INTRODUCTION

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 sherry, 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,
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.

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


[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 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 fulfill 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
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Jacobs, "A Possible Debt to Cooper," Poe Studies, 9 (June 1976), 23.


Marvin Felheim, Sam Moon, and Donald Pearce; "The Cask of Amontillado," Notes and Queries, NS 1 (October 1954), 447-49.


FURTHER READING


Cervo, Nathan. "Poe’s ‘The Cask of Amontillado’." The Explicator 51, No. 3 (Spring 1993): 155-56. Identifies Montresor’s family motto as the Scottish national motto, linking it to the tale’s structure.


Kishel, Joseph H. "Poe’s ‘The Cask of Amontillado’." The Explicator 41, No. 1 (Fall 1982): 30. Identifies Montresor’s economic motives from Fortunato’s last words, which are a beggar’s traditional cry for alms.


