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Edgar Allan Poe's - The Cask of Amontillado

Edgar Allan Poe, the originator of genres, such as: psychological thrillers, science fiction, horror, and what most are unaware of - the detective story, has captivated readers for virtually two centuries (Poe xi). Many people are also unaware that Poe wrote brilliant stories of humor and satire, as it is his horror stories for which he is most widely recognized. With his spine chilling tales of death, corruption, and insanity, Poe paints a nightmarish picture with masterful imagery. His tales, inspired by what has ruthlessly haunted him throughout his life, regards him as one of the most notorious literary legends of all time. His short stories and poetry continues to intrigue readers and will continue to terrify them for many more years to come.

Obsessed with themes of death and often drunk, Poe was given the reputation as merely a morbid and sadistic writer, and even himself seen as a mysterious, neurotic, pathological madman. Edgar Allan Poe lived a short and lonely life. Orphaned as a child and extremely poor as an adult, his writings became a desperate means of financial survival as well as an emotional outlet. Poe died tragically on October 7, 1849 at the age of forty (Poe Museum). The exact cause of his death still remains a mystery to this day.

According to the Poe Museum Web site, upon his death, Poe's literary rival, Rufus Griswold wrote a slanderous obituary and memoir of the author in a misguided attempt at revenge for some of the things Poe had said and written about him. Griswold portrayed Poe as a drunken, womanizing madman, with no morals, and no friends. Griswold's attacks were meant

to cause the public to dismiss Poe and his works, but the biography had the exact opposite effect and instead drove the sales of Poe's books higher than they have ever been before. Griswold's distorted image of Poe created the Poe legend that lives to this day while Griswold is only remembered (if at all) as Poe's first biographer (Poe Museum).

Among some of Edgar Allan Poe's works are: "The Raven", which made him a well-known author in his time, "The Tell Tale Heart", "Murders in the Rue Morgue", which is part of a detective trilogy, featuring the character C. August Dupin, forerunner of Sherlock Holmes, Lord Peter Wimsey, and other cunning detectives, and the last short story, and some say the greatest tale Poe ever wrote just before his death, "The Cask of Amontillado."

Poe demonstrates his ingenious writing ability in "The Cask of Amontillado" to blend mystery, irony, symbolism, and humor into this tale of horror. Published in 1846, "The Cask of Amontillado", is a tale about revenge, torture, and murder that reflects Poe's desire to punish those that have wronged him in his life. A feud that led to a fist fight and ultimately a lawsuit for defamatory writing between Poe and literary rival Thomas Dunn English is believed to be the main inspiration behind "The Cask of Amontillado" (MacMillian).

"The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could, but when he ventured upon insult I vowed revenge" (Poe 542). From the first sentence of this tale Poe captures the reader's attention. The narrator never tells us, "the readers" what the thousand injuries are or what the insult is; which is the mystery in this story. The narrators name is Montressor, he and Fortunato have a history, one where Fortunato has hurt Montressor over and over again, but it isn't until he insults Montressor does Montressor plan to exact his revenge. Montressor greets Fortunato during a carnival celebration, carefully, not showing he has been offended by Fortunato, Montressor consults him and his knowledge of wines. He knows Fortunato is a

connoisseur of wine, so he lures Fortunato into the catacombs (vast underground gravesite) of his family, where he tells Fortunato he has “a pipe for what passes as Amontillado (rare Spanish wine)” (Poe 542). Fortunato, foolish, and eager to try this wine swallows the bait and follows Montressor back to his residence, where he will soon learn of Montressor’s true intentions. Montressor eventually chains Fortunato to the wall and he bricks him in, burying him alive in the catacombs beneath his estate. Montressor states that for the half of a century no mortal has disturbed the remains of Fortunato (Poe 546).

It seems that Montressor committed the perfect murder in this tale, there is no evidence, it is never discovered, and Montressor faces no repercussions of his crime. G.R. Thompson argues that this was actually not the perfect Murder and instead that Montressor’s conscience has been eating at him for the past fifty years. Thompson believes that Montressor’s words in the opening of the story “You, who so well know the nature of my soul” (Poe 542) is Montressor addressing his confessor, and that this story is actually a confession made on Montressor’s deathbed (Thompson). If this is a confession, in my opinion Montressor does not feel any guilt in the murder of Fortunato. Montressor says, “My heart grew sick; it was the dampness of the catacombs” (Poe 546). At first he says his heart grows sick, which makes you think he feels sorry for Fortunato but he concludes with “it was the dampness of the catacombs” which shows he has no remorse for what he has done.

Edgar Allan Poe’s humor in this tale is characterized by the extensive use of irony and symbolism he employs in this story. There is a lot of thought and subtle detail that went into each character and scene of this tale. When Montressor first greets Fortunato at the carnival, Poe describes what Fortunato is wearing. “The man wore motley. He had on a tight-fitting parti-striped dress, and his head was surmounted by the conical cap and bells” (Poe 542). Fortunato is

dressed as a jester which symbolizes that he is the fool of this story. It is ironic that his name is Fortunato as well because Fortunato means fortunate, and judging by his fate, he was not fortunate at all in this story. Some argue that his name “Fortunato” symbolizes that he had fortune and that is also why Montressor kills him, because he is jealous. Montressor says to Fortunato, “You are rich, respected, admired, beloved; you are happy, as once I was” (Poe 543). This passage from the tale reinforces the meaning behind Fortunato’s name and envy as a possible motive of murder for Montressor.

Montressor, wearing a black mask and black cloak; leads Fortunato through the catacombs, the whole time ironically warning Fortunato of the catacomb’s dampness and how the walls are covered with nitre. Montressor acts worried about Fortunato because he is suffering from a cold, he gives Fortunato every opportunity to leave, carefully manipulating Fortunato’s pride. The black mask and cloak symbolize that Montressor is hiding something; that he is not who he says he is, he is “wearing a mask”. Also the outfit Montressor is wearing resembles that of an executioner. These details are symbols that couldn’t have come by coincidence. Poe undoubtedly intended every scene and aspect of this tale to have meaning. The way Poe describes the catacombs and crypts is almost with a beauty in its detail, which leads the reader to believe this is where Montressor takes his revenge.

As the story progresses so does the irony and symbolism. Montressor’s words often take on double meanings. Fortunato says that he will not die “of a cough” and the clever Montressor agrees “True—true” (Poe 543). Montressor serves Fortunato wine down in the catacombs; he makes Fortunato drink a wine called “De Grave”, which foreshadows where Fortunato will end up. At one point they toast, Fortunato to Montressor’s dead ancestors, and Montressor ironically toasts to Fortunato’s “long life” (Poe 543). There are multiple examples of symbolism, verbal

irony, and dramatic irony in this tale that Poe methodically employs to develop suspense and mood in a careful and masterful manner.

Montressor chains Fortunato to the wall in a matter of seconds. “Pass your hand, “I said, “over the wall; you cannot help feeling the nitre. Indeed it is very damp. Once more I implore you to return. No? Then I must positively leave you. But I must first render you all the little attentions in my power” (Poe 545). Montressor taunts Fortunato because Fortunato cannot leave and Montressor begins to brick Fortunato in.

Edgar Allan Poe brilliantly writes the ending of this tale, putting us “the readers” in the mind of a madman fueled by revenge. The imagery of these final scenes are chilling. As Montressor is burying Fortunato alive he hears the furious vibrations of the chains against the crypt wall. Montressor ceases his labors and sits down upon a pile of bones to listen to it, which signifies the satisfaction Montressor has with himself and his plan. Soon “a succession of loud and shrill screams, bursting suddenly from the throat of the chained form” (Poe 545), comes from the crypt. Poe describes how animalistic and panicked Fortunato has become by calling him a “form” and not a man. He describes how Montressor just screams louder and louder back at him becoming more and more animalistic, taunting Fortunato. Fortunato desperately begs Montressor to let him go but he is met with mockery as Montressor terrorizes him by just repeating his requests. The last line of the tale “In pace requiescat!” (Poe 546) means “may he rest in peace”. Critic Elena V. Baraban points out that this phrase is used in the Requiem Mass and during Last Rites. This is what a priest says to a dying person after the dying person has confessed their sins. She says “The fact that Montressor uses this expression for finally pardoning Fortunato highlights his conviction that he has merely avenged himself for the wrong that Fortunato afflicted upon him fifty years ago” (Baraban)

Poe's insight into the mind of a crazed madman is remarkably unsettling and frightening. The way Poe describes Montessor's plan unfolding and the way Montessor taunts Fortunato is chilling. This is a tale that also makes you think. It encourages you to identify the symbolism and irony. Because it is a rather short story it is easy understandable as it can be read many times over. "The Cask of Amontillado" is definitely the work of a tormented genius, whose thoughts and creativity have inspired me to read more of his work although, it will be hard to find a tale that intrigued me, frightened me, and enlightened me as much as this one did.

Works Cited

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After his wife's death from tuberculosis in 1847, Poe became involved in a number of romantic affairs. It was while he prepared for his second marriage that Poe, for reasons unknown, arrived in Baltimore in late September of 1849. On October 3, he was discovered in a state of semi-consciousness; he died four days later without regaining the necessary lucidity to explain what had happened during the last days of his life. Poe also wrote poems that were intended to be read aloud. This state of affairs was initiated by Poe's one-time friend and literary executor R.W. Griswold, who, in a libelous obituary notice in the New York Tribune bearing the byline "Ludwig," attributed the depravity and psychological aberrations of many of the characters in Poe's fiction to Poe himself. Griswold was married three times: his first wife died young, his second marriage ended in a public and controversial divorce, and his third wife left him after the previous divorce was almost repealed. Edgar Allan Poe, whose poetry had been included in Griswold's anthology, published a critical response that questioned which poets were included. This began a rivalry which grew when Griswold succeeded Poe as editor of Graham's Magazine at a salary higher than Poe's. They never reconciled their differences, and after Poe's mysterious death in 1849, Griswold wrote an unsympathetic obituary. Claiming to be Poe's chosen literary executor, he began a campaign to harm Poe's reputation that lasted until his own death eight years later. Upon the mysterious death of America's master of mystery and the macabre, the literary rival of Edgar Allan Poe wrote a scathing obituary and biography of the author. However, much of what was written by Poe's foe, Rufus Griswold, was untrue. Vengeful over things Poe had written about Griswold, the latter's postmortem portrait of Poe painted him as a womanizing madman, drug-addled and bereft of both morals and friends. Although far from the truth, many of Griswold's distortions stuck. Poe is best remembered for his tales of terror and haunting poems, but he is also credited as one of the earliest writers of short stories, the inventor of the modern detective story, and an innovator in the genre of science fiction.

2. He Was Prolific. Days after Poe's death, his literary rival Rufus Griswold wrote a libelous obituary of the author in a misguided attempt at revenge for some of the offensive things Poe had said and written about him. Griswold followed the obituary with a memoir in which he portrayed Poe as a drunken, womanizing madman with no morals and no friends. Griswold's attacks were meant to cause the public to dismiss Poe and his works, but the biography had exactly the opposite effect and instead drove the sales of Poe's books higher than they had ever been during the author's lifetime. Griswold's distorted image of P...