

Notes on “The Cask of Amontillado” by Edgar Allen Poe (1846)

Summary

The narrator, Montresor, opens the story by stating that he has been irreparably insulted by his acquaintance, Fortunato, and that he seeks revenge. He wants to exact this revenge, however, in a measured way, without placing himself at risk. He decides to use Fortunato’s fondness for wine against him. During the carnival season, Montresor, wearing a mask of black silk, approaches Fortunato. He tells Fortunato that he has acquired something that could pass for Amontillado, a light Spanish sherry. Fortunato (Italian for “fortunate”) wears the multicolored costume of the jester, including a cone cap with bells. Montresor tells Fortunato that if he is too busy, he will ask a man named Luchesi to taste it. Fortunato apparently considers Luchesi a competitor and claims that this man could not tell Amontillado from other types of sherry. Fortunato is anxious to taste the wine and to determine for Montresor whether or not it is truly Amontillado. Fortunato insists that they go to Montresor’s vaults.

Montresor has strategically planned for this meeting by sending his servants away to the carnival. The two men descend into the damp vaults, which are covered with nitre, or saltpeter, a whitish mineral. Apparently aggravated by the nitre, Fortunato begins to cough. The narrator keeps offering to bring Fortunato back home, but Fortunato refuses. Instead, he accepts wine as the antidote to his cough. The men continue to explore the deep vaults, which are full of the dead bodies of the Montresor family. In response to the crypts, Fortunato claims to have forgotten Montresor’s family coat of arms and motto. Montresor responds that his family shield portrays “a huge human foot d’or, in a field azure; the foot crushes a serpent rampant whose fangs are imbedded in the heel.” The motto, in Latin, is “nemo me impune lacessit,” that is, “no one attacks me with impunity.”

Later in their journey, Fortunato makes a hand movement that is a secret sign of the Masons, an exclusive fraternal organization. Montresor does not recognize this hand signal, though he claims that he is a Mason. When Fortunato asks for proof, Montresor shows him his trowel, the implication being that Montresor is an actual stonemason. Fortunato says that he must be jesting, and the two men continue onward. The men walk into a crypt, where human bones decorate three of the four walls. The bones from the fourth wall have been thrown down on the ground. On the exposed wall is a small recess, where Montresor tells Fortunato that the Amontillado is being stored. Fortunato, now heavily intoxicated, goes to the back of the recess. Montresor then suddenly chains the slow-footed Fortunato to a stone.

Taunting Fortunato with an offer to leave, Montresor begins to wall up the entrance to this small crypt, thereby trapping Fortunato inside. Fortunato screams confusedly as Montresor builds the first layer of the wall. The alcohol soon wears off and Fortunato moans, terrified and helpless. As the layers continue to rise, though, Fortunato falls silent. Just as Montresor is about to finish, Fortunato laughs as if Montresor is playing a joke on him, but Montresor is not joking. At last, after a final plea, “For the love of God, Montresor!” Fortunato stops answering Montresor, who then twice calls out his enemy’s name. After no response, Montresor claims that his heart feels sick because of the dampness of the catacombs. He fits the last stone into place and plasters the wall closed, his actions accompanied only by the jingling of Fortunato’s bells. He finally repositions the bones on the fourth wall. For fifty years, he writes, no one has disturbed them. He concludes with a Latin phrase meaning “May he rest in peace.”

Analysis

The terror of “The Cask of Amontillado,” as in many of Poe’s tales, resides in the lack of evidence that accompanies Montresor’s claims to Fortunato’s “thousand injuries” and “insult.” The story features revenge and secret murder as a way to avoid using legal channels for retribution. Law is nowhere on Montresor’s—or Poe’s—radar screen, and the enduring horror of the story is the fact of punishment without proof. Montresor uses his subjective experience of Fortunato’s insult to name himself judge, jury, and executioner in this tale, which also makes him an unreliable narrator. Montresor confesses this story fifty years after its occurrence; such a significant passage of time between the events and the narration of the events makes the narrative all the more unreliable. Montresor’s unreliability overrides the rational consideration of evidence, such as particular occurrences of insult, that would necessarily precede any guilty sentence in a non-Poe world. “The Cask of Amontillado” takes subjective interpretation—the fact that different people interpret the same things differently—to its horrific endpoint.

Poe’s use of color imagery is central to his questioning of Montresor’s motives. His face covered in a black silk mask, Montresor represents not blind justice but rather its Gothic opposite: biased revenge. In contrast, Fortunato dons the motley-colored costume of the court fool, who gets literally and tragically fooled by Montresor’s masked motives. The color schemes here represent the irony of Fortunato’s death sentence. Fortunato, Italian for “the fortunate one,” faces the realization that even the carnival season can be murderously serious. Montresor chooses the setting of the carnival for its abandonment of social order. While the carnival usually indicates joyful social interaction, Montresor distorts its merry abandon, turning the carnival on its head. The repeated allusions to the bones of Montresor’s family that line the vaults foreshadow the story’s descent into the underworld. The two men’s underground travels are a metaphor for their trip to hell. Because the carnival, in the land of the living, does not occur as Montresor wants it to, he takes the carnival below ground, to the realm of the dead and the satanic.

To build suspense in the story, Poe often employs foreshadowing. For example, when Fortunato says, “I shall not die of a cough,” Montresor replies, “True,” because he knows that Fortunato will in fact die from dehydration and starvation in the crypt. Montresor’s description of his family’s coat of arms also foreshadows future events. The shield features a human foot crushing a tenacious serpent. In this image, the foot represents Montresor and the serpent represents Fortunato. Although Fortunato has hurt Montresor with biting insults, Montresor will ultimately crush him. The conversation about Masons also foreshadows Fortunato’s demise. Fortunato challenges Montresor’s claim that he is a member of the Masonic order, and Montresor replies insidiously with a visual pun. When he declares that he is a “mason” by showing his trowel, he means that he is a literal stonemason—that is, that he constructs things out of stones and mortar, namely Fortunato’s grave.

The final moments of conversation between Montresor and Fortunato heighten the horror and suggest that Fortunato ultimately—and ironically—achieves some type of upper hand over Montresor. Fortunato’s plea, “For the love of God, Montresor!” has provoked much critical controversy. Some critics suggest that Montresor has at last brought Fortunato to the pit of desperation and despair, indicated by his invocation of a God that has long left him behind. Other critics, however, argue that Fortunato ultimately mocks the “love of God,” thereby employing the same irony that Montresor has effectively used to lure him to the crypts. These are Fortunato’s final words, and the strange desperation that Montresor demonstrates in response suggests that he needs Fortunato more than he wants to admit. Only when he twice

screams “Fortunato!” loudly, with no response, does Montresor claim to have a sick heart. The reasons for Fortunato’s silence are unclear, but perhaps his willing refusal to answer Montresor is a type of strange victory in otherwise dire circumstances.

Important Quotations Explained

1. “For the love of God, Montresor!”

In “The Cask of Amontillado,” Fortunato addresses this plea—his last spoken words—to Montresor, the man who has entombed him alive. Critics have long argued about the meaning of this quotation. On the one hand, some argue that Fortunato at last breaks down and, realizing the deathly import of the situation, resorts to a prayer for earthly salvation. Fortunato, according to this interpretation, maintains the hope that Montresor is playing a complex practical joke. The italicized words signal the panic in Fortunato’s voice as he tries to redeem Montresor from the grip of evil. On the other hand, some critics assert that Fortunato accepts his earthly demise and instead mocks the capacity for prayer to influence life on Earth. In this interpretation, Fortunato recognizes his own misfortune and taunts Montresor with the mention of a God who has long ago deserted him. Just as the carnival represents the liberation from respectable social behavior in the streets above, the crypts below dramatize religious abandon and the violation of sacred humanity.

Montresor’s response of “Yes, for the love of God!” mocks Fortunato in his moment of desperate vulnerability. However, Fortunato refuses to acknowledge this final insult. On the verge of death, he uses silence as his final weapon. He recognizes that his unknowing participation in the entombment has given Montresor more satisfaction than the murder itself. When Montresor twice calls out “Fortunato!” he hears only the jingle of Fortunato’s cap bells in response. The sense of panic shifts here from Fortunato to Montresor. Montresor’s heart grows sick as he realizes that Fortunato outwits him by refusing to play along anymore in this game of revenge. Montresor faces only the physical fact of the murder, and is stripped of the psychological satisfaction of having fooled Fortunato.

2. “In me didst thou exist—and, in my death, see by this image, which is thine own, how utterly thou hast murdered thyself.”

In “William Wilson,” the rivalrous double William Wilson utters these final words to the narrator, the man who has just stabbed him. This quotation, spoken with reference to an image in a mirror, points to the indistinguishability between the victim, William Wilson, and the narrator, William Wilson. The speaker uses the image of the mirror to represent his own death, but the mirror eerily reflects the image of the narrator, not the speaker. The quotation highlights the inseparability of the self and the rivalrous double, for the murder of the rival also produces the suicide of the self. The second William Wilson constitutes the narrator’s alter ego, the part of his own being that he has externalized in the figure of his competitor. Although the narrator believes he can use violence to curtail the power of his alter ego, he discovers that he owes his life to the person he most despises.

This quotation also points to the fine line between love and hate. The second William Wilson’s final words are not bitter or vengeful. Their compassionate insight precisely contrasts with the narrator’s act of violence that has triggered the quotation. William Wilson uses these words not only to convey his intimate knowledge about the narrator, but also to redeem the narrator from the paranoia that has taken his life. The quotation discloses the rivals’ indistinguishability so that the narrator might recognize that his own mental pathology has killed him. Whereas the narrator has construed their similarity as grounds for jealousy and violence, his rival alternatively uses

their doubling to convey difficult, and potentially redemptive, knowledge to the narrator. In this way, William Wilson, until his final breath, plays right into the narrator's jealousy by rejecting the very lust for vengeance that the narrator has been unable to escape. In the end, the narrator's suicide proves a tragic alternative to William Wilson's compassionate self-knowledge.

3. "In investigations such as we are now pursuing, it should not be so much asked 'what has occurred,' as 'what has occurred that has never occurred before.'"

In "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," Parisian private detective M. Auguste Dupin speaks these words to the narrator as the two men begin to inspect the gruesome crime scene. Dupin here sets out to explain his analytic approach to solving crimes. He accuses the Paris police of being too shortsighted in their investigative strategies by limiting their interest to "what has occurred." By Dupin's logic, the police fail to solve the murders in the Rue Morgue because the crimes move beyond the range of both their experience and their imagination. Instead of pooling their imaginative resources, the Paris police get distracted by the crime's gruesome elements. According to Dupin, while the best police minds can be, at times, ingenious, they often fail to be adequately creative.

Dupin distinguishes himself from the established police order in two ways. First, he approaches the ghastly violence of the scene dispassionately, treating it as a mathematical study. He is thus able to avoid becoming overwhelmed by the scene's emotional trauma. Second, Dupin expands the methodological reach of crime-solving by relying upon intuition and analysis. Not only does Dupin gather evidence from the crime scene that has previously escaped the notice of the police, like the window nails, but he is also able to adequately account for details that confuse others. For example, he translates the medical examiner's report of the immense, almost superhuman strength of the murderer into the possibility of a nonhuman having committed the crime. Dupin's effectiveness lies in his eccentric willingness to move beyond certain standards of rationality and believability. While his explanations piece together the disparate clues from the crime scene in an eminently rational way, he begins with premises that seem irrational—for example, that an animal could have committed the crime. Dupin utilizes such controversial premises because they privilege new modes of analysis—that is, consideration of what "has never occurred before."

4. I cannot, for my soul, remember how, when, or even precisely where, I first became acquainted with the lady Ligeia.

The narrator opens "Ligeia" by confessing certain gaps in his memory of his beloved first wife. The narrator's scant memory contrasts with the plot of the tale itself, which ultimately portrays Ligeia as one of Poe's most enduring revenants, or women who return from the grave. While the narrator claims to have forgotten the specific circumstances in which he met Ligeia, the tale proceeds to establish Ligeia as an unforgettable presence. When the lady Rowena, the narrator's second wife, becomes mysteriously ill in the second month of their marriage, the narrator has to fend off his memories of Ligeia. The tale affirms Ligeia's power in contrast to the narrator's claims of feeble memory. It thereby distinguishes "Ligeia" from Poe's other first-person Gothic narrations by shifting attention from the narrator's unreliability to the motif of the woman who return from the dead. While the plot highlights the irony of the narrator's opening words, Poe does not make the narrator's contradictions the centerpiece of the narrative's interest.

Ligeia's obscure origins, as portrayed in this quotation, contribute to her Gothic status as a revenant. She possesses a certain Gothic allure because she seems to come from nowhere and to be free from the laws of nature that govern both the narrator and Rowena. Ligeia's mysterious return in the tale's final scene effectively reenacts the narrator's opening remark about her sudden and mysterious appearance in his life. In this sense, while the tale undermines the narrator's claims of feeble memory, his initial remark also foreshadows Ligeia's Gothic return. She comes from nowhere in the tale's eerie conclusion just as she originally presents herself to the narrator as his beloved wife without a past.

5. A striking similitude between the brother and the sister now first arrested my attention; and Usher, divining, perhaps, my thoughts, murmured out some few words from which I learned that the deceased and himself had been twins, and that sympathies of a scarcely intelligible nature had always existed between them.

In "The Fall of the House of Usher," the narrator makes this observation about Roderick and Madeline Usher when he helps to bury Madeline after her apparent death. This quotation makes explicit the motif of the doppelgänger, or character double, that characterizes the relationship between Roderick and Madeline. Poe philosophically experiments with a split between mind and body by associating Roderick exclusively with the former and Madeline exclusively with the latter. The doppelgänger motif undermines the separation between mind and body. Poe represents this intimate connectivity between mind and body by making Roderick and Madeline biological twins. When sickness afflicts one sibling, for example, it contagiously spreads to the other. The mode of contagion implies an early version of ESP, or extrasensory perception. Poe insinuates that these mysterious sympathies, which move beyond biological definition, also possess the capacity to transmit physical illness. It is also possible to view these sympathies as Poe's avant-garde imagining of genetic transmission between siblings.

Poe suggests that the twin relationship involves not only physical similitude but also psychological or supernatural communication. The power of the intimate relationship between the twins pervades the incestuous framework of the Usher line, since the mansion contains all surviving branches of the family. The revelation of this intimacy also reaffirms the narrator's status as an outsider. The narrator realizes that Roderick and Madeline are twins only after she is nearly dead, and this ignorance embodies the fact that the walls of the Usher mansion have protected the family from outsiders up to the point of the narrator's arrival. When the narrator, as an outsider, discovers the similitude between Roderick and Madeline, he begins to invade a privileged space of family knowledge that ultimately falls to ruins in the presence of a trespasser.

Key Facts

full title · "MS. Found in a Bottle" (1833); "Ligeia" (1838); "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839); "William Wilson" (1839); "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841); "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843); "The Pit and the Pendulum" (1843); "The Black Cat" (1843); "The Purloined Letter" (1844); "The Masque of the Red Death" (1845); "The Cask of Amontillado" (1846)

author · Edgar Allan Poe

type of work · Short story

genre · Gothic short story; detective story; science fiction

language · English

time and place written · 1830–1846; Baltimore, Richmond, Philadelphia, New York

publisher · Saturday Visiter (Baltimore); Southern Literary Messenger (Richmond); Burton's Gentleman's Magazine (Philadelphia); Graham's (Philadelphia); Evening Mirror (New York)

Narrator · In the tales of criminal insanity, Poe's narrators are unnamed and often unreliable. They claim their sanity and then proceed to detail their pathological madness. In the detective stories, the narrator is a loyal friend of Dupin and is in awe of the crime solver's brilliance.

Point of view · In the tales of criminal insanity, Poe's first-person narrators produce unreliable confessions. They control the narrative, and we see only through their eyes. However, they describe their own pathological actions so meticulously that they demonstrate that they are actually insane. They are unable to step back from their narratives to discern their own madness. In the detective stories, Poe employs a third-person narrator, a friend of Dupin, and while the narrator tries to convey the tale fairly, his loyalty to Dupin prevents him from questioning or doubting Dupin's actions and strategies.

Tone · In the tales of criminal insanity, the narrators' diction, which is precise and often ornate, suggests a serious investment in confession as a defense of sanity. In the detective stories, Poe's narrator attempts a dispassionate and fair account of the events, but he often humbly defers to Dupin at moments of confusion or complexity.

Tense · The tales of criminal insanity often begin in the present tense as confessions and then flash back to recount past crimes. The detective stories also feature little action in the present and instead convey the important events as flashbacks.

Protagonist · The tales of criminal insanity establish the first-person narrators as protagonists by focusing on their struggles with madness and the law. The detective stories feature Dupin as the protagonist by focusing on his ability to save the Paris police with crime-solving brilliance.

themes · The similarity of love and hate; the rivalry between self and alter ego; the personification of memory after death

motifs · The revenant; the doppelgänger; the masquerade

symbols · Eyes; the whirlpool; "Fortunato"