

Edgar Allan Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado"
(to be the Homicidal Frenemy)

To pinpoint the difference between older versus modern literature—aside from technologies appearing in the latter—without referencing publication date, author, or reason for composition has been a rampant discussion among literary theorists for a while. Most disregard this concept, stating that it is these three criteria that prop a book up to 'Classic' status regardless of when it was published. Classic literature must have made an impact on the society it's created in and sustain its impact as additional generations read it. Several authors have been credited to specific genres where their works shine durably and brightest: Jane Austin's Romantic Realism, George Orwell's dystopian commentary, Agatha Christie and her stable of detective novels. Edgar Allan Poe's fiction.

Poe is a trailblazer of literary advancement. In one of his most acknowledged works, "The Cask of Amontillado" (1846), a tale of deceit, manipulation, and masonry, Poe's deeper machinations read more fluidly beneath his word choice. His prose highlights human perversion, a reflection of his own design and the design of 1800s society. The story's beginning introduces us to Montressor, a man proclaiming an imminent sense of righteous revenge upon another named Fortunato. Montressor states, "You, who so well know the nature of my soul, will not suppose, however, that I gave utterance to a threat" (Poe 1), indicating that the reader must have some knowledge of the narrator, enough to judge his actions as they would a friend or an acquaintance. However, Montressor's motives are not only of revenge but specifically a sadistic form of revenge.

His addressing the audience is also fourth-wall-recognizing in nature, a characteristic of Poe's writing. This similar style of perspective was seen a year prior with Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart," which likewise surrounds a morally incriminating scenario. That we as the reader do not know Montressor does not prove the narrator is speaking to anyone. Instead, this style of storytelling indicates a conscious, paranoid persona. This point of view (and directed internal dialogue) is used as a reflection of a protagonist's mental state even outside of first-person accounts. Montressor's internal dialogue is no longer a credible explanation of the scene, rather it's a biased self-determination. It instantly establishes an unreliable narrator, an important facet to keep in mind when close reading the text.

An unreliable narrator establishes two equally important facts: since "The Cask of Amontillado" is entirely first-person, descriptions of scenery, character apparel, and actions are

now put into question of veracity. Poe's word choice can be attributed directly to Montressor's character and to the deeper meaning behind the text. Poe's word choices have always been a spotlight for discussion, mainly their poetic potential, but with the filter of an unreliable narrator placed upon them they reveal intriguing perspectives. Once Montressor has tempted Fortunato into the catacombs of his failed family's fortune, he entertains his friend's wandering attention with family regalia. He discloses his family's coat of arms along with the Montressor motto *Nemo me impune lacessit*, another ironic play on their situation, as this Latin translates to *No one provoke me with impunity*. Meaning bluntly: no one attacks me without consequence. The following passage displays Montressor's reaction to his victim's remark:

The wine sparkled in his eyes and the bells jingled. My own fancy grew warm with the Medoc. We had passed through walls of piled bones, with casks and puncheons intermingling, into the inmost recesses of the catacombs. I paused again, and this time I made bold to seize Fortunato by an arm above the elbow. (5)

Applying what has been previously mentioned surrounding Montressor's unreliable narration, this passage reveals the deeper implications behind his current mentality through physical action. The phrase "My own fancy grew warm with the Medoc" implies more than growing drunk. Allusions to fancy typically refer to one's enjoyment or pleasure. This begs the question of how Montressor could be growing so pleased, even with his inebriation, by committing such a vile act? We've known that Montressor is joyous to be doing this thanks to such early passages as "to smile in his face, and he did not perceive that my smile now was at the thought of his immolation" (1). He will enjoy Fortunato's demise. However, Poe creates the visual imagery of "walls of piled bones, with casks and puncheons intermingling." Despite his perspective being filled with prideful language and overwhelmed with the excitement of the kill, it's continuously juxtaposed with this description of his dreary catacombs, growing drunk on the horror of his actions, as if a drug. Montressor isn't taking in this setting as the Gothic aesthetic "characterized by ambiguity, mystery, demise, macabre, murder, claustrophobia and the supernatural" (Ibrahim 4). Instead, he's actively giddy, portraying artistic expressionism in a dissonant, mysterious tone the way he "seizes" Fortunato's arm, and urges him toward the catacombs. The other man's reaction is what Montressor feeds from, creating a sadistically dark justification for murder.

It is this need for a reaction that provides a sudden contrast to the ways Montressor had been acting throughout the entirety of the story. He had been utterly confident, beginning the text by relaying how he had manipulated Fortunato's brash nature to his advantage. He had struck his

fancy by offering the promise of this fabled Amontillado cask, egging him further towards it with the premise (threat) of asking for another's expertise instead of Fortunato's. Montressor builds up his own ego as he continues to tease and hint: mentioning his coat of arms, showing off his weapon of the man's *immurement* (to entomb in a wall¹), and several other misunderstood insults. It is towards the end of the story where Montressor starts reacting in unexpected ways. He portrays anxious behavior reacting to a sudden, drunken movement with "I did not understand. I looked at him in surprise. He repeated the movement — a grotesque one" (6) which, frankly, is a bit of an overreaction with the quality of responses Fortunato had already been expressing. Once he thoroughly traps the man and enacts Fortunato's being buried alive, Montressor is startled by the "succession of loud and shrill screams, bursting suddenly from the throat of the chained form" (7). Montressor then displays a sudden, natural form of regret. Whether this is from the morality of his actions or fear of consequences, he is suddenly self-aware.

Irony is a prevalent theme over the course of "The Cask of Amontillado." Consider the naming scheme—*Fortunato* meaning fortunate, gifted—or how this man so prideful and well-versed in the mediums he's accredited for is still dressed as a fool (Stepp). It is also ironic how after everything Montressor has done to silence Fortunato, he grows angered once Fortunato stops speaking. He begins the story by stating, "The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could, but when he ventured upon insult I vowed revenge" (1) and yet ends it by invoking, "But to these words I hearkened in vain for a reply. I grew impatient. Called aloud — 'Fortunato!' No answer. I called again — 'Fortunato!' No answer still" (9). It's almost romantic how, with such hatred, he still longs for a response to his actions. It also hints towards the lack of a so-called perfect victory. Montressor's sense of overcoming Fortunato is such a fragile goal that even a lack of a response can ruin this perfectly executed vision of his. This questions the validity of Montressor's hatred to his core. If this crime's 'value' can be diminished so easily, was it even worth it in the first place?

In a perfect scenario where nothing goes awry, regret can still bloom, perverting the outcome. Human perversion warps the opposite side of morality, entirely swapping the essence of where deplorability stands. The action of killing someone in revenge is what readers would consider morally wrong. The perversion is not in killing Fortunato. Instead, it lies in entombing him. If perversion is essentially tempting someone into making an immoral action to create a

¹ IMMURED Definition & Meaning - *Merriam-Webster*

contrast from the intended good event, shouldn't perversion also extend to diverting one's path from something they consider morally ethical? Montessoro enacts a revenge he deems justified in nature, and if this story is entirely contrived from his perspective alone, then it is correct to assume he might deduce that sparing Fortunato is what would be dishonorable and perverted.

To an extent, the thought of taking revenge on someone who has wronged you is not an unpopular opinion and is much a fantasy. Killing someone on behalf of one's honor hadn't yet run its course through history by the time Poe began writing. Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton had their lethal duel only five years before Poe's birth. Especially with the rampant displays of masculinity, it is not far off-base to say this story is a reflection of Poe's agenda, given his history with one Rufus Griswold. Whilst publishing *The Poets and Poems of America*, Griswold came to Poe requesting to anthologize some of his writing. Initially, this was under the pretense that Poe would leave a positive review of Griswold's work. However, upon discovering that only three of his poems had been published—compared to the fifty from Griswold's close colleagues and friends—Poe followed through with the review and published a scathing, hate-filled response. The two engaged in a back-and-forth rivalry, writing even more degrading reviews of each other's works, and eventually a disgraceful rewriting, by Griswold, of Poe's [obituary](#). This period was known as the "War of The Literati," an instance of criticism aimed at Poe's aggression towards various poets working alongside him. Literary scholar John Freehafer writes:

It is a misunderstanding of Poe's art, however, to see in ["The Cask of Amontillado"] a miniature roman à clef. In which Montessoro is Poe, Fortunato a rival author, Luchresi a publisher of libels upon Poe, and the story is based upon a lawsuit and is intended to answer a topical novel. (2)

To separate this piece from the historic relevance of the event would remove any personal experience from a piece of art, which is unfeasible. While the framework of New Historicism—a literary theory dedicated to recognizing the close ties literature has with the cultural and societal contexts of their respective times—doesn't need to be applied to every work of fiction, it cannot be denied when analyzing a text with the author in mind. It isn't a misunderstanding or degrading of Poe's work to consider his personal motivations driving him to write this. If anything, it engages the reader with Poe's heightened understanding of his feelings on the matter. Gaining a sadistic persona in order to triumph over another is a deeper human 'back' thought brought forward, shining a spotlight on the human conscience. Poe's perspective of the human conscience is taken from a more controversial angle, viewing it from the start of the most immoral act, murder. By

creating an unreliable narrator, he explores how a bias can warp his sense of morality when compared to society. Within his ironies, Poe expands upon the nature of disagreement itself. Montessor's grudge is based on a myriad illogical fallacies depicting how flawed and senseless, yet utterly emotionally driven Montessor is to commit such a heinous act. To despise what another is doing to someone while enacting that same thing back in revenge is ironic. Poe exhibits what could be interpreted as a guilty understanding by showing Montessor's nerves and consistent backtracking. Nearing the end of his accomplishment, Montessor "hearkened in vain for a reply" (10). To console himself of his atrocity, he likened his guilt to "the dampness of the catacombs"—a human fear of repercussion, a need to silence the oppressor, snuffing out their voices similar to immurement.

This is in no way claiming Poe as an angel or author without spite—blameless in his circumstances—as he was often combative towards any and all people in his life. Nor were Griswold's comments on his severe alcoholism completely unfounded. Poe's struggles with addiction were well-documented. In "The Cask of Amontillado," we could view Poe's feelings on his feud with Griswold through the most violent of resolutions. A character study such as this shouldn't be contrived as Poe's murder fantasy, but instead a deep introspection of his very nature.

By establishing the context of a story's existence, literary analysis can occur. This may be an obvious fact. However, you cannot analyze something without deriving a claim from it first. This claim is produced from the words themselves. Books don't have an explanation written on the back of them that is more than just a synopsis of the text. To read is to have your brain interpret the meaning of a set of words aligned in a manner that conveys an emotional response. Whether it is a warning sign on a product or a large-scale musical opera, nothing can be *more than* claimed as the direct, intended meaning of a work. It could make the most sense, be logically sound, and yet nothing is contrived in a vacuum. Poe understood this, as all authors do. To publish something means people are going to draw their own inferences from the texts. Everyone has their ideologies. Everyone is their own unreliable narrator. Every bit of motion a person takes has some meaning behind it, even if they intended no meaning at all. This doesn't create criteria someone has to live by. They can still make uncharacteristic decisions. Nothing is a certain, conclusive answer, and it is with this that every literary viewpoint should be considered. It does not mean they are right, nor that they are wrong, but that a conclusion was reached through a long, winding process of thought biased from several hundred accounts of life. Poe's Montessor is not exempted from the human

experience, even if he is a fictional character. He is a product of an emotional response, one of his own narrative, and one of Poe's own world.

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