

Edgar Allan Poe's Cask of Amontillado: Prose, Poe, and Perversion

To pinpoint a difference between what marks a classic piece of literature, versus a modern piece of work without referencing publication date, author, or contextual reason for composition has been a rampant discussion amongst English literary theorists for a while. Most disregard this concept, stating that *it is* these three criterias that prop a book up to the title of "Classic," popularly found, it is not. It's bluntly put against the question: has it stood the test of time? In order to satisfy this question, a novel questioning its identity as a classic must have made an impactful effect within the society it's created within, and still continue to exist as an impact as further generations scour it. All of this must be encased with the diction of writing, depth, and complexity. It is with this prose that classics define the genre they encompass, and paint future criteria as the standard. This further extends to the authors who create this basis. Several authors have been accredited to specific genres where their works shine brightest: Jane Austin with romantic realism, George Orwell with exploratory dystopian commentary, Agatha Christie and her stable of detective novels. However, one of the leading pioneers of his time was Edgar Allan Poe, someone with a diverse portfolio in the fiction genre.

Poe's works span across several literary creations. Whether that being science fiction, or placing the seed for the detective genre to grow, he's a rightful trailblazer of literary advancement. However, within most analysis of Poe's genius, it is rather peculiar how one often does not separate Poe from the work he creates. Now, this is often credited with the concept of New Historicism, a theory devised to recognize the historical context of the time backing the creation of a story, along with the author's position in society. It is important to note the contextual evidence behind a set of writing in order to properly relate the motivations, or societal expectations of the time, and yet this idea digs deeper when it comes to Poe's individual stories.

Within one of his most acknowledged works, *The Cask of Amontillado*, a tale of deceit, manipulation, and masonry, Poe's deeper machinations read much more fluidly beneath his word choice. His prose highlights human perversion within his own mind, a reflection of his own design, and the design of 1800s society.

The beginning of the text introduces us to Montressor, a man proclaiming an imminent sense of righteous revenge upon another named Fortunato. He initially states within the first passage of the story, "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 Montressor enough as to judge his actions, as would a friend, or an acquaintance would do for another. His addressing of the audience is also fourth wall recognizing in nature, however, its characteristic of Poe's writing, so not entirely alien. This similar style of perspective was seen a year prior within Poe's short story *The Tell-Tale Heart*, another plot surrounding a morally incriminating scenario. This prior example, under the pretense that as the reader we *do not* know of Montressor, does not prove the narrator to be speaking to anyone. Instead, this style of storytelling indicates a conscious, paranoid persona being displayed in writing. This point of view, and directed internal dialogue is used as a reflection of a protagonist's mental state, even outside of first pronoun accounts. Meaning Montressor's internal dialogue is no longer a credible explanation of the scene, rather a biased self determination. Therefore it instantly establishes an unreliable narrator, an incredibly important facet to be kept in mind as continuing a close reading of the text.

The title of unreliable narrator establishes two equally important facts: since this story is entirely first-person, even descriptions of scenery, character apparel, and actions are now put into question of reliability. Secondly, every piece of Poe's word choice can be attributed directly to

Montessor's character, and to the deeper context of the meaning behind the text. Poe's word choices have always been a spotlight for discussion, mainly about their poetic potential, but with the filter of an unreliable narrator placed upon them they reveal some intriguing perspectives.

Jumping forward, once Montessor has tempted Fortunato into the catacombs of his failed family's fortune, he entertains his friend's wandering attention with regalia of his family. Once he discloses his family's coat of arms, along with their motto "Nemo me impune lacessit," another ironic play upon their situation, the following passage displays Montessor'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 Montessor's unreliable narration, taking apart this passage reveals the deeper implications behind the protagonist's current mentality solely through physical action. Immediately the phrase, "My own fancy grew warm with Medoc" implies more than simply growing drunk. When referring to someone's fancy, it is typically a saying referring to one's enjoyment, or pleasure. This begs the question on how Montessor could be growing so pleased, even with his inebriation, when he is questing to commit such a vile act? We've known as the reader that Montessor is joyous to be doing this, early passages such as, "to smile in his face, and he did not perceive that my smile *now* was at the thought of his immolation"(1) essentially states that he's going to enjoy Fortunato's demise. However, Poe then creates the visual imagery of "walls of piled bones, with casks and puncheons intermingling", something dark and disturbing as the deceased being closely intimate with something that spurs enjoyment to essentially compare the perverse joy in such a deplorable moment. To grow drunk on the horror of his actions, as if a drug. Montessor isn't taking in this

setting as the gothic aesthetic entails; something “characterized by ambiguity, mystery, demise, macabre, murder, claustrophobia and the supernatural”(Ibrahim 4). He’s actively giddy, portraying artistic expressionism (Schoenberg style) in the way he “seizes” Fortunato’s arm, and urges him onwards into both reminiscence, and the catacombs. The other man’s reaction is what Montressor feeds from, creating a sadistically dark justification of murder.

It is this need for a reaction that ended up being a sudden contrast to the ways Montressor had been acting throughout the entirety of the text. 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 *Cask of Amontillado*, egging him further towards it as he teased him with the promise of asking for another’s expertise instead of Fortunato’s. Montressor continues to build up this ego as he continues to tease and hint; mentioning his coat of arms, a direct implication of what he’s about to put upon Fortunato, showing off his weapon of the man’s immurement, 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” (Poe 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 begins his use of masonry to enact Fortunato’s immurement, he gets startled once the man starts to cry out, “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, I began to grope with it about the recess; but the thought of an instant reassured me”(7). He displays a sudden, natural form of regret. Whether that be from the morality of his actions, or the fear the consequences this might bring,

he is suddenly self aware. Over the course of *The Cask of Amontillado*, Irony has been an extremely prevalent theme to reference. Whether it's the irony between 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), there are plenty more examples to be made. So, it is ironic how after everything Montresor has done to achieve this silencing of 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 an existence of a so-called *perfect victory*. Even within a perfect scenario, where nothing goes awry, regret can still bloom perverting the reached positive outcome. Human perversion can extend as far as to warp the opposite side of morality; entirely swapping the essence of where the deplorability stands. Even though the action of killing someone in revenge is what the reader's would consider morally wrong, perhaps the morally wrong aspect can be perverted to the extent of *not* killing Fortunato being what's considered culpable. If perversion is to essentially tempt someone into making a humanly immoral action, to create a contrast from the intended *good* event, shouldn't perversion also extend to diverting one's path from something they personally consider morally ethical? Montresor is enacting a revenge he deems justified in nature, and if this story is entirely contrived from his perspective alone, then it is correct to assume that he might deduce that *not* killing Fortunato is what would be considered perverted, and dishonorable. Creating once again another contrasting irony.

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 continuing, rampant displays of masculinity, it is not far off base to say this story is a reflection of Poe's current agenda, given his history with one Rufus Griswold, and other literary rivals. As of publication, Edgar Allan Poe had been engaging in a literary scandal resulting from a turn in opinion upon an anthology Griswold had written. In return the two engaged in a back and forth rivalry, writing degrading reviews onto each other's works, and eventually a disgraceful rewriting of Edgar Allan Poe's legacy within his obituary. This period of history in literature has been attributed as the "War of The Literari," an instance of criticism aimed at Poe's aggression towards various poets working alongside him. In an analysis by John Freehafer, he retorts:

It is a misunderstanding of Poe's art, however, to see in his tale a miniature roman à clef. In which Montessor 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. (Freehafer 2)

However, to completely separate this piece from the historic relevance of this event would be to remove any personal emotional experience from a piece of art, which is simply unfeasible. While New Historicism doesn't need to be applied to every created work of fiction, it certainly cannot be denied when analyzing a piece of text with the author in mind. It isn't a misunderstanding, or degrading to Poe's work to consider his personal motivations to have driven him to write this, and if anything it engages the reader with Poe's heightened understanding of his feelings on the matter. To gain a sadistic persona in order to triumph over another is a deeper, human back thought brought forward, shining a spotlight onto the existence of the human conscience. His perspective of the human conscience is simply 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 senses of morality and wrong to right when compared to society. And within his several hundred ironies, he expands upon the nature of the disagreements itself. To despise what another is doing to someone, and yet to enact that very same thing back in revenge, is ironic. He also exhibits what could be interpreted as a guilty understanding of his situation by showing Montessor's nerves, and consistent backtracking. A human fear of repercussion, of a need to silence the oppressor, snuffing out their voices similarly to the styles of immurement. This is in no way claiming Poe to be an angel within his life; that he is without blame within his circumstances, it is just with *The Cask of Amontillado* that his feelings on the matter are explained through the most violent of circumstances. That 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 text's existence, literary analysis can occur. This may be an obvious fact, however, you cannot simply analyze something without deriving a claim from it first. And, this claim is simply produced from the words itself; books don't exactly have an explanation written upon the back of them that is more than just a synopsis of the text. To simply *read* is to have your brain interpret the meaning of a set of words aligned in a manner to convey something, and it is up to the reader to understand what this text is conveying. Whether it is a warning sign on the back of 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 has an understanding of this, as all authors do, that to publish something means people are going to take their own meaning from the texts. Which New Historicism deduces that this meaning now changes from person to person, as no

two people have lived an identical life, nor can they perfectly understand the life of another unless they have lived it. People have fought on whether each other's conclusions are a perversion of the true meaning, or a virtue of the true meaning, and yet no one pauses to think about why they are gaining different meanings in the first place. Everyone has their own set of ideologies; everyone is their own personal unreliable narrator. Nobody's actions are derived from nothing, every bit of motion a person takes has some meaning behind it even if they intended no meaning at all. Yet, 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, even if one disagrees with it. Because it does not mean they are right, nor that they are wrong, but that the conclusion has been reached through a long, winding process of thought. Biased from several hundred accounts of life.

Work Cited

- Freehafer, John. "Poe's "Cask of Amontillado:" A Tale of Effect." *Jahrbuch für Amerikastudien*, 1973, pp. 134-42.
- Griswold, Rufus W. "Death of Edgar A. Poe." *New-York Daily Tribune*, 9 Oct. 1849, p. 2+, www.eapoe.org/papers/misc1827/nyt49100.htm.
- Ibrahim, Abdul S. "La Estética Gótica Y La Moralidad De Edgar Allan Poe's En "El Barril De Amontillado"." *Revista de Ciencias Humanas y Sociales*, pp. 2900-14.
- Poe, Edgar A., and Guillermo D. Toro. *The Raven: Tales and Poems (Penguin Horror)*. Penguin Classics, 2013, pp. 251-58.
- Stepp, Walter. "The Ironic Double in Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado"." *Studies in Short Fiction*, vol. 13, no. 4, 1976.
- Sweet, Charlie. "Montresor's Underlying Motive: Resampling The Cask of Amontillado." *Studies in English*, vol. 6, no. 29, 1988.