

Teaching Edgar Allan Poe's “The Cask of Amontillado”: A Common Core Close Reading Seminar



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“The Cask of Amontillado”

UNDERSTANDING

Poe’s horror stories— “The Fall of the House of Usher,” “The Tell-Tale Heart,” and “The Cask of Amontillado,” for example—are keystones in the Gothic tradition. Poe is known for *internalizing* the Gothic, moving terror from the external world of ghosts and vampires to the psychological world of the deranged murderer. As Poe himself says, “my terror is not of Germany, but of the soul.” Focusing on close textual analysis of a single story considered to be one of Poe’s best, we will explore how the story conveys terror to readers with intricate language play: puns, ironies, foreshadowing, and double entendre. We’ll also locate the story in broader cultural contexts: Gothic tradition, the temperance movement, and obsessions with premature burial.

“The Cask of Amontillado”

FRAMING QUESTIONS

- “The Cask of Amontillado” is a revenge tale, in which revenge is exacted according to specific requirements. What are those requirements, and how are they fulfilled?
- How does the narrator’s attentiveness to language help him achieve his revenge? What is the role of puns, ironies, foreshadowing, and double entendre in the story?
- What is Poe’s theory of the “unity of effect,” and how does it work in “The Cask of Amontillado”?
- What is the “Gothic”? What is Poe’s place in the Gothic tradition?
- How does the story engage with broader cultural preoccupations like temperance? Is there any way it engages distinctly American concerns?

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Emily Dickinson in Context (ed.)
2013

*Gender and the Poetics of Reception
in Poe's Circle*
2004

The Opening: Paragraph 1

THE thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could; but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge. You, who so well know the nature of my soul, will not suppose, however, that I gave utterance to a threat. *At length* I would be avenged; this was a point definitively settled — but the very definitiveness with which it was resolved, precluded the idea of risk. I must not only punish, but punish with impunity. A wrong is unredressed when retribution overtakes its redresser. It is equally unredressed when the avenger fails to make himself felt as such to him who has done the wrong.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What is Montresor's theory of proper revenge?
- Reading clues: How does this paragraph instruct us to read the story that follows?
- Who might Montresor be addressing? Who is the "you"?

The Montresor's Coat of Arms



“The Montresors,” I replied, “were a great and numerous family.”

“I forget your arms.”

“A huge human foot dexter [of gold], in a field azure; the foot crushes a serpent rampant whose fangs are imbedded in the heel.”

“And the motto?”

“Nemo me impune lacessit.” [No one provokes me with impunity”]

DISCUSSION QUESTION

- What words and ideas are echoed here that are introduced in the first paragraph? What do these correspondences indicate?

It must be understood, that neither by word nor deed had I given Fortunato cause to doubt my good will. I continued, as was my wont, to smile in his face, and he did not perceive that my smile *now* was at the thought of his immolation.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Why is it important that the narrator pretend he has good will toward Fortunato?
- What does this proclamation suggest about the way he will go about exacting revenge?

The Significance of Costume

Fortunato:

The man wore motley. He had on a tight-fitting parti-striped dress, and his head was surmounted by the conical cap and bells. I was so pleased to see him that I thought I should never have done wringing his hand.

Montresor:

Thus speaking, Fortunato possessed himself of my arm. Putting on a mask of black silk, and drawing a *roquelaire* [knee length cloak] closely about my person, I suffered him to hurry me to my palazzo.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What do the costumes signify?
- How do they add to the story of revenge?

- Montresor
- Fortunato
- “A flacon of De Grave”

“Amontillado!”
“I have my doubts.”
“Amontillado!”
“And I must satisfy them.”
“Amontillado!”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What is the double meaning presented here? What is its significance for the story?
- Why is the word “Amontillado” repeated so often? What does that say about Fortunato?

“Come,” I said, with decision, “we will go back; your health is precious. You are rich, respected, admired, beloved; you are happy, as once I was. You are a man to be missed. For me it is no matter. We will go back; you will be ill, and I cannot be responsible. Besides, there is Luchesi ——”

“Enough,” he said; “the cough is a mere nothing; it will not kill me. I shall not die of a cough.”

“True — true,” I replied;

Fortunato: “I drink,” he said, “to the buried that repose around us.”

Montresor: “And I to your long life.”

DISCUSSION QUESTION

- Why is this exchange ironic?

I broke and reached him a flacon of De Grève. He emptied it at a breath. His eyes flashed with a fierce light. He laughed and threw the bottle upwards with a gesticulation I did not understand. I looked at him in surprise. He repeated the movement — a grotesque one.

“You do not comprehend?” he said.

“Not I,” I replied.

“Then you are not of the brotherhood.”

“How?”

“You are not of the masons.”

“Yes, yes,” I said, “yes, yes.”

“You? Impossible! A mason?”

“A mason,” I replied.

“A sign,” he said.

“It is this,” I answered, producing a trowel from beneath the folds of my *roquelaire*.

“You jest,” he exclaimed, recoiling a few paces. “But let us proceed to the Amontillado.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What is the miscommunication here? What is Fortunato talking about? What is Montresor talking about?
- How is the misunderstanding important for the story?

Fortunato: “But is it not getting late? Will not they be awaiting us at the palazzo, the Lady Fortunato and the rest? Let us be gone.”

Montresor: “Yes,” I said, “let us be gone.”

Fortunato: “*For the love of God, Montresor!*”

Montresor: “Yes,” I said, “for the love of God!” But to these words I hearkened in vain for a reply. I grew impatient. I called aloud —

“Fortunato!”

No answer. I called again —

“Fortunato!”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What are the double meanings in this exchange?
- What is the point of Montresor echoing what Fortunato says?
- Why does Fortunato stop answering?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How does Montresor enact the revenge? Did he fulfill his precise requirements? (punish with impunity and make himself felt as the avenger to the wrongdoer)
- How does the punishment fit the crime?
- How will the victim be aware of the precision of the retribution? What will Fortunato, in other words, piece together of the previous events while he's buried alive in his tomb?

“Cask” is a perverse morality play, where roles and plot are appropriate to the insult.

➤ Live burial is appropriate

1. Fortunato ignores Montresor’s distinction, his nearly dead family line. He doesn’t know the coat of arms.
2. Fortunato, on the other hand, has fame, fortune, friends, social standing. Montresor insists that Fortunato know finally what it feels like to be in the situation that Fortunato has repeatedly consigned him to: buried alive in the family vault.
3. In this way, Montresor instructs Fortunato viscerally on his coat of arms; he acts out in the scenario his family motto so that Fortunato learns it “by heart”: “no one offends me with impunity.”

Poe is recognized for formulating the idea of “unity of effect”.

The ordinary novel is objectionable, from its length, for reasons already stated in substance. As it cannot be read at one sitting, it deprives itself, of course, of the immense force derivable from *totality*. Worldly interests intervening during the pauses of perusal, modify, annul, or counteract, in a greater or less degree, the impressions of the book. But simple cessation in reading would, of itself, be sufficient to destroy the true unity. In the brief tale, however, the author is enabled to carry out the fullness of his intention, be it what it may. During the hour of perusal the soul of the reader is at the writer's control. There are no external or extrinsic influences--resulting from weariness or interruption.

From a review of Hawthorne's tales

“Unity of Effect” cont.

A skillful literary artist has constructed a tale. If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single *effect* to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents—he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect. If his very initial sentence tend not to the outbringing of this effect, then he has failed in his first step. In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design.

From a review of Hawthorne’s tales

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Has Poe achieved his aesthetic goal of “unity of effect” in “Cask”? Are there any extraneous details?
- What is the “unique or single effect” he conveys in “Cask”? Is it evident even in the first sentence?

“The Cask of Amontillado”

The most important source for “Cask” is Joseph Headley’s “A Man Built in a Wall,” from *Letters of Italy* (1845). Headley imagines the history of a skeleton he saw that had been found inside a church wall:

The workman began at the feet, and with his mortar and trowel built up with the same carelessness he would exhibit in filling any broken wall. The successful enemy stood leaning on his sword — a smile of scorn and revenge on his features — and watched the face of the man he hated, but no longer feared . . . It was slow work fitting the pieces nicely, so as to close up the aperture with precision . . . With care and precision the last stone was fitted in the narrow space — the trowel passed smoothly over it — a stifled groan, as if from the centre of a rock, broke the stillness — one strong shiver, and all was over. The agony had passed — revenge was satisfied, and a secret locked up for the great revelation day.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What does Poe take from this passage?
- How does he transform it?

Context: The Gothic Tradition

A key founding text of the Gothic tradition was “Monk” Lewis’ *The Monk* (1796):

I looked before me: An abyss presented itself to my affrighted eyes, and a steep and narrow Staircase, whither my Conductors were leading me. I shrieked, and started back. I implored compassion, rent the air with my cries, and summoned both heaven and earth to my assistance. In vain! I was hurried down the Staircase, and forced into one of the Cells which lined the Cavern's sides. My blood ran cold, as I gazed upon this melancholy abode. The cold vapours hovering in the air, the walls green with damp, the bed of Straw so forlorn and comfortless, the Chain destined to bind me for ever to my prison, and the Reptiles of every description which as the torches advanced towards them, I descried hurrying to their retreats, struck my heart with terrors almost too exquisite for nature to bear.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- This Gothic romance was written 50 years before Poe’s story. What “Gothic” elements do they share?
- How is Poe’s tale fundamentally different from Lewis’? What has changed?

Context: Temperance Fiction

T. S. Arthur's *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room* (1854) sold 400,000 copies:

Instantly, the young man, infuriated by drink and evil passions, threw the bottle at his father's head. The dangerous missile fell, crashing upon one of his temples, shivering it into a hundred pieces. A heavy, jarring fall too surely marked the fearful consequences of the blow. When we gathered around the fallen man, and made an effort to lift him from the floor, a thrill of horror went through every heart. A mortal paleness was already on his marred face, and the death-gurgle in his throat! In three minutes from the time the blow was struck, his spirit had gone upward to give an account of the deeds done in the body.

“Frank Slade! you have murdered your father!”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How does Poe adapt the “Cask” treat alcohol-enabled depravity differently? Is the main point of “Cask” to condemn the drinking of alcohol? Is it one of the points at all?
- The context of temperance fiction is uniquely American. Are there other ways that “Cask” engages particularly American concerns and issues?







Thank You



