

# Classic english literature essay

Life, Friendship



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## **How does Edgar Allan Poe display the central characteristics of romanticism in ‘ The Tell-Tale Heart’ and ‘ The Cask of Amontillado.’**

Edgar Allan Poe was an author best known for his dark tales of the macabre and utilised many significant elements of romanticism in his work. Known for its love of beauty, nature and emotion, romanticism is often thought of as being colourful and light but it did also have an interest in the sensation of fear and horror, especially when in association with the sublime and the wildest forms of nature. It does not, as many may believe, link directly to romance and love. Edgar Allan Poe uses an under-current of romanticism in a lot of his works, in order to produce an air of mystery and intrigue, not least in The Cask of Amontillado, the tale of a wronged friend seeking revenge; and The Tell-Tale Heart, the story of a murderer insisting of his innocence but whose own hallucinations of the still-beating heart are proof of his guilt. Both tales are told from the perspective of the murderer and both include certain ‘ unreal’ qualities which detach them from realism, the polar opposite of romanticism.

Poe’s novels often focus on some of romanticism’s primary ideas: love, death, pride and beauty. In The Cask of Amontillado, we are introduced to our protagonist, Montresor who seeks revenge after being insulted by his friend. The motifs of pride and death are used throughout the short story and are, in fact, the entire motive behind the plot. In actual fact, Poe wrote the story as revenge towards another author of the time, Thomas Dunn English. He and Poe were engaged in a literary entanglement which involved a

number of novels featuring caricatures of one another in more and more confrontational manners. In that sense, *The Cask of...* is a revenge novel about revenge and is almost a meta-narrative for it: it most certainly holds some post-modern qualities, way before its time. It was a novel of English's where he showed Poe in a less than favourable light that encouraged Poe to pen his response where a rivalry results in a murder: a sure warning, if ever there were one.

*The Tell-Tale Heart* is written without the use of pronouns throughout and various theories divide readers as to whether the murderer and protagonist is a man or a woman. This may well be a deliberate act on Poe's part as in romanticism, gender is not a big issue but rather the idea that we are all part of nature and exist as one consciousness. Again, its focus is on death but rather than pondering its details, we are instead drawn into the protagonist's confused web of proving his sanity. This does detract from the story's overall romanticism and actually, with the exception of its focus on death and its dismissal of science, the story is more 'gothic' than it is romantic. It is ambiguous as to whether a lot of the tale takes place in reality or in the mind of the murderer and it gives rise to the idea that the murderer represents the imagination and the old man as science. Since the old man is murdered, it leans towards Poe's usual romantic notions but its grotesque imagery and horror make it more of a hybrid.

## References

Poe, Edgar Allan. *The Cask of Amontillado*. USA: Godey's Lady's Book, 1846.

Poe, Edgar Allan. *The Tell-Tale Heart*. USA: James Russell Lowell, 1843.