

The cask of amontillado



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Edgar Allan Poe is known for his thrilling tales of madmen, cunning murderers, and intense, claustrophobic situations. “The Cask of Amontillado” is one such tale. From the very beginning of the story, the narrator’s unreliable nature shines through his over exaggerated descriptions of how honorable of a man he is, of the wrongs that have been committed against him and the culprit responsible. Throughout the narrator’s confession there is foreshadowing. Montresor warns Fortunato to turn back, that the nitre on the walls may worsen his cough, yet at the same time he deceives Fortunato, pretending to be his friend, so that he will never know the reason for Montresor’s grotesque deed. Since the story is told in a flashback in the narrator’s perspective, we can see more closely the narrator’s soul, and can judge how he really feels about his so-called revenge. At the beginning of the story, Montresor relays to the reader some rules of revenge, which by the end of the story are not fulfilled by his actions against Fortunato. Ironically, it seems that Fortunato has had the ultimate revenge that Montresor fantasized about so obsessively. Poe uses these four devices to address the question of whether Montresor’s fantasy of revenge without consequence is realistic or not. Montresor begins his confession as though he is an honorable man only fulfilling some unwritten law concerning “unredressed wrongs”. Montresor declares from the very start, “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”(Poe 312). Of course, Montresor is simply doing the noble thing by fulfilling his vow. He was wronged by Fortunato, and being a gentleman, he must have his revenge against his aggressor. He justifies his primal urges to do Fortunato harm by telling the reader and himself that

Fortunato deserves it, yet it is not apparent that Fortunato really did anything to deserve any punishment at all. Montresor tells the reader that “the thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could, but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge”(312). However, he fails to enlighten the reader and Fortunato as to exactly which insult it was that plunged him over the edge into a murderous rage. Yet, he continuously tries to justify his actions even by attacking Fortunato’s character. To Fortunato’s face Montresor uses his deceptive cunning and plays to Fortunato’s ego by praising and complimenting his genius: “ You are rich, respected, admired, beloved; you are happy as once I was”(314). However, to the reader, he describes Fortunato as a court jester: “ He accosted me with excessive warmth, for he had been drinking much. The man wore motley. He had on a tight-fitting parti-striped dress and his head was surmounted by the conical cap and bells”(312). So, to the reader Fortunato seems an imbecile, a drunken idiot, easily taken advantage of. However, it is obvious that Fortunato is a well-educated man, only blinded by his drunkenness and his friend’s overtures of concern. This biased portrayal of Fortunato only serves to make Montresor look more cunning and superior to have fooled a fool to willingly walk into his own damp grave. To persuade Fortunato to willingly walk to his death, Montresor uses a kind of reverse psychology, which is an excellent source of foreshadowing for the reader. “‘ Come,’ I said, with decision, ‘ we will go back; your health is precious... 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’”(314). Montresor goes on and on about Fortunatos health, feigning concern. Furthermore, Montresor continues to mention another friend, Luchesi, who also has some talent in identifying wine, although his

talents are far from Fortunato's. With the mere mention of this man, Luchesi, Fortunato presses on with determination, the determination not to let another man have the glory of identifying this Amontillado: "' As you are engaged, I am on my way to Luchesi. If any one has a critical turn, it is he. He will tell me' - ' Luchesi cannot tell Amontillado from Sherry.' And yet some fools would have it that his taste is a match for your own'"(313). Instead of imploring Fortunato to come to his vaults, Montresor let's his friend make the demands and, luckily for Montresor, Fortunato demands to see the Amontillado despite his hacking cough and the deadly nitre that awaits. While Fortunato knows nothing of Montresor's ill intentions, it becomes painfully obvious to the reader that Fortunato will not escape with his health or his life. "' 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"(314). To make the constant allusions to Fortunato's death even more ridiculous to the point the reader wonders whether Fortunato really is an idiot to not understand what is happening, Montresor mocks Fortunato by drinking to his long life. When he does this, with Fortunato none the wiser, the reader is certain of Fortunato's fate. The Montresor family crest, " A huge human foot d'or, 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 insults me with impunity)"(314), only serves to remind the reader of Montresor's promise at the beginning of his confession. The fact that Fortunato is still clueless after their discussion makes the reader wonder whether Montresor will get the revenge that he seeks. Finally, when Fortunato mentions the Masons, Montresor pulls a trowel from his roquelaire, the trowel that he will later use to bury Fortunato alive. Fortunato, however, takes it as a joke and thinks

nothing more about it, continuing on to the Amontillado like a fly to honey. This is the last warning that Montresor allows Fortunato, and Fortunato is still oblivious, a fact that will come to haunt Montresor as time passes. Montresor tells the story fifty years later, the first time word of his horrible deed has reached human ears. Therefore, the reader knows that he has punished Fortunato with no obvious consequences. But, as the story is told in a flashback, it is evident that the murder he's been hiding for so many years still weighs heavy on his mind. " You, who so well know the nature of my soul, will not suppose, however, that I gave utterance to a threat"(312). It is repeated over and over that Fortunato is in the dark when it comes to his own demise, and this obviously perturbs Montresor as he seems to obsessively repeat it. Also, the reason that Montresor does not mention specifically what the offense was against him, leads the reader to believe that, upon looking back on it, it wasn't that offensive after all, and if mentioned now, would render the support of the reader against him. Montresor may in fact regret his actions, though he would never admit it. To him, he has done the right thing, the honorable thing, by avenging himself and fulfilling the motto on his family crest. The sheer fact that Montresor appeals to the reader for support shows that he may feel guiltier than he lets on. As Montresor stated at the very beginning, " It [revenge] is equally unredressed when the avenger fails to make himself felt as such to him who has done the wrong"(312), it is surprising at the end when Montresor walls up Fortunato's tomb without first enlightening his friend of the transgression that forced him to seek revenge. " In an instant he had reached the extremity of the niche, and finding his progress arrested by the rock, stood stupidly bewildered"(315). Obviously, Fortunato is extremely shocked at

what his dear friend Montresor is doing and he clearly has no idea why. Montresor pauses to mock Fortunato, “‘ Pass your hand,’ I said, ‘ over the wall; you cannot help feeling the nitre. Indeed it is very damp. Once more let me implore you to return. No? Then I must positively leave you. But I must first render you all the little attentions in my power”(316), however he does not pause to explain himself. It is evident that without Fortunato’s knowledge of the whole scheme, Montresor has failed to exact proper revenge upon him. It is also evident that this disturbs Montresor to no end, “ My heart grew sick; it was the dampness of the catacombs that made it so”(317), even though he will not admit it to the reader, nor to himself. Ironically, it seems that Fortunato has achieved the ultimate revenge, revenge with no consequences, only in death. The main point that Edgar Allan Poe seems to be making is that revenge by Montresor’s definition is not humanly possible. While there may be no physical or legal consequences, the mind of a murderer who has to live with his actions for the rest of his life can do terrible things. The unreliable narrator allows us to see him make mistakes, to lie, and to see him as he really is, even though he may not be telling the story exactly as it happened. All the while, Montresor continues to warn Fortunato to turn back, as a friend, and this deceptiveness is Montresor’s pitfall, causing his obsessive revenge to be a failure. If he had been honest with Fortunato from the very beginning, then his revenge would have been closer to reality. As the story is told entirely in a flashback, we are able to see the narrator’s true feelings about the deeds that were done fifty years before, even though he may be adept at hiding them from the reader and himself. Finally, by Montresor’s definition of revenge at the beginning, “ It is equally unredressed when the avenger fails to make himself felt as such to

him who has done the wrong”(312), it is evident that he has failed, while Fortunato has come very close to succeeding. Only in death, will human nature allow for the ultimate revenge, so that there are absolutely no consequences. So, it seems that Montresor’s revenge is wholly unrealistic and completely impossible.