of falling. Baudelaire's "Le Voyage" is a translation of the desire of Poe's fisherman in "A Descent into the Maelström," who clings to the grass to keep from falling, yet has the desire to explore the depths of the whirlpool.

The development of Poe's theory of the perverse was a gradual one. We find the beginning of it in the "MS. Found in a Bottle," first published in 1831. The narrator finds himself, when his ship off the coast of New Holland falls from a mountain-like billow into a watery abyss, suddenly hurled upon that terrible black ship, the *Discovery*. On this ship the narrator discovers a new sense, a nameless feeling, the nature of which he cannot be satisfied about. "A Descent into the Maelstrom," published in May 1841, develops the horror of falling into an abyss. "The Pit and the Pendulum" published in 1843, introduces the outstretched arm of General LaSalle to save the narrator from the abyss. The general's arm is not melodrama but an analogy showing that even a strong mind that can think himself out of the problem of the pendulum cannot under pressure resist the impulse to fall into the abyss, and will fall, if there is no outstretched arm to hold him. In "The Tell-Tale Heart," published in January 1843, the nameless feeling that forces the narrator into an abyss is not the pressure of fiery walls, but a ringing in the ears. Here and in "The Purloined Letter" Poe's analysis of the feeling has moved from the physical to the psychological, from the material to the immaterial. Says Dupin: "The material world abounds with very strict analogies to the immaterial; and thus some color of truth has been given to the rhetorical dogma, that metaphor, or simile, may be made to strengthen an argument as well as to embellish a description." In "The Black Cat," published in August 1843, the abyss into which the narrator falls is sin. He knows that he is committing a sin that will jeopardize his soul "beyond the reach of the infinite mercy of the Most Merciful and Most Terrible God." And to this moral horror, "The Imp of the Perverse" adds the agony of the unaccountable delay. "Unaccountably we remain," says the narrator. After this delay, we are destroyed, if there is no friendly arm to save us. "If there be no friendly arm to check us, or if we fail in sudden effort to prostrate ourselves backward from the abyss, we plunge, and are destroyed."

"The Cask of Amontillado," published in November 1846, would not have been written, I think, if Poe had not worked out the spirit of perverseness in the earlier stories. In this story Poe does what Pascal wanted to do—"Je veux lui faire voir la-dedans un abîme nouveau"²³—to make us see the abyss, the infinity, the chaos inside ourselves into which we both dread and desire to fall. Pascal says that he who looks into the abyss will become afraid of himself: "Qui se considerera de la sorte s'effraiera de soi-même."²⁴ Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado" should frighten us of ourselves.

Notes

¹ Margaret Alterton and Hardin Craig, *Edgar Allan Poe* (New York, 1962), p. cx.

² Dorothy Norris Foote, "Poe's 'The Cask of Amontillado,'" *The Explicator*, XX (November 1961), Item 27.

³ Robert H. Fossum, "Poe's 'The Cask of Amontillado,'" *The Explicator*, XVII (November 1958), Item 16.

⁴ Edgar Allan Poe, *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York, 1938), p. 216. Hereafter referred to as Poe.

⁵ Poe, p. 216.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 274.

⁷ Alterton and Craig, p. cxi.

⁸ Vincent Buranelli, *Edgar Allan Poe* (New York, 1961), p. 76.

⁹ Edgar Allan Poe, *The Portable Poe*, Philip Van Doren Stern, ed. (New York, 1963), p. 288.

¹⁰ Poe, p. 191.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 280.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 281.

¹³ Poe, p. 143.

¹⁴ Poe, p. 142.

¹⁵ Buranelli, p. 32.

¹⁶ Paul Elmer More, *Shelburne Essays on American Literature* (New York, 1963), p. 99.

¹⁷ Poe, p. 225.

¹⁸ Poe, p. 214. In "The Purloined Letter" G. tries to get free advice from Dupin by entering into ordinary conversation and not even mentioning the purloined letter until the narrator asks him about it. Then Dupin says:

"Do you remember the story they tell of Abernethy?" "No, hang Abernethy!"

"To be sure! Hang him and welcome. But, once upon a time, a certain rich miser conceived the design of spunging upon this Abernethy for a medical opinion. Getting up, for this purpose, an ordinary conversation in a private company, he insinuated his case to the physician, as that of an imaginary individual."

"'We will suppose,' said the miser, 'that his symptoms are such and such; now, doctor, what would *you* have directed him to take?'"

"'Take!' said Abernethy, 'why, take *advice*, to be sure.'"

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

²¹ Poe, p. 282.

²² Edgar Allan Poe, *The Selected Poetry and Prose of Edgar Allan Poe*, T. O. Mabbott, ed. (New York, 1951), p. 424.

²³ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (Paris, 1960), p. 141.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

Criticism: James W. Gargano (essay date 1967)

SOURCE: "'The Cask of Amontillado': A Masquerade of Motive and Identity," in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. IV, No. 2, Winter, 1967, pp. 119-26.

[In the following essay, Gargano considers the symbolic value of Montresor and Fortunato, arguing "'The Cask of Amontillado' is a work of art (which means it embodies a serious comment on the human condition) and not just an ingenious Gothic exercise. "]

"The Cask of Amontillado," one of Edgar Allan Poe's richest aesthetic achievements, certainly deserves more searching analysis than it has received. To be sure, critics and anthologists have almost unanimously expressed admiration for the tale;¹ still, they have rarely attempted to find in it a consistently developed and important theme. Indeed, most criticism of the story has the definitive ring that one associates with comments on closed issues. Arthur Hobson Quinn, for example, pronounces Poe's little masterpiece "a powerful tale of revenge in which the interest lies in the implacable nature of the narrator."² More recently, Edward Wagenknecht asserts that the tale derives its value from Poe's "absolute concentration upon the psychological effect."³

A few adventurous critics, however, have tried to define the theme of "The Cask of Amontillado" in terms of a split or division within the psyche of the narrator-protagonist or within the author himself. Edward H. Davidson has ably related the story to Poe's broad concern with "the multiple character of the self." Davidson concludes that the narrator, Montresor, is capable of becoming two distinct beings with little affinity to each other: "'The Cask of Amontillado' . . . is the tale of another nameless 'I' [*sic*] who has the power of moving downward from his mind or intellectual being and into his brutish or physical self and then of returning to his intellectual being with his total selfhood unimpaired."⁴ On the other hand, William Bittner, unconcerned with the division within Montresor, speculates that the "two characters are two sides of the same man—Edgar Poe."⁵ Unfortunately, Davidson weakens his judgment by ignoring the role of Fortunato, and Bittner's opinion, if valid, would tell us more about Poe than about Poe's story. Unfortunately, too, Richard Wilbur makes no mention of the tale in "The House of Poe," a brilliant and perhaps seminal essay in which he characterizes the "typical Poe story" as made up of "allegorical figures, representing the warring principles of the poet's divided nature."⁶

In their emphasis upon the psychological "effect" produced by "The Cask of Amontillado," Wagenknecht and others imply that Poe's story has a great deal of art and little or no meaning. In fact, Wagenknecht goes so far as to categorize it with those tales from which Poe deliberately "excludes the ethical element."⁷ Once drained of "thought" or serious implication, "The Cask of Amontillado" becomes little more than a remarkably well-executed incident, a literary *tour de force* whose sustained excitement or horror justifies its existence. It degenerates into an aesthetic trick, a mere matter of clever manipulation, and cannot be considered among Poe's major triumphs. Perhaps it is this sense of the work's empty virtuosity which leads W. H. Auden rather loftily to belittle it.⁸

I believe that "The Cask of Amontillado" has discouraged analysis because, uniquely for Poe, it makes its point in a muted and even subtle manner that seems deceptively like realistic objectivity. Proceeding in a style that Buranelli calls "unencumbered directness," the narrator 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 or attempt, as does the nameless narrator of "Ligeia," an excruciating analysis of his delusions and terrors. 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. In short, "The Cask of Amontillado" is one

of Poe's most cryptic and apparently noncommittal works.

Yet, though the tale restricts the amount of meaning directly divulged, almost all of its details fuse into a logical thematic pattern. Action and dialogue that at first appear accidental or merely horrific appear, upon close examination, to have far-reaching connotative value. The usual critical presumption that Montresor and Fortunato provide the narrative with a convenient Gothic "villain" and "victim" must give way to the view that they are well-conceived symbolic characters about whom Poe quietly gives a surprising amount of information. In addition, the setting and pervasive irony of the tale do not merely enhance the grotesque effect Poe obviously intends; more importantly, they contribute their share to the theme of the story. In short, "The Cask of Amontillado" is a work of art (which means it embodies a serious comment on the human condition) and not just an ingenious Gothic exercise.

I should like to suggest that Poe's tale presents an ironic vision of two men who, as surrogates of mankind, enter upon a "cooperative" venture that really exposes their psychological isolation. This theme of mock union disguising actual self-seeking intimates that the placid surface of life is constantly threatened and belied by man's subterranean and repressed motives. It also implies that, no matter how beguiling the surface may seem, human division is more "real" than union. Of course, Poe clearly shows the human affinities that make even a pretense of union possible and convincing, but he also reveals his characters' refusal to recognize or acknowledge the binding quality of those affinities. Moreover, as my consideration of the story will seek to prove, Poe suggests that man's inability to act upon these affinities leads to the self-violation that ultimately destroys him.

All the major facets of "The Cask of Amontillado"—action, the calculated contrast between Montresor and Fortunato, and the setting—emphasize the characters' relatedness and differences. In the first of the main incidents, the two men come together only to maintain their psychological separateness; in the second, they undertake an ostensibly common journey, but pursue divergent goals; and in the denouement, when the murderer should emancipate himself from his victim, he becomes psychically attached to him. Moreover, Poe's almost obtrusive point-by-point comparison of the two characters demonstrates that they possess unusual similarities concealed by incompatibilities. Even the masquerade setting subtly establishes the fact that the two men reverse, during the carnival season, the roles they play in "real" life: Fortunato, normally an affluent and commanding man, dwindles into a pitiful dupe, and Montresor, who considers himself a persecuted, social nonentity, takes control of his enemy's destiny and is controlled by it.

The masquerade setting is essential to the meaning of "The Cask of Amontillado." Through it, Poe consciously presents a bizarre situation in which the data of the surface of ordinary life are reversed. Fortunato, we learn, impresses the narrator as a "man to be respected and even feared," a man capable of highhandedly inflicting a "thousand injuries" and "insults." His social importance is more than once insisted upon: "You are rich, respected, admired, beloved." In addition, as a member of a Masonic lodge, he obviously patronizes Montresor: "You are not of the Masons . . . You? Impossible! A mason?" With a touch of self-important loftiness, he admits that he has forgotten, perhaps as something trivial, his companion's coat of arms. Yet, Fortunato's supremacy dissolves in the carnival atmosphere: though he is a man of wealth and status, he is, for all the abilities implied by his success, an extremely vulnerable human being whose nature is revealed by his costume, that of a fool or jester: "The man wore motley. He had on a tight-fitting parti-striped dress, and his head was surmounted by the conical cap and bells." Absurdly off guard, he has obviously surrendered to the camaraderie of the occasion; he has drunkenly and self-indulgently relaxed his customary vigilance for the trusting mood of the season.

Montresor, on the other hand, is bitterly obsessed with his fall into social insignificance. He announces to Fortunato, with a submissiveness that masks his monomaniacal hatred, "You are happy, as once I was. You are a man to be missed. For me it is no matter." At another point, when his besotted and insensitive companion expresses surprise at the extensiveness of his vaults, he answers with pride: "The Montresors . . .

were a great and numerous family." We must remember, too, that his plan to kill Fortunato, deriving from family feeling and a sense of injured merit, is in accordance with his coat of arms and motto. He regards himself as the vindicator of his ancestors, "The human foot d'or" about to crush the "serpent rampant whose fangs are imbedded in the heel." In other words, Fortunato's prosperity has somehow become associated in his mind with his own diminution. His decision to destroy his enemy, pointedly explained in his motto, "Nemo me impune lacessit," ("No one insults me with impunity") indicates that he suffers from a deep dynastic wound. Montresor, then, feels that Fortunato has, by ignoring his ancestral claims, stolen his birthright and ground him into disgrace.

Yet, during the carnival, he is transformed into a purposive man to be feared. Intellectual and implacable, he designs his evil as if it were a fine art. He facetiously baits his powerful adversary with a false inducement; he lures him deeper and deeper into the sinister vaults with cajolery and simulated interest in his health. The preposterous ease with which he manages Fortunato demonstrates how completely he has become the master of the man who has mastered and humiliated him. In the subterranean trip toward the fictitious *amontillado*, Montresor momentarily regains his birthright and reestablished his family's importance by giving dramatic substance to the meaning of his coat of arms and motto. Of course, we must ask later whether his triumph is delusive and fleeting or whether, as Davidson declares, he returns to the real world with his "total selfhood unimpaired."

The carnival world, then, inverts and grotesquely parodies the actual world. From the beginning of the tale, when Montresor explains the evil motive behind his geniality toward Fortunato, Poe presents a picture of life in which man is bifurcated and paradoxical, dual rather than unified. We see that casual contacts, like Fortunato's meeting with Montresor, may be deeply calculated stratagems; people who greet each other as friends may be enemies; words of kindness and invitation may be pregnant with deceit; helpless gullibility may be allied with talent and firmness; and love may cloak hatred. Everywhere, opposites exist in strange conjunction. One recalls William Wilson's bewilderment as he contemplates the fact that his benign Sunday minister can "double" as a cruel teacher on weekdays: "Oh, gigantic paradox, too utterly monstrous for solution."

Clearly, the oppositions and disharmonies contained within individual men project themselves into the world and turn it into an ambiguous arena where appearances and words belie themselves. Every aspect of life is potentially deceptive because it has a double face. If universal unity once existed, as Poe speculates in *Eureka*, such harmony no longer prevails in a world where all is only remotely akin but more immediately heterogeneous and in conflict. Significantly, even in the midst of his bitter feud with his namesake, William Wilson entertains 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." Yet, he dismisses this insight as a "delusion" and persists in his enmity toward the second William Wilson. It is not surprising, then, that man's internal discord recreates "reality" in its own image and that single words, like single persons, contain diverse and incompatible meanings. Montresor's wine "vaults," which contain the precious *amontillado*, become Fortunato's burial "vaults." Fortunato boasts of his membership in a Masonic order, but it is the narrator, who as a different kind of mason, walls up and suffocates his enemy. For Fortunato, Montresor's coat of arms and motto are mere emblems, hardly to be given a second thought, whereas for the latter they are spurs to malevolent action. In one of the most brilliant scenes in the story, the entombed victim's shrieks express his agony; the murderer imitates these shrieks, but his clamor is a gleeful parody of pain. In fact, both men once utter almost identical sentences to express the contrary emotions of terror and joy:

"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."

Poe's irony in "The Cask of Amontillado" extends to many details that invest life with an eerie inscrutability.

Fortunato, the fortunate man, is singled out for murder. Montresor, "my treasure," locks within himself a treasure of ancestral loathing which impoverishes his nature. Both characters, it soon becomes evident, are intoxicated, one with wine and the other with an excess of intellectualized hatred. Fortunato, on his way to certain death, ironically drinks a toast to "the buried that repose around us." Before his last colloquy with his companion, Montresor expresses a perverse impulse of his being and calls Fortunato "noble." The irony of the last words of the tale, "*In pace requiescat*," is only too evident. So too is the irony of the method by which the narrator, in ordering his servants to remain at home during his announced "absence," insures that they will be away while he perpetrates his crime safely at home.

Obviously, the ironic pattern of "The Cask of Amontillado" adumbrates a world caught in a ceaseless masquerade of motive and identity. Nevertheless, Poe does not naively cleave the world into two irreconcilable antinomies. Instead, he demonstrates that Montresor's dissimulation is an unnatural and unbearable act. For in spite of himself, the narrator's self-divisive behavior affronts his own need for a unified psyche and conscience. After all, he really longs to be what Fortunato is and what he and his family once were. In short, the major ironies of "The Cask of Amontillado" are that Fortunato represents Montresor's former self and that the latter deludes himself in imagining that he can regain his "fortune" by the violent destruction of his supposed nemesis. Ironically, he turns his energy and genius against himself, against the memory of his lost eminence. Once again, then, Montresor resembles Fortunato in being the dupe of his own crazed obsessions; in the truest sense, he is as much a fool as the wearer of motley. Contrary to Davidson's belief that the narrator recovers his total selfhood after the crime, Montresor is broken on the wheel of a world in which violence is simultaneously an internal and external action. It is in accordance with this principle that the narrator in "The Black Cat" feels that in hanging his pet he is "beyond the reach of the infinite mercy of the Most Merciful and Most Terrible God." Montresor no more achieves his revenge than his victim comes into the possession of the amontillado.

In the final analysis, like so many Poe characters, Montresor fails because he cannot harmonize the disparate parts of his nature and, consequently, cannot achieve self-knowledge. His mind overrules his heart as much as Fortunato's drunken goodfellowship—his trusting heart—has repealed his intellect. Fortunato's ironically meaningful words, "You are not of the brotherhood," imply, on the symbolic level of the tale, that Montresor lives too deeply in his plots and stratagems to have any warm affiliation with mankind; still, though he prides himself that he can commit murder with impunity, he cannot completely eradicate those subconscious feelings which establish—no matter what he wills or intellectually devises—his relatedness to Fortunato. Just as William Wilson's refusal to recognize his "conscience" does not eliminate it or deprive it of retributive power, Montresor's intellectualization of his actions does not divest them of their psychological consequences. He remains so divided against himself that, as he consummates his atrocity, it recoils upon him; the purposefulness with which he initiated his plan almost immediately disintegrates. As his victim screams, he momentarily hesitates, trembles, and unsheathes his rapier. With unwitting self-betrayal, he refers to the buried man as the "noble Fortunato." In addition, he confesses that, at the final jingle of his foe's bells, "my heart grew sick." Even though he obtusely attributes his sickness to an external cause, "the dampness of the catacombs," his rationalization should deceive no alert reader. And lastly, his compulsively detailed rehearsal of his crime after fifty years demonstrates that it still haunts and tortures his consciousness.

The ending of "The Cask of Amontillado" leaves little doubt as to the spiritual blindness of the protagonist. Montresor resembles many Poe characters who, with no self-awareness, project their own internal confusions into the external world. William Wilson, for example, never understands that his conflict with his strange namesake represents an inner turmoil; with almost his last breath, he declares that he is "the slave of circumstances beyond human control." Certainly, the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" fails to discover that

the insistent heartbeat he hears and cannot escape is his own rather than that of the murdered old man. To cite a final example, the main character in "The Black Cat" never suspects that his mutilation of Pluto is an objective equivalent of his own self-impairment. Montresor, I am convinced, should be included in Poe's gallery of morally blind murderers; he does not understand that his hatred of Fortunato stems from his inner quarrel with "fortune" itself. Undoubtedly, Fortunato symbolizes Montresor's lost estate, his agonizing remembrance of lapsed power and his present spiritual impotence. With a specious intellectuality, common to Poe's violent men, Montresor seeks to escape from his own limitations by imagining them as imposed upon him from beyond the personality by outside force. But the force is a surrogate of the self, cozening man toward damnation with all the brilliant intrigue Montresor uses in destroying Fortunato.

Notes

¹ Frances Winwar, *The Haunted Palace* (New York, 1959), p. 320, declares, for example, that with "The Cask of Amontillado," "Poe's skill in the tale had now reached its peak." Vincent Buranelli, *Edgar Allan Poe* (New Haven, 1961), p. 76, describes Poe's tale as a "gem of realism."

²*Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography* (New York, 1941), p. 500.

³*Edgar Allan Poe: The Man Behind the Legend* (New York, 1963), p. 161.

⁴ Edward H. Davidson, *Poe: A Critical Study* (Cambridge, Mass., 1957), p. 201.

⁵*Poe: A Biography* (Boston, 1962), p. 218.

⁶*Anniversary Lectures*, 1959, Library of Congress (Washington, 1959), p. 24.

⁷ Wagenknecht, p. 161.

⁸ W. H. Auden, "Introduction" to *Edgar Allan Poe: Selected Prose and Poetry* (New York, 1956), p. v.

Criticism: John Freehafer (essay date 1968)

SOURCE: "Poe's 'Cask of Amontillado': A Tale of Effect," in *Jahrbuch für Amerikastudien*, edited by Ernst Fraenkel, Hans Galinsky, Dietrich Gerhard, Ursula Brumm, and H. J. Lang, Carl Winter, 1968, pp. 134-42.

[In the following essay, Freehafer provides an overview of scholarship on Poe's tale.]

According to the usual view, Edgar Allan Poe's "Cask of Amontillado" is a masterful tale of an implacable revenge for an unspecified insult, marked by economy of words and singleness of effect. Yet no part of this customary estimate of the story has gone unchallenged. Whereas one writer contends that it is not a tale of revenge at all, but a manifestation of "Poe's theory of perversity,"¹ others see in it an embodiment of the duello or a compulsive confession of a remorseful murderer. Other commentators have argued that Montresor's revenge is inspired by Fortunato's Freemasonry, or Poe's literary quarrels. Furthermore, the story has had its detractors, for Saintsbury and Auden have stated their unexplained personal dislike of it.² Thus, only a new examination of its time, place, characters, theme, tone, and purpose will show whether the traditional understanding and estimate of the story can stand or must be modified.

The time of action of Poe's tale has gone almost undiscussed, yet it can be placed in the eighteenth century. Since the story was published in 1846, and "the half of a century" has passed since the murder it describes, that murder cannot have taken place much after 1796. On the other hand, Fortunato's secret Freemasonry

dates the tale after 1738. Freemasonry was introduced into Italy in 1732-33,³ and concealment of Masonic membership there followed papal bulls of 1738 and 1751 which declared that the act of joining the Masons made in Italian *ipso facto* excommunicate. Montresor dons a *roquelaire*, a mantle that was popular throughout the eighteenth century. It was named for its designer, the Duc de Roquelaure (1656-1738), who wears it in a portrait of 1697.⁴ Also appropriate to the eighteenth century are "the British and Austrian *millionaires*" who buy misrepresented Italian art works—a phenomenon memorialized in Zoffany's painting of 1772-74, *The Tribuna of the Uffizi*, which shows two dozen English dilettanti examining a hodgepodge of art works in Florence, while the artist himself sells to an English peer an Italian painting that he had picked up as a bargain. Thus, the action of "The Cask of Amontillado" may be dated between 1738 and 1796.

Placing the tale in Italy poses no difficulty unless we suppose that the narrator, and his clearly ancient family, are French. Indeed, Professor Mabbott has suggested that the scene might be France.⁵ Montresor, however, describes his residence as a "palazzo," and Fortunato later speaks of his palazzo. In addition, Montresor says that the walls of his family vaults "had been lined with human remains, piled to the vault overhead, in the fashion of the great catacombs of Paris"—which suggests that the scene is not Paris. The names of Fortunato and Luchresi, and a probable source of the story in a letter about Italy,⁶ further suggest that its scene is Italy. Although Rome is not the only Italian city with carnival and catacombs, its large and small catacombs and its famous river point to Rome as the place. By setting his tale in Italy and in a prior century, Poe provides the story teller's customary background for a tale of masquerade, revenge, and adroitly concealed murder.

The nationality of Montresor has also been a matter of dispute, but, no matter how long his family has buried its dead in Rome, Montresor apparently chooses to regard himself as a Frenchman, for he speaks of the Italians as a group to whom he does not choose to belong:

Few Italians have the virtuoso spirit. For the most part their enthusiasm is adopted to suit the time and opportunity, to practice imposture upon the British and Austrian *millionaires*. In painting and gemmary, Fortunato, like his countrymen, was a quack.

The extensive "catacombs of the Montresors" suggest, however, that the family has long been established in Italy, and that Montresor has chosen to identify himself with the remote French ancestors who gave his proud family its name rather than his Italian countrymen.

This tale of revenge may somehow reflect the bitterness of the "War of the Literati" in which Poe was engaged just before "The Cask of Amontillado" appeared. It is a misunderstanding of Poe's art, however, to see in his tale a miniature *roman à clef*, in which Montresor is Poe, Fortunato is a rival author, Luchresi is a publisher of libels upon Poe, and the story is based upon a law suit and is intended to answer a topical novel.⁷ The fact that Poe's tale immediately followed the *Literati* series in *Godey's Lady's Book* does not prove that it is part of that series. Since Poe broke off the series suddenly,⁸ he may have given Godey the tale instead of another chapter of *The Literati*. Furthermore, Poe was in poverty at the time, partly because of his wife's desperate illness; and he may have taken some satisfaction from publishing a tale of grisly horror in the pages of a fashionable ladies' magazine.

Miss Rea has argued that "The Cask of Amontillado" exemplifies "Poe's theory of perversity," in which "we want to hurt or to kill or to bury alive someone because he has been good to us." She contends that it is not a tale of revenge, but she cites no evidence from the tale itself to support her conclusion that "Montresor kills Fortunato because Fortunato has been good to Montresor, and Montresor knows this."⁹ Poe's works do not indicate that he believed in a "theory of perversity." It is not Poe, but the narrators of "The Black Cat" and "The Imp of the Perverse," who fabricate, and expound at length, a theory of perverseness, as a specious excuse for their crimes. Indeed, in "The Imp of the Perverse," the narrator's disquisition upon "*perverseness*" is so fulsome that the work is more essay than tale. It is significant, therefore, that no such disquisition appears in "The Cask of Amontillado." Instead, Montresor presents his crime as virtually a self-justified

action, required by a Mediterranean code of revenge. Whereas the narrators in "The Black Cat" and "The Imp of the Perverse" are constitutionally unable to control either their actions or their tongues, Montresor plans and carries out a precisely calculated revenge which he finally reveals, after "the half of a century," only to one who "well know[s] the nature of [his] soul."

Poe cautioned the writer of a tale that "if his very initial sentence tend not to the outbrining of [his] 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." (XI, 108) It is not surprising, therefore, that the first paragraph of "The Cask of Amontillado" serves as a thesis for the tale and states the code according to which Montresor acts:

The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could, but when he ventured upon insult I vowed revenge. You, who so well know the nature of my soul, will not suppose, however, that I gave utterance to a threat. *At length* I would be avenged; this was a point definitely settled—but the very definitiveness with which it was resolved precluded the idea of risk. 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.

A recent commentator has suggested that Montresor observes the duello, a code of honor long regarded as appropriate for Christian gentlemen and knights.¹⁰ The duello held, however, that an insult required to be publicly resented—usually by the *mentita*, or giving the lie—and publicly redressed, by means of law, arbitration, or a duel.¹¹ Since Montresor says, "It must be understood that neither by word nor deed had I given Fortunato cause to doubt my good will," he has not observed the duello, which, furthermore, forbade assassination¹² and combat with a drunken opponent.¹³ Like a typical Poe hero, Montresor flouts the social code of the duello and follows instead a primitive code of revenge which gives perverse expression to his individualism and egoism. Poe's contemporary Burckhardt might almost have based his account of the code of revenge of the Italian Renaissance upon Poe's tale. After remarking that popular approval of blood vengeance permitted each man to take the law into his own hands, Burckhardt says that the revenger was judged to be successful to the extent that he was artful, deceitful, passionless, patient, and opportunistic:

Nur muß Geist in der Rache sein und die Satisfaktion sich mischen aus tatsächlicher Schädigung und geistiger Demütigung des Beleidigers; brutale plumpe Übermacht allein gilt in der öffentlichen Meinung für keine Genugtuung. Das ganze Individuum, mit seiner Anlage zu Ruhm und Hohn muß triumphieren, nicht bloß die Faust.

Der damalige Italiener ist vieler Verstellung fähig, um bestimmte Zwecke zu erreichen . . . Mit völliger Naivität wird deshalb auch diese Rache als ein Bedürfnis zugestanden. Ganz kühle Leute preisen sie vorzüglich dann, wenn sie, getrennt von eigentlicher Leidenschaft, um der bloßen Zweckmäßigkeit willen auftritt. . . .

Hierin liegt denn auch der Grund des oft langen Aufschiebens. Zu einer "*bella vendetta*" gehört in der Regel ein Zusammentreffen von Umständen, welches durchaus abgewartet werden muß. Mit einer wahren Wonne schildern die Novellisten hie und da das allmähliche Heranreifen solcher Gelegenheiten.¹⁴

Much of the fascination and horror of Montresor's crime derives from the fact that it exactly fulfills this picture of the perfect revenge. As Montresor manipulates Fortunato and acts out the threat of his family's proud motto, *Nemo me impune lacessit*, the tale recalls Poe's dictum that

every plot, worth the name, must be elaborated to its *dénouement* before anything be attempted with the pen. It is only with the *dénouement* constantly in view that we can give a plot its indispensable air of consequence, or causation, by making the incidents, and especially the tone at all points, tend to the development of the intention. (XIV, 193)

In "The Cask of Amontillado," that tone is one of pervasive irony. The basic situation of masquerade, deceit, and treachery makes for sustained irony, and in addition the tale contains many specific touches of irony. The name of Fortunato is realized in both of its ambiguous significances, as Fortunato, "the lucky one," gives way to Fortunato, "the fated one." Fortunato, the man of pride and insolence, is dressed as a fool. The smile of Montresor is seemingly cordial, but truly malicious. Montresor speaks of Fortunato as his friend, calls him "noble," and speaks of his glowing health and "good nature." Murder occurs at the gayest time of the year. The wine vaults of Montresor become the burial vault of Fortunato. Fortunato is buried with the family he has insulted. It is Fortunato, not Montresor, who is made to insist upon descending to the vaults and going down to the place of his death. Montresor repeatedly expresses concern for Fortunato's health, and warns of the dampness and the nitre. Montresor emphatically agrees when Fortunato naively remarks, "I shall not die of a cough." Fortunato innocently drinks to "the buried that repose around us," whom he is about to join, while Montresor mockingly drinks to Fortunato's "long life." Montresor, the supposed connoisseur of Italian wines, is called upon to judge two Spanish wines and fails to distinguish between two common French wines. Fortunato greets with indulgent delight the ominous coat of arms and motto that foreshadow his own death. Fortunato, the excommunicate Mason, asks to be released "*for the love of God.*"

Other ironies are hidden under the form of puns. Whenever Fortunato hesitates, Montresor lures him on by offering to consult Fortunato's rival "Luchresi"—for so the name appears in Poe's original publication of "The Cask of Amontillado." As Dedmond has pointed out, "Luchresi" may be read as "Look Crazy."¹⁵ Those who might suppose that Poe was incapable of such a pun need look no farther than his "Why the Little Frenchman Wears His Hand in a Sling," in which a speaker of Irish brogue refers to a French dancing master as "Look-aisy." Thus the name "Luchresi" suggests that the rival of whom Fortunato is passionately jealous is another quack. When Montresor drinks to Fortunato's long life, he appropriately offers his victim Médoc, a therapeutic wine which "will defend us from the damps;" but when the besotted Fortunato requests "another draught of the Médoc," Montresor instead reaches him "a flaçon of De Grave." As Professor Mabbott remarks, the name of De Grave "is significant, for its common English pronunciation is a grim pun."¹⁶ That Poe intends a pun is shown by the fact that his designation of the wine is a misnomer; its correct name is Graves. Furthermore, a flaçon is not a wine bottle, but a smelling-bottle, used to revive the faint, ill or dying.¹⁷

Even the title of Poe's tale is probably a pun on cask—casket and the suggestion of something heaped up in the word "Amontillado," which combines the idea of a mountain with a participial ending.¹⁸ That the "mountain" is the heap of bones behind which Fortunato is immured, as in a casket, appears when Montresor at last accedes to Fortunato's insistent demands that he be brought to the Amontillado. Montresor reveals a trowel, and Fortunato says,

"But let us proceed to the Amontillado."

"Be it so," I said, replacing the tool beneath the cloak and again offering him my arm. He leaned upon it heavily. We continued our rout¹⁹ in search of the Amontillado. . . .

From the fourth side [of an interior crypt] the bones had been thrown down, and lay promiscuously upon the earth, forming at one point a mound of some size. Within the wall thus exposed by the displacing of the bones, we perceived a still interior crypt or recess, in depth about four feet, in width three, in height six or seven. . . .

"Proceed," I said; "herein is the Amontillado." . . .

"The Amontillado," ejaculated my friend, not yet recovered from his astonishment.

"True," I replied; "the Amontillado."

As I said these words I busied myself among the pile of bones of which I have before spoken.

Thus, the Amontillado is overtly identified with the burial place of Montresor's enemy. Since the "cask" is described as a "pipe," it is an unusually large cask, capable of holding four barrels and surely large enough to be a casket. In "King Pest," Poe had "buried" Hugh Tarpaulin in a huge puncheon of ale in an undertaker's shop. If Montresor's name, like those of Fortunato and Luchresi, has a hidden meaning, then the murderer's "treasure" is probably this very "cask of Amontillado," which has securely held his victim "for the half of a century" since Montresor "re-erected the old rampart of bones." So Montresor achieves his revenge and also keeps his promise to bring Fortunato to the Amontillado. Burckhardt said (III, 298) that artful revenge aimed to have "die Lacher auf ihrer Seite," and Poe's tale features puns as sardonic and audacious as those in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

Professor Felheim has argued that Fortunato's "long-standing insult" to Montresor is his Freemasonry:

Here is insult enough to the proud Montresor, member of "a great and numerous" Italian (presumably Catholic) family, a family whose vaults include catacombs; here, indeed, is not personal injury (which could be "borne") but insult (which required "revenge").²⁰

Felheim's argument falls to earth because the insult must have occurred before Fortunato entered Montresor's vaults. That Montresor's crime was premeditated appears from his choice of the carnival season, with its built-in elements of confusion and concealment; from the ruse by which he gets his servants out of the way; from his cunning appeal to Fortunato's vanity; from his planting of concealed stone and mortar where the crime is to be committed; and, above all, from his statement that "*At length* I would be avenged, this was a point definitely settled." Yet it appears that Montresor first learns that Fortunato is a Mason when Fortunato laughs and throws

the bottle upwards with a gesticulation I did not understand.

I looked at him in surprise. He repeated the movement—a grotesque one.

"You do not comprehend?" he said.

"Not I," I replied.

"Then you are not of the brotherhood."

"How?"

"You are not of the masons."

"Yes, yes," I said; "yes, yes."

"You? Impossible! A mason?"

"A mason," I replied.

"A sign," he said, "a sign."

"It is this," I answered, producing from beneath the folds of my *roquelaire* a trowel.

"You jest," he exclaimed, recoiling a few paces.

Since Montresor had no prior knowledge that Fortunato was a Mason, he could not have used Masonry as an excuse for his premeditated crime. Poe wisely left Fortunato's "insult" unspecified, thus avoiding the arguments that would otherwise have ensued as to its adequacy and propriety, and giving his tale a touch of grimness that is missing even from "Hop-Frog." The omission of the specific insult was consistent with Poe's avoidance of the moralistic and the didactic.

The Masonic episode is another of Poe's ironies. In the language of Masonry itself, Fortunato is a "speculative" Mason, but Montresor is an "operative"—one who purposefully builds with trowel, stone, and mortar. Furthermore, the colloquy upon Masonry enables Montresor to display the murder weapon to the victim he has duped. Although Poe had little interest in politics and was not a Mason, he must have known of the Anti-Masonic movement that swept the United States in 1826. Indeed, Poe was acquainted both personally and professionally with William Wirt, who was the presidential candidate of the Anti-Masonic party in 1832.²¹

Montresor glorifies his revenge by picturing his victim as a man of nobility and high station, who has one "weak point," but "in other regards" is "a man to be respected and even feared." According to Montresor, the "noble" Fortunato is not only sincere "in the matter of old wines," but is "rich, respected, admired, beloved, . . . happy, . . . a man to be missed." Fortunato is presented as a proud and insolent man, who never utters a word of friendship or respect for Montresor. It appears at once that Montresor has borne a "thousand injuries" from Fortunato, followed by an "insult." Condescension appears as soon as Montresor meets Fortunato, who, he says, "accosted me with excessive warmth." Fortunato arrogantly pronounces the suggestion that Montresor has bought a pipe of Amontillado "impossible," and Fortunato looks forward eagerly to proving that Montresor has "been imposed upon" and has paid "the full Amontillado price" for common sherry. Fortunato accepts praise for his supposed skill in judging wine and his nonexistent "good nature" as no more than his due. He nods "familiarly" to Montresor, and expresses ill-mannered surprise that "these vaults are extensive." When reminded that "the Montresors were a great and numerous family," Fortunato haughtily professes to have forgotten their arms and motto. As a further insult Fortunato flaunts his Masonry and brands Montresor as an outsider, saying, "you are not of the brotherhood." When Montresor claims to be a Mason, and supports his claim by means of a potent "sign," Fortunato nonetheless flatly declares it to be "impossible!" Thus, in the brief time between dusk and midnight, Fortunato rashly adds a series of new injuries and insults to the thousand and one, presumably of the same character, that he had previously inflicted upon Montresor.

The murder of Fortunato is symbolized in the Montresor coat of arms, which shows "a huge human foot d'or, in a field azure; the foot crushes a serpent rampant whose fangs are imbedded in the heel." The serpent is both Fortunato and the serpent who deprived mankind of the primal happiness of Paradise and was thenceforth placed under the curse that mankind "shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel" (*Genesis* 3, 15). Thus, Montresor equates his murder of Fortunato with the crushing of mankind's ancient enemy. The same identification of the insulting Fortunato with Montresor's loss of happiness appears when Montresor says to Fortunato, "you are happy, as once I was. You are a man to be missed. For me, it is no matter."

Like most of Poe's murderers, Montresor does not understand his antagonist, who has many weaknesses. Fortunato insults Montresor and Luchresi, risks his health and life, drinks to excess, flaunts his membership in the forbidden order of Masons, and boasts of his doubtful skill in judging wines. He is "noble" only in the technical sense that he has a palazzo and his wife is "Lady Fortunato." Montresor, who shares the single-minded obtuseness of many of Poe's protagonists, deludes himself into thinking that he can regain his happiness by manipulating and destroying a noble and powerful adversary; but it does not appear that Fortunato's family, station, wealth, taste, or character is better than Montresor's. Indeed, these masked and

intoxicated men seem to be quite similar to one another. Montresor ranks among the ratiocinators in Poe's tales, those who think rather than feel. Because his crime is clever and fulfills the demands of the code of revenge, he can relate it, with pride and gusto, after "half of a century." Of the three faculties that Poe recognized, Montresor is endowed with "pure intellect" and a degree of "taste," but apparently none of the "moral sense" (IV, 203). Although Poe professed to be neither a moralist nor a didactic writer, he dedicated his ambitious prose poem *Eureka* to "those who feel rather than to those who think." (XVI, 183)

Although moralistic interpretations of Poe's works are out of fashion, they survive in efforts to prove that Montresor feels a half century of remorse for his crime. The first supposed proof of such remorse is found in a reading of Griswold's text of 1850, where Montresor, just before placing the last stone that imprisons Fortunato, says, "My heart grew sick—on account of the dampness of the catacombs." The dash has been interpreted as indicating that Montresor suppresses an expression of remorse. Poe's original text does not support such a view, however, for it says merely, "My heart grew sick; it was the dampness of the catacombs that made it so." The second supposed evidence that Montresor feels remorse is his story itself, which has been described as a "compulsively detailed rehearsal of his crime after fifty years" that "demonstrates that it still haunts and tortures his consciousness."²² Poe could scarcely have abridged the details of the story without falling into the "undue brevity" that he condemned. (XI, 108) and a tale that is told after the passage of "half of a century," and to a confidant, provides no evidence of compulsiveness.

Just seven months before he published "The Cask of Amontillado," Poe had spoken of "constructing a story" of "originality," marked by "a novel, first, and secondly a vivid effect." (XIV, 194) Whether or not he was actually describing "The Cask of Amontillado" in this passage, it was the next tale he published thereafter, and it embodies the principles he had so recently enunciated. It is not surprising, therefore, that, far from being a conventional tale of remorse for a crime that can not be undone, this story features many vivid signs of remorselessness, both before and after the murder. After he has lured his victim to the place of his death and deftly chained him to the wall, Montresor mockingly says, "let me *implore* you to return," then offers to render Fortunato "all the little attentions in my power." When the victim vibrates his chain, Montresor says, "that I might hearken to it with the more satisfaction, I ceased my labours and sat down upon the bones." When the prisoner screams, Montresor probes with his rapier, then echoes Fortunato's screams: "I reechoed, I aided, I surpassed them in volume and in strength." When Fortunato, desperately pretending to believe that he is the victim of a practical joke, asks to be released, Montresor mockingly repeats his words. Not even "for the love of God" will Montresor release his victim. A half century after he has vanquished his foe, he tells the whole story with gusto and ends it with the mocking wish, "*In pace requiescat!*"

Poe's intention in writing "The Cask of Amontillado," which can be traced throughout the story, was to produce one of those tales of effect that he had praised so highly when he said that the tale, rather than the poem, should treat

with terror, or passion, or horror. . . . And here it will be seen how full of prejudice are the usual animadversions against those *tales of effect*, many fine examples of which were found in the earlier numbers of Blackwood. The impressions produced were wrought in a legitimate sphere of action, and constituted a legitimate although sometimes an exaggerated interest. They were relished by every man of genius. (XI, 109)

The *dicta* which Poe laid down with respect to the writing of the tale of effect find their highest embodiment in "The Cask of Amontillado." Just seven months before publishing it, he had speculated whether the effect of a tale could "be best wrought by incident or tone—whether by ordinary incidents and peculiar tone, or the converse, or by peculiarity both of incident and tone" (XIV, 194)—the last combination evidently being his choice in this tale. Certainly it illustrates his famous saying that the writer of a tale, "if wise,"

has not fashioned his thought 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. (XI, 108)

The novel and vivid effect that Poe aimed to create in this tale was the ultimate horror story of a perfect crime of revenge, in which the revenger enjoys the mastery and impunity of the goddess Nemesis and demands admiration for the artistry and sangfroid with which he has sacrificed his victim. The exceptional objectivity of "The Cask of Amontillado," its remarkable economy of words, its irony and sardonic humor, and its theme of implacable revenge all point to the conclusion that Poe's purpose, which he achieved, was to produce a "tale of effect" that would outdo those that he had admired in the pages of *Blackwood's Magazine*.

Notes

¹ J. Rea, "Poe's 'The Cask of Amontillado,'" *Studies in Short Fiction*, IV (1966), 59.

² George Saintsbury, "Edgar Allan Poe," *Dial*, LXXXIII (1927), 457; W. H. Auden, "Introduction" to *Edgar Allan Poe: Selected Prose and Poetry*, New York, 1950, p. v.

³ Humphrey Johnson, "Freemasonry in Italy," *Dublin Review*, CDXLV (1949), 94.

⁴ Millia Davenport, *The Book of Costume*, New York, 1948, vol. II, pp. 556-57.

⁵ Thomas O. Mabbott, "Are There Flaws in 'The Cask of Amontillado,'" *Notes & Queries*, CXCIX (1954), 180.

⁶ Joseph S. Schick, "The Origins of 'The Cask of Amontillado,'" *American Literature*, VI (1934), 19.

⁷ Francis B. Dedmond, "'The Cask of Amontillado' and the War of the Literati," *Modern Language Quarterly*, XV (1954), 144-45.

⁸ Edgar Allan Poe, *Complete Works*, ed. James A. Harrison, New York, 1902, vol. XVII, p. 271. Works of Poe are cited, by volume and page number, from this edition, except for "The Cask of Amontillado," which is quoted from the original text in *Godey's Lady's Book*, XXXIII (1846), 216-18. That text seems not to have been reproduced or properly collated by any modern editor.

⁹ Rea, *Studies in Short Fiction*, IV, 59.

¹⁰ John H. Randall III, "Poe's 'The Cask of Amontillado' and the Code of the Duello," *Studia Germanica Gandensia*, V (1963), 175-84.

¹¹ See Frederick R. Bryson, *The Point of Honor in Sixteenth-Century Italy*, New York, 1935.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 69.

¹³ John Seiden, "The Duello," in *Works*, London, 1726, vol. III, p. 71.

¹⁴ Jacob Burckhardt, "Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien," in *Gesammelte Werke*, Basel, 1955, vol. III, pp. 297-98.

¹⁵ Dedmond, *Modern Language Quarterly*, XV, 145.

¹⁶ Thomas O. Mabbott, "Poe's 'The Cask of Amontillado,'" *Explicator*, XXV (1966), item 30.

¹⁷ The common reading "flagon" is not in the original text.

¹⁸ Charles W. Steele, "Poe's 'The Cask of Amontillado,'" *Explicator*, XVIII (1960), item 43, notes two Italian participles of similar sound and meaning.

¹⁹ Most edited texts read "route," but "rout" may be correct, as it can signify "a riotous procession," "an evening party," or both.

²⁰ Marvin Felheim, "'The Cask of Amontillado,'" *Notes & Queries*, N. S., I (1954), 447-48.

²¹ Richard B. Davis, "Poe and William Wirt," *American Literature*, XVI (1944) 212-20.

²² James W. Gargano, "'The Cask of Amontillado': A Masquerade of Motive and Identity," *Studies in Short Fiction*, IV (1967), 119-26.

Criticism: Kathryn Montgomery Harris (essay date 1969)

SOURCE: "Irony in Poe's 'The Cask of Amontillado,'" in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. VI, No. 3, Spring, 1969, pp. 333-35.

[In the following essay, Harris indicates how Masonic imagery coheres the tale's ironic effects.]

"The Cask of Amontillado" has been less often read for itself than used to support theories about Poe's life, his psyche, or his narrative technique. It well illustrates his obsession with live burial and his use of sadism as a Gothic device,¹ and it meets exactly the criteria of unity and economy set out in his review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*. But such readings separate theme and form, emphasizing one at the other's expense, and neglect the irony of Montresor's trowel, that symbol of brotherhood and instrument of death. This irony gives coherence to the images of the tale and to many of Montresor's apparently gratuitous, sadistic sarcasms—and suggest a motive for murder as well.²

From the beginning Montresor has a motive—or thinks he does: "The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as best I could, but when he ventured upon insult I vowed revenge" (p. 167).³ The chill grows as we progressively discover that Montresor, a connoisseur of the ironic, has a premeditated plan. Relying on Fortunato's envy and pride and his weakness for wine, he has arranged for his servants to desert for the holidays; he carries an ominous trowel beneath his cloak; the cave has been recently swept of old bones. Suddenly the plan is clear: entombment. And just as his revelation of the trowel at mid-point in their journey underground confirms the existence of a plan, its irony suggests his motive. When Montresor is surprised by a gesture of Fortunato's, Fortunato underscores his lack of comprehension; Fortunato is a freemason and Montresor is not:

"Then you are not of the brotherhood."

"How?"

"You are not of the masons."

"Yes, yes," I said. "Yes, yes."

"You? Impossible! A mason?"

"A mason," I replied.

"A sign," he said, "a sign."

"It is this," I answered producing from beneath the folds of my *requeuaire* a trowel.

"You jest," he exclaimed, recoiling a few paces (pp. 171-172).

Fortunato's incredulity suggests that Montresor is a Catholic.

Earlier in the tale Montresor has gathered to himself several details that have religious, particularly Catholic, associations. The coat of arms of the house of Montresor with its vengeful motto, "*Nemo me impune lacessit*," is more than a simple revenge motif. The circuitous device—"A huge human foot d'or, in a field of azure; the foot crushes a serpent rampant whose fangs are embedded in the heel" (p. 171)—is taken from the curse upon the serpent in Genesis 3:14. This is not an image of impartial revenge, but the traditional representation of the Church militant triumphing over the forces of evil in retribution for Adam's fall.⁴

"The Cask" is set at carnival time, a Catholic season, just before Lent, and the tale itself begins as a confession. The underground passages below the palazzo are literally "the catacombs of the Montresors" (p. 169), but the phrase also recalls the history of the early Church. The wine they seek, though its eucharistic significance is not elaborated, appropriately suggests through its non-existence the ironic perversion of Montresor's religious devotion.

Montresor's pun on "mason" is dramatized when he walls Fortunato behind eleven courses of carefully laid stone. He consistently describes his handiwork as "masonry" or "mason-work," and in the final paragraph, among the double-edged words *against* and *reerected* and the relics that may represent the Church, the word is surely symbolic: "Against the new masonry I re-erected the old rampart of bones" (p. 175). The story ends on a resoundingly Catholic note: "*In pace requiescat*," the final words of the requiem mass.

Although the occasion for murder is as mysterious as ever, it is clear that the hostility between the two characters is worked out in terms of the Catholic-masonic opposition. This is not to say that Poe saw his tale as a morality play, a cataclysmic battle between Good and Evil, nor is it probable that Montresor is much more of a Catholic than Poe needed for the plot. Catholicism, like other aspects of medieval life, was for Poe a Gothic device used to intensify effect. Among Roderick Usher's favorite books are "a small octavo edition of the *Directorium Inquisitorum*" and "his chief delight," a "rare and curious book in quarto Gothic . . . the *Vigiliae Mortuorum Secundum Chorum Ecclesiae Maguntinae*"⁵ The Inquisition is the source of horror in "The Pit and the Pendulum," and the Church and immurement are linked in "The Black Cat," whose protagonist conceals his wife's body in a wall "in the cellar—as the monks of the middle ages are recorded to have walled up their victims."⁶

Montresor's Catholicism—even if it is only nominal and melodramatic—is essential to the unity of the story. At the beginning Montresor gives us his two criteria for revenge: "A wrong," he says, "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" (p. 167). The first requirement is fulfilled. No retribution seems to have overtaken Montresor. He does not speak from prison; his tone is never remorseful;⁷ and in spite of the use in the story of religious trappings, there is no hint of divine retribution. But the second criterion is a loose end, a violation of narrative economy if Fortunato dies without understanding why.⁸ Knowing Montresor is a Catholic, we, like Fortunato, can hear the irony of what have been seen as a villain's final sadistic sarcasms and understand the terms on which the revenge has been undertaken. By the time the first course is laid, the

"intoxication of Fortunato had in a great measure worn off (p. 174). He is sober enough to see Montresor's intent, to scream, to protest that he has seen the jest. He is sober enough to beg: "*For the love of God, Montresor!*" and to hear more than mere mockery in the reply. "Yes," I said, "for the love of God!" (p. 175). It is a declaration of motive, a triumphal boast, and the understanding silences Fortunato. The last stone is wedged into place.

The final line—"In pace requiescat!"—is not an expression of "sanctimonious contentment," a plea to be freed of guilt, or a sarcasm uttered as Montresor sees that Fortunato died without recognizing that his murder was an act of vengeance.⁹ It is an appropriate ironic comment on the death of a mason, a santification of Montresor's private auto-da-fé.

Whether our failure to see the mason-Catholic conflict in the story has been the result of a modern preoccupation with mental aberration and "motiveless evil" or of Poe's failure to work out the conflict clearly, permitting his irony to give itself away more readily, "The Cask of Amontillado" is a more coherent tale than has been thought. Its details of horror are not merely decorative sadism but part of an ironic vengeance; and Montresor, whether his plan is evidence of sanity or madness, has what in Poe's world at least constitutes a motive for murder.

Notes

¹ Joseph Wood Krutch found the "simple sadism" of the story another of Poe's flights from reality to "neurotic delights" (*Edgar Allan Poe: A Study in Genius*, New York, 1926, p. 78). David M. Rein sees the story as a revenge fantasy with Fortunato standing for Mr. Allan (*Edgar A. Poe: The Inner Pattern*, New York, 1960, p. 42). Francis B. Dedmond takes the tale as psycho-drama: the avenger is Poe, the victim Thomas Dunn English, the cask Poe's libel suit against English ("The Cask of Amontillado' and the War of the Literati," *Modern Language Quarterly*, XV [1954], 137-146). Only recently has James W. Gargano defended the story as a work of art and "not just an ingenious Gothic exercise" ("The Cask of Amontillado': A Masquerade of Motive and Identity," *Studies in Short Fiction*, IV [1967], 119-126). For a fuller review of recent scholarship, see Gargano.

² Montresor's apparent lack of motive has been exaggerated. Edward H. Davidson believes that in Montresor's narrative "the 'I' does not function as a mind; we never know what has made him hate Fortunato nor are we aware that he has even laid out any plan to effect his revenge" (*Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Study*, Cambridge, Mass., 1957, pp. 201-202). J. Rea maintains that Montresor's vengeance is merely an excuse used to conceal his motiveless perversity ("Poe's 'The Cask of Amontillado,'" *Studies in Short Fiction*, IV [1967], 55-69).

³ Page numbers in parentheses refer to *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, The Virginia Edition, James A. Harrison, ed. (New York, 1902), vol. v.

⁴ See *Paradise Lost*, X, 179-190.

⁵ *The Complete Works*, Harrison, ed., II, 287.

⁶ *Ibid.* IV, 152.

⁷ Robert H. Fossum, however, sees a desire for peace of conscience, expressed in the final line, as Montresor's reason for telling the story after fifty years ("Poe's 'The Cask of Amontillado,'" *The Explicator*, XVII [1958], Item 16).

⁸ Believing that Fortunato dies unenlightened, Dorothy Norris Foote finds the irony of the story is at Montresor's expense (Poe's "'The Cask of Amontillado,'" *The Explicator*, XX [1961], Item 16).

⁹ The views, respectively, of Rein (p. 42), Fossum, and Foote.

Criticism: Francis J. Henninger (essay date 1970)

SOURCE: "The Bouquet of Poe's Amontillado," in *South Atlantic Bulletin*, Vol. XXXV, No. 2, March, 1970, pp. 35-40.

[In the following essay, Henninger explains how the ending of Poe's story always elicits shock, despite the conclusion's obvious predictability.]

"Nothing is more clear than that every plot, worth the name, must be elaborated to its *dénouement* before anything can be attempted with the pen. It is only with the *dénouement* constantly in view that we can give a plot its indispensable air of consequence, or causation, by making the incidents, and especially the tone at all points, tend to the development of the intention."

With these words of the second paragraph of his "Philosophy of Composition," Edgar Allan Poe illuminates an important part of his literary method; they help to explain the powerful effect of many of his stories. This effect, of course, was Poe's aim; as he says only a little further on in the same essay: "I prefer commencing with the consideration of an effect." But we must not be misled by this emphasis on the importance of knowing a story's end before starting its composition, by this emphasis on the subordination of the other elements of a story to its ending. How mistaken would be the conclusion that a Poe ending must be relatively easy to surmise once one is into a Poe story. We know, on the contrary, that most of his stories have startling if not, in the usual sense of the term, surprise endings. They are built toward with perfect logic, yet the endings of Poe's major stories are never predictable.

Many will immediately object that "The Cask of Amontillado" is a major Poe story and that its ending, revealed in almost its entirety from the start, is neither startling nor unpredictable. I would go even further and say that this is perhaps Poe's greatest story, and that its superiority stems from its ending because that ending, which seems to be neither, is, in fact, both startling and unpredictable. This essay is an attempt to prove that statement.

A brief look at some of Poe's other major short stories will be helpful. "Ligeia" was first published in 1838. The narrator "met her first and most frequently in some large old decaying city near the Rhine," and remembers that meeting now only through the haze of "long years" of suffering. She was and is still mysterious, her paternal name unknown. Soon, as we might expect, the narration darkens beyond mystery into tragedy as Ligeia fights with ghastly determination against a wasting illness that finally takes her from her bereaved husband. At this point the reader is left without a hint of the conclusion. He may only suspect a peculiar twist because the story indeed seems to be over with the death of this beautiful "wife of my bosom." Only much later, and perhaps largely because one suspects such things from Poe, does the reader's premonition of terror begin to shape itself into a realization of the actuality. Yes, it is Ligeia who has taken over the body of Lady Rowena and brought herself, by force of will, back to mortal life. It is obvious that Poe intended this to be a startling ending. "'Here then, at last,' I shrieked aloud, 'can I never—can I never be mistaken—these are the full, and the black, and the wild eyes—of my lost love—of the lady—of the Lady Ligeia!'"

A year later appeared "The Fall of the House of Usher." As with "Ligeia" and several other of the best known of Poe's stories, one can imagine him conceiving the final scene and then contriving as credible a development

as possible toward the final horror. And again the conclusion is not to be guessed from the beginning. The day is "dull, dark, and soundless," the country a "dreary tract"; but who would imagine that this house at which the narrator arrives will soon contain a young woman buried alive, or that the "building" itself will soon be rent by a fissure which will grow, releasing a whirlwind, and that the fragments of the house will sink "sullenly and silently" into the "deep and dark tarn"?

Two years after this cataclysm first appeared in print it was followed by "A Descent into the Maelstrom." At first glance it seems a story of a very different type. There is no startling ending; after all, the narrator within the story did survive; he is standing here before us. The story seems to depend almost entirely on the terror it stimulates in the reader. Yet the story also fits among those Poe speaks of as stories of ratiocination. The man is saved only because he keeps his head and studies the clues of salvation which surround him in the black whirling torrent. The reader is carried on, I believe, not by the emotion evoked but by his curiosity. How did the fisherman survive? The reader begins to learn the answer only after ninety percent of the story has been told. He learns only in the last paragraph that this solution was effective. So, it seems, there is a turn here, a conclusion that is at least intellectually, if not emotionally, startling. The fisherman ends the story. "I told them my story—they did not believe it. I now tell it to you—and I can scarcely expect you to put more faith in it than did the merry fishermen of Lofoden."

Another year later, in 1842, Poe published "The Masque of the Red Death." "The Prince had provided all the appliances of pleasure. There were buffoons, there were improvisatori, there were ballet-dancers, there were musicians, there was beauty, there was wine. All these and security were within. Without was the 'Red Death'." This is a little heavy-handed; Poe did not intend that the final irony should escape even the barely sophisticated. But who is to guess the actual form of the grotesque conclusion? "The grave ceremonies and corpselike mask, which they handled with so violent a rudeness, (were) untenanted by any tangible form." Soon "Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all."

"The Purloined Letter" appeared three years later in 1845. Ratiocinative like "The Descent into the Maelstrom," it too, and even more so, depends for its force upon an unpredictable ending. Who indeed, as Poe suggests, would expect to find such a valuable document hidden in so open and prominent a card rack? The reader has been kept guessing from the start and is happy to have his curiosity satisfied at the last.

But now another year and it is 1846 and Poe publishes "The Cask of Amontillado." It seems immediately apparent that, contrary to the method he has employed to this date in all his major stories, there is no surprise in store here. This is to be a study of the calculated creation of that masterwork of criminal art, the perfect crime.

The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could, but when he ventured upon insult I vowed revenge. You, who so well know the nature of my soul, will not suppose, however, that I gave utterance to a threat. *At length* I would be avenged: this was a point definitely settled—but the very definitiveness with which it was resolved precluded the idea of risk. 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.

We see the crafty Montresor lure the unfortunate Fortunato to his doom. Perhaps Poe realized the danger of losing his reader with such an apparently predictable tale because he entertains him with sardonic humor en route through the subterranean passageways.

Fortunato: "I drink to the buried that repose around us."

Montresor: "And to your long life."

He also piques the reader's interest with that mysterious and oft remarked reference to the Masons. This too gives him another opportunity for horror as Montresor shows Fortunato his sign, a trowel. Soon Fortunato is walled up by that trowel.

But I have said that the "ending which seems to be neither, is, in fact, both startling and unpredictable." At the conclusion Fortunato sounds somewhat hysterical.

"Ha! ha! ha!—he! he! he!—very good joke, indeed—an excellent jest. We will have many a rich laugh about it at the palazzo—he! he! he!—over our wine—he! he! he!"

"The Amontillado!" I said.

"Ha! ha! ha!—he! he! he!—yes, the Amontillado. But is it not getting late? Will not they be awaiting us at the palazzo, the Lady Fortunato and the rest? 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!"

But to these words I hearkened in vain for a reply. I grew impatient. I called aloud—

"Fortunato!"

No answer. I called again—

"Fortunato!"

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; it was the dampness of the catacombs that made it so. 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!*

Apparently the revenge is complete.

But is it? Montresor says his "heart grew sick," and that admission is disturbing. It can, of course, be interpreted as heavy and cruel irony indicating that his heart was anything but sick, that it was, indeed, elated as it only should be at the moment of such transcendent triumph, as elated as only such a cruel murderer's heart could be at the completion of the undiscoverable revenge. It can be interpreted as such an irony, but if it is then how does one interpret the next line, "I hastened to make an end of my labor"? Montresor has been enjoying the last scene in his playlet immensely. Twice he has put aside the trowel to savor and increase the sufferings of his victim. His hastening now, just after the previous admission, is strong evidence that something has gone very wrong. What exactly has happened here at the end of Montresor's plot? Let us study the possibilities.

Is Fortunato dead? Montresor's "heart grew sick." Fortunato's death could not have this effect. This has been the story of a typical Italian vendetta by a man whose family arms are "A huge human foot d'or in a field azure; the foot crushes a serpent rampant whose fangs are embedded in the heel," and whose family motto is "No one can harm me with impunity." Montresor, Poe is telling us, would not be disturbed by the death of a

man he had so long intended to kill. Nor is there even a hint in the story that this Montresor has any contrary elements in his character. Besides, he does hear a "jingling of bells."

Is Fortunato alive and determinedly resisting the temptation to beg any more for mercy from his murderer? No. That too cannot account for the sickness in Montresor's heart. How he would enjoy the look of agonized determination.

Is Fortunato asleep? No, his bells are jingling. Is he dazed? Is he, perhaps, dumb with amazement or terror? Again, no. None of these explanations accounts for that sickness in that treacherous heart. Yet it must be accounted for; Poe points to it and underlines it; he tells us it is the clue to what has actually happened. "My heart grew sick; it was the dampness of the catacombs that made it so." This excuse from the heretofore proud and self-congratulating Montresor is so obviously lame that we must accept Poe's challenge to discover the true cause of this unexpected sickness.¹

Only one thing could make Montresor sick, the spoiling of his revenge. Has that actually occurred? Remember, Fortunato is not dead, asleep, dazed, dumb or fatalistic. Only one possibility remains. Fortunato has gone completely mad. He is a madman; a man without his rationality. And Montresor? He is a man killing a rational animal who has lost his reason; his vendetta is being worked out upon an animal. Not only is his wrong "unredressed" because the avenger has failed "to make himself felt as such to him who has done the wrong," but he has the satisfaction one would receive from avenging his family's honor upon an offending dog. No wonder his heart grew sick and he "hastened to make an end to (his) labor." (There is no need to study the credibility of such an occurrence. Those who will not grant that insanity could come so instantaneously, disregarding perhaps Poe's buildup of the hysteria of Fortunato, will at least grant that shock, which would appear to be insanity to a man of Poe's day, would sufficiently resemble insanity and might well be induced by a fate like Fortunato's.)

So goes my reasoning to the conclusion that this story is perhaps Poe's greatest. I believe in fact that he had been developing a technique, while writing stories with more obvious plots, which came to fruition in this sophisticated tale. He had been writing tales with startling endings, but here he writes one guaranteed not to startle. When it does, when the reader is taken completely by surprise with Montresor as his heart grows sick, the effect is so delightfully jarring and puzzling that it is not easily forgotten. Why else should this story, which otherwise seems so innocent and straightforward, bear the weight, alongside the other more primitively startling stories he wrote earlier, of the scrutiny of so many years of reading? One can only believe that Poe had matured in his craft in a way little suspected heretofore, and that this story, which is almost the last one he wrote, is indeed perhaps his greatest.

Notes

¹ I have quoted the line in its original form from the November, 1846 issue of *Godey's Lady's Book*. The Griswold edition, which T. O. Mabbott, in a note in his Modern Library College Edition, says he is "sure" is using Poe's own revision of this story, has it: "My heart grew sick—on account of the dampness of the catacombs." (For unexplained reasons some recent editions using the Griswold text have changed the dash to a semi-colon, or even omitted it altogether. These changes do damage to Poe's intent.) If the Griswold edition does reflect Poe's second thoughts, one can easily understand his decision to soft-pedal his rather obvious hint at a meaning which, as noted above, is so strongly implied in his next sentence anyway.

Criticism: James E. Rocks (essay date 1972)

SOURCE: "Conflict and Motive in The Cask of Amontillado," in *Poe Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 2, December, 1972, pp. 50-1.

[In the following essay, Rocks provides a cultural context for the Catholic-Masonic conflict that informs the plot.]

Critical commentary on "The Cask of Amontillado" has tended to dismiss the question of Montresor's motive in killing Fortunato, but the tone of the story betrays a narrator confused and troubled by the guilt of a vengeful murder that has deprived him of spiritual peace and sanctifying grace, though convinced of the righteousness of his act. His uneasy conscience has become a kind of retribution for his crime, and the benediction "In pace requiescat" at the conclusion of the story is ironic in the light of his spiritual isolation and psychological unrest and his knowledge that his own soul is damned by mortal sin. Fortunato and Montresor were political enemies but they can also be regarded as religious ones, for Montresor's act of killing Fortunato is motivated, I suggest, by a faithful Catholic's hatred and fear of the brotherhood of Freemasonry. [See Marvin Felheim, "The Cask of Amontillado," *Notes and Queries*, 199 (1954), 447-448; Donald Pearce, *Notes and Queries*, 199 (1954), 448-449; and Kathryn Montgomery Harris, "Ironical Revenge in Poe's The Cask of Amontillado," *Studies in Short Fiction*, 6 (1969), 333-335, for important discussions of the Catholic-Masonic conflict.] The last exchange of words between Fortunato and Montresor reveals Montresor's motive: "For the love of God, Montresor!" "Yes," I said, "for the love of God!" Montresor is not merely echoing Fortunato's oath or plea but is offering a reason, however cryptically expressed, for his fiendish act. Montresor's execution of vengeance against Fortunato, partaking somewhat of Old Testament morality, is the work of a man who believes he must protect God's word and His Church against His enemies and who demonstrates his "love" of God in this deed of sacrifice. A defender of the faith, Montresor may also be like the prophet who feels the command of God to undertake a mission of retributive justice. In addition, he may be the political man who has felt his family name and heritage threatened by the power and domination of a faithless secret society. As Felheim notes, when Montresor refers to Fortunato's death early in the story as an "immolation," he is suggesting a kind of religious sacrifice, with himself designated as the sacrificial priest.

That the conflict can be defined as one between political and religious enemies is substantiated if we look very briefly at anti-Catholic themes in the Gothic fiction of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and at the history of Freemasonry, which Poe must have been aware of. Such famous Gothic novels as Lewis' *The Monk*, Mrs. Radcliffe's *The Italian* and Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* portray monastic life as wretched and perverted. As Devendra Varma points out, there are no direct attacks against Catholic theology, but "the anti-Catholic note is struck again and again in the Gothic novels." [*The Gothic Flame* (London: Arthur Barker, Ltd., 1957), pp. 171, 219-220.] Such a Gothic writer as Maturin satirized the abuses of religion and the omnipotence of the Catholic Church, as he saw them. In Gothic novels the garb of the votary frequently masks an assassin and the cloister often imprisons its inhabitants; scenes of the Inquisition, such as those in *The Italian* (cf. "The Pit and the Pendulum"), evoke the terror of a powerful political as well as religious institution. Poe's story differs of course in not being anti-Catholic—Poe passes no judgment on his two characters—but the theme of religious conflict in his story finds an interesting antecedent in the earlier Gothic fiction.

Although the time of Poe's story is unclear, it could be set during the period of forthright Catholic reaction against Freemasonry: by the eighteenth century some Masons of the French, Italian and other Latin lodges were hostile to the Church, and in 1738 Pope Clement XII condemned Freemasonry in his bull, *In Eminenti*. Clement declared that those who joined the fraternity were excommunicated because the beliefs of Freemasonry made it a secretive and pagan religion and a possible threat to Church and state; also, he condemned the oaths and ritual. After 1738 many of the largely Catholic countries tried to suppress Freemasonry. [The best short histories of Freemasonry are in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1970) and *New Catholic Encyclopedia*.] As a Freemason and thus a heretic Fortunato would automatically be excommunicated and therefore in Montresor's deranged mind without the benefits of communion in the Catholic Church, no better than the infidels whom the Crusaders killed. And as a political enemy of the Church Fortunato would be a threat to its secular domination. Also, his Masonic sign, which Montresor calls "grotesque," would be, by the command of the Pope, offensive. Montresor appointed himself the agent of

retribution against this enemy of God and cleverly turned Fortunato's Freemasonry against him in the plan of the murder, but it is not surprising that as a faithful Catholic Montresor should later be disturbed by his deed, even if he cannot define those feelings nor experience genuine remorse. His discontent is intensified by a strong sense that his wrongs have not been wholly redressed, that he has failed in his vengeance against this religious and political enemy. Because of the complexity of his motivations and personality, Montresor is a character of considerable importance and interest in Gothic fiction. On account of its irony "The Cask of Amontillado" can be read in a variety of ways, not the least of which should take cognizance of the Catholic-Masonic conflict, the source of which can be traced to both fact and fiction.

Criticism: Philip McM. Pittman (essay date 1975)

SOURCE: "Method and Motive in 'The Cask of Amontillado'," in *The Malahat Review*, No. 34, April, 1975, pp. 87-100.

[In the following essay, Pittman argues that the perceived inconsistencies of Poe's tale contribute to its narrative, tonal, and thematic unity, positing that a symbolic schema, in which Fortunato's character assumes diabolic proportions, structures the tale.]

It may prove both presumptuous and superfluous to try to add "yet one word more" to the already respectable body of critical material available on "The Cask of Amontillado." General consensus has it that the story is one of Poe's best, or at least one of his most effective. It is perhaps a measure of the greatness of the story (*Hamlet* like, I suppose) that, beyond the matter of a successfully sustained effect (whatever that may be, and however we are to cope with it), there is no particular agreement on just how and why the story is great. Though we all assume that somehow the piece demonstrates Poe's efficiency as a craftsman, yet the measure of his craftsmanship has apparently not been taken. We are quite inured to acknowledgments of the care which Poe took in preparing especially his shorter compositions (by which care alone could he hope to sustain the unity of effect he sought), and the insistence on such care should presuppose, one would think, a unity beyond the mechanics of tone and effect. I will hope to demonstrate that in "The Cask of Amontillado" even the most disturbing of supposed inconsistencies may well add to just such a "total" unity—narrative, tonal, and thematic.

The 1954 "symposium" on the story in *Notes and Queries* (CXCIX) may be taken as representative of the variety of critical approaches to "The Cask of Amontillado." The arguments run from Jacob Adler's suggestion that the piece may be seriously flawed (the name *Montresor* is inappropriate as representative of a time-honored noble ancestry in an eighteenth-century Italian setting, and further he speaks at least once as a knowledgeable foreigner, which makes ambiguous the ancestral mansion replete with catacombs), to Sam Moon's assertion that the story is confessional in nature and that the confession is necessitated by a crucial irony ("the profound failure of the revenge"), to Donald Pearce's contention that "The Cask of Amontillado" is a parodic enactment of a sort of profane rite or Black Mass, according to which a Mephistophelean Montresor captures a Christ-like Fortunato. Each of these arguments contains, I would suggest, a grain of truth. The difficulty is one of emphasis, and the main problem is pulling them together.

In the same issue of *Notes and Queries* Marvin Felheim initiates an extremely productive train of thought: that the story is a formal study in revenge necessitated by the traditional Catholic/Masonic antipathy, which revenge is both fitting and complete, even to a formal benediction. The thought has been recently and soundly reechoed by Katherine M. Harris, who more fully explores the specific religious paraphernalia of the story: that Montresor is a Roman Catholic (that is, not of the "brotherhood"), that the story is set in a Catholic season (the pre-lenten carnival), in a Catholic age and in a Catholic country. She focuses on the Montresor coat of arms as a Catholic device ("the traditional representation of the Church militant triumphing over the forces of evil in retribution for Adam's fall"), and notes that the final line (*In pace requiescat*, the final words of the

requiem mass) "is an appropriate ironic comment on the death of a mason, a sanctification of Montresor's private auto-da-fé."¹

The argument thus carried over from Felheim to Harris is the most productive I know of as a measure of the curious success of the story. It seems clear to me that, especially given its large dose of rather exacting religious detail, the story is a great deal more than an ingenious exercise in Gothic perversity (the simplest of the possible explanations of its sustained effect), that in fact the carefully developed ritual element of it adds to an exact working out of just such a conflict. I suspect, however, that the insistence upon a strict Roman Catholic reading unduly restricts the thematic significance of the tale and fails adequately to answer Adler's charge of narrative inconsistency. Too, it does not take into account the dramatic nature of the piece, for neither Felheim nor Harris satisfactorily resolves the problem of the understood third party: the "You" to whom the tale is told (who appears only in the first paragraph), and who is generally taken as some sort of later day confessor.

Perhaps the first order of difficulty in interpreting "The Cask of Amontillado" arises from the assumption that the story is an uncomplicated one—another exploration of the theory of the perverse.² I do not wish to oversimplify Poe's theory of perversity, but I am far from sure that the matter of the tale is so one-dimensional, that either Poe's interest or his method is in this case so purely psychological (though, of course, the psychological element in large measure accounts for the successfully sustained effect). The first troublesome detail is the enigmatic "You" of the first paragraph, the unnamed and unidentified dramatic recipient of the tale. The thing is, after all, a dramatic monologue, which fact should cue us to consider seriously the device of self-revelation, of both character and motive. Beyond that, moreover, the monologic presentation begs us as readers to ponder a broader problem: that of the dramatic moment of the piece, and the circumstances that bring it forth.

As I indicated above, the usual (and, I think, somewhat pat) suggestion is that the tale is formally confessional—that Montresor is Roman Catholic and that some fifty years following his crime he is moved to save his soul by confessing to a priest. It seems to me that there are difficulties attached to such a reading. In the first place, save for the fictive background and symbolic apparatus, considerations specifically religious do not enter into Montresor's performance. Further, though the dramatic nature of the story distinctly underscores its confessional nature, there is no sense of urgency to it, no real measure of religious bad conscience. It may be the most tenuous sort of subjective comment to make, but there is just no funereal pall hanging about the narrative; Montresor does not talk like a man who is trying to save his own soul, or who is even concerned about the state of it. Nor does he appear in any way (certainly judging from what we know of his past) the sort of man who, in order to satisfy social and religious convention, would undertake such a detailed private confession. Poe's theory of perversity may seem to get in my way here, but even as Rea reads the story in light of the theory, the perverse person is drawn into the perversity of spelling himself out by some sort of inner necessity. I feel no such necessity in "The Cask of Amontillado." What we have in the story is much more of an armchair narrative, one old friend talking with great care to another old friend in the comfort of their club.

Such a suggestion, of course, but opens the way to further difficulties. If the dramatic situation from which the story springs is so "clubbish," why has Poe not taken the pains to delineate his drama more carefully? Why do we not know more of the dramatic moment and of the listening character? The answer to these questions, even if we take the story in the formal confessional vein, is crucial to an intelligent reading and central to Poe's method. In "The Cask of Amontillado," perhaps more than in any other of his tales, Poe calls upon the reader to exercise his own ingenuity in order to arrive at an intelligent understanding. For the key to a successful interpretation may well lie in the thought that the "You" to whom the tale is told, who "know[s] so well the nature of my soul," is the reader himself. Effectively, I would suggest, Poe carefully draws us into confidence with his narrator and so allies us with him in such a manner as to turn Montresor into a variety of universal *alter ego*—a formally representative everyman the deepest resources of whose soul we are supposed to know and to know well, and with whom, according to our long and intimate relationship, we are to be in sympathy.

Such an observation, if it may be allowed, does not discount the assumption that "The Cask of Amontillado" is a manifestation of Poe's interest in the perverse (which he also developed as a universal inclination), but it does considerably widen the range of interpretative possibilities inherent in the story. For, even though Poe may appeal initially to our own perverse side, as we are drawn into complicity in the murder itself (we know Montresor's soul well, and yet have done and will do nothing about him) so too we are supposed to understand his motive. It is implied throughout that there is a great deal to that motive beyond mere perversity, and we are invited to discover it. We might well add that Montresor at no time even hints that we would not, should we incline to judge, find in his favor. He is cool, calm, and unafraid of what he has done. His tale is apologetic in only the formal sense of the word, and not at all tinged with regret.

The pattern of universality thus initiated appears to me to be forwarded by the ambiguity surrounding Montresor's family name and social position, which Professor Adler concludes to be a flaw in the story. To be sure, the name *Montresor* is inappropriate as having a long-standing family tradition in eighteenth-century Italy, and at least once (in the third paragraph of the story) he does appear to speak as an outsider (drawing a careful distinction between the Italians and himself). We may do well, however, to consider carefully the effects of this ambiguity, and I think it is another mistake in the direction of oversimplification to operate under the assumption that Montresor's background is a narrative imperfection. What it seems to me Poe accomplishes by the joint techniques of bringing the reader into the story and allying him with his main character and then confusing the historical veracity of that character is, while writing ostensibly within a relatively strict historical framework, to raise his story above its historical setting. The tale is both Italian and Roman Catholic according to its setting, and presumably (if we may judge from Montresor's garment—the *roquelaire*) eighteenth century. Yet *Montresor* is a patently French name, introduced as having a long and respectable history within the Italian setting, and (at the risk of pressing the story beyond the conditions of its essential fiction, but appropriately enough if I am right concerning the identification of the party to whom the tale is told) he tells his tale in English to a presumably American audience (in which observation I do not intend violence to the story by trespassing beyond its imaginative conditions, but do wish to underscore the point that the effect of the piece is not merely Italian, nor is it limited to its historical epoch).

Professor Adler expended considerable time and energy in order to demonstrate the inappropriateness of Montresor's name. I would not like to undervalue his conclusions, but would suggest that the inappropriateness may well be a part of Poe's method, an essential condition of the fiction the effect of which is to universalize the story, to make it, in spite of its geographical and temporal ties, a timeless and placeless drama. In short, the confusion of time and place (or the intentional "vagueness," to echo Adler's own word) may be designed precisely in order to establish a symbolic or metaphorical frame for the story, a means of moving beyond the historical moment in which the fiction operates. Only thus can we reconcile the ambiguity of a Frenchman seeking out an Italian whose specific skill is in Italian vintages in order to identify an Iberian wine.

So the key to the significance of Montresor's name is probably not to be found in any dictionary of national biography, but may be contained in the name itself, which is quite exactly derived from the French *mon trésor*, "my treasure, riches, wealth, etc." The name carries a double thrust. Professor Gargano has rightly pointed out that Montresor has suffered social persecution or reduction of status (perhaps a literal loss of treasure) which in some fashion Fortunato is responsible for.³ But more than that, and again interpretation hinges on the ambiguous "You" with whom the story begins, we may conjecture that the "treasure" in question has to do with spiritual resources, those same spiritual resources which we are supposed to know so well.

It is curious to me that Professor Adler devoted all of his scholarly energies to the Montresor family name, and did virtually nothing with *Fortunato*. That name, of course, sounds right in the Italian setting, and so offers no immediate difficulty to the careful reader. That does not, however, discount the possibility (or probability, as I would read the story) that it too is a name which carries symbolic weight. Working a logic

upon it similar to that which I applied to *Montresor*, *Fortunato* emerges literally as one who possesses, is conditioned by, or is responsible for fortune.

Where, then, does this mode of enquiry lead us? The first conclusion I suggest is that the tale both can and should be read as one which moves considerably beyond the strict confines of its historical setting. That is to say that it develops symbolic overtones from the very beginning, that the symbolism begins to operate in the names assigned to its two principal characters, and that the symbolism focuses through the device of allying the reader with Montresor who tells the story. The remainder of this investigation will attempt to sort out and make some sense of these symbolic possibilities.

The two most important elements within the fictive framework of the story are established in the initial paragraph of it as carefully interwoven and interrelated themes: ritual and revenge. Indeed, the Renaissance doctrine of formal revenge both initiates and controls the ritual element. Like Hamlet, who declines killing Claudius while he is praying because his soul would thus be in an automatic state of grace and that would negate the revenge which the ghost has called for, Montresor carefully delineates the conditions which govern his revenge: "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." (paragraph one) The conditions thus set forth are fully traditional and must be viewed according to the conventions governing the properties of revenge.

The argument that Montresor is merely a character operating within the framework of Poe's theory of the perverse must begin with the apparent ambiguity of Montresor's motive—"The thousand injuries of Fortunato," which finally "ventured upon insult." Theories of perversity notwithstanding, the important fact is the notion of revenge itself, and unless it can be proven that indeed there is no real motive for it, the seeking after retribution is *not*, emphatically, a measure of perversity. In fact, the *properties* of revenge provide a far sounder area for our consideration. We may assume (as we are invited to do) that there is a motive, and that that motive will be self-revealing as the story progresses. So for the moment the painstaking care in execution is the important matter. And the care with which Montresor approaches the problem he sets for himself, the seriousness with which he regards Fortunato's ritual immolation, is part and parcel of the religious background of the tale. For the successful working out of the revenge should not be viewed as a matter of criminal perversity. It is in fact better considered within the overtly Christian framework. An older Christianity than the one we now practice not only allowed for but necessitated revenge under certain circumstances, and that revenge is necessarily incomplete if the revenger loses his soul in the process—a point which becomes increasingly important as the story unravels.

Donald Pearce has addressed himself to the ritual element of "The Cask of Amontillado," and though I do not agree with his conclusions, I hope I may be pardoned (in the interest of long range economy) a lengthy quotation from his note on the story:

The tale has a strong flavour of a profane rite, a sort of Black Mass, or parody of archetypal events and themes in holy scripture. Fortunato's cry, "*For the love of God*" (he is chained in a quasi-crucified posture when he utters it), tolls back through the story drawing together several grotesque images: Montresor's costume is distinctly Mephistophelean; his coat of arms (doubtless invented on the spot) contains a human foot being bruised at the heel by a Satanic serpent (*cf.* Genesis, 3:15); his procedure with Fortunato is temptation by appeal to pride. Elements reminiscent of Christ's passion are introduced: Fortunato is taken on the night of the Carnival (*cf.* the night of the Passover, John 19:14-16); the mode of "capture" is intimate betrayal, closely resembling the kiss of Judas; he is led through the streets, the ancestral catacombs, to Golgotha (trans.: "place of skulls") for his final agony, where he is mocked. Fortunato wears, we will say, a crown of bells for a crown of thorns; he belongs to the mystic (Masonic) brotherhood—Montresor's trowel ironizing and mocking the point. The

wine they seek has sacred connotations (Amontillado—"from the mountain") and sacrificial overtones; its non-existence parodies by inversion the ritual significance of the communion service; and with the discovery of its non-existence the light of the world flickers out for the entombed Fortunato—as equally, in another sense, for Montresor, who, having lived for fifty years with the crime in his mind, displays vague affinities with the Wandering Jew.⁴

Pearce is, I think, quite right in his identification of many of the metaphoric elements which add so much to the story, and he places them in a valid context—that of the continuing battle between good and evil which culminates in the events surrounding Christ's passion and resurrection. He notes the ambiguity inherent in the story as a valid "strategy" of composition, and attempts to resolve that ambiguity by reading the events of the tale as ironic (the ritual element is profane, the Mass is Black). His reading hinges on the observation that the story is an "étude . . . in the key of Sadism." In forcing such a resolution, he must necessarily make a choice, and he chooses on the side of the diabolic (the side most easily reconcilable with Poe's theory of perversity).

I would like to suggest that the broad metaphoric associations of the story work better in a modified perspective, that there is another means of resolving the story which is more satisfactory both according to the terms of the story itself and as a means of elevating Poe's theory of the perverse above the largely mechanical consideration of sustained effect. In essence, I would argue that Pearce reverses the most appropriate associations of Fortunato and Montresor. The symbolic paraphernalia of "The Cask of Amontillado" may be better resolved if we consider Fortunato as the Mephistophelean figure, and Montresor as playing out a role in which he extracts a fully Christian retribution. The central associations of the drama are still with the conflict between Christ and Satan (or man's continuing struggle to quash the forces of evil), but the reconciliation of that drama thus becomes a triumph for humanity rather than for the devil.

The events of the tale are set specifically "one evening during the supreme madness of the carnival season," which Pearce quite rightly associates with the feast of the Passover. Outside the Jewish culture, however, the season of carnival must be viewed in a broader context, and especially so in a Roman Catholic setting. The carnival (Mardi gras, by Montresor's specific association with the French, or Shrovetide) celebrates a last fling before the deprivations of Lent. More important yet, Mardi gras commemorates Christ's last indulgence in the pleasures of the flesh before walking into the wilderness to confront Satan; thus too it is closely associated with the end of Satan's earthly dominion. He is about to be defeated in the wilderness and bound during the harrowing of hell. The carnival festival, then, naturally manifests an inherent Satanic element; it is in a peculiar sense a feast of the devil. Like Midsummer-Night, the other traditional celebration of ritual madness and a festival of the devil, Mardi gras places Satan at the head of the table; he is elevated to a position of prominence with full understanding that he will be unmasked and dethroned. The festival thus has its highly comic element, and the center of that comedy rests in the comfortable understanding that Satan is the Prince of Fools who will be exposed and banished at the climactic moment of the carnival.

Thus Fortunato's association with the carnival may be of symbolic importance; he is of it and in it, and the social prominence which Montresor attributes to him would indicate that he is an honored participant. In this context his motley and cap and bells are also significant. They are not, I think, as Pearce would have it, to be associated with the garments and crown of thorns of the Christ, but represent quite literally Satan in his traditional role as Prince of Fools.

There are many other details in the story that support the reading of Fortunato's role as diabolic—not the least of which is what Pearce (in another connection) isolates as the mode of temptation by appeal to pride (an ironic reversal of the scripture story, appropriate to the triumph of man over Satan). If the names of the principal characters are as important and as symbolically loaded as they appear to be, Fortunato's name is also fully appropriate to his diabolic role. According to the derivation of his name he is immediately and inextricably associated with the concept of fortune, which is an expression of man's plight in what appears to be an arbitrary and mutable world. The goddess Fortuna is blind, passionless, and apparently wholly

unreasonable. She is expressive of the inscrutability of both human nature and the nature of the world we live in, a world conditioned by man's fall from grace in Paradise. Dame Fortuna is, that is to say, Satan's own child, an expression of the perversity of his mind as he worked his will upon the world, and so the association of Fortunato with the idea of fortune should underscore his diabolic role.

Several other details emphasize Fortunato's diabolism. At least once in the story, at the dramatically important point at which the Catholic/Masonic conflict is introduced, Fortunato's "eyes flashed with a fierce light"—a small enough item in itself, but significant when taken along with the other details we are given. We must also note the malignant leer with which he drinks "to the buried dead that repose around us." One detail which I have not seen satisfactorily treated in any of the critical commentaries is Fortunato's cold. It is apparent to Montresor from the moment he first encounters his friend in the streets, and becomes dramatically more apparent to us as the story progresses deeper and deeper into the catacombs. It disappears at the moment when Fortunato enters his place of entombment. It may seem curious that, as carefully as Poe has developed Fortunato's cough, during the several hours it must take Montresor to complete the entombment it is never heard. The cough is an involuntary reaction aggravated in part by the dampness of the catacombs and the nitre on the walls. The sepulchre to which the two men journey is in the deepest and so dampest part of the catacombs, and the nitre is particularly thick in it; yet the cough is silenced.

My suggestion on this point can be only tentative, and again conditioned by the conviction that Poe was craftsman enough to look after his details. But I wonder quite seriously if the cough (and the fact that it is an involuntary reaction is significant) may function as a mark of the devil. From the vast body of traditional literature we should be familiar with the thought that the devil can never quite wholly disguise himself. Generally we will find the print of a cloven foot, an inability to produce a reflection in a mirror, an odd and well hidden birthmark, or (as indeed happens once in "The Cask of Amontillado") a muted flashing in the eye. In this case the diabolic imperfection may well be the cough, and its disappearance is thus fully appropriate to the moment in which the Prince of Fools is unmasked.

But perhaps, at least in the context of my argument, the most convincing detail within the frame of the story is Fortunato's complicity with the masonic brotherhood. In this context the historical frame of the story is of special importance, for only by understanding the seriousness with which the Italian Roman Catholic society has traditionally regarded the Masons can we approach the full significance of Montresor's revenge. The Freemasons were viewed, particularly in the eighteenth century, as a secret society bent on undermining both religion and organized government throughout Europe—quite literally, devil's advocates.⁵ So Fortunato's association with the brotherhood, matched with Montresor's ignorance of masonic ritual (and his ironic adoption of masonic tools in a literal sense in order to accomplish his revenge), carries forward the cluster of details which suggest the highly serious conflict between the Church and its enemies, between Christ (or mankind) and the devil's party.

In a passage already quoted Katherine M. Harris has forwarded the thought that Montresor's coat of arms, a visual representation of God's promises to Eve and the serpent in Genesis, 3:15, is "the traditional representation of the Church militant triumphing over the forces of evil in retribution for Adam's fall." I suggested that Harris' strict Roman Catholic reading of the story may prove itself too thematically restrictive, for I suspect that historical Roman Catholicism is rather a part of the fiction of the piece than a device central to its thematic development. Almost certainly, for instance, though Montresor is apparently Roman Catholic, his "confession" has no sense of urgency about it; he seeks understanding more than absolution. The Catholic/Masonic conflict is but one metaphor for the continuing struggle between good and evil. At any rate, the metaphor of struggle between man and Satan is not exclusive Roman Catholic property, and this conflict, conceived in its broadest sense, is the substance of the story.

Donald Pearce, in his consideration of the ritual elements of "The Cask of Amontillado," implies that the conflict in the tale is an ironic (and so perverse) representation of the battle between Christ and Satan, which

thus celebrates the triumph of the devil. In a limited sense he, like Katherine Harris, is right. But it is significant to note that the Genesis story from which the heraldic device is taken promises enmity between man and serpent, not between God and serpent: "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." (King James) It is further important to note that the resolution of the conflict, given in the story of the temptations in the wilderness (Matthew IV: 1-12. Luke IV: 1-13), carries forward the idea of conflict between man and Satan. The whole weight and significance of Christ's triumph rest in the fact that He abjured manifestation of His Godhead; His victory on earth is theologically more important than His previous victory in heaven and His subsequent victory in hell precisely because the weapons in His arsenal were identical to those available to Adam in Paradise. That is to say, He triumphed by asserting His *human* nature in its potential perfection. I would suggest that this spiritual potential is the *trésor* of Montresor's name, that he, as a human being, is engaged in a ritual reenactment of mankind's victory over Satan. I have already commented on the appropriateness of the carnival season to such a reading, and the universal and symbolic conception of the main characters would seem to support it.

The thematic direction of the fiction thus comes into clearer, if broader, focus. The story is a retelling of the resolution of the conflict between man and devil, replete with all of the appropriate biblical echoes. The narrative moves metaphorically into the depths of the past (passing by the bones of the buried generations of Montresors, to whom Fortunato pridefully drinks, and which ironically conceal the instruments of his entombment), and there the ritual victory fulfills itself. Fortunato is literally bound as Satan was bound during the harrowing of hell (the tale only implies his actual death), and as he is we may even suggest that the generations of Montresor ancestors are metaphorically liberated from his "injuries" (the ancestral bones have been themselves integral to the plan of entrapment, and are so freed from the curse of Fortunato's malicious toast). The ultimate irony of the piece, and the strongest metaphor for the human triumph it celebrates, is, of course, the fact that Montresor turns Fortunato's own professional tools against him. The Prince of Fools, precisely because he is the Prince of Fools, is incapable of understanding that, at the height of the celebration which will unmask him, the trowel which Montresor produces is to be the instrument of his undoing.

The final dramatic exchange of the story is most often read as ironic mockery evidencing Montresor's perversity. I would suggest that perhaps in this instance alone in the story there is no irony. Fortunato cries out in desperation "*For the love of God, Montresor!*" quite literally calling upon the last trick he has at his disposal to secure his release. He seeks to elicit Montresor's sympathy, which in this case would be evidence of the human imperfection which has given Satan free play in the world. The calm assurance with which Montresor replies cements the significance of the ritual immolation. Montresor has indeed bound and buried Fortunato for the love of God. The ancestral bones are re-erected against the new masonry; the generations of Montresors are vindicated. The liturgical tag which concludes the tale is thematically appropriate. May he indeed rest in peace—not perhaps destroyed, but bound by a climactic and forceful assertion of the human will.

It has been argued (by J. Rea in the article already cited) that Fortunato and Montresor have been close friends, and that Montresor's immolation is (to belabor the obvious) perverse, both as a breach of the friendship and as a transgression against Fortunato's courtesy. I would be remiss if I did not at least briefly answer this observation.

There is no critical myopia attached to the thought that Milton's Satan is in a great many respects the most attractive and fully drawn of his characters. His very attractiveness, indeed, as Romantic Milton criticism demonstrates, is the trick which makes him work. Before Milton, Shakespeare had done roughly the same thing with Falstaff (who, E. M. W. Tillyard points out, functions as a literal embodiment of the seven deadly sins), who is Prince Hal's greatest moral problem, and who proved so attractive that it took his creator some three tries to finally get rid of him. Even before that, the morality dramatists had developed the personification of Covetousness, the specific sin most attractive in both appearance and operation to *genus humanum*, and so

most dangerous to the final state of his soul. In each of these instances the central danger of the form of sin which may lead to ultimate damnation is its attractiveness. The Miltonic argument will suffice to my point here: in so far as vice is black and ugly it represents no trial at all and so has no moral significance; only when it presents itself in all of its native beauty is it either significant or dangerous. For this reason Shakespeare hated flattery above all other beguilements to the man of responsibility in this world: we like it and so are hard pressed to put it by.

In this particular sense, vice is born into all of us (a not very original argument for original sin), and when we deny it we very really kill off a part of ourselves. That vice which is dangerous is after all both comfortable and self-assuring; dramatically, a fellow we want very much to sit down and have a drink with. This, I think, is the measure of Fortunato's friendship (a friendship which Montresor is wise enough not to deny—for denial would tip Fortunato off to the revenge plot); it amounts to courtesy in the form of flattery, and traces its roots in tradition to Milton, Shakespeare, and the moralities. He is that part of us which we must kill off in order to make salvation possible for the other part. And this small hint of self-murder may also make possible a reading of "The Cask of Amontillado" in light of a broader understanding of Poe's theory of the perverse—for it is perverse to murder even a part of the self, though circumstances may demand it. But that would be a subject for another essay on another occasion.

Notes

¹ Katherine M. Harris, "Ironical Revenge in Poe's 'The Cask of Amontillado,'" *Studies in Short Fiction*, VI (Spring, 1969), 333-335.

² As J. Rea reads the piece. See "Poe's 'The Cask of Amontillado,'" *Studies in Short Fiction*, IV (Fall, 1966), 57-69. This article also contains an abbreviated, though acceptable, review of the more traditional scholarship on the subject, as does James W. Gargano's "'The Cask of Amontillado': A Masquerade of Motive and Identity," *Studies in Short Fiction*, IV (Winter, 1967), 119-126.

³ Gargano, pp. 122-123.

⁴ "The Cask of Amontillado," *Notes and Queries*, CXCIX (1954), 448-449.

⁵ See, for instance, John Robison, *Proofs of a Conspiracy against all the Religions and Governments of Europe, Carried on in the Secret Meetings of Free Masons, Illuminati, and Reading Societies. Collected from Good Authorities*, [London], 1797 (2nd edition).

Criticism: Charles A. Sweet, Jr. (essay date 1975)

SOURCE: "Retapping Poe's 'Cask of Amontillado,'" in *Poe Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 1, June, 1975, pp. 10-12.

[In the following essay, Sweet argues that Montresor's murder of Fortunato is motivated by an unconscious desire to destroy a despised part of himself]

Montresor's motive [in "The Cask of Amontillado"] is generally taken to be the punishment of historical transgressions. James Rocks believes "Montresor's act of killing Fortunato is motivated . . . by a faithful Catholic's hatred and fear of the brotherhood of Freemasonry."¹ James Gargano decides that Montresor "regards himself as the vindicator of his ancestors" who "feels that Fortunato has, by ignoring his ancestral claims, stolen his birthright and ground him into disgrace."² Critics have not considered, however, that while these may be Montresor's conscious motives, unconsciously he may view Fortunato as a present, personal symbol of his own true self, a mirror image.

Sam Moon has hinted in passing of Poe's technique of creating "an ironic parallel between Fortunato and Montresor, so that by the end they are virtually identified."³ Although Gargano too has noted some of the similarities between the two men, he has not realized that the parallels serve to exhibit the unconscious psychological process of transference and hence to elucidate Montresor's motivation. Montresor unconsciously projects himself into Fortunato. Montresor's revenge, then, is not a ritual of sacrifice, but of scapegoating.

Poe begins this unconscious process of transference by establishing surface parallels between his two characters.⁴ Both are dilettantish Italian noblemen with long heritages, and Poe develops this dilettantism into one of the keys to the story. Early Montresor mentions in "painting and gemmery, Fortunato, like his countrymen was a quack. . . ."⁵ Consciously Montresor, after noting Fortunato's connoisseurship of wine, explains "I was skilful in the Italian vintages myself, and bought largely whenever I could" (p. 168). Immediately to entice his victim, Montresor relates "I have received a pipe of what passes for Amontillado . . . and I was silly enough to pay the full Amontillado price . . ." (p. 168). What Poe implies is that Montresor believes Amontillado to be an Italian wine rather than the Spanish wine it is. Twenty years ago Jacob Adler noted this discrepancy as well as the fact that "the wines he [Montresor] drinks in the catacombs are French" and labeled it a flaw, "a detail which contributes nothing."⁶ Because of Poe's insistence that every element contribute to the "certain unique and singular effect," it seems more likely that Poe intended the detail to establish Montresor as a false virtuoso, a man lacking conscious self-awareness. Poe clearly shows, then, both men as quacks; himself a dilettante, Montresor believes Fortunato another and unconsciously despises the parallel with himself.

Poe establishes other parallels between the two. When Montresor first encounters Fortunato—both names refer to wealth—he immediately notes his friend's sycophancy or "excessive warmth" (p. 168); in the next breath, however, he remarks on his own pleasure at seeing him that "I thought I should never have done wringing his hand" (p. 168). Here Montresor obviously imitates Fortunato.

Both men wear masks. Fortunato has donned the costume of the fool while Montresor assumes not only the guise of friend but subsequently "a mask of black silk" (p. 169). Poe also employs the device of repetitive rhetoric whereby the two reiterate each other's words. When Montresor observes he has received "a pipe of what passes for Amontillado" (p. 168), Fortunato exclaims "Amontillado? A pipe?" (p. 168) and repeats the name of the wine three times. When Montresor claims "He [Luchresi] will tell me . . .," Fortunato says "Luchresi cannot tell . . ." (p. 168). Montresor argues "I perceive you have an engagement" and Fortunato replies "I have no engagement" (p. 169). "Nitre" asks Fortunato, and Montresor replies, "Nitre" (p. 170). As the two men continue on their journey, Poe again stresses the parallels. Each man carries a torch. To fortify themselves against the cold, both partake of Medoc wine. When Montresor gazes into his companion's eyes, he notes "two filmy orbs that distilled the rheum of intoxication" (p. 170); a short time later Montresor admits that his "own fancy grew warm with Medoc" (p. 171).

Their journey culminates with a series of terrifying parallels which Poe uses now to emphasize the process of transference that has unconsciously occurred in Montresor's mind. After partially walling his victim within the catacombs, Montresor hears a "succession of loud and shrill screams . . ." (p. 174). That Montresor identifies with his victim is indicated by his next act. Although unable to explain why in retrospect, Montresor admits "I replied to the yells of him who clamoured. I reechoed, I aided, I surpassed them in volume and in strength" (p. 174). Montresor's behavior can be viewed as an unconscious attempt at cathartic exorcism of the despised self as personified in others, much in the same manner as Robin's laughter at the sight of his uncle in Hawthorne's "My Kinsman, Major Molineux." Rather than severing the psychic bond between the two men, however, the act has the ironic effect of reinforcing the link, as does Montresor's subsequent repetition of Fortunato's words three times: "Amontillado," "let us be gone," and "for the love of God!" (p. 175).

Poe employs another familiar device to provide further insight into Montresor's mind and motives for unconsciously transferring his self into Fortunato. In stories such as "The Fall of the House of Usher," "Ligeia," and "William Wilson," buildings represent characters' states of mind. Similarly, Montresor's choice of location for his crime is revealing. He might have extracted revenge by stabbing Fortunato amidst the crowd during the carnival, by setting fire to his home, by abducting Lady Fortunato, and so on; in each case to fulfill the requirements of the successful avenger Montresor could have informed Fortunato of his conscious reason, the "thousand injuries" and the "insult" (p. 167). Instead he chooses a time when the supposed connoisseur (and himself) are intoxicated, a state that contradicts their connoisseurship. Secondly, Montresor's crime takes the form of an unconscious projection of his psychic problem. Montresor's premature burial of his mirror self in the subterranean depths of his ancestral home (house equals mind in Poe) paints the psychological portrait of repression; the physical act of walling up an enemy in one's home duplicates the mental act of repressing a despised self in the unconscious.⁷ Montresor acts very similarly to Hawthorne's Reuben Bourne in "Roger Malvin's Burial." Both men transfer unwanted feelings to another, then do away with the other in a scapegoating process of purgation. An important difference between the two stories, however, is that, while Bourne shoots his son, Montresor only buries alive his scapegoat. As a Catholic Montresor knows that suicide (the potential murder of Fortunato) is a mortal sin; thus, his unconscious dictates that if suicide is impossible, then only repression (the premature burial) is possible. In Montresor's unconscious mind he is not murdering Fortunato, but burying/repressing that dilettantish side of himself he can no longer endure, that side symbolized by Fortunato.

Repression, however, is only a temporary measure. Fifty years later Montresor the Catholic appears to be confessing the whole story on his deathbed to a priest, "You, who so well know the nature of my soul" (p. 167). The guilt engendered by the Catholic conscience and troubled by this unsuccessful attempt at repression pours out after half a century. Montresor has failed to satisfy his own first requirement for a successful avenger because the guilt of "retribution overtakes its redresser" (p. 167). He also misses his second requirement of the successful avenger for he fails to "make himself felt as such to him who has done the wrong" (p. 167). On Montresor's conscious level, Fortunato is the one "who has done the wrong" (p. 167). When Fortunato begs "for the love of God" (p. 175), he can only surmise general religious reasons for Montresor's vengeance. When he grows silent and finally offers only "a jingling of the bells" (p. 175), Poe indicates that Fortunato the fool goes insane and thus provides the last similarity with Montresor. On the unconscious level, however, Fortunato is only Montresor's objectification of his dilettantish self; the real question, then, is whether Montresor "makes[s] himself felt" (p. 167) to himself? Certainly his confession is a recognition of the guilt stemming from his act of incarceration, not from his sense of a self-suicide. So finally Montresor must be viewed in an ironic light; as the "*In pace requiescat*" (p. 175) indicates, it is relief from guilt, not forgiveness for a crime, he ultimately desires. Self-knowledge eludes the unrepentant Montresor until the end, as does the absolution he seeks.

Notes

¹ "Conflict and Motive in 'The Cask of Amontillado,'" *Poe Studies*, 5 (1972), 50. Kathryn Harris in "Ironic Revenge in Poe's 'Cask of Amontillado,'" *Studies in Short Fiction*, 6 (1969), 333-335, also comments on Montresor's Catholicism.

² "'The Cask of Amontillado': A Masquerade of Motive and Identity," *Studies in Short Fiction*, 4 (1967), 122.

³ "The Cask of Amontillado," *Notes & Queries*, 199 (1954), rpt. in *Controversy in Literature*, ed. Paul Davis et al. (New York: Scribner's 1968), p. 57. Joseph Moldenhauer in "Poe's Aesthetics, Psychology, and Moral Vision," *PMLA*, 83 (1968), 293, also notes a "psychological identification," but likewise does not explore its ultimate ramifications.

⁴ Marie Bonaparte in *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe* (1949; rpt. New York: Humanities Press, 1971), p. 535, comments that "Both [Montresor and the friend-narrator of 'Never Bet the Devil Your Head'] are sedate doubles of their dare-devil friends," but she is much too involved in her psychoanalytic-biographical approach to pursue her idea.

⁵*The Complete Works of Allan Poe*, ed. James A. Harrison (1902; rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1965), VI, 167. Hereafter, such references will appear in the text.

⁶ "Are There Flaws in 'The Cask of Amontillado'?" *Notes & Queries*, 199 (1954), rpt. in *Controversy in Literature*, p. 55.

⁷ Leslie Fiedler in *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Dell, 1966), pp. 126-141, notes that the Gothic castle and the exploration of its subterranean chambers are archetypal representations of the journey into the unconscious.

Criticism: Walter Stepp (essay date 1976)

SOURCE: "The Ironic Double in Poe's The Cask of Amontillado'," in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. XIII, No. 4, Fall, 1976, pp. 447-53.

[In the following essay, Stepp casts Fortunato as a "negative" image of Montresor's doppelgänger, comparing Fortunato's function to that of the double in Poe's story "William Wilson."]

In Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado," an heraldic emblem offers a suggestive entrance into the story. Descending into the catacombs of Montresor's failed family, Fortunato says, "I forget your arms."¹ It is one of his numerous blind, unintentional insults. The proud Montresor, biding his time, blinks not and replies: "A huge human foot d'or, in a field of azure; the foot crushes a serpent rampant whose fangs are embedded in the heel."

"And the motto?"

"Nemo me impune lacessit."

"Good!" he said. (p. 276)

The brief scene highlights the major plot dynamics of Poe's great story: the clumsy insult, Montresor's menacing irony, and Fortunato's further blindness to this irony. ("Good!") Montresor flashes countless "clues" like the one above before Fortunato's rheumy eyes—signals of his impending doom, but Fortunato does not perceive. The clues are part of the larger "system" or "demonstration" motif of the story: Montresor, the diabolical rationalist, systematically demonstrates again and again that the arriviste, Fortunato, does not *know*, cannot distinguish. Montresor, at the end of his life, has addressed his narrative to "You, who so well know the nature of my soul. . ." (p. 274), and it is as if he were performing before some ultimate audience, saying, "You see? I show him the picture of his own death, and he says 'Good!'" An unspoken corollary of this speech I have imagined for him might read, "And yet, this buffoon, this Fortunato . . . 'is rich, respected, admired; he is happy, as once I was' (p. 276). *He* is the heir of Fortune!" And so Montresor proceeds to demonstrate the illegitimacy of this heir.

The heraldic emblem represents all the irony of life that Fortunato cannot comprehend. But it is the more interesting, I think, for what it says of Poe's knowledge of his evil protagonist (the two being so often equated in Poe's case). For the emblem suggests a deeper motivation that Montresor does not understand, either, but

which Poe seems to have built upon. The Latin verb in the motto makes clear what is clear anyway—that Montresor identifies himself with the golden foot, ponderously triumphing over the lashing serpent.² When he holds up the dire image before Fortunato's unseeing eyes, he has in mind no doubt the golden legitimacy of his vengeance, a just and unquestionable retribution for the thousand lacerations he has borne in silence. He will trod him into the ground, and indeed he does seal poor Fortunato in stone.

Such is Montresor's reading of the emblem, it seems reasonably clear; but another reading—Poe's, I think—does not so easily identify Montresor with the foot. The snake is the more obvious choice. Secrecy, cunning, serpentine subtlety—these are the themes Montresor demonstrates best of all. And the huge, golden boot fits very snugly the Fortunato that Montresor presents to us—large, powerful, and very clumsy. The larger story shows very well how to read the emblem: a giant has blindly stepped on a snake.

Moreover, to arrive at my main point, the emblem represents a scene of mutual destruction. Allegorically speaking, the foot and the serpent are locked together in a death embrace: neither can escape the ironic bond that is between them. Through this allegory, then, I want to point to the deeper relationship between the two men, a deeper motive for murder, and, finally, a deep, ineffably horrible sense of retribution for the crime. This last may be especially difficult to see, in view of the fact that much of the slow horror of the tale derives from just that sense that Montresor has indeed escaped retribution for his deed, that has acted out his readers' most terrible phantasy: to murder "without conscience." This is the chief burden of his demonstration, told with appropriately dry matter-of-fact-ness. He ends by letting us know he has lived fifty triumphant years since the murder of "the noble Fortunato." My allegory, then, is certainly not Montresor's.

Is it Poe's? I shall say that Fortunato rather ironically represents the familiar Poe *doppelgänger*, and that, as in Poe's earlier, more explicit allegory, "William Wilson," the double corresponds with conscience. (That "with" is a nice hedge for the moment.) The correspondence is unmistakably pat in the earlier story; "Cask" suggests that Poe's command of his theme had considerably deepened in that the double now is a reversed image—a "negative" double, if you will, an ironic double. (Well, all doubles are; I mean something further in that the double is not recognized "as such" by Montresor.) I think most readers have noticed the rather perfect symmetry of opposition between Montresor and Fortunato; most readers should, for that is the chief burden of Montresor's systematic demonstration. Montresor frames a "facade-system" to deny his double, the irony being that he denies him so systematically that he ends by creating a perfect double-in-reverse. The analogy with a photographic positive and its negative is rather exact here—not because life operates so, but because of Montresor's compulsive program, his obsessional wish to demonstrate that "He is not I." Or: "I am not he." The right emphasis ought to emerge from the demonstration to follow.

I think I need mention only a few instances of the systematic oppositions that Montresor's procrustean method presents to us, enough to recall its obsessive symmetry. Most importantly, Fortunato is broadly drawn as a character entirely befitting his carnival motley and clownish bells. He appears as the open, gullible extrovert, an innocent possessed of that same ignorant vanity that caused the original fall from grace; he thinks he knows enough to sample the apple the serpent tempts him with. He believes the sacred Amontillado is meant for *him*, but he is a drunkard, Montresor lets us know, certainly not a man of his companion's fine taste. Every delicacy, every pearl of ironic distinction, is utterly lost on this man: "He is not I; I am not he."

But it should be said that Montresor more than once obliquely acknowledges that there is more to Fortunato than his portrait is designed to show. Montresor does acknowledge certain sympathies with Fortunato, which point to what is being denied by the rationalist's demonstration. He begins, "He had a weak point—this Fortunato—although in other regards he was a man to be respected and even feared" (p. 274). Here at least, in the beginning, Montresor is quite conscious of his portraiture's limitation, and perhaps that is enough to convince us that he is not himself caught up in his own "sincerity"—Montresor's word for his rival's weakness: "In painting and gemmery, Fortunato, like his countrymen, was a quack, but in the matter of old wines he was sincere" (ibid.). Montresor plays on this sincerity even as Fortunato practices on gullible

millionaires. Fortunato is hoist by his own petard, and Poe intimates that Montresor is too, I think; but of course the mine of irony lies deeper with him. If Fortunato's "sincerity" is his connoisseurship, Montresor's is his system. But that is the larger point; here let me emphasize their clearer level of affinity: they are both successful "quacks."

"The rumor of a relationship"—the phrase is from "William Wilson"—sifts out in a few of Montresor's oft-noted "slips." One most touching occurs when Fortunato is near death. Montresor speaks of "a sad voice, which I had difficulty in recognizing as that of the noble Fortunato."

The epithet may be taken as an obvious piece of sarcasm in keeping with the general ironic tenor, but I do not find that Montresor allows himself the double-edge when addressing "you who so well know the nature of my soul" (ibid.). Then he keeps to hard, dry understatement of fact. (An exception might be Montresor's final utterance: "*In pacet requiescat.*" And even then, if there is indeed a bond between them. . . .)

And most readers have noted this piece of apparent rationalization: "There came forth [from out the niche] only a jingling of bells. My heart grew sick—on account of the catacombs" (p. 279). There is also Montresor's failure to satisfy the "definitive" conditions he has set down for himself, the code of honorable vengeance. "A wrong is unredressed when retribution overtakes its redresser," Montresor says (p. 274), and whether he satisfies that clause is being debated here. "It is equally unredressed when the avenger fails to make himself felt as such to him who has done the wrong." Satisfaction is not debatable here; Montresor fails, for of course Fortunato never knows why he dies. He does not know the avenger "as such." Indeed, his nemesis has gone to great lengths to show that Fortunato is not *capable* of knowing such a man. He merely knows that Montresor has deceived him and that his fortune has run out. To connect with our larger theme, then, Montresor has failed "definitively" to achieve his vengeance in a way that suggests he does not understand its motive much more than does Fortunato. Why *did* he fail? It would have been simple enough to state the formal motive: You have wronged me thus and so; therefore you die. Whether we explain it as a prideful blindness (system always assumes its rationale is self-evident) or as an unwillingness to raise the ambiguous question, the irony of Montresor's "oversight" derives deep from the common substance of the two apparently opposed characters. As the emblem foretold, Montresor is boned with Fortunato and "dies" with him.

But it is the "mocking echo" motif that is most suggestive of the two men's relationship. (I take the phrase from Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown," another kind of double story.) Montresor's chosen method of demonstration and torment is to resound Fortunato's innocent words, striking a sinister edge in them known only to himself and his sole confidant, his reader. I am suggesting something further, a strange case of what one might call "murderous identification." I am thinking of the obvious case of "William Wilson," in which the protagonist learns too late the retribution for slaying one's conscience. Two examples: When Fortunato at last realizes his murderer's intentions, he vainly tries to humor him.

"... But is it not getting late? Will they not be awaiting us at the palazzo, the Fortunato and the rest? 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!" (p. 279).

And Fortunato is heard no more, silenced at last by his own words thrust back at him. Certainly the most horrific—because so understated—example of this diabolical doubling occurs immediately preceding this last. While Montresor has been laying the tiers of his masonry, Fortunato has been sobering up and presumably comprehending the imminence of his death. "... a low moaning cry from the depth of the recess. It was *not*

the cry of a drunken man" (p. 278). This is followed by a long and "obstinate" silence. When the wall is nearly completed, "A succession of loud and shrill screams, bursting suddenly from the throat of the chained form, seemed to thrust me violently back" (p. 278). Montresor quickly puts down his momentary fright and reassures himself of the "solid fabric of the catacombs." Then, "I reapproached the wall, I replied to the yells of him who clamored. I reechoed—I aided—I surpassed them in volume and in strength. I did this, and the clamor grew still" (p. 278). I have always wanted to see a skilled actor play that scene; rather, two skilled actors. Fine points matter especially here, to see in Montresor's performance just that fine, ironic blend of "quackery" and "sincerity." Fortunato's dazed agony would be a study, too, as he witnesses the weird spectacle of this devil out-clamoring his victim's agonies—eerie harmonics there. And perhaps in this terrible way, Montresor demonstrates how one defeats the double—by beating him at his own game, doubling *him* up. Just as the subtler quack dupes the lesser, so perhaps Montresor "re-echoes" an "echoer."

Again, the parallel with "William Wilson" helps here. There it was the uncanny voice of the double-as-conscience that was most devastating.³ "*And his singular whisper, it grew the very echo of my own . . .*" (p. 632). But William Wilson was not so well defended as Montresor; he tried the direct frontal assault and lost. Montresor, it would seem, achieves his triumph by reversing roles with his double, in effect *usurping* the double's occupation. Now *he* becomes the menacing echo and sends his double to the doom meant for himself, as it happened to Wilson.

By systematically denying every impulse represented by "the noble Fortunato," Montresor perhaps restores the perfect, lucid order that prevailed when the Montresors "were a great and numerous family" (p. 276). That is to say, a mental equilibrium, false though it may be, has been restored. I am speculating now that the decline of the Montresor family represented a devastation of disorder to the compulsive Montresor, signifying to him the price of his impulsivity. I suggest this term, of course, because it is the direct antithesis of the cool, controlled character Montresor represents himself to be. I have tried to show Montresor's ambivalence toward the impulsive parvenue, the childlike Fortunato, indeed innocent to the end since he never "knows." As in "William Wilson," Montresor is "galled . . . by the rumor of a relationship" (p. 631), but in spite of the double's "continual spirit of contradiction, I could not bring myself to hate him altogether" (p. 630). Who is "the noble Fortunato"?

In "William Wilson," Poe makes it absolutely clear that the double represents conscience; such a parallel is not so clear in "Cask," but it is the case, I think. Fortunato is not the interdictory conscience of "William Wilson," but he is conscience-related: he is guileless, trusting innocence. It may be misleading to call him conscience, but *his* death is required to slay conscience. If it is not so clear that Fortunato corresponds to conscience, perhaps the blame (or credit) may be laid to Montresor's elaborate plan of denial. If Fortunato is a double-as-conscience, such an idea is not likely to be directly verified by a man whose one great wish is to portray himself as a man—nay, *the* man—without conscience. Indeed, the murder of Fortunato might be thought of as a "test case" to confirm just that notion: a man kills his conscience and rests in peace for fifty years. Surely the horror of Poe's little gem rests on the fantasy of the crime without consequences. If a man might do that, as every boy has dreamed of doing, where is "the public moral perspective"? The disposal of a rival becomes as simple as a child's "omnipotent" wish that he should "go away."

"William Wilson" tells the story of a man who murdered his conscience and thus himself; the same story is at work in "Cask," I submit, but with the great difference that Wilson recognizes his folly, while Montresor steadfastly refuses to. This significant difference is at least one reason why I find "Cask" much the more interesting story. Wilson's recognition satisfies, perhaps too easily, our own conscientious understanding of the way things ought to be; Montresor is more difficult, he challenges that understanding. He makes claims on us, if we take him seriously, that Wilson does not. Wilson, for all his prodigality, is, after all, "one of us," the difference being of degree. But Montresor, like Iago, stands in the line of Machiavellians who assert that the public moral perspective is but a façade by which knaves are stung and puppies drowned. We may say that Montresor is at heart a tormented sinner like Wilson, but it requires rather more subtlety to show it, and the

villain is not likely to own it when we do.

The question of "comeuppance" in the two stories is a measure of their relative subtlety. In "William Wilson," poetic justice is clear if not profound: He slew his conscience and thus himself. Poe clearly emphasized an allegorical understanding and his story serves that purpose admirably well. In "The Cask of Amontillado," the same idea is intimated, but much more ambiguously and with formidable qualifications that make its meaning less easily satisfying. That is, though a reader may discern significant chinks in Montresor's armor, the armor remains—for a lifetime, he tells us. The armor represents a powerful lie, and it is important not to underestimate its power. Its felt presence stands in defiance of any mere allegorical, or purely intellectual, understanding. It is disturbing, it sustains the muted horror of this story, and is not as easily dismissed, I think, as in James Gargano's formulation: "With a specious intellectuality, common to Poe's violent men, Montresor seeks to escape from his own limitations by imagining them as imposed upon him from beyond the personality by outside force. But the force is a surrogate of the self, cozening [the] man toward damnation with all the brilliant intrigue Montresor uses in destroying Fortunato."⁴ All which I most potently believe, but I hold it not honesty to have it thus set down, as Hamlet replies to *his* own speech. In the "damnation" of the criminal Montresor, I believe, in theory. Theological grounds being what they are not these days, I might make the case in the good humanistic tradition Gargano espouses. To gain precision and authority, I might go further to document, on psychoanalytic grounds, the suffering that must lie at the heart of "the compulsion neurotic." (I think that is the correct classification.) But, alas, these are general and even problematic premises; they do inform my understanding of Poe's story, but they tend to pale before the immediacy of Montresor's defiant evil. The truth of the story, its meaning, must acknowledge that dilemma of the reader—unless, of course, as is common, we want merely to use the story as "case" to illustrate doctrine. The slow horror of the story rests ultimately on the reader's ambivalent wish-belief that Montresor did indeed triumph, that he did indeed sin with impunity: that he *did* slay his conscience. When Poe had Montresor address his story to "you, who so well know the nature of soul,"—alluding perhaps to the *reader's* role as ironic double—I do not think he intended an easy irony.

Notes

¹ *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*, Modern Library Edition with an introduction by Hervey Allen (New York: Random House, 1938), 276. All subsequent references to Poe stories are to this edition.

² See Kathryn Montgomery Harris, "Ironic Revenge in Poe's 'The Cask of Amontillado,'" *Studies in Short Fiction*, 6 (1969), 334. Ms. Harris notes that the heraldic emblem is suggested by "the curse upon the serpent in Genesis 3:14. This is not an image of impartial revenge, but the traditional representation of the Church militant triumphing over the forces of evil in retribution for Adam's fall."

³ Cf. Fenichel on "the auditive origin of the superego" in *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis* (New York: Norton, 1945), p. 431.

⁴ "The Cask of Amontillado': A Masquerade of Motive and Identity," *Studies in Short Fiction*, 4 (1967), 126.

Criticism: John Clendenning (essay date 1977)

SOURCE: "Anything Goes: Comic Aspects in 'The Cask of Amontillado'," in *American Humor: Essays Presented to John C. Gerber*, edited by O. M. Brack, Jr., Arete Publications, 1977, pp. 13-26.

[In the following essay, Clendenning details the story's parody of Catholic rites and enological errors, identifying Montresor and Fortunato as classic comic figures.]

The reader who seeks guidance by perusing the "Preface" to Poe's *Tales of The Grotesque and Arabesque* (1840) may feel justifiably exasperated. Instead of finding definitions which might help to explain the book's title and thus lead to formal distinctions between the two aspects of Poe's fiction, the reader is confronted with the evasive assertion that the key terms, *grotesque* and *arabesque*, are self-evident, that the stories themselves demonstrate the difference. "The epithets 'Grotesque' and 'Arabesque'," he says at the outset, "will be found to indicate *with sufficient precision* the prevalent tenor of the tales here published."¹ Does Poe mean that the terms describe two separate types of story or two elements blended in each of the stories? Though critics have generally assumed the former meaning, Poe's remarks seem to give credence to the latter. His singular phrase, "the prevalent tenor of the tales," and his stated desire "to preserve . . . a certain unity of design" suggest that Poe intended no disharmony between the *grotesque* and the *arabesque*, the crude and the fantastic, the comic and the serious. But surely to read the *Tales* is to be convinced of a fundamental difference between "Morella" and "Lionizing," between "William Wilson" and "The Man That Was Used Up," between "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "The Duc De L'Omelle," and so on throughout the book. The first type of story—the arabesque—is serious, gothic, psychological; its "thesis" is the "terror . . . of the soul." The other stories—the grotesques—are outrageous comedies, cutting satires; they never terrorize, but merely amuse by means of exaggerated ridicule. If both types share common materials—exotic settings, freakish characters, and violent action—the grotesques disengage the reader's sympathy with absurd juxtapositions and linguistic byplay. In the world of Poe's grotesques kings are fools, philosophers are drunks, and physical mutilation is merely a joke.

Still one must come to terms with Poe's claim that there is a "prevalent tenor" and a "certain unity" throughout the *Tales*, and by implication, throughout his fiction in general. Is there nothing serious in the grotesques? Are the arabesques entirely lacking in humorous or satirical elements? To find positive answers to these questions one must examine the various levels on which Poe's stories operate.² Such an inquiry leads to the most fruitful criticism of his art; for Poe, at his best, provides a rich texture that allows one to discover new meaning in successive layers. "The Cask of Amontillado," one of Poe's later arabesques and clearly one of his finest stories, will provide an illustration of my thesis that, although the grotesque and the arabesque are often distinct kinds of fiction, they can function effectively as different, but harmonized levels in the same story. Two overlooked grotesque or comic levels will be emphasized.

I

When "The Cask of Amontillado" is first encountered, usually during one's adolescence, it is enjoyed as the simplest of gothic tales, complete with a sinister villain who leads his unwitting victim through subterranean corridors toward a cold-blooded murder by means of premature burial. As the reader's sophistication grows an appreciation of Poe's stylistic achievement develops. At this level the story is praised for its economy, control, rhythm, unity—in short, its sustained effect: no other story more perfectly illustrates Poe's artistic powers. Another level introduces the psychological aspects. "The Cask" is thus seen as a concentrated study of controlled murderous rage working on a blind victim who gradually awakens through a series of carefully implied states to a knowledge of his destiny. One deeper layer opens up the ironic structure of the story. The names are most obviously ironic: "Fortunato" means both "lucky" and "fated"; "Montresor" suggests "monster," but also, if traced to its French origin, the name combines the words *montrer* (to show) and *sort* (fate). Thus the one who shows fate meets his fated victim with the cheerful greeting: "My dear Fortunato, you are luckily met."³ The time of the year also has its ironic dimension: it is the carnival season, and "carnival" is traceable to the Italian *carne* + *levare* (to put away the flesh), the irony of which the luckless Fortunato has not anticipated. Consider also the characters' costumes: wearing "tight-fitting parti-striped dress, . . . his head surmounted by the conical cap and bells,"⁴ Fortunato is unwittingly dressed to play the role of the perfect dunce: in contrast, Montresor's black silk mask and roquelaire suggest that he has deliberately dressed in the guise of an executioner. The action of the story, like the characters and setting, is governed by a series of ironies. Although, as is gradually revealed, Montresor has elaborately prepared the scene of the murder, it is Fortunato who suggests that they go to the vaults. Repeatedly Montresor urges Fortunato to turn back, but is

always answered with renewed determination to push forward. When Montresor expresses concern for his victim's health, Fortunato insists, "I shall not die of a cough," to which Montresor replies, "True—true."⁵ A moment later Fortunato proposes a toast "to the buried that repose around us" and is joined by Montresor who drinks "to your long life."⁶ Again, when Montresor describes his coat of arms and motto—"*Nemo me impune lacessit*"—Fortunato says "Good!"⁷ And finally when Fortunato questions Montresor's claim of being a mason and is shown a trowel as proof, he exclaims, surprised but still uncomprehending, "You jest."⁸

These patterns of ironic detail are principally responsible for the story's popularity. The more deeply it is read the more it seems to offer. With newly discovered ironies one is able to pass from one level of sophistication to others. And thus, the story that is universally enjoyed by children remains a fascinating literary experience for adults. With maturity, for example, comes the more advanced pleasure of recognizing that in one important and ironic sense Montresor, as much as or possibly more than Fortunato, is the victim. When the murder is completed, Montresor feels sick. He feels none of the pleasures of triumph, fulfilled vengeance, or purged rage. Fifty years after the fact, he is still tormented by his anger and is compelled to relive the incident by retelling it. Thus Montresor, who needed to murder with impunity, though never caught and punished by external authority, becomes his own merciless punisher.

Irony does indeed constitute the art of "The Cask of Amontillado." Furthermore, it is through irony that Poe has blended and harmonized the arabesque and the grotesque. There is a comic absurdity in irony. To discover that things are not what they seem is to find a pattern disfigured. Something won't fit, is out of place, discordant. The murder of a clown. Such disfigurement is the prominent feature of Poe's grotesque. The story is serious, it does study the psychology of rage and terror, but at the same time it is funny, even grimly hilarious. Bearing close kinships to the burlesque, Poe's grotesque irony involves the deliberate cultivation of the crude: it is art defying art.

II

So far we have been traveling over relatively familiar territory. It is well known that there is a comic aspect in Poe's fiction and that "The Cask of Amontillado" is richly ironic. Other levels of irony, however, have not been so clearly identified. One of these is indicated through the last words of the story: "*In pace requiescat!*" Literally meaning, "May he rest in peace," this remark has two apparent meanings. First, it is odd that a murderer should offer a traditional burial prayer to his victim; one might suppose that an element of sarcasm is mixed with the verbal irony. But, on the other hand, one could argue that Montresor does literally hope that Fortunato will rest in peace—bodily if not spiritually, for if the body is found Montresor will have to explain. A third irony, one that opens up a new level of the grotesque in the story, is reached when we ask the source of this concluding remark, "*In pace requiescat!*" More familiar in a slightly different word order, "*Requiescat in pace*" is one of the concluding prayers in Roman Catholic Masses for the Dead, where it replaces the traditional dismissal: "*Ite. Missa est.*"⁹ That Montresor should conclude the story of his murder with the prayer that concludes the Requiem Mass is alone ironical, but when we unite this detail with other features of the story, it is clear that Montresor has a more comprehensive purpose.

My point is this: Montresor is performing his murder in the fashion of a grotesque mockery of Holy Mass. A supreme connoisseur, Montresor must not only kill with impunity, but also with style. He has chosen, therefore, a ritualistic murder, and the model of his ritual is the Burial Mass, one of the several Masses for the Dead. Performing this ritual he takes the role of the celebrant. His roquelaire, which at one level of irony suggests his role as executioner, serves as the appropriate priestly vestment. This kneelength cape slips over the head and hangs over the shoulders, covering both front and back. A roquelaire is, therefore, nearly indistinguishable from a chasuble, the predominant vestment of the Mass, and a black roquelaire is liturgically appropriate to a Mass for the Dead. Thus the grotesque irony grows richer as Montresor plays the dual roles of executioner and celebrant. Returning to his name, we may observe that "Montresor" not only means "show fate" and suggests "monster," it also contains an echo of "monsignor."

Another indication of this level of irony occurs in the second paragraph of the story as Montresor describes the background of his vendetta: "I continued, as was my wont, to smile in his face, and he did not perceive that my smile *now* was at the thought of his immolation."¹⁰ The key word here is "immolation," which specifically refers to a sacrificial killing. If, as appears to be the case, Montresor is dedicated to the task of avenging himself against the alleged insults of Fortunato, it is difficult to see how the murder can be described as a sacrifice. What has Montresor to lose? What is he willingly giving up? On the level of vengeance the murder of Fortunato is no immolation at all. But if we connect this detail to the final ironic prayer—"*In pace requiescat!*"—Montresor's associated meaning is clear: he is thinking of Fortunato as an absurd Christ figure, Christ dressed as a clown. The official meaning of the Holy Mass, according to the Roman Catholic Church since the Council of Trent, is the symbolic re-enactment of the crucifixion of Christ. In the words of the Council, "The sacrifice offered on the altar is the same which was offered on Calvary. . . ."¹¹ Christ is the supreme scapegoat of the Christian world: he is the Lamb of God who takes upon himself the sins of the world; through his blood man is redeemed. Upon this belief the Catholic Church was founded, and as a constant reminder of this central drama, the Mass not only commemorates, but re-enacts the crucifixion of Christ. When Montresor decides upon murder, and decides to perform it according to the drama of a Burial Mass, he naturally associates Fortunato with the immolation of Christ, the dunce with the redeemer. The grotesque irony of the situation appeals to the mind of Montresor, and he gets the most out of it.

The setting is carefully arranged, not only with appropriate vestments, but with other trappings of churchly ritual. The murder is arranged in the catacombs, historically a burial place of early Christians who had gone underground to escape the persecution of the Roman Emperors. The earliest Masses were, in fact, celebrated in these catacombs, frequently on tombs, a fact which is still reflected in the shape of altars in Catholic Churches and more explicitly by the traditional enclosing of saints' relics, especially those of martyrs, within the altar stone at the spot where the priest places the Sacred Host. In further setting the scene Montresor has provided candles on sconces which he and Fortunato carry into the vaults, wine which is available underground, and bells that are conveniently attached to Fortunato's conical cap.

These bells play an important role in Montresor's grotesque requiem. Their association with Fortunato suggests that he is not only the Clown-Christ, but also the Clown-Acolyte, unconsciously performing his assigned part in the ritual. Much of the dialogue does suggest the versicles, the verse-response interaction between the priest and the altar boy. The Mass begins with the following prayer:

Ant. Introibo ad altare Dei. (I will go in unto the altar of God.)

R. Ad Deum qui lætificat juventutem meam. (Unto God, who giveth joy to my youth.)¹²

Early in "The Cask" this exchange is echoed: "Come, let us go." "Whither?" "To your vaults."¹³ Sometimes the dialogue fits together precisely as verse and response, providing strong echoes of the versicles, as this toast, for instance, illustrates: "I drink," he said, "to the buried that repose around us." "And I to your long life."¹⁴ Observing his duties as Acolyte, Fortunato rings his bells at appropriate moments. The bells ring four times: first when they reach the bottom of the stairs to the catacombs, next when they open a bottle of wine and exchange toasts, third when they drink from a bottle of wine, and finally at the end of the story when Fortunato is walled up in his tomb. This last ringing of the bells can be considered a closing irony, but otherwise unrelated to the ritual. The first three ringings, however, correspond directly to the use of the bells in the Mass. The bells are first rung at the beginning of the Canon, which is, according to liturgical literature, "the very heart of the Mass."¹⁵ The prefatory prayers to this section emphasize the coming of the Lord. The priest directs the congregation to lift up their hearts and to give thanks, and as the bells are ringing, he concludes his prayers with the exclamation: "*Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini. Hosanna in excelsis.*" ("Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest!")¹⁶ The grotesque counterpart to this divine advent is Fortunato, who has just reached the floor of the catacombs, drunkenly ringing his silly bells to announce that the Clown-Christ is coming. The second ringing of the bells in the Mass occurs at the

Consecration, the changing of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ. After first blessing the bread, the priest takes the chalice of wine in his hands and consecrates it while repeating the words of Christ at the Last Supper: "*ACCIPITE, ET BIBITE EX EO OMNES. HIC EST ENIM CALIX SANGUINIS MEI, NOVI ET ÆTERNI TESTAMENTI: MYSTERIUM FIDEI: QUI PRO VOBIS ET PRO MULTIS EFFUNDETUR IN REMISSIONEM PECCATORUM.*" ("TAKE AND DRINK YE ALL OF THIS, FOR THIS IS THE CHALICE OF MY BLOOD, OF THE NEW AND ETERNAL TESTAMENT: THE MYSTERY OF FAITH: WHICH SHALL BE SHED FOR YOU AND FOR MANY UNTO THE REMISSION OF SINS.")¹⁷ This, the holiest part of the Mass, is parodied by Montresor as he pauses before a rack of wine bottles:

Here I knocked off the neck of a bottle which I drew from a long row of its fellows that lay upon the mould.

"Drink," I said, presenting him the wine.

He raised it to his lips with a leer. He paused and nodded to me familiarly, while his bells jingled.¹⁸

Every detail in this scene is designed to invert all that is most sacred in the Church: the mystery of transubstantiation, re-enacted in the Mass, is here imitated irreverently and violently by the breaking of a wine bottle; the consecration prayer is grossly abbreviated to a single, offhand imperative, "Drink"; and as the Clown-Acolyte rings his bells, his lips twist into a leer. The approach of Holy Communion in the Mass is signaled by the third ringing of the bells. Prayers offered as preparation for receiving the sacrament emphasize the confession of sins, redemption through Christ, the unworthiness of man, and the promise of life everlasting. Humility and renunciation are the dominant attitudes of this part of the Mass, and to add emphasis to this mood, the faithful are directed to perform the gesture of penance, the striking of the breast, as they repeat three times the prayer: "Lord, I am not worthy that Thou shouldst enter under my roof; say but the word and my soul shall be healed."¹⁹ The reverse of this act of contrition is practiced by both Montresor and Fortunato. The coat of arms and family motto—"*Nemo me impune lacessit*"—which Montresor boastfully describes emphasizes the fact that he is devoted to a life of aggression. He will permit no insult; he will crush the serpent that attacks him. A Monster-Monsignor he offers Fortunato wine from a broken bottle. The latter empties it "at a breath," throws the bottle upwards, and makes a "grotesque" gesture. The reverse of the breast-striking Christian gesture of penance, this gesture is practiced by the secret and anti-Catholic fraternity of Freemasons; as such, the gesture is sacrilegious.

Thus, unwittingly, Fortunato is playing his assigned part in a parody of the Mass and, by implication, of the Church in general, making Montresor's sin not only more horrible, but also grotesquely comic when it is performed according to sacred ritual.

Another aspect of this mockery of faith is clarified by religious significance of the time of year. Montresor has decided to murder Fortunato "during the supreme madness of the carnival season," that is during the festivities that precede Lent. Since it is "the supreme madness" or climax of this season, it is implied that the day is Mardi Gras, the day before Ash Wednesday. In actual fact, the murder occurs after midnight, so it is really the first day of Lent. The special prayers or Proper for Ash Wednesday are important in terms of Montresor's parody, for just as he reverses the religious attitudes surrounding a Burial Mass, he also ironically copies the spirit of Ash Wednesday.

The season of Lent, the forty days preceding Easter, gives unusual emphasis to the inner life. It is a season of spiritual growth through penance and renunciation; it is a season of purification through suffering, "a fervent ascent to Calvary."²⁰ The liturgy of Lent gives constant attention to these moods, but the liturgy of Ash Wednesday, being the first day of the season, gives special emphasis to the predominant Lenten themes: humility, fasting, repentance, divine mercy, Christ's sacrifice, and redemption. Typical of the Lenten mood is

the antiphon for Ash Wednesday: *"Immutemur habitu, in cinere et cilicio: jejunemus, et ploremus ante Dominum: quia multum misericors est dimittere peccata nostra Deus noster."* ("Let us change our garments for ashes and sackcloth: let us fast and lament before the Lord: for plenteous in mercy is our God to forgive our sins.")²¹ All that Montresor is and does is antithetical to the Lenten ideals of fasting, lamenting, practicing humility, seeking mercy and forgiveness of sins. Not only is he determined to sin and to sin violently, but to design his acts as monstrous and even artfully grotesque sins against the Church and its Holy Mass.

III

The foregoing level of "The Cask of Amontillado" presents Montresor as the supreme connoisseur who has perfected the art of murder. Though supremely cruel, the murder is performed with complete mastery of style and form. It is a majestic joke, multifaceted, with comic dimensions. No act of impulsive rage, it is planned in every detail and utterly controlled. It is the perfect expression of a man who is, as he proclaims himself, a connoisseur, in wine and in everything. At least it would seem so.

But is it? Viewed from another level, the crime seems not only grotesque, but simply gross. Aren't the ironies finally a bit too heavy handed? Isn't the form of Montresor's murder really very crude and obvious? Doesn't the plot succeed only because the victim is such a fool? Examined on this level, the artful crime that Montresor has executed against Fortunato and the Church is simply base. Montresor would have the world regard him as a connoisseur of all the arts of life and death, but the more carefully he is regarded, the more he appears to be a fake.

The first indication of this deeper level of irony in the story comes in the third paragraph through Montresor's description of Fortunato:

He prided himself on his connoisseurship in wine. Few Italians have the true virtuoso spirit. For the most part their enthusiasm is adopted to suit the time and opportunity, to practice imposture upon the British and Austrian *millionaires*. In painting and gemmery, Fortunato, like his countrymen, was a quack, but in the matter of old wines he was sincere. In this respect I did not differ from him materially: I was skilful in the Italian vintages myself, and bought largely whenever I could.²²

The clear meaning of Montresor's evaluation is that Fortunato is a fake in all the arts except in wines: in this respect he is sincere. "Sincere" is, however, moderately evasive. At best it means that Fortunato's oenology is well intentioned. It does not mean that his claim of knowledge in wines is sound. Ironically, when Montresor identifies himself with this evaluation, he opens up his own possible incompetence. He asserts that he is "skilful in the Italian vintages," but if, like Fortunato, he is merely "sincere," his skill is at least problematic.

The problem of Montresor's oenological authority is illustrated repeatedly throughout the story. Take, for example, the names of two wines that are drunk as Montresor and Fortunato make their way through the catacombs. One of the wines, "Medoc," is mentioned twice, but without the accent mark which indicates pronunciation: correctly spelled, the wine is "Médoc." A minor error perhaps, but the spelling error indicates Montresor's lack of full authority in one of his favorite avocations. A more serious error occurs with the designation of "De Grave." No such wine exists. Montresor must be thinking of "Graves." Of course anyone but Montresor might conceivably make such mistakes, even the badly garbled second error. But one would suppose that he, who displays such careful attention to the details of his murder, would not be so careless about the names of his wines: for connoisseurs are, as a class, notoriously fussy.

One obvious way of explaining these errors is to refer them to Poe—to assume that he, not Montresor, simply didn't know wines. This does remain possible. In Poe's other works dealing with wines, spelling errors do occasionally find their way into the text. An interesting example appears in the grotesque tale "Some Passages

in the Life of a Lion: (Lionizing)"; in a list of dinner guests, the narrator mentions:

There was Bibulus O'Bumper. He touched upon Latour and Markbrünen; upon Mousseux and Chambertin; upon Richebourg and St. George; upon Haubrion, Léonville, and Médoc; upon Barac and Preignac; upon Grave, and upon St. Péray. He shook his head at Clos de Vougeot, and told, with his eyes shut, the difference between Sherry and Amontillado.²³

Of the sixteen wines mentioned in this passage three are misspelled: Léonville instead of Léoville, Barac instead of Barsac, and Gráve instead of Graves. This last error, since it is similar to the one made in "The Cask," does suggest that Poe was not sufficiently familiar with this wine. On the other hand, three errors compared to thirteen correct spells (note that Médoc is spelled correctly!) is not hard evidence for Poe's ignorance. On the contrary, the passage suggests that Poe had remarkable knowledge of wines.²⁴ Furthermore, since O'Bumper like all the guests in the story, is being revealed as a fool and a fake, the errors can justifiably be considered his, not Poe's. Particularly interesting is his pronouncement upon "the difference between Sherry and Amontillado"; since the same odd point is exchanged between Montresor and Fortunato in "The Cask," this supposed "difference" will be analyzed later. It is not possible, therefore, to state unequivocally that the misspellings in "The Cask" are not deliberate and informative ways that Poe has chosen to reveal Montresor's impostures. The evidence does, in fact, suggest that the misspellings are intentional and significant details, not flaws but subtle aspects of a highly artful story.

This view gets further support from qualities of the wines selected and the ways they are handled. In the first place, Médoc and Graves are districts within the Bordeaux region. Lacking more specific designations the vintages with these names are presumed to be table wines; Médoc is usually red, Graves is white. The lack of specification also suggests that these wines are quite ordinary; a fine vintage would carry the name of one of the more distinguished chateaux. Now it is highly unlikely that one true connoisseur would offer another an ordinary table wine under the circumstances described in the story. A liqueur, a Cognac, or even sherry would be appropriate as a late evening drink, but a casual reaching out for the nearest bottle of *vin ordinaire* gives unmistakable evidence of a crude taste. And not only does Montresor merely reach out, he takes the bottles roughly in hand and smashes them off at the neck. He then offers the jagged bottles to Fortunato who drinks them—at least one of them—in a single gulp. This method of sampling the stores of Montresor's wine vaults is utterly inconsistent with the practices, even the most informal practices, of the true connoisseur. It is well known that there is an elaborate ritual connected with the opening and tasting of wine, for unlike distilled beverages, wine is a living substance and must be approached with great gentleness and dignity. Abrupt movements, such as we have described in the story, are absolutely forbidden by the well honored codes of the connoisseur. Every step is prescribed: removing the bottle from its rack, cutting the seal, drawing out the cork, testing the cork, savouring the wine, giving it a time to "breathe," pouring a small amount into an appropriate glass, testing its colour, savouring it again, and finally sipping a bit. The violent disrespect for this ritual, demonstrated by both Montresor and Fortunato, is alone sufficient proof that they are both "quacks." They may be "sincere," but nothing more.

This leads us to the most interesting oenological peculiarity in the story, the highly valued pipe of Amontillado. The first odd fact is that Montresor apparently thinks that Amontillado is an Italian wine. His remark—"I was skilful in the Italian vintages myself, and bought largely whenever I could"—leads directly to his telling Fortunato that he has "received a pipe of what passes for Amontillado." But Amontillado is not an Italian wine, but one of the several varieties of Spanish sherry. This fact is coupled to a second peculiarity. When Montresor proposes that he consult Luchresi to determine the truth about his pipe of wine, Fortunato insists that Luchresi "cannot tell Amontillado from Sherry."²⁵ A moment later he repeats the charge, but reverses the terms: "and as for Luchresi, he cannot distinguish Sherry from Amontillado."²⁶ Fortunato presumably believes that sherry and Amontillado are similar but distinct wines, and that he alone is best qualified to discriminate. But since Amontillado is sherry, Fortunato's claim has the logical status of distinguishing between a roadster and an automobile. This peculiarity may be cleared up, of course, by

interpreting Fortunato's remark as forming a distinction between a species and its genus; he may be asserting, in other words, that he is able to identify Amontillado as a particular and especially excellent member of the sherry family. This interpretation, however, leads to further difficulties. Among these is the fact that the designation of a sherry as Amontillado does not imply the qualities of either excellence or scarcity. It is, like Médoc and Graves, a regional designation, and as such it describes certain general characteristics: it is medium dry, amber, and is noted for its distinct "nutty" flavor. No one familiar with wines would have any special difficulty identifying Amontillado. Also like Médoc and Graves, Amontillado varies widely in excellence and value. Owing doubtlessly to the fact that it is the mid-point between the pale, very dry Fino and the darker, sweeter Oloroso, Amontillado is very popular. It may be taken at any time in the day or night, with or without meals. If, in Spain, you order simply "Jerez," you will most likely get a glass of Amontillado. The popularity and universal acceptability of Amontillado make it the most available of all the sherries. By raising such a huge and silly fuss over a cask of Amontillado, Montresor and Fortunato are simply making their ignorance obvious. In poor Fortunato's case it is a fatal piece of foolishness.

The "errors" of "The Cask of Amontillado" are not, therefore, to be explained away by alleging the author's ignorance. Poe was extremely attentive to matters of detail, and could, as we have seen, display a clear, accurate knowledge of wines as well as a subtle pattern of religious parody. The misspellings of Médoc and Graves, the inappropriate selection of these wines, the outrageous mishandling of them, and especially the ignorance of a well-known wine such as Amontillado—these details are a vital part of a grotesque level of the story. They expose Montresor and Fortunato as imposters, whose sincerity is generically that of Laurel and Hardy. They are, in fact, essentially and finally comic characters; they belong to the tradition of burlesque humor, which one might argue is the most distinctly American of all the varieties of our traditions of native humor. Audaciously puffing themselves up to supreme heights, then collapsing in a remarkable display of oenological claptrap, they anticipate the Duke and the Dauphin of *Huckleberry Finn*.

The final consideration of this essay must be some attempt to reconcile the various levels of interpretation in the story. We begin with a tale of terror, the arabesque, and end with comic highjinks, the grotesque. One might suppose that Poe's compulsion to achieve "totality of effect" would preclude such seemingly antithetical readings of a story. On the other hand, a totality may have its laminations and remain one rather than several things. It is well to remember a sentence from "Marginalia," which Poe published in *Graham's Magazine* one month after "The Cask" appeared in *Godey's Lady's Book*, "The truth seems to be that genius of the highest order lives in a state of perpetual vacillation between ambition and *the scorn of it*."²⁷ This vacillation is artfully demonstrated in "The Cask of Amontillado." The story is a grim tale of terror; it is also a psychological story and a textbook illustration of finesse in writing the short story. But then Poe also introduces a grotesque element. He allows Montresor to perform his murder as a parody of the Burial Mass; he is allowed to have his triumph as an elaborate act of blasphemy, as a grotesque satire of the Roman Catholic Church. With this, the genius of the story reaches its climax of "ambition." But the "*scorn of it*" also has its part in the story. Poe turns against his self-styled artist-narrator. He scorns the ambition of Montresor and ruthlessly exposes him as a crude charlatan. In doing all this, Poe was firmly within the tradition of the American comic spirit. He was following the only obligatory rule of burlesque: Anything Goes!

Notes

¹*The Complete Works of Edgar Allen Poe*, ed. James A. Harrison (New York: Fred de Fav & Co., Publishers, 1902), 1: 150. Emphasis added. All quotations are from this so-called Virginia Edition—hereafter cited as *Works*.

² For other treatments of the comic levels of Poe's fiction, see Stephen L. Mooney, "The Comic in Poe's Fiction," *American Literature*, 33 (1962); 433-41; Walter Fuller Taylor, "Israfel in Motley," *Sewanee Review*, 42 (1934); 330-40.

³*Works*, 6: 168. The Harrison text of "The Cask of Amontillado" is based on the only authoritative version of the story: *Godey's Magazine and Lady's Book*, 33 (November, 1843); 216-18. Harrison's text is a literal transcription of Godey's text with the following exceptions:

<i>page: line (Works)</i>	<i>Harrison</i>	<i>Godey</i>
167: 6	definitely	definitively
171: 27	flagon	flacon
172: 14	route	rout
173: 23	must	will
174: 7	vibrations	vibration

⁴*Works*, 6: 168.

⁵*Works*, 6:170.

⁶*Works*, 6: 170-71.

⁷*Works*, 6: 171.

⁸*Works*, 6: 171-72.

⁹ Dom Gaspar Lefebvre, O. S. B., *Saint Andrew Daily Missal* (Saint Paul, Minn.: The E. M. Lohmann Co., 1952). p. 938. All liturgical quotations are from this text hereafter cited as *Daily Missal*.

¹⁰*Works*, 6: 167.

¹¹*Daily Missal*, p. vi.

¹²*Daily Missal*, pp. 890-91.

¹³*Works*, 6: 168-69.

¹⁴*Works*, 6: 170-71.

¹⁵*Daily Missal*, pp. 914-15.

¹⁶*Daily Missal*, pp. 914-15.

¹⁷*Daily Missal*, pp. 922-23.

¹⁸*Works*, 6: 170.

¹⁹*Daily Missal*, p. 933.

²⁰*Daily Missal*, p. 198.

²¹*Daily Missal*, p. 210.

²²*Works*, 6: 167-68.

²³*Works*, 2: 39.

²⁴ Other examples of Poe's accurate oenology are too numerous to cite here; see "The System of Dr. Tarr and Prof. Fether" (*Works*, 6:53-77); "The Angel of The Odd: An Extravaganza" (*Works*, 6:103-15); and "Bon-Bon" (*Works*, 2: 125-46). Not only are the wines in these stories correctly spelled, but their qualities and suitability to certain occasions are flawlessly described.

²⁵*Works*, 6: 168.

²⁶*Works*, 6: 169.

²⁷*Works*, 16 : 121.

Criticism: James W. Spisak (essay date 1979)

SOURCE: "Narration as Seduction, Seduction as Narration," in *The CEA Critic*, Vol. XLI, No. 2, January, 1979, pp. 26-9.

[In the following essay, Spisak considers Montresor's pleasure in telling his story as both the protagonist and the narrator.]

By assuming, with most readers, that the narrator of Poe's "Cask of Amontillado" is motivated by guilt to tell his tale, we miss the twin seduction he invites us to share. Besides apparently luring Fortunato to his doom, Montresor also draws the reader to partake in the pleasure he relives in telling the tale of his successful seduction. The narrator mentions his audience only once early in the tale, offering no indication as to why the listener should "so well know" him. There is no other evidence in the story of a real listener. Hence, the "you" seems to be a direct reference to the reader rather than to a third-person confessor. During the course of the story, the delight of the original seduction is reflected in the retelling, until the roles of protagonist and narrator climactically merge.

Poe's narrator enjoys telling his story, and has apparently done so many times. Opening the tale with a reworking of the cliché on insult and injury, Montresor provides a well-wrought explanation of his theories on punishment and revenge. He also tells us that he kept a smiling face for Fortunato, whom he still remembers as a worthy antagonist. This control is not characteristic of a man making a deathbed confession. Rather, it comes from one who has told his story with such relish and frequency that he has been able to master its subtleties and enjoy sharing them.

The informational tone of the first paragraph indicates that it should be taken at face value, that the narrator did, in fact, "punish with impunity." The emphasis on "*at length*" shows the anticipation Montresor felt in waiting to seduce Fortunato to punishment. Moreover, it shows that the pleasure is still enjoyed in the deliberate recounting of the event. Montresor has been smiling all along: the deceptive smile which he maintained in the early stages of his relationship with Fortunato took a sincere side when he began to realize Fortunato's immolation—a sacrifice, perhaps, to the ancestors who were the target of the instigating insult. The emphasis on "*now*" further suggests that the smile continues, that the rhetoric of narrating Fortunato's immolation rekindles the pleasure he is still unable to forego.

Montresor has been able to derive continual pleasure from this quasi-sexual rhetoric because it is the rhetoric of success. His seduction was successful because he knew the weaknesses of his victim and he enjoys narrating it because of the challenge Fortunato offered him: "he was a man to be respected and even feared." The logic and planning which Montresor tells us he used have certainly grown to perfection with the retelling

of the story, as seen by his clear description of Fortunato's dress and the memorable pleasure of wringing his hands. Montresor takes care to let us know that the meeting was arranged during "the supreme madness of the carnival season," at an hour when Fortunato was likely to be drunk. He then shows how flattery, pride, and gluttony were used in securing Fortunato's cooperation. Montresor flattered his victim by assuming he had a previous engagement, then appealed to his pride by reminding him of the availability of Luchresi, his competitor. Further, he offered a taste of Amontillado as a reward for Fortunato's being able to endure the nitre. Montresor's fervor in retelling all this is seen in the excitement he ascribes to Fortunato upon hearing of the rare wine. Montresor's repetition of "Amontillado," even though attributed to Fortunato, shows the pleasure he gains with each retelling of the story. At this point the narrator is beginning to relive the foreplay of his lustful actions. Montresor engages the reader with the same rhetoric he used on Fortunato.

The detail with which Montresor describes the trip back to his palazzo and down into the catacombs again makes us feel he has told this story before. Hence, we are more attentive and more willing to empathize with him. After having gone through "several suites" in the house and descending a "long and winding staircase," Montresor tells how he and his victim came "at length" (again) to the beginning of the catacombs. At this point Fortunato wanted to move onward, but Montresor lingered:

"The pipe," he said.

"It is farther on," said I; "but observe the white webwork which gleams from these cavern walls."

Fortunato then began to cough and could not speak "for many minutes." Montresor took this opportunity to savor the impact of his seduction by verbally surmising Fortunato's present situation: "We will go back; your health is precious. You are rich, respected, admired, beloved; you are happy, as once I was. You are a man to be missed." Montresor's remembering that he said this "with decision," along with the rich detail of the trip, indicates how much he still enjoys this lingering. His rhetorical pleasure grows as he boasts of his ironical reply to Fortunato's desire to move onward, despite his cough:

"Enough," he said; "the cough is a mere nothing; it will not kill me. I shall not die of a cough."

"True—true," I replied.

Such ambiguities provide the reciprocal link between Montresor's narration of Fortunato's seduction and his seduction of the reader by means of that narration.

Montresor's treatment of Fortunato's mockery again shows us a controlled narrator, one who has carefully edited his tale. When Montresor tells how he gave Fortunato the Medoc, we feel as though something is missing. Fortunato drank the draught "with a leer," toasting Montresor's ancestors: "'I drink,' he said, 'to the buried that repose around us.'" This mockery probably had some connection with the vague insult, of which Montresor naturally tells us very little. As storyteller he is more interested in pointing out the *double entendre* in his reply, letting the reader know that he alone possessed the secret of Fortunato's seduction: "'And I to your long life.'" Fortunato persisted in his antagonism by claiming to forget Montresor's coat of arms. The narrator described the family's arms matter-of-factly, leading up to the more important motto: "*Nemo me impune lacessit*.'" Fortunato's jocular reaction to the motto further enhances Montresor's pleasure in repeating it. Montresor is not threatened by Fortunato as he retells his story, so he is able to laugh last at these insults, thereby gaining the reader's involvement.

Montresor continues to derive pleasure from telling us how he tolerated Fortunato when he talks about the masonic gesture. Montresor has polished his story to the point that the reader sees him here as a seemingly

naive participant who reveals his true intentions when they can have their most shocking effect. When Fortunato made the "grotesque" masonic gesture, Montresor claimed he "did not understand" it. Montresor allowed him to spell it out and assert a feeling of superiority before he revealed the trowel "from beneath the folds" of his cloak. As with the motto, Montresor's pleasure was enhanced by Fortunato's reactions: "'You jest.'" Montresor did not deny this, but simply replaced his tool beneath his cloak. Recanting these exhibitionist pleasures, like the retelling of any good story, is just as satisfying as performing them: the reader is becoming, along with Fortunato, a victim of Montresor's captivity.

Montresor then leisurely describes the last stage in the verbal phase of his seduction. The length at which he describes the catacombs allows the reader—as the actual trip allowed Fortunato—to become completely taken in by him. Montresor caps this as he retells how he secured Fortunato's complete and final seduction by again mentioning Luchresi and the nitre. He wins the reader over by seemingly clearing his conscience: "'Once more let me *implore* you to return. No? Then I must positively leave you.'" Montresor delights in relating Fortunato's astonished cry for Amontillado and hence in reiterating his own success at having lured him to his doom: "'True,' I replied, 'the Amontillado.'"

When Montresor begins to recant the immolation itself, he becomes consumed by his story; rhetoric enables him to relive the quasi-sexual pleasure of the act, and his role as narrator merges with his role as protagonist. This brings the reader to a position parallel with that of Fortunato: we are taken in by Montresor's narration just as Fortunato was by his action. He recalls with detail that he began to work "vigorously," having uncovered the planted stone and mortar. His sadistic pleasures are enhanced as he remembers how Fortunato was shocked into sobriety. Montresor can now boast of his enjoyment of Fortunato's "low moaning cry," knowing that "it was *not* the cry of a drunken man." Distance and polish have also enabled him to downplay Fortunato's "obstinate silence," emphasizing instead that he stopped working to listen to his victim's subsequent attempt to escape the chains. Montresor lingers over describing the immolation in much the same way that he lingered over carrying it out. Both the act and the retelling of it have their climax in the orgasmic screaming in which Montresor partakes in order to silence his victim.

Montresor sustains his pleasure even after the climactic scream. The length at which he describes his placing the final stone reflects the satisfaction with which he did so. Montresor offers Fortunato's hideous laughter and barely recognizable "sad voice" as final evidence of the full impact of his actions. His pleasure is further enhanced when he is able, one last time, to play on the *double entendre* of Fortunato's words:

"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."

Fortunato's failure to reply (for whatever reason), which would have showed his continued suffering, made Montresor impatient. After calling twice more and finally throwing the torch through the remaining hole, Montresor's "heart grew sick" as he finally realized the climax of his quasi-sexual lust was past. Still unwilling to forego this pleasure completely, though, Montresor ascribed his heart-sickness to the dampness in the catacombs. He then decided to finish his job quickly rather than prolong his disappointment. Remembering his disappointment brings Montresor back to reality once again, and the pleasure of reliving the deed subsides. The pleasure of retelling it, though, continues; though Montresor the protagonist has faded, as narrator he still succeeds in seducing the reader to share his experience vicariously. He offers a sarcastic "*In pace requiescat!*" and a story, highly polished by fifty years' telling, which supports the tantalizing conclusion that one can, in fact, punish with impunity.

Criticism: Jay Jacoby (essay date 1979)

SOURCE: "Fortunato's Premature Demise in 'The Cask of Amontillado,'" in *Poe Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 2, December, 1979, pp. 30-1.

[In the following essay, Jacoby addresses the significance of Fortunato's silence.]

"The Cask of Amontillado" is occasionally read as a perverse success story of a perfectly executed revenge in which crime does pay,¹ and, more frequently, as a tale of cosmic and psychological retribution akin to "The Tell-Tale Heart," "The Black Cat," and "The Imp of the Perverse." Critics of the latter persuasion often point to the tale's pervasive irony, particularly Montresor's frustrated expectations of revenge. Early in the tale, Montresor posits two conditions for revenge. To fulfill the first, he "must not only punish, but punish with impunity. A wrong is unredressed when retribution overtakes its redresser" (*Works*, III, 1256). Critics have often discussed the irony involved with this condition, noting the setup of the tale as a death-bed confession and the mortal nature of Montresor's sin.² But they have neglected the second condition—that a wrong "is equally unredressed when the avenger fails to make himself felt *as such* to him who has done the wrong" (*Works*, III, 1256; italics mine)—even though it occasions further elucidating irony.

While Fortunato has been inebriated during much of his journey through the vaults, his intoxication quickly wears off after Montresor chains him in the recess. Fortunato is thus able to perceive the threat in Montresor's actions, but some question remains whether or not he recognizes Montresor as an avenger "as such." Regarding Montresor's motive, Fortunato is figuratively and literally left in the dark. It is to his auditor, not to Fortunato, that Montresor intimates his motive in alluding to the "thousand injuries of Fortunato" and his "insult." On this matter, Dorothy Foote argues that because Fortunato never received "an expressed or implied bill of redressment," he dies without fully comprehending Montresor's motives, thus leaving the second condition for revenge unfulfilled.³ This interpretation is insightful but incomplete, for it fails to take account of the implicit strategy of Montresor's revenge and the irony that emerges from its premature frustration.

Montresor's choice of the mode of execution—slow suffocation—suggests that he did not expect Fortunato to recognize his motive *immediately*, but to sober up and then, in walled-in solitude, to discern gradually the cumulative result of the "injuries" he had perpetrated on Montresor. The size of the recess—"in depth about four feet, in width three, in height six or seven" (*Works*, III, 1261)—is large enough to accommodate a lingering death and therefore Fortunato's dawning recognition of Montresor's motives. In terms of such a strategy, things start to go awry after Montresor echoes his victim's final cry, "*For the love of God, Montresor!*"⁴

What accounts for Fortunato's silence? Perhaps now wholly sober, he is resigned to his fate and unwilling to give Montresor the satisfaction of pleading for mercy, although this explanation is inconsistent with the multiple ironies that run through the tale and improbable after Montresor suddenly thrusts a torch at his victim. Francis Henninger speculates that Fortunato has gone mad and thus that Montresor's "vendetta is being worked out upon an animal,"⁵ an explanation which accords with the theme of frustrated expectations; but nothing in the story prepares us for sudden madness in Fortunato, much less for silent madness. A more likely hypothesis—one consistent with Montresor's responses—is that Fortunato's silence is due to his death, which occurs long before his tormentor desires.

The terror of Fortunato's situation, which precipitates a "succession of loud and shrill screams" (*Works*, III, 1262), and his physical condition, indicated by a persistent cough described at length earlier in the tale, could well combine to bring about his death. That Montresor is troubled by such a possibility explains his actions after his final mocking repetition of Fortunato's pleas goes unanswered:

But to these words I hearkened in vain for a reply. I grew impatient. I called aloud—

"Fortunato!"

No answer. I called again—

"Fortunato!"

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. (*Works*, III, 1263)

Poe foreshadowed this scene with Fortunato's earlier silence, which Montresor then interpreted as "obstinate." When his victim subsequently vibrated his chains, Montresor ceased work on the masonry and sat upon the bones so that he "might hearken to [the sound] with the more satisfaction" (*Works*, III, 1262). But such "satisfaction" remains incomplete if Fortunato ultimately fails to recognize his tormentor as an "avenger" per se, which Fortunato gives no explicit indication of having done prior to his final silence. Hence, Montresor's growing impatience for a reply in the above scene: his plan for revenge requires that his victim be conscious.

When Montresor thrusts a torch through the remaining opening in the new masonry, he makes a final, even frantic effort to arouse his victim, suggesting that he is beginning to suspect that Fortunato is already dead (Fortunato, whose name can be translated as "the lucky man," in dying quickly may be considered relatively lucky). Since the opening is six or seven feet above the floor and four feet from the back of the recess, Montresor's act is brutally direct: the flaming torch is thrust toward the victim's head and allowed to drop to his feet in the confined space. The jingling of the bells that "came forth in return" is often interpreted as a sign that Fortunato is still alive, but it seems more probable that here, as elsewhere, they jingle involuntarily, either struck by the torch or shaken when Fortunato slumps in death. Surely a conscious Fortunato, no matter how stoic, would have cried out in response to the flame. Montresor himself appears to interpret the sound as a death knell; his subsequent haste implies a recognition that the "satisfaction" to be derived from his victim has ended. Thus, the jingling bells may suggest, in light of the traditional role of the fool from Shakespearean drama through Poe's own "Hop-Frog," that Fortunato ultimately gets the best of his adversary, if only by dying too soon.

Finally, this reading of Poe's tale suggests a new perspective on Montresor's often-glossed emotional response to these bells: "My heart grew sick—on account of the dampness of the catacombs." Ironist critics of the tale generally agree that Montresor's explanation is deceptive. Robert Fossum, for example, argues that "the sudden nausea of guilt, of the horror of his crime," causes Montresor's heart-sickness.⁶ But a stronger case can be made for another emotion underlying Montresor's hasty rationalization: sudden disappointment as his carefully planned drama of revenge aborts at the untimely end of its main character (and, until fifty years later, its only audience) who dies still unaware of Montresor's motives and before suffering the slow suffocation that would provide him time to fathom those motives.

Montresor's rationalization suggests that he is fully cognizant of the irony of his own self-defeat but unable, even after fifty years, to acknowledge it directly. In light of his predilection for irony, however, he may indirectly admit that final gesture of one-upmanship which Fate bestows upon Fortunato (whose name can also be translated as "the fated man"), for the last words of Poe's tale—"In *páce requiescat!*"—are probably spoken with more sincerity than has generally been supposed.

Notes

¹ See, for example, Terence Martin, "The Imagination at Play: Edgar Allan Poe," *Kenyon Review*, 28 (1966), 196-197; John Freehafer, "Poe's 'Cask of Amontillado': A Tale of Effect," *Jahrbuch für Amerikastudien*, 13 (1968), 134-142; and Charles M. Nevi, "Irony and 'The Cask of Amontillado,'" *English Journal*, 56 (1967), 461-463.

² See G. R. Thompson's Introduction, *Great Short Works of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), pp. 19-20; William H. Shurr, "Montresor's Audience in 'The Cask of Amontillado,'" *Poe Studies*, 10 (1977), 28-29; James F. Cooney, "'The Cask of Amontillado': Some Further Ironies," *Studies in Short Fiction*, 11 (1974), 195-196; and Arthur Waterman, "Point of View in Poe," *CEA Critic*, 27 (1965), 5. Waterman contends that like the serpent in his family's coat of arms, and like Satan, Montresor is destroyed as he destroys and will be condemned to hell for his arrogant murder. It is worth noting that, in having Montresor state that "I followed immediately at his [Fortunato's] heels" (*Works*, III, 1261), Poe reinforces the identification of Montresor with the serpent rather than the foot on the coat of arms. For another interpretation of how "in a Christian universe no private vengeance can be exacted with impunity," see Kent Bales, "Poetic Justice in 'The Cask of Amontillado,'" *Poe Studies*, 5 (1972), 51.

³ "Poe's 'The Cask of Amontillado,'" *Explicator*, 20 (1961), Item 27.

⁴*Works*, III, 1263. On the significance of this line as providing a "declaration of motive [which] silences Fortunato," see Kathryn M. Harris, "Ironic Revenge in Poe's 'The Cask of Amontillado,'" *Studies in Short Fiction*, 6 (1969), 333-335; Marvin Felheim, "'The Cask of Amontillado,'" *Notes & Queries*, 199 (1954), 447-448; and James E. Rocks, "Conflict and Motive in 'The Cask of Amontillado,'" *Poe Studies*, 5 (1972), 50-51. These critics contend that Montresor's revenge was motivated by the hostility that existed between the Brotherhood of Freemasons (of which Fortunato is a member) and the Roman Catholic Church (of which Montresor is ostensibly a member), and that Fortunato would recognize this hostility as the cause of his death. Even if this view of Montresor's motivation can be reconciled with his stated reasons for the revenge, there is no clear evidence that Fortunato grasps such a meaning in this line, or, indeed, any rationale whatsoever behind Montresor's action.

⁵ "The Bouquet of Amontillado," *South Atlantic Bulletin*, 35 (1970), 39.

⁶ "Poe's 'The Cask of Amontillado,'" *Explicator*, 17 (1958), Item 16.

Criticism: Leonard W. Engel (essay date 1983)

SOURCE: "Victim and Victimizer: Poe's 'The Cask of Amontillado,'" in *Interpretations*, Vol. 15, No. 1, Fall, 1983, pp. 26-30.

[In the following essay, Engel discusses the narrative function of enclosure as a literary device in Poe's tale, focusing on the ways it affects and transforms the characters.]

Edgar Allan Poe used the enclosure device, whether an actual physical enclosure or an enclosure alluded to on the level of image and metaphor, in a highly artistic way. In much of his fiction, and specifically in "The Cask of Amontillado" (1846), the device helps to focus the action, assists in plot development, and has a profound impact on the main character, often affecting his personality. In his essay "The Philosophy of Composition" Poe remarked, "A close *circumscription of space* is absolutely necessary to the effect of insulated incident—it has the force of a frame to a picture."¹ A "circumscription of space," that is, an enclosure, I consider to be any sort of physical confinement that restricts a character to a particular area, limiting his freedom. That Poe intended this confinement to have a certain power over narrative action is indicated by the phrases "insulated incident" and "the force of a frame to a picture." But confinement in Poe's fiction, I will

argue, also has power over a character and often causes him to do things he would not ordinarily do.² Such is the case, I believe, with the tale "The Cask of Amontillado."

Montresor, the narrator, it will be remembered, unlike the narrators in other tales (such as "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat") who have murdered their victims and then tried to conceal their bodies, does succeed in concealing his crime, but it has so obsessed his memory and imagination that fifty years after the act, he is able to render an exact, detailed description as though it occurred the previous day. Like the narrator in "The Black Cat," Montresor uses an enclosure to conceal his victim, but Poe places more emphasis on it in "The Cask of Amontillado" by making it a vault which Montresor fashions himself, within his own family catacombs under the city—an enclosure within a series of enclosures. One might argue that Poe uses the same device in "The Black Cat," for the narrator in that tale conceals his wife's body within a wall of his cellar. The main difference lies in the fact that in "The Cask of Amontillado" Poe centers the entire plot on the journey through the catacombs and into the vault in which Fortunato is finally walled up. In the former tale, Poe, while concentrating on the narrator's neurosis throughout the tale, dramatizes the main enclosure at the climax. In "The Cask of Amontillado," the enclosures are more directly related to the narrator's neurosis.

The journey of Montresor and Fortunato through the catacombs becomes gloomier and more ominous with each step. Montresor relates: "We had passed through walls of piled bones, with casks and puncheons intermingling, into the inmost recesses of the catacombs. . . . 'The nitre!' I said; 'see, it increases. It hangs like moss upon the vaults. We are below the river's bed. The drops of moisture trickle among the bones. Come, we will go back ere it is too late. Your cough—"It is nothing," he said; 'let us go on.'"³

Furthermore, Montresor's language in the following passage emphasizes the enclosure:

We passed through a range of low arches . . . and . . . arrived at a deep crypt. . . . At the most remote end of the crypt there appeared another less spacious. Its walls had been lined with human remains, piled to the vault overhead, in the fashion of the great catacombs of Paris. Three sides of this interior crypt were still ornamented in this manner. From the fourth the bones had been thrown down, and lay promiscuously upon the earth, forming at one point a mound of some size. Within the wall . . . we perceived a still interior recess, in depth about four feet, in width three, in height six or seven. (pp. 1260-61)

When Fortunato, at Montresor's urging, enters this tiny "interior crypt" in search of the Amontillado, Montresor quickly chains him to the granite wall and begins "to wall up the entrance of the niche" (p. 1262).

Montresor's last comment and his description of the enclosures indicate a certain relish for the plan, its locale, and the task of walling up his victim. He even pauses at one point to hear more precisely Fortunato's clanking the chain and to take pleasure in it: "The noise lasted for several minutes, during which, that I might hearken to it with the more satisfaction, I ceased my labors and sat down upon the bones" (p. 1262). As the narrator in "The Pit and the Pendulum" is the victim of the enclosure, greatly fearing the pit and its unknown horrors, Montresor in this tale is the homicidal victimizer, fully aware of the horrors of enclosure, enjoying them, and scheming to make them as terrifying as possible.

In spite of his quick and effective work, Montresor pauses twice more before he finishes. The first pause occurs when Fortunato releases a "succession of loud and shrill screams." "For a brief moment I hesitated—I trembled. Unsheathing my rapier, I began to grope with it about the recess: but the thought of an instant reassured me. I placed my hand upon the solid fabric of the catacombs, and felt satisfied. I reapproached the wall. 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 clamor grew still" (p. 1262). The frantic screams of Fortunato momentarily disturb Montresor, until he is reassured by the thought of the locale—the enclosure—and "the solid fabric of the catacombs."

The second disturbance comes when he is nearly finished. He thrusts the torch through the remaining aperture and lets it fall: "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" (p. 1263). At this crucial instant, Montresor tells us, his "heart grew sick"; of course, he is quick to assure us it is because of "the dampness of the catacombs." Although Montresor is obviously fascinated by the deadly enclosure, and uses it with satisfaction in walling up Fortunato, he also experiences moments of horror while within it.

In this story, then, enclosure has a dual aspect. While it is Montresor's main source of delight in planning his revenge, it does create momentary flashes of panic which almost disrupt his carefully planned revenge. One wonders if on a subconscious level Montresor is not trying to isolate, and enclose, a part of himself and a neurosis he hates—symbolized by Fortunato: Once his victim is walled up and Montresor's neurosis is in a sense buried and out of sight, he believes he will probably regain some measure of sanity. But, of course, Poe does not allow him this luxury, for the conclusion of the tale clearly indicates that even though the long dead Fortunato may be buried, Montresor is still obsessed with the details of the crime and can recite them complete and intact after half a century.

Like the narrators of "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat," Montresor buries his victim on his premises. But Montresor goes much deeper than the other two narrators, deeper than his cellar, deeper even than his family's subterranean burial ground, though he passes through it to reach the tiny crypt he has prepared for Fortunato. It seems as if he is reaching deep into the past, into his ancestral heritage, to deal with his current problem, Fortunato's insult. Like the other two narrators, he could have disposed of his victim in any number of ways having nothing to do with an enclosure, but he used burial and chose his family's catacombs, even his ancestors' bones, to conceal Fortunato's body: "Against the new masonry I re-erected the old rampart of bones" (p. 1263). His act indicates that though he wants to be rid of his victim, he wants him to remain within reach, that is to say, among the bones of his ancestral past.

Fortunato, as a character, has little importance; he becomes significant as the object of Montresor's self-hatred, of the projection of his guilt for his aristocratic family's decline. Montresor says at one point, when his unwitting victim remarks on the extensiveness of the vaults, that "the Montresors . . . were a great and numerous family," implying that they once were but no longer are; and Poe is careful not to mention any immediate family of Montresor.

Like the other two narrators, Montresor, while taking pains to conceal his crime, must needs be found out. However, unlike the other narrators, whose crimes are discovered shortly after they are committed, Montresor's is not found out until he informs the reader of it fifty years afterward. So, although the crime appears successful, the revenge is not, because Montresor has not freed himself from guilt—a fact indicated by his rendering of details which have no doubt obsessed him through every day since the deed. His final words, "In pace requiescat!" (p. 1263), underscore Poe's irony. Montresor's rest has surely been troubled. Why he has preferred anonymity, while sustaining this obsession during those years, might well be explained by his unconscious fear of the guilt he would, once it was found out, consciously have to accept. And having to accept it might drive him insane, as it does the narrator at the conclusion of "The Tell-Tale Heart," or it might force him to acknowledge the depth of his evil and truly repent—something Montresor is loath to do—as it does the narrator of "The Black Cat," who reveals to the reader that he "would unburthen [his] . . . soul" before he dies.⁴

It appears, then, that Montresor is making Fortunato a scapegoat and symbolically enclosing Fortunato, his own identity, in a hidden crypt deep within his own soul—out of sight but certainly not forgotten. A similar view has been expressed by Charles Sweet: "Montresor's premature burial of his mirror self in the subterranean depths of his ancestral home (house equals mind in Poe) paints a psychological portrait of repression; the physical act of walling up an enemy in one's home duplicates the mental act of repressing a

despised self in the unconscious." Montresor, Sweet continues, "buries alive his scapegoat. . . . In Montresor's unconscious mind he is not murdering Fortunato, but burying/repressing that dilettantish side of himself he can no longer endure, that side symbolized by Fortunato."⁵ The enclosure Poe uses in "The Cask of Amontillado," in addition to being the focal point of the plot, providing a journey through a series of enclosures, and adding a sense of pervasive gloom and oppression to the tale, also becomes the central symbol in my interpretation. These enclosures and the crypt in which Montresor buries Fortunato are metaphors for Montresor's obsessive mind and the complex relationship between the reality of his disturbed inner self and his controlled, rational outer appearance. They emphasize his neurosis and symbolize the guilt he wishes to bury. Thus, Poe's enclosures in this enigmatic tale provide it with a thematic unity and an artistic integrity it might not otherwise have.

Notes

¹ Edgar Allan Poe, "The Philosophy of Composition," *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. James A. Harrison (1902; rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1965), XIV, 204. The italics are Poe's.

² See my article "Edgar Allan Poe's Use of the Enclosure Device in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*," *ATQ*, 37 (Winter 1978), 35-44, where I argue that Poe's enclosures cause personality changes in the main character.

³ Edgar Allan Poe, "The Cask of Amontillado," *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Thomas Ollive Mabbott (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1978), III, 1260. All other references to this tale are cited in parentheses immediately following each quotation.

⁴ Edgar Allan Poe, "The Black Cat," *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Thomas Ollive Mabbott (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1978), III, 849.

⁵ Charles S. Sweet, Jr., "Retapping Poe's 'The Cask of Amontillado,'" *Poe Studies*, 8 (June 1975), 11.

Criticism: E. Bruce Kirkham (essay date 1986)

SOURCE: "Poe's Amontillado, One More Time," in *American Notes & Queries*, Vol. XXIV, Nos. 9-10, May-June, 1986, pp. 144-45.

[In the following essay, Kirkham comments on the multiple meanings of some proper nouns in Poe's story.]

Poe's delight in allusions and word play is evident throughout his works but no more so than in the short story "The Cask of Amontillado" where proper nouns, particularly, are capable of carrying multiple meanings. Fortunato believes himself to be the "fortunate one" in that he has been selected by Montresor to taste of the rare Spanish sherry, but he is also "fated" to die. He should feel "fortunate," according to his murderer's line of reasoning, to be laid to rest among the bones of Montresor's ancestors whose arms he had forgotten and whose descendent he had insulted, and yet he is "fortunate" in that he, unlike his murderer, has rested in peace for fifty years.

The name "Montresor" also has obvious possibilities: his treasures are multiple. His first "treasure" is his family honor, which Fortunato has impugned; his second, the sherry he claims to have in the vault to which he leads his victim; and finally, the new "treasure" he entombs with his ancestors, the body and spirit of his victim which haunt him for fifty years, an ironic treasure indeed. John Clendenning suggests that he is a "monster" who will show (*montrer*) Fortunato his fate (*sort*).¹

Of all the names in the tale, that of the sherry has given readers the greatest problem. Amontillado is a dry nutty sherry, an imitation of Montilla wine, produced in the Spanish town of Jerez de la Frontera.² Certainly Poe chose that particular sherry because embedded in the name or its associations were possibilities for punning which would contribute to the total effect of the story.

Although no cognates can be found in either French or Latin,³ many readers have seen the resemblance between the name of the sherry and the Spanish verb *amontonar* meaning "to heap or pile up." Steele prefers the Italian cognate *ammontare* also "to mount" or "to climb" and its past participles *ammonticchiato* and *ammonticellato* which, he argues, would be closer to the pronunciation of the wine. "The implication of the pun," he suggests, "may be understood as the pile of bricks." I would like to suggest an additional pun.

Fortunato, pleading to Montresor to end the game and let him out, suggests to him in a voice punctuated by nervous laughter that they will have "many a rich laugh about" this joke "over our wine." Montresor's reply springs, I think, from Fortunato's mention of wine and suggests the finality of the activity. The meaning of the Italian noun *ammontare* gives us a better pun than those heretofore suggested. The word means "sum or amount." As he seals off the life-giving air and achieves his revenge, Montresor presents to Fortunato, in his native Italian, the check, the bill, the final accounting. He cries, in effect, "your account with me is now paid in full." But ironically, after fifty years, Montresor is still in debt to Fortunato; he has been unable to settle the account, balance the books. His guilt will not let him close the ledger, no matter how many times he tells the tale. There is still a balance outstanding.

Notes

¹ John Clendenning, "Anything Goes: Comic Aspects in 'The Cask of Amontillado,'" *American Humor: Essays Presented to John C. Gerber*, ed. O.M. Brack, Jr. (Scottsdale, AZ: Arete, 1977), p. 14.

² Charles W. Steele, "Poe's 'The Cask of Amontillado,'" *Explicator* 18 (1960), Item 43.

³ Arthur Hobson Quinn says that Poe studied Latin and French at the University of Virginia, and French at West Point and excelled in both; Steele says he also studied "Italian and Spanish at the same time" at Virginia. Either way, Poe had training in foreign languages and, of course, had access to dictionaries. *Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography* (New York: Appleton Century, 1941), pp. 98-99, 169.

Criticism: Kate Stewart (essay date 1987)

SOURCE: "The Supreme Madness: Revenge and the Bells in The Cask of Amontillado," in *The University of Mississippi Studies in English*, Vol. V, 1987, pp. 51-7.

[In the following essay, Stewart draws parallels between Poe's narrative and the stagecraft of Elizabethan revenge tragedy, highlighting his use of sound effects.]

Even the most nonchalant reader admits that Edgar Allan Poe was more than a little interested in madness; he may be less aware, however, that Poe also dabbled in the dramatic arts. Poe's mix of madness and drama, specifically the substance of revenge tragedy in "The Cask of Amontillado," offers yet another example of his wideranging mind and creative propensities. I perceive in Poe's tale a parallel to Elizabethan revenge tragedy.¹ Pointing out that Woodberry calls "Cask" "a tale of Italian revenge," Mabbott states that such feeling embodies "an implacable demand for retribution," which Poe accounts for in the beginning of the tale. As he works out the action and develops the character of Montresor as a revenge-tragedy hero, Poe by means of sound effects proves himself a master of dramatic technique. As Montresor falls deeper into insanity, the ringing of the bells symbolizes his descent.

Montresor's first declaration alerts us that revenge is the central motivation underlying the story: "The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could, but when he ventured upon insult I vowed revenge."² No one will dispute the motivation, yet scholars question the exact nature of the insult. Proponents of a politico-religious interpretation of the story see the insult growing from the tensions arising between the Catholic and the Protestant, the non-member and the Freemason, respectively Montresor and Fortunato.³ Certainly these factors contribute to the conflict. The insult is, however, the more basic one found in Elizabethan revenge tragedy: revenging an insult to a family member. Noting the connection between Italian revenge and Elizabethan revenge tragedy, Shannon Burns emphasizes that avenging an insult is Montresor's motivation since the tale focuses on family and Catholicism.⁴

This fact is borne out as Montresor and Fortunato wander through the catacombs. When Fortunato comments on the vaults, his companion replies: "The Montresors . . . were a great and numerous family." Fortunato responds: "I forget your arms." Although on the surface the comment appears benign, Fortunato implies that the family is hardly worth remembering. If the Montresors had at one time been prominent, then Fortunato would surely know something about the coat of arms. Since the men also have a fairly close relationship, Fortunato should remember the arms. Gargano sees that Montresor is the "vindicator of his ancestors" for precisely this reason. He adds that the coat of arms itself signifies Montresor's avenging his injured family.⁵

The ancestral bones of the Montresors offer another parallel to revenge tragedy. Although not a device always employed by revenge tragedians, ghosts frequently appeared—the spirits of family members visiting the protagonist and spurring him to action.⁶ *Hamlet* offers a good example: the apparition of the murdered father urges his son to avenge his death. The bones of the Montresors in "Cask" function as do ghosts in revenge tragedy. Piles of ancestral bones must be removed to expose the crypt; therefore, the bones of the insulted Montresors that cover the place of Fortunato's entombment share in the death of the enemy. Later, when he finishes his brickwork, Montresor replaces the bones; consequently the "ghosts" reach out to insure the burial of Fortunato. Unlike the ghosts in Elizabethan tragedies, the apparitions in "Cask" do not appear and reappear. Instead they are ever-present, constant reminders of the family's history. When Fortunato, drunken and proud, sarcastically toasts his friend's ancestors, he underlines his contempt for the family, living and dead—and both the living and the dead are there to avenge that insult.

Several characteristics in "Cask" align with elements of Gothicism: gruesomeness, terror, horror, and violence. Because of their association with murder and death, the bones also contribute to Gothicism in this tale. Aside from their immediate relationship with physical suffering, they produce this effect through sound: they rattle and so reinforce terror. Noting the revival of Renaissance drama in the late 1700s, Clara F. McIntyre sees borrowings—especially in the blood and violence, revenge, madness, and ghosts—from Elizabethan tragedy in the novels of Ann Radcliffe and others.⁷

Added to these distinct features of revenge tragedy is the presence of the prototypical hero from such drama. Fortunato has gradually victimized Montresor. The victim allows a thousand injuries to pass, and he takes punitive action only when Fortunato insults him. To his listener Montresor emphasizes that he would "at length" be avenged. Avoiding any risks, the protagonist carefully calculates his actions because his being caught and punished could render the vengeance ineffective. The fact remains, though, that Montresor, like a revenge hero, does delay the fulfillings of his plans. His meticulous engineering of the murder over an unspecified, but certainly not a brief, period causes Poe's vengeance-seeker to brood upon his hatred for Fortunato. Because of his constant agonizing, Montresor's plans become obsessive, leading him to insanity.

In their study of the revenge-tragedy motif, Charles A. and Elaine S. Hallett postulate that "the brutal act committed by the revenge is what distinguishes the act of revenge from the act of justice and makes void all of the protagonist's claims to sanity."⁸ This statement sheds light on Montresor's actions; his violent act emblemizes his mental condition.

Many critics believe that the protagonist of "Cask" resembles Roderick Usher and William Wilson. Davidson views Roderick and Madeline as the mental and physical components of one person. Another divided self, William Wilson, confronts his mirror image. He is enraged by his twin's loathsome traits.⁹ Montresor is this same type of divided self. Thus, when Montresor kills his enemy, he commits suicide. Ridding himself of Fortunato, he destroys the hated personality traits within himself.¹⁰ Although in his warped mind he views Fortunato as the enemy, in particular his own, Montresor is clearly the sinister figure. He is the plotter, the murderer. Despite his malevolence, however, he is the protagonist of "Cask." Montresor is, then, a hold-over of the Elizabethan villain-hero.¹¹

The evidence is sufficient: the protagonist is a split personality—a madman. Without exhaustive characterization of Montresor, the text proper offers ample evidence of his divided self. After he has determined vengeance, he qualifies: "It must be understood that neither by word or deed had I given Fortunato cause to doubt my good will." Here is the classic description of a dual personality, the man who does not externalize his feelings. Showing an apparent or ironic good will, Montresor inquires after Fortunato's health as they travel toward the latter's death.

Beginning with the cordial meeting of the two, this journey leads Montresor into madness: "I am on my way to Luchresi." Mabbott interprets the name as meaning "Lookcrazy." "Luchresi" recurs, yet the structure of its first appearance is highly significant. The tense of the verb is progressive. On the surface the statement is merely a decoy to lure Fortunato to his death; however, the forward-moving action expressed by the verb structure renders greater meaning. Montresor is on his way to deeper insanity. Even after fifty years of pondering his crime, he finds no peace of mind. In his descent into madness, the murderer remembers vividly the ringing of the bells. The story of the crime might become distorted after so many years, although the haunting sound of the bells in the last scene between pursuer and victim remains with Montresor. Noting that Montresor views Fortunato as his "mirror image," Sweet states that, when Montresor hears only the jingling of the bells after he yells "Fortunato," those bells signify the insanity of the protagonist.¹² This final chiming marks Montresor's complete descent into madness. The bells sound throughout the story, and each "jingling" furthers the mental breakdown of Montresor.¹³

Recounting his murder of Fortunato, Montresor sets the stage by describing the evening "during the supreme madness of the carnival season." The atmosphere suggests the mental state of the murderer. Like the craziness around him, he verges upon collapse. His long brooding over the method of repaying his adversary has led him to a state of frenzy as he sets his plans in motion. Poe dresses Montresor's enemy as a court jester with "conical cap and bells." Critics see this garb as one of the ironies in "Cask" since Montresor and Fortunato have switched places. Fortunato is no longer the power figure; he is a fool who is now victimized by his former victim. Montresor rises to power before Fortunato the dupe.¹⁴ The costuming is ironic, to be sure, but it serves a dramatic function. The bells on Fortunato's cap ring time and again. With each ringing, Montresor slips farther and farther into his own "supreme madness."

Montresor first mentions the bells as he and Fortunato enter the catacombs: "The gait of my friend was unsteady and the bells upon his cap jingled as he strode." Montresor specifically refers to the bells on three subsequent occasions, but his first remark remains significant because it demonstrates his keen awareness of this particular sound. Since they "jingled as he strode," the bells sound more or less constantly. The faint chimes mark each drunken step taken by Fortunato. Montresor would be attuned to the incessant ringing; consequently the bells haunt him fifty years after the crime.

Constantly aware of the bells, he would notice them more on certain occasions. After one coughing spell: "Ugh! Ugh! Ugh!" (the hacking itself echoing the repeated sounding of bells), Fortunato drinks to the departed Montresors.

Again the protagonist hears the bells. Montresor observes of Fortunato as the latter proposes his toast: "He raised it to his lips with a leer. He paused and nodded to me familiarly, while his bells jingled." Fortunato's actions indeed seem to be contemptuous. Once more the aristocrat goes beyond injury to insult, and Montresor more intensely desires revenge.

Shortly, Montresor again refers to the bells, after explaining his coat of arms: "The wine sparkled in his eyes and the bells jingled." This statement marks roughly the midpoint of the story. The companions near the place of entombment; Montresor will soon realize his goal. Attaining the prize, though, he will slip into greater unreality. This halfway point signals his halfway point to insanity. When readers note Montresor's third reference to the bells, they should look back to the first: the bells sound at each step. Because of his increasing drunkenness, evident in his glazed eyes, his walk no doubt degenerates from being "unsteady" to staggering. To signify mere unsteady steps the bells would sound with some regularity. By contrast, more halting and unsure steps create a more erratic sound. From soft regular tinkling, they would grow irregular. The bells' more erratic sounds symbolize Montresor's loss of mental stability. Another Poe narrator is likewise lost in "fancy," a word closely associated with illusions and distorted mental activity. When the narrator in "The Raven" begins "linking Fancy unto fancy," he is obviously losing control. Montresor's situation is the same because, the closer he comes to destroying his enemy, the cloudier grows his thinking.

When the men reach their destination, Montresor chains a stunned Fortunato inside the crypt. This scene functions as the play-within-the-play motif of revenge tragedy because it portrays the culmination of the vengeance. Moreover, despite some verbalizing, the episode conveys a sense of pantomime; nowhere are actions so exaggerated. The Halletts suggest that the play-within-a-play reflects the mental state of the revenger by portraying his "mad act." They further surmise that "this motif brings in a world distinct from that of the real world. The separation is represented visually by the creation of a sealed-off space within which the play can be staged."¹⁵ Montresor sets his "dumb-show" in operation, and again the bells figure significantly. The revenge-hero's work with the chain roughly imitates the sound of bells: metal striking metal. This "bell ringing," however, contrasts sharply to the earlier jingles. The bells on Fortunato's cap would emit a light, cheerful tinkling. On the other hand, the ringing of the chain might be heavy and somber. While the amateur mason goes about his work, he hears the "furious vibrations of the chain." The rumblings of the metal prompt Montresor to cease his labors and sit down to enjoy the success of his plot. When the chains stop rattling, he resumes. His labors are interrupted, however, by "loud and shrill screams." Noticeably affected by these outcries, the protagonist admits that he "hesitated" and "trembled." Regaining his composure, Montresor answers the yells of anguish, returning scream for scream. Finally silence prevails. The type of ringing produced by the chains represents Montresor's going insane; the "mad act" is complete. Surely his tremblings and screamings, much on the order of the scenes in "Tarr and Fether," typify a madman.

After his final exchange with his victim, Montresor hears the bells ring for the last time. Twice calling "Fortunato" and receiving no response, he hears nothing save the jingling of the bells, which sickens him. He attempts to rationalize his sickness as a consequence of the dampness in the catacombs. His state results, however, from the awareness and horror of his sin.¹⁶ Earlier he blamed wine for his declining mental condition, but he rationalizes again. A victim of a diseased mind, he hears the ringing of the bells, emblems of his madness, fifty years after the murder. Gargano states: "Montresor fails because he cannot harmonize the disparate parts of his nature, and, consequently, cannot achieve self-knowledge."¹⁷ Also describing Montresor's failure, Kozikowski sees the man's revenge as "a shambles, a wreckage of the human spirit . . ."¹⁸ Recognizing his heinous crime, Montresor cannot escape the horror of the deed. Revenge, madness, and bells echo eternally in his head.

"Cask" testifies impressively to Poe's subtle art of networking his multiform interests and knowledge into a unified work of art. In its compactness this tale offers the full range of Poe's talents: his adept characterization, his careful attention to setting, and his stunning dramatic technique.

Notes

- ¹ Scholars debate Poe's knowledge of Renaissance drama. Killis Campbell postulates that Poe knew little about the subject. Other scholars note otherwise. Thomas Olive Mabbott cites some fifteen allusions from Elizabethan drama in *Politian*; Burton Pollin lists numerous references to Renaissance tragedians and their works. N. Bryllion Fagin also credits Poe with wide knowledge of the dramatic arts.
- ² "The Cask of Amontillado" is quoted from *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, 3. vols., ed. Thomas Ollive Mabbott, with the assistance of Eleanor D. Kewer and Maureen C. Mabbott (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1978). Fredson Bowers in *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy* (Princeton, 1940) emphasizes that the essential element of revenge creates the tragic action in such drama. Furthermore, he states that the hero pursues retribution because of jealousy, injury or insult, or self-preservation and that, as a natural result of vengeance-seeking, he goes insane.
- ³ Kathryn Montgomery Harris, "Ironie Revenge in Poe's 'The Cask of Amontillado'," *PoeS*, 5 (1972), 50-51; John Clendenning, "Anything Goes: Comic Aspects in 'The Cask of Amontillado'," *American Humor*, ed. O. M. Brack, Jr. (Scottsdale, 1977), pp. 13-26.
- ⁴ Shannon Burns, "'The Cask of Amontillado': Montresor's Revenge," *PoeS*, 7 (1974), 25.
- ⁵ James W. Gargano, "'The Cask of Amontillado': A Masquerade of Motive and Identity," *SSF*, 4 (1967), 126.
- ⁶ Bowers, p. 64.
- ⁷ Clara F. McIntyre, "Were the 'Gothic Novels' Gothic?," *PMLA*, 36 (1921), 652-658.
- ⁸ *The Revenger's Madness: A Study of Revenge Tragedy Motifs* (Lincoln, 1980), p. 82.
- ⁹ Edward H. Davidson, *Poe: A Critical Study* (Cambridge, Mass., 1973), pp. 198-199.
- ¹⁰ Charles A. Sweet, Jr., "Retapping Poe's 'The Cask of Amontillado'," *PoeS*, 8 (1975), 10; Walter Stepp, "The Ironie Double in Poe's 'The Cask of Amontillado'," *SSF*, 13 (1976), 448.
- ¹¹ McIntyre, p. 665.
- ¹² Sweet, p. 11.
- ¹³ Another study of the relationship between bells and madness is Richard Fusco, "An Alternative Reading of Poe's 'The Bells'," *UMSE*, ns, 1 (1980), 121-124.
- ¹⁴ Gargano, p. 121.
- ¹⁵ Hallet, pp. 90-91.
- ¹⁶ Stanley J. Kozikowski, "A Reconsideration of Poe's 'The Cask of Amontillado'," *ATQ*, 39 (1978), 277.
- ¹⁷ Gargano, pp. 125-126.
- ¹⁸ Kozikowski, p. 278.

Criticism: Patrick White (essay date 1989)

SOURCE: "The Cask of Amontillado": A Case for the Defense," in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. 26, 1989, pp. 550-55.

[In the following essay, White justifies Montresor's actions and his lack of remorse, explaining the symbolism of the family shield and his sense of familial obligation.]

The usual way of responding to "The Cask of Amontillado" with something like pure and unqualified revulsion at Montresor's dark deed as an act outside the normal range of human behavior has its validity but stops short of the story's ultimate revelation. Wittingly or otherwise, Poe has given us the means of seeing Montresor's act as something other than a demented or Satanic pursuit of revenge. True, the story has been found compelling for generations of readers who see Montresor as a very special case of the human potential for evil. But is Montresor such a special case? I do not think so. He is neither demented nor Satanic. He has his reasons for what he does, and these are reasons we should be able to understand. Therein lies a deeper horror in the story.

In order to understand how Montresor can feel justified in what he has done and be free of any twinge of guilt even fifty years after the event, we must understand how family in general and his own family's motto and coat of arms in particular affect his motivation. One of the puzzles of the story has to do with its location. Does it take place in Italy, as some detail might suggest and as most readers have assumed; or in France, as the name Montresor might suggest?¹ There is no way of answering this question definitively, and perhaps Poe intended it that way. For what is important for Montresor is not that he is French or Italian but that he is a Montresor. His allegiance is to his family in a way that we can understand only by reflecting on our national allegiance. Poe has left the historical setting somewhat indeterminate, but his story seems to take place at a time in the past, before the triumph of nationalism, when an aristocratic family like the Montresors could feel something akin to sovereignty and even assert it openly. Living as we do at a time when the family has ceased to exist as a political unit, we may need to make a special effort to understand Montresor's attitude toward his rights and responsibilities as a member of a noble family. From his point of view, he is acting patriotically, as it were, in seeking vengeance on his family's enemy. It may be easier for us to understand how family could be an object of something like patriotic devotion if we bring to mind that the word "patriot" derives from Latin *pater*. Montresor feels justified in killing on behalf of his "fatherland," his family, in the same way that a citizen or subject of more recent times can feel justified in killing on behalf of his "fatherland," the nation-state.

In a modern nation-state, a family coat of arms and motto can be hardly more than innocent wall decoration, however formidable in content. But for Montresor, with his feudal orientation, they would be capable of imposing the most serious and fearful obligations. That is why Poe sees to it that we are informed of their contents. Fortunato's ignorance of Montresor's coat of arms may be an insult even though the presumed insult cannot provide motivation for the killing. That has already been decided upon. More importantly, however, Fortunato's ignorance serves Poe as an expository device: it provides the opportunity for us to learn the details of Montresor's coat of arms and motto. These details are essential to our understanding of the family imperatives rooted in Montresor's mind as he plans and carries out the killing of Fortunato.

"*Nemo me impune lacessit*."² Montresor's family motto has been translated, "No one attacks me with impunity."³ But it can be translated, "No one bothers me in the slightest with impunity." It seems to be an assertion, at the least, of extreme punctiliousness, if not of a kind of mad arrogance. Any kind of injury or an insult of almost any degree would warrant retaliation. Just taking the motto at face value, we might well sense a touch of peculiar family madness here. But what, then, are we to make of the fact that, as has been pointed out, this was the motto of the royal house of Scotland?⁴ Whether Poe got the motto by way of Fenimore

Cooper⁵ or through some other source, he was, it would seem, making some kind of point here, although the point might be lost on a reader unaware of the motto's ultimate origin. For by this one stroke, Poe has conflated royal house and aristocratic family. Is retaliation on behalf of the one, acceptable patriotism; and on behalf of the other, madness? Is extravagant touchiness acceptable in the one and arrogance in the other? Deeply buried in the story though it be, once seen, the fact that Montresor's family motto, seemingly so arrogant and barbaric, is that of a royal house clearly places Montresor's proceedings in a new light.

A particular detail in the motto that is worth noting is that it speaks not of "us" but of *me*. Insofar as we are not aware of the motto's origin, the singular pronoun creates some misdirection. It gives the impression that Montresor is seeking redress as an individual person who has been wronged rather than as a member of a family he feels has been wronged. To do justice to Montresor, we should understand that he is not an individual person seeking redress for personal insult or injury but, rather, an agent of retribution acting on behalf of his family. Since we never get any specifics of Montresor's grievance against Fortunato, we have no way of knowing whether Montresor took the brunt of the perceived offense or not. But the question is moot in the sense that Montresor clearly shows himself to be acting on behalf of family, not self. Even if Fortunato's presumed offense had been directed against Montresor personally, not only Montresor but the entire Montresor family would be shamed by it. To strike one is to strike all.

"A huge human foot d'or, in a field azure; the foot crushes a serpent rampant whose fangs are embedded in the heel" (1259). The Montresor coat of arms owes little to the traditional symbols of heraldry and would seem to be mostly Poe's invention. However, it may owe something to the American-Revolution era flag depicting a snake and the motto "Don't tread on me." The effect of this collocation of revolutionary-era flag and coat of arms is similar to that of the Montresor motto's being that of the royal house of Scotland. Both connections tend to lend dignity and validity to what might otherwise seem to be the pretensions of the Montresors.

The family motto, emphasizing retaliation, would suggest that the snake in the coat of arms represents the Montresor family. The gold foot is striking the snake—crushing it, as Montresor describes the coat of arms to Fortunato—but not with impunity. As the snake is being crushed, it is biting the heel of the gold foot. The scene seems to illustrate graphically what an enemy of the Montresors can expect. We notice also that even though it is being crushed, the snake still somehow manages a proud and heroic pose: it is "rampant," and yet, at the same time, it is ignobly biting its adversary in the heel. The coat of arms suggests that if someone puts its foot on the family, the family will strike back as best it can, as a snake might strike the heel of the foot that crushes its body, and not lose any of its assurance of virtue. The coat of arms suggests that Montresor need feel no obligation to be concerned with chivalry in striking back. It is almost as if the coat of arms, depicting the adversary as a golden foot, shows with prescience the feudal family's fall as concomitant with the rise of capitalism and gives its prospective blessing to a response that need owe nothing to the standards of chivalry. For even though Montresor acts with a sense that what he does is fully sanctioned, he still must act in a covert manner. His family can assert sovereignty openly in its motto and coat of arms, but he knows that the actual implementation of this sovereign power must be muted. And so he carries out the killing of his adversary in secret. The snake "rampant," with whatever convolutions, being crushed by an adversary, must strike his adversary in the heel. Montresor need have no qualms about his covert operation. He has prior and complete sanction for it.

But we may still ask how he can relish his retaliation and why he need inflict the unnecessary cruelty of death by slow suffocation on his victim? In order to see how Montresor can do these things and still feel justified, we need to keep the larger context in mind. He can relish what he is doing because he can feel that what he is doing is right as surely as a soldier in the service of a modern state can take pleasure in the killing he does because he is carrying out a patriotic obligation and being of service to his country. The same context should enable us to understand the cruelty of Montresor's method. Put into terms analogous to those of modern warfare, the method constitutes an atrocity. And anybody who knows anything about warfare knows that atrocities are more the practice than the exception. If we grant Montresor the mentality of a soldier in

combat—and it would seem he is possibly entitled to such consideration—we should be able to understand that he would not have to be either demented or Satanic to carry out the killing of Fortunato as he does.

Montresor is so convinced of his right in carrying out his plan of vengeance that he can speak of the killing of Fortunato as an "immolation" (1257). We need not go so far as to see him assuming the role of a priest performing the ritual killing of a sacrificial victim, as some commentators on the story have done;⁶ but we should be able to understand that, given his family imperatives, he might well be able to see himself as a person carrying out a quasi-sacred duty.

He similarly shows confidence in the Tightness of his action in his last words to Fortunato. Fortunato, desperate for his life, pleads, "*For the love of God, Montresor!*" Montresor, with what must strike Fortunato as biting irony, replies, "Yes, . . . for the love of God!" (1263). He is doing this terrible thing, not "For God and Country!" but for what comes down to the same thing for him, "For God and family!" We are surely mistaken if we see Montresor's invocation of the divine as blasphemy or reduce it to parody. Montresor is apparently quite sincere in equating the family dictate with a divine commandment.

Montresor's lack of remorse, then, even after fifty years, should not be a wonder to us. He is not an exceptional person. He is not a Hamlet, reluctant to take issue with his family's adversary. He is bright, but not one of the *best* and brightest. He is quite ordinary and conventional. He is loyal, but limited. He has an obligation to his family; he carries it out, with relish, and savors deeply the satisfaction that success in carrying out this obligation brings him. He is coarse enough to have been capable of inflicting unnecessary suffering on his victim and enjoying his victim's distress. He is barely sensitive enough to have felt some passing queasiness during the performance of his deed. But, withal, what he did, he is convinced, was justified. He was carrying out an obligation to his family as he saw it—as he was culturally conditioned to see it. Now, fifty years after the event, he can recount it with pride.

He addresses his account to someone who knows, he says, "the nature of my soul" (1256). Who is this listener, this person who is physically present to Montresor as he tells of this incident in his family's history? We have no way of knowing. It is not likely to be his father confessor, for there is no hint of penitence, nor any hint that he feels he has done anything that requires penitence. All we know is that it is someone who, Montresor believes, knows the nature of his soul. This is where we, the reader, come in. Poe achieves another conflation here. For we, as surely as the person physically present, are Montresor's listener. And we, as surely as the person physically present, also know the nature of Montresor's soul. We know it because, whether we like to admit it or not, we share that soul. We, as members of the human community, share it with the royal house of Scotland, with revolutionary-era American patriots, with all members of universal humanity whoever they may be, who anticipating or experiencing a grievance against their tribal unit, whether it be one of formal political autonomy or not, feel justified in holding the right to take direct action against an adversary and in taking action if the provocation occurs. And, sharing that soul which we know so well, we know that the provocation can be slight and the retaliation brutal. And the conscience can be left perfectly clear. The story is a chilling example of man's capacity for rationalization. It is as much a tale of ratiocination as a tale of terror, and all the more terrible for that.

One commentator has claimed that Poe was using Montresor as his alter ego in pursuing vicarious revenge against his literary enemies when he wrote the story.⁷ Even if Poe were not doing so, he might still have been able to echo Flaubert's well-known words, "*Madame Bovary, c'est moi.*" Given the nature of Montresor's soul, that he, like us, could know so well, he might still have been able to say, "Montresor, he is I." And we, the gentle reader, might similarly welcome Montresor back into the human community with our horror-stricken hearts.

Notes

¹ Burton R. Pollin, *Discoveries in Poe* (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1970), p. 35.

² "The Cask of Amontillado," in *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. T. O. Mabbott (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1978), III, 1260. Further references are cited in the text.

³ James H. Pickering, ed., *Fiction 100: An Anthology of Short Stories*, 5th ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1988), p. 1253.

⁴ E. W. Carlson, Introduction to *Poe: A Thematic Reader* (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1967), p. 573; cited in Edward Craney Jacobs, "A Possible Debt to Cooper," *Poe Studies*, 9 (June 1976), 23.

⁵ Edward Craney Jacobs, "A Possible Debt to Cooper," p. 23.

⁶ Marvin Felheim, Sam Moon, and Donald Pearce; "'The Cask of Amontillado,'" *Notes and Queries*, NS 1 (October 1954), 447-49.

⁷ Francis B. Dedmond, "'The Cask of Amontillado' and the 'War of the Literati,'" *Modern Language Quarterly*, 15 (June 1954), 137-46.

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Analysis: Style and Technique

James Russell Lowell, in his satiric poem *A Fable for Critics* (1848), called Poe's work three-fifths genius and two-fifths fudge. In the genius-fudge ratio, "The Cask of Amontillado" ranks high on the genius side. A brief, concise story, it fulfills Poe's literary theory that every detail and word in a tale or poem should contribute to the intended effect. Here, there are only two characters, and though Montresor insists on his patience in devising an appropriate and satisfying revenge, the story moves quickly and relentlessly to its climax. In contrast to the verbosity found in the works of Sir Walter Scott and James Fenimore Cooper, Poe's story, only about four pages long, has not a wasted word. Poe grips readers and plunges them right in with the opening sentence, "The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could, but when he ventured upon insult I vowed revenge." Readers learn almost nothing about the background of the characters; one is told nothing about their age, their families, their wives and children, if any, or their appearance. One is not even told when and where the story takes place, though the name Fortunato and references to a palazzo indicate Italy. From the last sentence, stating that Fortunato's bones have moldered in the tomb for half a century, one can deduce that they were young men at the time of the tale, which could occur no later than the end of the eighteenth century. As for character, Montresor tells readers that Fortunato was to be respected and even feared, that his only weak point was his pride in being a connoisseur of wine. This pride in such a trivial matter becomes grotesquely disproportionate and leads him into the trap.

Critics have complained that all of Poe's characters sound alike, that Poe has only one voice, but in "The Cask of Amontillado" the narrative voice—learned, passionate but cold, ironic—fits perfectly the character of the avenger. Like Shakespeare's Iago and Richard III, Montresor takes the reader into his confidence, assuming he or she will approve not only of his revenge but also of the clever and grotesque manner of it, and share his gloating satisfaction. The sensitive reader will also identify with Fortunato, however, and share his fear of the charnel-like catacombs and his horror of being walled up alive, to die slowly in the dark of starvation or suffocation among the skeletons of Montresor's ancestors.

The reader should realize, as Montresor does not, that despite his cleverness and irony, Montresor is an inhuman monster and something of a madman. Montresor's tone throughout is jocose. Repeatedly, he baits Fortunato (whose name is ironic in light of his ghastly fate) by playing on his vanity, suggesting that Luchesi can judge the wine as well, pretending to be his concerned friend, giving his enemy chance after chance to escape. The vaults are too damp, Fortunato has a cough, his health is precious, and they should turn back. With foreknowledge, Montresor observes that Fortunato will not die of a cough and drinks to his long life. Montresor interprets his family's coat of arms—signifying, he says, that no one injures him with impunity, a warning that Fortunato has ignored. When Fortunato makes a secret gesture and asks if Montresor is a mason, the latter produces a trowel, which he will use to wall up his enemy. Thus, Montresor plays cat and mouse with his victim. After chaining his enemy, he implores him to return, then says he must render him “all the little attention in my power,” and proceeds to the masonry. Clearly, he savors every moment of his murderous revenge. When Fortunato begins to scream, Montresor reveals his own madness. Unsheathing his rapier, he thrusts about with it and then responds by echoing and surpassing the cries of his victim. At the end, he returns to his jocose tone, observing that his heart grew sick on account of “the dampness of the catacombs,” and concluding, fifty years later, “In pace requiescat”: “May he rest in peace.”

Analysis: The Cask of Amontillado

Furious because of unspecified insults by Fortunato, the nobleman Montresor seeks revenge. By appealing to his enemy's pride, Montresor lures Fortunato into his family vaults to sample some wine to determine if it is true Amontillado. Once there, Montresor bricks the drunken man into a niche in the wall to die. Montresor tells the story of his crime fifty years later to an unnamed someone who knows well the nature of his soul.

The clues to the basically ironic nature of the story can be seen in many separate details which suggest that the truth is just the opposite of the surface appearance. The central irony lies in Montresor's coat of arms--which depicts a large human foot crushing a serpent whose fangs are embedded in the heel--and his family motto: No one harms me with impunity. There is irony also in Montresor's criteria for a successful revenge: that a wrong is unredressed when retribution overtakes its redresser or when the avenger does not make clear that he is acting out of revenge.

At the end of the story, although Montresor does indeed murder Fortunato, he never really makes clear to him why he is doing it. Moreover, the fact that fifty years later he confesses his crime, perhaps to a priest, might mean that he has been punished by guilt all this time. The question left in the reader's mind is: If Montresor is represented by the foot crushing out the life of the serpent Fortunato, then are the fangs of Fortunato still embedded in Montresor's heel? If so, it might be said that Fortunato fulfills Montresor's criteria for revenge more perfectly than Montresor himself does.

Analysis: Historical Context

The Short Story

Although there have been stories as long as there have been people to tell them, many critics trace the beginnings of the short story as a genre of written prose literature consciously developed as an art form to the nineteenth century. Previously in the West there had been great ages of epics memorized or extemporized orally, narrative poetry, drama, and the novel, but it was not until the early 1800s that critics began to describe the short story as a specific art form with its own rules and structures. In Europe, Honore de Balzac and others were already writing and theorizing about the new form. An early American voice in the discussion was Poe's. In 1842 he wrote a review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* (1842), a collection of thirty-nine brief stories and sketches, many dealing with the supernatural. In his influential review, Poe delineated the differences, as he saw them, between poetry, the novel and the “short prose narrative.”

Rhymed poetry, according to Poe, was the highest of the genres. But the “tale proper,” he claimed, “affords unquestionably the fairest field for the exercise of the loftiest talent, which can be afforded by the wide domains of mere prose.” The novel was inferior because it could not be read in one sitting, therefore making it impossible to preserve a “unity of effect or impression.” The ideal short story, one that could be read in thirty minutes to two hours, was created to produce one single effect. If a writer's “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.” Poe praised Hawthorne and [Washington Irving](#) for their skill with the new form, and kept firmly to the goal of the “single effect” in his own fiction. For this reason, his prose is almost exclusively in the short story form, and he limited each story to a small number of characters, simple plots, small geographical areas, and short time frames, as demonstrated in “The Cask of Amontillado.”

National Literature

In the first half of the nineteenth century, there was a great call for Americans to develop a national literature, by which was meant a body of works written by Americans, published by Americans, and dealing with particularly American characters, locales, and themes. The United States was still a young country, and most American readers and writers looked to Europe for great books and great authors, as well as for literary forms and themes. In 1837, Ralph Waldo Emerson gave an influential address titled “The American Scholar,” in which he called upon Americans to combine the best of European ideas with a determined self-knowledge, to create the new American intellectual who would best be able to lead the nation. Writers and publishers hoped that a national call for a national literature would create a stronger market for their products, which were being outsold by European imports.

Poe, although he had the same difficulty supporting himself through writing as his contemporaries, did not whole-heartedly embrace the movement. On the one hand, his published criticism and reviews railed against writers who wrote mere imitations of popular European writers. But neither did he approve of writing that was too patriotic, that offered clichéd praise of the United States with little artistic merit. He was also critical of those who praised inferior work simply because it was American. Like Emerson, Poe believed in using elements from Europe if they were useful artistically, and he believed that international settings helped establish universality. Still, he called upon American writers to use their imaginations to produce original and vital works. In “The Cask of Amontillado,” therefore, he used a European setting to create his exotic and murky atmosphere, but within the structure of the new and distinctly American short story form.

Analysis: Setting

The setting of “The Cask of Amontillado” has attracted a great deal of critical attention, because both the location and the time of the story are only vaguely hinted at. To bring touches of the exotic to his murky atmosphere, Poe freely combines elements of different nations and cultures. Fortunato and Luchesi are Italians, knowledgeable about Italian wines. Montresor, as argued convincingly by Richard Benton and others, is a Frenchman. Amontillado is a Spanish wine. Montresor's family motto, *Nemo me impune lacessit* (“No one wounds me with impunity”), is the motto of the royal arms of Scotland. Sprinkled among the Latin motto and other Latin phrases are references to Montresor's palazzo, his roauelaire, his rapier, and his flambeaux. If Poe's readers could not be expected to identify the nationality of each element, so much the better for creating the impression that the story happens “in another place and time.”

The time of the story may be guessed at. Montresor's short cape and rapier, the slightly formal vocabulary, and the torches used to light the men's way indicate that the story takes place in the eighteenth or nineteenth century. Scholars tracing the family name of Montresor and the history of laws governing the Mardi Gras carnivals in France have placed the date of the murder more precisely: John Randall III and others believe the murder occurs in 1796, while Benton argues for 1787-88.

Analysis: Literary Style

Point of View and Narrator

"The Cask of Amontillado" is told in the first person by Montresor, who reveals in the first sentence that he intends to have revenge from Fortunato. He tells the story to an unidentified "you, who so well know the nature of my soul," but this "you" does not appear to respond in any way as Montresor delivers a long monologue. The most striking thing about Montresor's voice, in fact, is its uninterrupted calm and confidence. He tells the story from beginning to end with no diversion, no explanation, and no emotion. If he is gleeful at gaining his revenge, or if he feels guilty about his crime, he does not speak of it directly, and his language does not reveal it. Even at the most terrifying moment in the story, when Fortunato realizes that Montresor intends to seal him up behind a wall, the narrator is calm and detached: "I had scarcely laid the first tier of the masonry when I discovered that the intoxication of Fortunato had in a great measure worn off. The earliest indication I had of this was a low mourning cry from the depth of the recess. It was *not* the cry of a drunken man. There was then a long and obstinate silence. I laid the second tier, and the third, and the fourth."

By presenting the story in the first person, Poe avoids hinting at any interpretation of the action. Montresor is in control, deciding what to tell and what to leave out. A third-person narrator, even a limited narrator who could not see into the minds and hearts of the characters, would have presented a more balanced story. An objective narrator telling a terrible story objectively might be frightening, but even more frightening is a man telling without emotion the story of his own terrible crime.

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The time of the story may be guessed at. Montresor's short cape and rapier, the slightly formal vocabulary, and the torches used to light the men's way seem to indicate that the story takes place in the eighteenth or nineteenth century. Scholars tracing the family name of Montresor and the history of laws governing the Mardi Gras carnivals in France have placed the date of the murder more precisely; John Randall III and others believe the murder occurs in 1796, while Benton argues for 1787-88.

Gothicism

Poe is often considered a master of the Gothic tale, and "The Cask of Amontillado" contains many of the standard elements of Gothicism. Gothic stories are typically set in medieval castles and feature mystery, horror, violence, ghosts, clanking chains, long underground passages, and dark chambers. The term "Gothic" originally referred to the Goths, an ancient and medieval Germanic tribe, but over time the word came to apply to anything medieval. The first Gothic novel, Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1764), was set in a medieval castle, and later works that attempted to capture the same setting or atmosphere were labeled "Gothic."

Poe was fascinated with the materials and devices of the Gothic novel, although he preferred to work in the short story form. He was a great admirer of Walpole, and of the American Gothic writer Charles Brockden Brown. "The Cask of Amontillado" takes many details from the Gothic tradition: the palazzo of the

Montresors with its many rooms, the archway that leads to the “long and winding staircase” down to the catacombs, the damp and dark passageway hanging with moss and dripping moisture, the piles of bones, the flaming torches that flicker and fade, and the “clanking” and “furious vibrations of the chain” that Montresor uses to bind Fortunato to the wall. The overall atmosphere of brooding and horror also come from this tradition.

Some elements of the Gothic, however, Poe intentionally avoided: there is no hint in “The Cask of Amontillado,” or in most of his horror stories, of the supernatural. Poe was quite clear on this point, explaining that the plot of a short story “may be involved, but it must not transcend probability. The agencies introduced must belong to real life.” Montresor’s crime is terrible, but it is believable, and it is committed without magic or superhuman power. Although there may be a hint of the supernatural in his remark that “for the half of a century no mortal has disturbed” the pile of bones outside Fortunato’s tomb, those beings that might not be mortal are not described, and indeed Fortunato does not reappear as a ghost or a vampire or a zombie. Poe uses Gothic conventions to create an atmosphere of terror, but then subverts the convention by using only human agents for terrible deeds. For Poe, it is not supernatural beings that people should fear; the real horror lies in what human beings themselves are capable of.

Analysis: Social Sensitivity

In the first half of the nineteenth century there was a great call for Americans to develop a national literature, by which was meant a body of works written by Americans, published by Americans, and dealing with particularly American characters, locales, and themes. The United States was still a young country, and most American readers and writers looked to Europe for great books and great authors, as well as for literary forms and themes. In 1837 Ralph Waldo Emerson gave an influential address titled “The American Scholar,” in which he called upon Americans to combine the best of European ideas with a determined self-knowledge, to create the new American intellectual who would best be able to lead the nation. Writers and publishers hoped that a national call for a national literature would create a stronger market for their products, which were being outsold by European imports.

Poe, although he had the same difficulty supporting himself through writing as his contemporaries, did not wholeheartedly embrace the movement. On the one hand, his published criticism and reviews railed against writers who wrote mere imitations of popular European writers. But neither did he approve of writing that was too patriotic, that offered clichéd praise of the United States but had little artistic merit. He was also critical of those who praised inferior work simply because it was American. Like Emerson, Poe believed in using elements from Europe if they were useful artistically, and he believed that international settings helped establish universality. Still, he called upon American writers to use their imaginations to produce original and vital works. In “The Cask of Amontillado,” therefore, he used a European setting to create his exotic and murky atmosphere, but within the structure of the new and distinctly American short story form.

Analysis: Compare and Contrast

1830s: An Anti-Masonic political party is formed in the United States, intended to counterbalance the supposed political influence of the Free and Accepted Masons. It is the first important third party in United States history.

1990s: With six million members but no central authority, the Free and Accepted Masons are found in nearly every English-speaking nation, including a large membership in the United States. They are more widely known for social activities and for community service than for political activity.

1840s: Poe, who did not graduate from college, is able to read Latin, French, German, Italian and Spanish, and expects his readers to have basic competence in Latin and French.

1990s: Most American college graduates have taken two years or less of foreign language study.

1840s: Writers are concerned that Americans do not have the attention span required to read long works of fiction. Poe writes, "We now demand the light artillery of the intellect; we need the curt, the condensed, the pointed, the readily diffused in place of the verbose, the detailed, the voluminous, the inaccessible."

1990s: Educators and parents complain that young people, raised with televisions and computers, do not like to read for long periods, but prefer to get their information in short, visual forms. Politicians complain that voters will not listen to complex arguments and ideas, but are interested only in "sound bites."

Analysis: Topics for Discussion

1. Who is the narrator addressing? Who is the "you" to whom Montresor confesses his crime? What is his motivation in telling the story?
2. Discuss the function and symbolism of wine in the story.
3. Why do you think Poe gives no explanation of the "thousand injuries" and final "insult" committed by Fortunato? What can you guess about them based on the interaction between the men? How do you explain the fact that Fortunato does not ask why Montresor is ready to kill him?
4. Consider all the factors that work in combination to lead Fortunato to his demise, including his drunkenness and his pride. What makes this a particularly lethal combination?
5. Is Montresor ever sorry for what he did? Explain the passage in which Fortunato begs for his life and Montresor replies, "Yes, for the love of God." Why, at the end of the story, does Montresor say "Rest in peace"?
6. Charles Dana, an early reviewer of Poe's stories, described them as "clumsily contrived, unnatural, and every way in bad taste." What other works that might fit this description also eventually won critical and popular favor?

Analysis: Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Investigate the history of the Free and Accepted Masons, the group to which Fortunato apparently belongs. How were Masons perceived in the United States during the nineteenth century? Why might Poe have chosen to make Fortunato a member?
2. Identify similarities and differences between "The Cask of Amontillado" and another Poe story, such as "The Premature Burial" or "The Tell-Tale Heart."
3. What is nitre (also known as potassium nitrate or saltpeter)? How would it form on the walls of the catacombs? Why might it be harmful?
4. Research the field of heraldry, the medieval system of assigning and describing symbols displayed on a shield to identify families. Learn enough of heraldry's special vocabulary to explain the conversation between Montresor and Fortunato on the subject of Montresor's "arms."

5. Learn what you can about European gentlemen's attire in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Fortunato, who has been enjoying the carnival, is dressed in motley. Montresor wears a silk mask and a *roquelaire*. What does the men's clothing reveal about their station in life or about their character?

6. Compare and contrast Poe's style of horror in "The Cask of Amontillado" with that of another well-known writer of the genre, such as Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne, H. P. Lovecraft, or Stephen King.

Analysis: Topics for Further Study

Investigate the history of the Free and Accepted Masons, a group to which Fortunato apparently belongs. How were Masons perceived in the United States during the nineteenth century? Why might Poe have chosen to make Fortunato a member?

What is nitre (also known as potassium nitrate or saltpeter)? How would it form on the walls of the catacombs? Why might it be harmful?

Research the field of heraldry, the medieval system of assigning and describing symbols displayed on a shield to identify families. Learn enough of heraldry's special vocabulary to explain the conversation between Montresor and Fortunato on the subject of Montresor's "arms."

Learn what you can about European gentlemen's attire in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Fortunato has been enjoying the carnival, and is dressed in motley. Montresor wears a silk mask and a *roquelaire*. What does the men's clothing reveal about their station in life, or about their character?

Analysis: Related Titles / Adaptations

The audio-cassette collection *The Best of Edgar Allan Poe* (1987), read by Edward Blake, includes "The Cask of Amontillado" and thirteen other stories and poems. The set is published by Listening Library. A radio play version of the story, originally broadcast on the NBC University Theater, is available on the audio-cassette *Nosology; The Cask of Amontillado; The Fall of the House of Usher* (1991), part of the Golden Age of Radio Thrillers series issued by Metacom. Other audio presentations include "The Cask of Amontillado" (1987) in the Edgar Allan Poe collection by Westlake House; *An Hour with Edgar Allan Poe* (1979) from Times Cassettes; and *Basil Rathbone Reads Edgar Allan Poe*, a record album issued in 1960 by Caedmon.

The story has also been captured many times on film and videotape. Videotapes include *The Cask of Amontillado* (1991) from Films for the Humanities; *The Cask of Amontillado* (1982) from AIMS Media; *Tales of Edgar Allan Poe* (1987) from Troll; and a three-tape set that includes six stories by six authors, *Classic Literary Stories* (1987), from Hollywood Select Video. Film versions include a 16mm film from BFA Educational Media accompanied by a teacher's guide; another 16mm film from Films Incorporated (1975); and a 35mm film from Brunswick Productions (1967) that analyzes and presents excerpts from the story.

"The Premature Burial" (1844), another one of Poe's tales of horror, is a catalog of anecdotes examining the horrors of being buried alive.

"The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843) is Poe's tale of a murderer who, unlike Montresor, is driven mad by guilt.

In "The Imp of the Perverse" (1845) Poe explores a man's uncontrollable impulses to do things that he knows will harm him—a recurring theme in Poe's fiction.

There are literally hundreds of anthologies of Poe's work to choose from. *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Tales* (1998), which is widely available, includes several of Poe's influential horror and detective stories.

Analysis: Media Adaptations

The audio cassette collection *The Best of Edgar Allan Poe* (1987), read by Edward Blake, includes "The Cask of Amontillado" and thirteen other stories and poems. The set is published by Listening Library. A radio play version of the story, originally broadcast on the NBC University Theater, is available on the audiocassette *Nosology; The Cask of Amontillado; The Fall of the House of Usher* (1991), part of the Golden Age of Radio Thrillers series issued by Metacom. Other audio presentations include "The Cask of Amontillado" (1987) in the Edgar Allan Poe collection by Westlake House; *An Hour with Edgar Allan Poe* (1979), from Times Cassettes; and *Basil Rathbone Reads Edgar Allan Poe*, a record album issued in 1960 by Caedmon.

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Analysis: What Do I Read Next?

Bodies of the Dead and Other Great American Ghost Stories (1997) is a collection of thirteen classic stories by Ambrose Bierce [Edith Wharton](#) [Nathaniel Hawthorne](#) and others.

Bram Stoker's Best Ghost and Horror Stories (1997) is a collection of fourteen spine-tingling stories by the author of *Dracula*.

Restless Spirits: Ghost Stories by American Women, 1872-1926 (1997) collects twenty-two stories by well-known and long-forgotten writers including [Zora Neale Hurston](#) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

Behind a Mask: The Unknown Thrillers of Louisa May Alcott (1995) demonstrates that the author of *Little Women* had a darker and more humorous side.

"The Premature Burial" (1844), another one of Poe's tales of horror, is a catalog of anecdotes examining the horrors of being buried alive.

"The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843) is Poe's tale of a murderer who, unlike Montresor, is driven mad by guilt.

In "The Imp of the Perverse" (1845), Poe explores a man's uncontrollable impulses to do things that he knows will harm him—a recurring theme in Poe's fiction.

There are literally hundreds of anthologies of Poe's work to choose from. *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Tales* (1998) is widely available, and includes several of Poe's influential horror and detective stories.

Among the many Poe biographies, *William Bittner's Poe: A Biography* (1962) strikes the best balance between the scholarly and the popular.

Analysis: For Further Reference

Benton, Richard P. "Poe's 'The Cask' and the 'White Webwork with Gleams.'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 28 (Spring 1991): 183-95. Benton focuses on Poe's fascination and use of the natural world in his stories, specifically the nitrous deposits in the caverns where Fortunato met his demise in "The Cask."

Carlson, Eric W. In *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Volume 74: American Short-Story Writers before 1880. Edited by Bobby Ellen Kimbel and William E. Grant. Detroit: Gale, 1988, pp. 303-22. Carlson lauds Poe for his "pioneering contributions to the genre," including developing the traditional Gothic tale and expanding the boundaries of the modern short story.

Cervo, Nathan. "Poe's 'The Cask of Amontillado.'" *The Explicator* 51 (Spring 1993): 155-57. Cervo reads the line, "No one wounds me with impunity," as a theme of Poe's story.

Gruesser, John. "Poe's 'The Cask of Amontillado.'" *The Explicator* 56 (Spring 1998): 129-31. Gruesser examines the debate over whether Montresor achieved perfect revenge against Fortunato.

Lawrence, D. H. "Edgar Allan Poe." In *The Symbolic Meaning: The Uncollected Versions of 'Studies in Classic American Literature.'* Centaur Press Limited, 1962, pp. 115-30. Originally written in 1919, Lawrence's essay studies Poe's depiction of love as a "destructive force in his short stories."

"The Cask of Amontillado." In *Literature and Its Times: Profiles of 300 Notable Literary Works and the Historical Events That Influenced Them*. Vol. 2. Edited by Joyce Moss and George Wilson. Detroit: Gale, 1997, pp. 81-86. An extensive overview of Poe's short story, including analyses of historical and social contexts.

Platzky, Roger. "Poe's 'The Cask of Amontillado.'" *The Explicator* 57 (Summer 1999): 206. This short critical essay focuses on Poe's obsession with living interment.

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Stevenson, Robert Louis. In *The Academy* VII (January 2, 1879): 1-2. Stevenson derides Poe's last works as lacking in humanity and the creative genius that made him famous.

Thompson, G. R. Essay on Poe in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Volume 3: Antebellum Writers in New York and the South. Edited by Joel Myerson. Detroit: Gale, 1979, pp. 249-97. This essay examines the importance of Poe in both American and European literary traditions, and explores critics' arguments over the intrinsic merit of Poe's writings.

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Rocks, James E. "Conflict and Motive in 'The Cask of Amontillado,'" in *Poe Newsletter*, Vol. 5, December 1972, pp. 50-51.

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A clear and accessible introduction to Gothic images and texts in their historical and cultural contexts. Includes a chapter on twentieth-century Gothic books and films.

Buranelli, Vincent. *Edgar Allan Poe*, Boston: Twayne, 1977.

An overview of the life and work for the general reader, which includes a chronology, a helpful index, and a no-longer-current bibliography of primary and secondary sources.

Carlson, Eric W., ed. *The Recognition of Edgar Allan Poe: Selected Criticism Since 1829*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966.

A collection of reviews and commentaries, especially interesting for the remarks by those Poe influenced, including the French poet Charles Baudelaire, Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevski, and British and American writers including [Walt Whitman](#) [William Butler Yeats](#) and T.S. Eliot.

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At over eight hundred pages, this scholarly work is the definitive and insightful, though difficult-to-read, biography.

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Questions and Answers: How does Poe explore the theme of disguise?

Poe explores the theme of disguise in this story, both in practical and psychological terms. For example, disguise is a critical component in Montresor's ability to carry out his revenge plot. The story is set during Carnival, just before Lent, during which everyone who is celebrating wears a costume to disguise his or her identity. Montresor uses his disguise, a mask and black cloak (much like an executioner) to ensure that he is not identified as having been with Fortunato. Fortunato is himself costumed as a jester or fool, symbolic of his character. In addition, the catacombs, part of the gothic framework of the story, also provide a crucial part of the disguise—they are hidden underneath Montresor's palazzo and descend into the earth where no one goes on a regular basis (except to the upper levels where wine is stored). From a psychological standpoint, Montresor very successfully disguises himself and his intentions from Fortunato and the outside world when he poses as Fortunato's true friend, and one can argue that the "insult" itself is the most important disguised element of all.

Questions and Answers: What is the significance of Fortunato's jingling bells?

Many questions have been asked about the significance of Fortunato's carnival costume and the jingling bells on his hat. In the first place, Poe dressed his character in a jester's costume to make him as conspicuous as possible. Fortunato chose the costume because he thinks of himself as a clever jester. Montresor wants to lure Fortunato off the streets and down into his catacombs. The fact that Fortunato is so conspicuous and even has ringing bells on his hat seems to make Montresor's task more difficult, since Montresor does not want to be seen with the man on the night he disappears. But this is the main plot problem to be solved. The protagonist, Montresor, has a motive, which is to commit a murder. His problem is to do so without being caught and punished. The victim's costume simply makes the problem greater. But Poe, a literary genius, realized that the more attention Fortunato attracted to himself, the less attention would be given to the man in black who was with him and who was wearing a black mask. Many of the intoxicated revelers would remember seeing Fortunato, but none would remember seeing his companion, who would be almost a shadow.

So the jingling bells help to attract attention to Fortunato. But that is not all. They serve to place him, to locate him, to represent him while the two men are down in the stygian catacombs. The reader eventually cannot visualize Fortunato in that darkness but can only hear him and know that he is following his nemesis to his death.

Poe mentions the jingling bells many times throughout the story. The last time he refers to Fortunato's bells comes very near the end.

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.

This excerpt from the story's last paragraph should show Poe's intention. The reader cannot visualize Fortunato because he is completely walled up. Even Montresor, whose point of view has been the reader's point of view throughout the story, cannot see his victim. The jingling of bells behind the newly erected wall suggests that Fortunato is still alive and may remain in that horrible situation for a long time before he expires. The jingling bells have been telling Montresor and the reader the whereabouts of the victim in the pitch darkness, and they serve as absolute proof of Fortunato's final fate. Poe cannot describe Fortunato in chains after the wall is completed because the author does not want to depart from Montresor's point of view; and Montresor cannot see what the scene is like behind the wall.

Montresor wanted, above all, satisfaction. The jingling bells in the last paragraph tell him that he has achieved his complete and perfect revenge. The bells place Fortunato in a site where he will never be found. After fifty years he will be nothing but another skeleton. When Montresor pens the final words, *In pace requiescat*, he is

signifying that he has achieved full closure.

Questions and Answers: How does Montresor lure Fortunato to his death?

Many first-time readers might not understand the subtlety in Montresor's method of luring Fortunato into his catacombs. They believe Fortunato is motivated by a desire (1) to drink some delicious Amontillado, (2) to demonstrate his connoisseurship, (3) to do Montresor a favor, and (4) to prove he knows more about wine than Luchesi. None of these beliefs is entirely correct. The whole story does not have to be read to understand how Montresor has baited his trap. The following contains all the information necessary to appreciate the thought Poe devoted to fashioning the story Montresor tells Fortunato. The nonexistent cask of Amontillado is the bait. The first minutes are crucial.

I said to him—"My dear Fortunato, you are luckily met. How remarkably well you are looking to-day. But I have received a pipe of what passes for Amontillado, and I have my doubts."

"How?" said he. "Amontillado. A pipe? Impossible! And in the middle of the carnival!"

"I have my doubts," I replied; "and I was silly enough to pay the full Amontillado price without consulting you in the matter. You were not to be found, and I was fearful of losing a bargain."

"Amontillado!"

"I have my doubts."

"Amontillado!"

"And I must satisfy them."

"Amontillado!"

"As you are engaged, I am on my way to Luchesi. If any one has a critical turn it is he. He will tell me—"

Montresor says, "You are luckily met" because he wants Fortunato to think he has been seeking him on an important matter. Then Montresor says, "But I have received..." The words "But" and "received" deserve particular attention. "But" implies that Montresor would like to join Fortunato, *but* he is on an urgent errand. He does not say he has purchased a pipe of Amontillado, only that he has "received" one. This suggests he has previously ordered the cask that has just been delivered. He has to say "received" so that Fortunato will believe the wine is at Montresor's home and nowhere else. The obvious assumption is that a ship from Barcelona has arrived with an entire cargo of Amontillado. There is no other way Montresor's cask could have been transported to Venice.

Fortunato does not ask questions about the transaction for several reasons, including that he is drunk. The "But" gives Fortunato no time to ask questions of a man in a hurry. And he does not want to show too much interest in details for fear of revealing that he would like to get in on this bargain. He must volunteer to sample the wine before Montresor goes to Luchesi. If he accompanies Montresor to his palazzo, Fortunato can keep Luchesi from finding out about this bargain. What interests Fortunato is the possibility of making a huge

profit, and not sipping a glass of sweet wine in a cold, dark, damp catacomb in order to please a friend and to show off his supposed connoisseurship. Fortunato would not have to go with Montresor at all if it were not for Luchesi, who would also be very interested in the bargain if he learned about it. Fortunato otherwise could tell Montresor he could not accompany him that night—after all, he is inadequately dressed, he has a bad cold, and he could invent a previous engagement—and then go directly to the harbor and find the Spanish ship. He doesn't need to taste Montresor's wine; he can sample it from several big casks on board.

Why does Montresor repeat, "I have my doubts"? The manifest meaning is that he needs an expert to advise him. But why so urgently? Because he got a bargain and wants to buy more before word gets out. That is why he is running around looking for Fortunato and then giving up on finding him and heading for Luchesi's. He wants to buy more wine that night, but he has to be sure it is genuine. Otherwise it is no bargain. But Poe concocted another reason for "I have my doubts." If Fortunato cannot accompany him that night, he is sure to inquire about it later. This is one reason Montresor says he "received" the pipe. He can say he bought it from a person who wishes to remain anonymous. He never claimed there was more available or that he wanted to buy more. And if Fortunato asks to taste that totally fictitious Amontillado, Montresor can present him with a bottle of ordinary sherry and say it was drawn from the big cask. Fortunato will taste it, shake his head, and hopefully forget the matter. Montresor will have to think of some other way of disposing of his enemy. He will never be able to lure him into his catacombs with a similar cock-and-bull story.

Finally Montresor says, "As you are engaged..." He wants to find out whether Fortunato is expected at home or anywhere else that night. He must leave a cold trail. He doesn't want Fortunato missed before tomorrow morning at the earliest. Montresor fails to respond to the first gambit. But when Fortunato takes him by the arm and proceeds to drag him off to his wine cellar, Montresor says:

"My friend, no; I will not impose upon your good nature. I perceive you have an engagement. Luchesi—"

"I have no engagement,—come."

Once Fortunato says, "I have no engagement," his doom is sealed. Fortunato will be recognized by many drunken celebrants, especially with his conspicuous jester's costume and jingling bells; but his companion, wearing a black cloak and a black mask, will be as nameless as a shadow.

The subtlety of Montresor's entrapment scheme could be lost on first-time readers, who might make the assumption that Fortunato is motivated by a desire (1) to drink some delicious Amontillado, (2) to demonstrate his connoisseurship, (3) to do his friend a favor, and (4) to prove he knows more about wine than Luchesi. But a careful reader will see much more in the story, which can be read over and over with new insights.

Questions and Answers: Is Montresor an unreliable narrator?

Many people have called Montresor an "unreliable narrator." Some seem to think Montresor is telling his story to them. There are multiple ways to look at this issue, but one can definitely make the case that Montresor is a reliable narrator. Poe makes it clear from the beginning that this is a confidential communication to one single individual whom Montresor has known for many years. He addresses this person as "You, who so well know the nature of my soul." If he is unreliable, he is not intentionally so. If the reader fails to understand something Montresor says or writes, that does not mean the confidant, or confidante, does not understand it perfectly. If Montresor is "unreliable," it can only be because he does not understand himself; he is not trying to deceive the confidant or confidante, and there is no one else he could have been

trying to deceive.

So, where is the evidence of unreliability? Most people point to the thousand injuries plus an insult. Montresor is certainly unreliable in what he says to Fortunato, but he knows he is being intentionally deceptive. Why does it seem unreliable to say that he received a thousand injuries from his victim? Surely the recipient has heard from Montresor a number of times over the fifty years before receiving this strange confession. If the reader does not know the nature of at least some of the injuries, the person who reads the confession must surely have heard about some of them in all that time. If they had not been corresponding for fifty years, Montresor would not be so sure he could trust the other person with this incriminating revelation. He considers the other man, or woman, a person who knows all about him, who knows the nature of his soul. Is this also supposed to be unreliable? Was Montresor making a big mistake in trusting this other person with such information? That seems unlikely because he had taken such great precautions, not only to commit the murder, but to do so with what he calls "impunity." No one would suspect him of having anything to do with Fortunato's strange disappearance because everyone thought they were the best of friends. Montresor repeatedly refers to his victim as "my friend," "my good friend," and "my poor friend" even when he is leading him to his death. He has conditioned himself to think of Fortunato as his friend and always to speak of him as his friend, even as his good friend. He should be above suspicion, and he would have been the one who showed the most concern about Fortunato's whereabouts for the longest time. The reader can only call Montresor "unreliable" if he assumes Montresor is addressing him, but Poe has invented a narrative device that enables him to leave out a plethora of background information in order to focus on the dramatic aspect of the narrative.

Questions and Answers: How does Montresor display foresight in his murder of Fortunato?

Montresor specifies that he must murder with "impunity" in order for his revenge to be totally successful. He knows there is sure to be a big investigation into Fortunato's mysterious disappearance. It could actually go on for years. If the police authorities gave up on it, Fortunato's family might still pursue the investigation. It would long be the talk of the town. Montresor wanted to be above suspicion. That explains why he calls Fortunato "my friend" and why he refers to him many times throughout the story as "my friend," "my good friend," and "my poor friend." He has conditioned himself to think of Fortunato as his very good friend even though he plans to murder him. No doubt he customarily refers to Fortunato as "my friend Fortunato" at every opportunity. And no doubt Montresor continued to ask about his good friend for years after his disappearance, longer than anybody else in Venice. He had concealed his victim behind a stone wall and plastered it over to make it look like part of the solid rock wall of the catacombs. Nevertheless, he would have preferred not to be included in any house-to-house search. He assumed that no one would ever suspect him of having murdered Fortunato because they were such very good "friends." He was probably right in this assumption. During the fifty years that have passed since he chained his victim to the rock wall, it is unlikely that anyone has passed by that spot, with the possible exception of Montresor himself. Montresor has not only committed his crime without being caught in the act, but he has managed to avoid any hint of suspicion that he could have had anything to do with the strange disappearance.

Many questions have been asked about the "thousand injuries of Fortunato." Readers wonder why Poe didn't at least give a few examples. Poe had to be vague about the "thousand injuries" because he had to protect Montresor from suspicion. Perhaps the injuries would have to be of such a nature that they would be known only to Montresor. Fortunato himself might not have considered them injuries at all but as "jests." Montresor is obviously a hypersensitive man who might feel slight injuries more poignantly than others. The fact that Montresor has endured a thousand injuries should not be surprising if the injuries were so slight and so subtle that nobody else was aware of them and everybody thought the two men were the best of friends. In other words, if the injuries were petty, there would have to be a lot of them to motivate Montresor to retaliate.

Poe actually gives samples of the kinds of injuries Montresor has suffered. Here is one:

He raised it to his lips with a leer. He paused and nodded to me familiarly, while his bells jingled.

"I drink," he said, "to the buried that repose around us."

Fortunato knows that all these bones are not those of Montresor's ancestors. Montresor's French name shows he is a relative newcomer to Italy. He doesn't consider himself Italian. He probably doesn't own the palazzo but is renting it from the owner, who is also the owner of most of the bones. Fortunato is being disingenuous. The "leer" shows he is being intentionally cruel in reminding Montresor of his inferior social status.

Here is another example of Fortunato's injuries:

"I forget your arms."

"A huge human foot d'or, in a field azure; the foot crushes a serpent rampant whose fangs are imbedded in the heel."

"And the motto?"

"Nemo me impune lacessit."

Fortunato does not believe that Montresor has a coat of arms. Here again he is being disingenuous. In fact, Montresor's family does not have a coat of arms or a motto, and Montresor is only making them up to amuse himself. Both the imaginary coat of arms and the motto are too appropriate to the situation. Fortunato may or may not believe they are genuine, but he is too drunk to give them much thought at this time.

Why has Montresor continued to associate with Fortunato all this time if he keeps receiving injuries and contumely? Perhaps the two men have some business relations which are important to Montresor because Fortunato is rich and well connected. The third paragraph of the story suggests that both these men deal in one-of-a-kind luxury items such as oil paintings, jewelry (gemmetry), and antiques. Perhaps even in real estate. They are not shopkeepers, by any means, but might be described as "gentlemen brokers."

He had a weak point—this Fortunato—although in other regards he was a man to be respected and even feared. He prided himself on his connoisseurship in wine. Few Italians have the true virtuoso spirit. For the most part their enthusiasm is adopted to suit the time and opportunity, to practise imposture upon the British and Austrian millionaires. In painting and gemmary, Fortunato, like his countrymen, was a quack, but in the matter of old wines he was sincere. In this respect I did not differ from him materially;—I was skilful in the Italian vintages myself, and bought largely whenever I could.

Questions and Answers: Who is Montresor addressing when he says "You, who so well know the nature of my soul"?

It has been suggested that Montresor is confessing to a priest. It has also been suggested that he is writing a letter to a friend. There are other possible answers to the many questions about the identity of "You, who so well know the nature of my soul."

One of them is that "You" means *you*, the reader. This puts you close to the narrator. It also makes you an accomplice, because you know where the body is buried. You are to imagine that you have known Montresor all your life and that he is confiding in you because you are the only person he can trust with his guilty secret. By the time you finish reading this tale you will indeed know the nature of his soul very well.

Another possibility is that Montresor is addressing a totally imaginary confidant or confidante, or perhaps a private diary.

Questions and Answers: Why doesn't Fortunato ask questions?

Fortunato accompanies Montresor all the way to his palazzo, down into his catacombs, and along winding corridors to the niche where he is imprisoned. During all that time he never asks any of the questions that should have been obvious. Why not? Why doesn't he ask where Montresor bought the Amontillado? Why doesn't he ask how much he paid for it? Why doesn't he ask the name of the person Montresor dealt with? Why doesn't he ask where the wine was produced or how long it had been aged?

Edgar Allan Poe realized it would seem strange to the reader that Fortunato never asked any questions about the wine, although the two men would obviously have to talk about *something* during all the time they were together, and the obvious thing for them to talk about would be the Amontillado they are supposedly going to sample. Poe tries to account for Fortunato's failure to ask questions about the wine in a number of ways:

- Fortunato is intoxicated when Montresor encounters him on the street, and Montresor keeps him intoxicated until he has him chained to the rock wall. Presumably this drunken condition would prevent Fortunato from thinking clearly, so that he might even forget why they were there and where they were going.
- Poe provides Fortunato with a very bad cold and a cough. The author even devotes a whole separate paragraph to describing the cough. "*Ugh! ugh! ugh!—ugh! ugh! ugh!—ugh! ugh! ugh!—ugh! ugh! ugh!—ugh! ugh! ugh!—ugh! ugh! ugh!*" The sole purpose for giving Fortunato that cough is to make it hard for him to talk. Montresor even says, "*My poor friend found it impossible to reply for many minutes.*"
- Montresor distracts Fortunato on more than one occasion by calling his attention to all the nitre on the catacomb walls. "*The nitre!*" *I said; "see, it increases. It hangs like moss upon the vaults. We are below the river's bed. The drops of moisture trickle among the bones. Come, we will go back ere it is too late. Your cough—"*
- The men engage in some chit-chat about Montresor's coat of arms and family motto and the Masons. All of this is only to fill up space with some conversation not related to the Amontillado. If Fortunato is such a great connoisseur, he might know a lot more about that type of wine than either Montresor or Edgar Allan Poe. This partially explains why Poe would rather not have to answer a lot of questions about it.
- Montresor is not as naive as Fortunato supposed. Montresor knows that his "friend" is only interested in the wine because Montresor has told him he got a bargain. Fortunato, we may suspect from his strange silence on the subject, is already planning to say that the wine is only ordinary sherry. He might assume a Spanish ship loaded with barrels of Amontillado sherry has just arrived in port and the Spaniards are having a hard time selling it because everybody is neglecting business during the carnival. Fortunato could easily find the ship and buy up the whole cargo. But, if this were true, he has to make sure it is genuine Amontillado.

Questions and Answers: Is the story Montresor tells Fortunato about the Amontillado believable?

How does Fortunato expect to taste the Amontillado that Montresor claims to have stored in his underground vaults? Both men refer to the cask as a "pipe," which is a huge barrel containing 126 gallons. The wine must have been aged in the wooden barrel. The pipe would be on its side and slightly tilted forward. There would be a spigot at the bottom of the round end of the barrel by which the vintner could draw off a small glass of the wine from time to time in order to test it. This makes it a little suspicious that he would have to bring Fortunato into the catacombs to taste the wine—but Fortunato, drunk and blinded by pride, follows credulously.

Fortunato's drunkenness—and perhaps his cough—prevents him from asking many questions. He is a clever man, but he is not thinking straight. From the time Montresor encounters Fortunato on the street to the time he chains him to the rock wall inside the niche, Fortunato does not ask any of the obvious questions about the price, the seller, or why exactly they're traveling so far underground. Montresor sets the scene for his revenge by instead talking about Masons and his coat of arms.

Questions and Answers: What makes Montresor's entrapment scheme successful?

Montresor's scheme to lure Fortunato to his death may be understood from the few lines of dialogue between the two men when they first meet. The following is what Montresor says, with Fortunato's dialogue left out.

I said to him—"My dear Fortunato, you are luckily met. How remarkably well you are looking to-day. But I have received a pipe of what passes for Amontillado, and I have my doubts....I have my doubts," I replied; "and I was silly enough to pay the full Amontillado price without consulting you in the matter. You were not to be found, and I was fearful of losing a bargain....I have my doubts. And I must satisfy them. As you are engaged, I am on my way to Luchesi. If any one has a critical turn it is he. He will tell me—"

Montresor has honed his story to perfection. He wants to get Fortunato to come to his palazzo immediately. Otherwise Fortunato might have time to check on the story and find there was no newly arrived shipment of Amontillado in port. Fortunato might also tell other people that he was going to Montresor's home at his request to sample some wine. But Montresor's story forces Fortunato to come immediately if he wants to come at all. Montresor says he is on his way to see Luchesi. He pretends to be in a big hurry to have an expert sample his totally fictitious cask of wine and tell him whether or not it is genuine Amontillado. Why? *Because he got it at a bargain price. He only bought one cask because he wasn't sure it was genuine. But he would like to buy more if he can get an expert to taste it and reassure him.*

This is what interests Fortunato—the bargain. He is not going to Montresor's palazzo to do a favor for a friend. He is not anxious to show off his connoisseurship. He is not interested in drinking a glass of wine, however delicious, in a dank, dark catacomb, especially when he is inadequately dressed and has a bad cold. But he senses the possibility of making a lot of money. Neither man is really interested in acquiring a "pipe" of Amontillado for personal consumption. A pipe contains 126 gallons. Both are thinking of buying the wine for resale purposes.

Montresor appears to be struggling financially. If he were sure his Amontillado was genuine he might buy one or two more pipes. But Fortunato is a rich man. He could buy an entire shipload of Amontillado, bottle it, and make a small fortune. If it took a few years to dispose of the wine that wouldn't matter. The wine would only

improve with age in its wooden cask. But Fortunato would also have to be sure it was genuine. He doesn't really need to go to Montresor's palazzo to establish that. If there is a Spanish ship in port bringing a cargo of wine from Barcelona, he could find it easily just by inquiring on the waterfront. He could sample the wine aboard the ship and buy up the entire cargo. Ordinarily he would probably give Montresor some excuse and go directly to the Spanish ship—but Montresor has added Luchesi to his scheme. If Fortunato begs off because of his cold, or for any other reason, Montresor would go straight to Luchesi. We can assume that this third man is a potential competitor. Fortunato might find himself competing with Luchesi in bidding up the price of the wine. He doesn't want Luchesi to hear a word about this bargain—that is why he sees he must go to Montresor's palazzo immediately.

Montresor knows his victim from bitter past experience. He is not foolish enough to think that Fortunato will tell him the truth. Readers might suspect that Fortunato is already planning to taste the wine, shake his head, and say it is only ordinary sherry. In fact, he seems to be preparing Montresor for disappointment when he says earlier, before they have even started for Montresor's palazzo:

"You have been imposed upon."

Questions and Answers: What does "In pace requiescat!" mean?

Montresor knows that his revenge against Fortunato would not be satisfying if he himself were caught and punished. He must also realize that killing Fortunato would not bring him satisfaction unless it enabled him to get rid of the bad feelings he harbors against the man. Montresor feels anger, hatred, resentment, and humiliation, among other things. When he achieves his perfect revenge and his hated enemy is dead, Montresor feels cleansed of all his bitter feelings. Revenge is sweet. After the passage of fifty years, Montresor can feel assured that he will never even be suspected of causing Fortunato to disappear so mysteriously. If he thinks of Fortunato at all, he pictures him as a wretched skeleton still chained to the granite wall in the narrow niche, still wearing the soiled rags of his jester's costume. He no longer hates this man at all. Montresor has achieved closure. He has cleansed his heart and mind of all the bitterness he felt because of the thousand injuries he had endured. This is why it is appropriate that Montresor ends his story with the words "In pace requiescat!" or "Rest in peace!" Montresor is not being sarcastic. He really and truly means it. This is sweet revenge. Fortunato is nothing now. He is of no more importance to Montresor than all those other bones in the catacombs. Montresor feels obliged to say "In pace requiescat!" Who else could say it? He is the only person in the whole wide world who knows where Fortunato's body is interred, and the only person in the whole wide world who knows how it got there. Montresor wishes Fortunato to rest in peace because he himself has found peace of mind by disposing of him.

Questions and Answers: How does Montresor behave toward Fortunato?

Montresor's attitude towards Fortunato throughout "The Cask of Amontillado" can best be described as obsequious. This word is defined in various ways. Dictionary.com defines it as:

characterized by or showing servile complaisance or defer-ence....fawning

"Fawning" is defined as:

displaying exaggerated flattery or affection

Montresor certainly displays exaggerated affection. Although he hates Fortunato and intends to murder him in a horrible way, he calls him "My friend" and refers to him as "my good friend" and "my poor friend" throughout the tale. Here are some examples of obsequious speech and behavior intended to reassure his intended victim of his good will:

I said to him—"My dear Fortunato, you are luckily met. How remarkably well you are looking to-day."

"My friend, no; I will not impose upon your good nature."

I took from their sconces two flambeaux, and giving one to Fortunato, *bowed him through several suites of rooms to the archway that led into the vaults.*

"Come," I said, with decision, "we will go back; your health is precious. You are rich, respected, admired, beloved; you are happy, as once I was. You are a man to be missed. For me it is no matter. We will go back; you will be ill, and I cannot be responsible. Besides, there is Luchesi—"

Montresor's behavior is that of an inferior towards a superior. This suggests an answer to the questions: Why did Montresor put up with a "thousand injuries"? Why didn't he just stay away from him? Montresor is dependent upon Fortunato for money. The third paragraph suggests that these two men may invest in luxury items.

He had a weak point—this Fortunato—although in other regards he was a man to be respected and even feared. He prided himself on his connoisseur-ship in wine. Few Italians have the true virtuoso spirit. For the most part their enthusiasm is adopted to suit the time and opportunity, *to practise imposture upon the British and Austrian millionaires. In painting and gemmery, Fortunato, like his countrymen, was a quack, but in the matter of old wines he was sincere.* In this respect I did not differ from him materially;—I was skilful in the Italian vintages myself, and bought largely whenever I could.

Perhaps Montresor put up with Fortunato's injuries because he needed him for business purposes. Meanwhile, Montresor's hatred keeps building but he continues to act obsequiously while intending to take his revenge when the time is ripe.

It must be understood that neither by word nor deed had I given Fortunato cause to doubt my good will. I continued, as was my wont to smile in his face, and he did not perceive that my smile *now* was at the thought of his immolation.

It is interesting to note that even when Montresor has his "friend" chained to the granite wall he does not gloat or vent his hate and anger. He maintains the same obsequious manner he has been exhibiting all along. Fortunato will understand that Montresor has been deceiving him all these years.

"Pass your hand," I said, "over the wall; you cannot help feeling the nitre. Indeed, it is *very* damp. Once more let me *implore* you to return. No? Then I must positively leave you. But I must first render you all the little attentions in my power."

Questions and Answers: What are the "thousand injuries of Fortunato"?

Many readers have complained about the fact that Montresor never offers any examples of the thousand injuries he claims to have suffered. Some readers think Montresor must be insane and only imagining the injuries. The story was originally published in 1846, and to this day the thousand injuries have remained a puzzle. It almost seems as if Edgar Allan Poe was playing a joke on his readers, leaving them to wonder what those injuries could have been or whether there were any injuries at all. But Montresor is not addressing us readers; he is addressing a confidential confession to someone he calls "You, who so well know the nature of my soul." That person must have known about some of Montresor's grievances, but he or she is dead now, and nobody else will ever know what any of those grievances were. They must be kept secret, just as Fortunato's body must be kept hidden from the world. If anybody knew that Fortunato had injured Montresor a thousand times, then Montresor would be a prime suspect. And if he were a prime suspect, a careful search of his premises would lead to the discovery of Fortunato's body. That is why the reader comes up against a stone wall. Poe intended it that way. He wanted his readers to wonder. It was sufficient that the injuries were known to "You, who so well know the nature of my soul." The story is not addressed to you or me, but to this man or woman who is the only person in the world that Montresor trusts. We can only guess at the nature of those injuries—if we think it is important. They have to be injuries that nobody else knew about. Montresor pretends to be oblivious of any injuries. He deliberately refers to Fortunato as his friend and his good friend on every possible occasion. He constantly addresses Fortunato himself as "my friend" and has even conditioned himself to think of him as such, even when he is plotting to kill him and is leading him to his death. Fortunato must have gotten the idea that this Montresor is a fool and a toady who will put up with anything. Montresor is acting the part of a toady throughout the tale. He keeps addressing Fortunato as "My friend" and treats him with great courtesy. It is noteworthy that he is even obsequious when he is preparing to wall his good friend up inside the little niche.

"Pass your hand," I said, "over the wall; you cannot help feeling the nitre. Indeed, it is *very* damp. Once more let me *implore* you to return. No? Then I must positively leave you. But I must first render you all the little attentions in my power."

Questions and Answers: How does Montresor use reverse psychology on Fortunato?

Wikipedia gives the following definition of reverse psychology.

Reverse psychology is a technique involving the advocacy of a belief or behavior that is opposite to the one desired, with the expectation that this approach will encourage the subject of the persuasion to do what actually *is* desired: the opposite of what is suggested. This technique relies on the psychological phenomenon of reactance, in which a person has a negative emotional reaction to being persuaded, and thus chooses the option which is being advocated against. The one being manipulated is usually unaware of what is really going on.

There are many reasons that the author has Montresor keep suggesting that they go back. Perhaps the most important reason is that it will make Montresor seem perfectly harmless to Fortunato. If Montresor keeps suggesting going back, then he can't be leading him anywhere that could be dangerous.

But Montresor knows that Fortunato could easily become suspicious. Montresor is taking him a long, long way through a network of dark passages. Why on earth should he have stored a big barrel of wine so far away from the bottom of the stairs leading down into his wine cellar. The farther they go, the more strange it must seem. The "pipe," if it existed, would contain 126 gallons of wine. That is a huge barrel. The men would have had a very difficult time carrying it or rolling it through all those catacombs. It is only because Fortunato is heavily intoxicated that he doesn't protest. Poe describes his intoxication as follows:

He turned towards me, and looked into my eyes with two filmy orbs that distilled the rheum of intoxication.

Poe had to have Montresor take Fortunato all the way from the street where he first encounters him back to his palazzo, down into the wine vault, and through a series of catacombs without saying anything about the Amontillado. It would seem natural for Fortunato, who is supposedly an expert, to ask questions such as "Where did you get it?" and "How much did you pay?" But Poe didn't want Fortunato asking questions. Fortunato knows more about Amontillado than Montresor; otherwise Montresor wouldn't be asking his advice. If Fortunato started asking questions, he would probably sense that Montresor was lying. Poe himself may have known nothing about Amontillado except that it was a gourmet sherry and was an important export from Spain.

Instead of talking about what is the object of their trip, the two men engage in chit-chat about the Masons, family crests, the nitre covering the walls of the catacombs, and other miscellaneous subjects. One of the ways Poe fills the gap with dialogue is to have Montresor keep suggesting that they go back. For example:

"Come," I said, with decision, "we will go back; your health is precious. You are rich, respected, admired, beloved; you are happy, as once I was. You are a man to be missed. For me it is no matter. We will go back; you will be ill, and I cannot be responsible. Besides, there is Luchesi—"

Poe seems to be indicating that Montresor is using what is called "reverse psychology" to keep his victim motivated. But this is also a way of filling a lot of space with dialogue.

Fortunato might be suspected of avoiding the subject of the Amontillado because he has an ulterior motive. He is not just doing Montresor a favor. He wants to taste the wine, make sure it is genuine, and then go off by himself and find the Spanish ship that brought in a whole cargo of the gourmet wine. If Montresor bought a pipe at a bargain price, Fortunato can buy a whole shipload at an even better price and make a fortune. Therefore, he doesn't want to show too great an interest in the wine he is about to sample. Montresor knows his friendly enemy would tell him it was only ordinary sherry, whether it were or not, thus even eliminating Montresor as a competitor for the bargain. Montresor can only be so anxious to get an immediate expert opinion on his purchase of the one pipe because he would like to buy more.

So Montresor keeps suggesting that they turn back because:

- Poe has to fill up some space with dialogue.
- The suggestions make Montresor look innocent. He can't be leading Fortunato into any danger if he tells him to turn back.
- Montresor is using "reverse psychology" because this is often an effective way to get some people--especially drunks--to insist on doing the opposite. We all know of drunks who insist on driving themselves home just because their friends are trying to talk them into letting someone else drive.
- Fortunato does not want Luchesi to learn that there is a whole shipload of Amontillado being offered at a bargain price. He believes that if he drops out, Montresor will go straight to Luchesi that same night. Then Fortunato would find himself competing with another expert and bidding up the price of the nonexistent Amontillado.
- The suggestion to turn back is a distraction. It is beginning to seem ridiculous that they should be walking so far in these bone-filled, stygian catacombs to find a single barrel of wine. Poe is not only distracting Fortunato but distracting the reader, keeping him from asking awkward questions, such as, "Why did you move the wine-barrel way back here?" "Why didn't you just tap the barrel for a couple of bottles and bring them up to your living room, where people could sample the wine in comfort?"

Questions and Answers: What role do Montresor and Fortunato's professions play in the story?

The entire third paragraph of the narrative suggests that both Montresor and Fortunato are not noblemen but gentlemen who earn their livings by trading in expensive goods, which would include paintings, antiques, jewelry (gemmary), and gourmet wines. Venice, where the story is obviously set, has been a decaying city for centuries. Aristocratic families have been forced to sell off possessions, which could include masterpieces by great Renaissance artists, in order to survive. They would naturally want to deal with gentlemen-businessmen who were knowledgeable and discreet. In many cases, Montresor and Fortunato would not buy expensive items but would act as brokers and receive commissions. Many of the items to be sacrificed might never leave the seller's premises. The prospective purchasers would be brought to the seller's home while the family retired to another wing of their palazzo.

If Fortunato is a "quack" in some areas, this may partially explain why Montresor endures his "thousand injuries." Fortunato may call on Montresor to assist him in appraising such items as paintings and jewelry. The fact that Montresor considers Fortunato a "quack" suggests that Montresor has expertise in some things and Fortunato in others, such as wines, and that they have been interdependent on various occasions. They have a symbiotic relationship—but Fortunato may take advantage of Montresor in business dealings whenever he can. The "thousand injuries" are likely injuries in business dealings. These are known only to Montresor. If it were widely known that Fortunato had injured Montresor many times, there would be some suspicion of Montresor when Fortunato disappeared. Montresor is anxious to avoid the slightest suspicion; he wants "impunity," i.e., no suspicion at all.

Montresor is poor, and Fortunato is rich. This should also help to explain why Montresor puts up with Fortunato's "thousand injuries." Montresor can't afford to break off relations with this arrogant and selfish man. Montresor consistently acts obsequiously towards Fortunato. In one place in the narrative, Montresor reveals a great deal about the nature of their relationship.

"Come," I said, with decision, "we will go back; your health is precious. You are rich, respected, admired, beloved; you are happy, as once I was. You are a man to be missed. For me it is no matter. We will go back; you will be ill, and I cannot be responsible. Besides, there is Luchesi—"

Montresor makes money by his relationship with Fortunato. He needs Fortunato more than Fortunato needs him. But then why kill Fortunato? Evidently Montresor has decided that he cannot put up with his behavior any longer. Besides, there may be some material advantage in eliminating a competitor.

Questions and Answers: Does Montresor have an internal conflict?

In the opening paragraph of the story, Montresor says:

At length I would be avenged; this was a point definitely settled...

Poe seems to have inserted the paragraph, and these words in particular, in order to establish that Montresor did not have an internal conflict. Poe's story is clearly to be about Montresor's external conflict: the problems he has in luring Fortunato off the streets and down into his doom without being recognized or ever suspected.

Montresor encounters Fortunato when his proposed victim is drunk and unaccompanied. Montresor has the problem of getting Fortunato to accompany him to his palazzo immediately without being recognized himself. Poe ingeniously helps his character solve the problem of avoiding being recognized by making Fortunato so conspicuous in his jester's costume, complete with a cap with jingling bells, that he attracts all the attention while Montresor in his black cloak and black mask is like a shadow. Many people will remember seeing Fortunato on the night he disappeared, but nobody will remember seeing anybody with him.

Montresor has concocted a story designed to get Fortunato to want to proceed voluntarily to Montresor's palazzo immediately. Montresor himself acts as if he is in a big hurry. Why? He has bought a big cask of Amontillado sherry and had it delivered to his palazzo. It is already bought, paid for, and delivered. Why is it so important that it should be judged by a connoisseur right away? This is the finely honed falsehood Montresor uses:

I said to him—"My dear Fortunato, you are luckily met. How remarkably well you are looking to-day. But I have received a pipe of what passes for Amontillado, and I have my doubts."

"How?" said he. "Amontillado, A pipe? Impossible! And in the middle of the carnival!"

"I have my doubts," I replied; "and I was silly enough to pay the full Amontillado price without consulting you in the matter. You were not to be found, **and I was fearful of losing a bargain.**"

"Amontillado!"

"As you are engaged, I am on my way to Luchesi. If any one has a critical turn it is he. He will tell me—"

What incites Fortunato, as Montresor anticipated, is the idea of a bargain. A pipe of wine contains 126 gallons. Fortunato assumes that Montresor would like to buy more than one pipe and make a bigger profit. There is no question that Montresor would want 126 gallons of sherry for his private consumption. That would be 500 quart bottles. It would take him years to drink that much—and he apparently wants to buy even more! Fortunato visualizes a recently arrived ship from Barcelona carrying a full cargo of Amontillado. He is a rich man. He could buy the whole cargo and make a fortune. This is the idea Montresor's story is intended to plant in his mind.

But why should Fortunato want to go to Montresor's palazzo at this late hour, when he is drunk, inadequately dressed, and has a bad cold? Why wouldn't he beg off with some excuse and go directly to find the Spanish ship and sample the wine on board? The answer is that Montresor has told him he is on his way to see Luchesi. If Fortunato should put Montresor off, then Montresor would go straight to Luchesi, and Fortunato would have a competitor in bidding for the cargo of wine. Montresor is a poor man and could only afford to buy another one or two pipes, but Luchesi, presumably, is capable of buying an entire cargo. So Montresor's ploy succeeds. Fortunato says:

"Let us go, nevertheless. The cold is merely nothing. Amontillado! You have been imposed upon. And as for Luchesi, he cannot distinguish Sherry from Amontillado."

Thus speaking, Fortunato possessed himself of my arm; and putting on a mask of black silk and drawing a roquelaire closely about my person, I suffered him to hurry me to my palazzo.

Fortunato is wearing a "tight-fitting" costume. He is obviously not armed. But Montresor has a rapier under his cloak. Once he gets Fortunato down the stairs into his wine vaults, his victim is at his mercy. He can kill him any time he wants—but he would like to lead him all the way to the niche where the old chains are fastened to the granite wall. That would save him the trouble of dragging a body through the catacombs. Once he entices Fortunato to the spot where he can seal him behind a stone wall—for which he has the materials already prepared—his conflict is resolved and the story is nearly at an end. The whole story has been about an external conflict. Poe puts any doubts, fears, misgivings, etc., behind Montresor with the words, "*At length* I would be avenged; **this was a point definitely settled**—but the very definitiveness with which it was resolved precluded the idea of risk"—so that Poe does not have to deal with an internal conflict and an external conflict at the same time.

Questions and Answers: What is the significance of Montresor's coat of arms and motto?

Fortunato appears to be acting disingenuously when he asks Montresor about his family coat of arms and motto. He regards Montresor as a member of a lower class than himself and probably has asked many such disingenuous questions during their relationship with the sole intention of hurting Montresor's feelings. He apparently believes that Montresor has no coat of arms or motto. Montresor has been lying to Fortunato consistently since they meet on the street, so there is no reason to think he is telling the truth when he describes his coat of arms.

A huge human foot in gold—such a design on a shield would seem bizarre, surrealistic, or comical. Poe probably wanted the reader to realize that Montresor was only kidding Fortunato. The motto, *Nemo me impune lacessit*, meaning "Nobody injures me with impunity," is, of course, appropriate, but it seems almost too appropriate. Montresor must be taking advantage of the fact that Fortunato is drunk to make the man look like a fool. Montresor is telling him what his coat of arms and motto would be if he had a coat of arms and a motto. Fortunato is not only drunk but probably does not even understand Latin, so it is especially ironic that he answers, "Good!" when Montresor is virtually predicting what is soon going to happen to him.

Montresor himself has been doing a little drinking along with Fortunato, so his rather odd behavior, including showing Fortunato his trowel and claiming to be a Mason, is understandable. Also Montresor has been under pressure to get Fortunato off the street and down below; and now he is experiencing relief because he knows he has his victim in his power. Montresor has a rapier concealed under his cloak. He can kill the unarmed Fortunato any time he wants—although it would be preferable to lead him to the site when he intends to wall him up.