

# Justifying murder in the cask of amontillado

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Edgar Allan Poe is most known for his short stories containing the same gothic themes. In most of Poe's stories all the characters sound alike but in *The Cask of Amontillado* Montresor is different and has his own voice (Morsberger 336). In the act of committing a crime, it is for certain the criminal will do anything to justify what they have done whether they are right or wrong. *The Cask of Amontillado* is the confession of a man whose thoughts are subject to mortality. The murderer, whose name is Montresor, is telling the confession fifty years later which shows that he is older. Montresor is approximately seventy to eighty years old when he is confessing to the murder. Since Montresor is now elder it is possible he feels a sense of guilt for murdering Fortunato. At this point in Montresor's life, it can be inferred that he feels his justification for revenge is not valid. In *The Cask of Amontillado*, Montresor seeks revenge on Fortunato because he feels he has betrayed and insulted causing many emotional and mental injuries. Montresor planned a premeditated murder on his at-one-point friend because he felt required to do so. Montresor's reasons for murdering Fortunato were never lawfully justified. Since there were never any legal actions, there is only Montresor's point of view of the situation. Montresor took it upon himself to resolve the issues never giving Fortunato the opportunity to explain why he insulted him or the opportunity to apologize and make amends. In *The Cask of Amontillado*, Poe uses his perspective of revenge and mortality to show how individuals justify murder.

Throughout Poe's life, he encountered many grueling things that influenced his style of writing. As a child, both of his parents died putting him with a foster family. After his foster mother died he was disowned by his foster

father. Poe faced many issues with drinking making his financial situation more difficult than it already was. Poe needed a way to express his feelings so he used poetry but soon switched to short stories because they were in such high demand. It is known that his main reason for beginning to write like many others was because of his financial situation. Poe needed to financially support his Aunt and his cousin, Virginia Eliza Clemm Poe, who would become his wife (Delaney).

It's easy to notice signs of possible depression from the themes of his tales and personal issues that he faced. Also, Poe's affiliation with Freemasonry may be why he was so easily able to manipulate gothic effects in his works (Davis-Undiano). During this time in American culture, Freemasonry seemed to be a prominent issue that most people today do not know about. Whether you were a mason or not during this time, you knew about it and without intention had some affiliation with it. It is not clear whether Poe was a mason or not but he made sure it was clear that Montresor stated he was during dialogue with Fortunato:

" 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." I said

' 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. (155-156)

In this dialogue, Montresor not only says he is a mason but refers to it as a brotherhood. This brotherhood reference can mean that freemasonry feels like a brotherhood to Poe and he wants to indirectly inform people on it. Being that during this time it was not something that people were so easy to accept Freemasonry it is understandable as to why Poe would slip references about it in his work. This reference could be taken literally by the reader and could bring assumptions of Poe's involvement in Freemasonry. The way that Montresor murders Fortunato is an example of a Masonic ritual and could be his justified reasoning for his revenge.

The word mortality is defined as the state or condition of being subject to death (" Mortality"). This tale showcases the theme of mortality because Montresor sought revenge on Fortunato. Elena V. Baraban refers to the murder as mediocre and states that Montresor's elaboration on it was a sophisticated philosophy of revenge (Baraban). Montresor felt that he had been insulted by Fortunato putting him in a position to murder him. The act of humiliation gave Montresor the motive to murder Fortunato and get the revenge he feels he deserves. Montresor says, " The thousands injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could; but when he ventured upon result, I

vowed revenge" (Poe 152). This quote is the opening of the tale and Poe is sure to make it so that the reader is immediately wondering what he has done and why. It is easy to infer Montresor feels that the revenge on Fortunato was caused by the thousands of injuries he received from him (Baraban).

Montresor is showing signs of guilt by immediately explaining why he felt he had to get revenge on Fortunato. I believe that there is a possibility of mental issues or insanity in him. It is possible that the thousands of injuries from Fortunato were friendly jokes that Montresor took the wrong way. The carnival environment where this tale takes place could have influenced Fortunato to make the jokes about Montresor. The way it is projected in this story makes it seem that Montresor is being dramatic and misinterpreting what Fortunato meant. Perhaps all the injuries from Fortunato could have been solved in a different manner other than the act of mortality. Fortunato's life was taken away from him for reasons that are unclear. The act of mortality was unfair in Fortunato's favor because his murder was never legally justified.

When Montresor made the decision to murder Fortunato he made himself the court because he decided to handle the situation his own way. There is only Montresor's explanation making the tale into a mystery with the question of " Who did it?" and " Why did he do it (Baraban). Because there was no real evidence as to why Montresor made the decision to murder Fortunato, he just felt that was what he had to do. If this murder ever had that opportunity to go to trial all of Montresor's reasoning would have not

been proven as justified. Though the reasons Montresor presented for killing Fortunato were not valid he was sure to try and convince the reader that they were. In *The Cask of Amontillado* Montresor said, " I must not only punish, but punish with impunity (Poe 152). Montresor wanted to punish with impunity in order to free himself from the thousands of injuries brought on by Fortunato. Montresor had waited fifty years to talk about what he has done which means instead of feeling impunity he has a guilty conscience (Baraban). Montresor felt that this was something that must be done on behalf of him and his " fatherland" (White 551). Montresor is a part of a noble family, which means he holds certain responsibilities. He is showing a sense of patriotism to his homeland by feeling it was his responsibility to murder Fortunato (White 551). Since he has these responsibilities this revenge could have felt justified to him.

When someone has done what Montresor did they will do anything to convince themselves and others that it was able to be justified. It is almost impossible to establish what one feels when the thought of murder is on his mind. Every day people take their lives or the lives of others because of similar situations like Montresor's. There is not really a logical reason but only a physiological reason for committing murder. In today's court system with similar circumstances, the defendant would plead a state on insanity. Whatever Montresor felt his reasons were they were wrong and this crime was not justified.

By analyzing this tale the reader is able to see that Poe uses his perspective of revenge and mortality to show how individuals justify murder. In all of his

characters and themes, Poe seems to base it on similar gothic details, but in this tale the character was different. Montresor changed and developed into an inhuman person or “ mad man” because of the circumstances of the issues he faced (Magill). Poe went through many things in his life that influenced who he was and how he wrote. Although it is impossible to exactly know why Poe wrote the way he did it is easy to wonder why. In this tale, the act of mortality was simply based on revenge that Montresor felt must be done. Through all of the same aspects, Poe was able to express why revenge and Mortality were justified to a character who faced issues that he needed to overcome. The way Montresor felt he needed to be free of impunity, which was similar to Poe wanting to escape financial instability or his alcohol addiction. After analyzing all of Montresor’s reasonings, were the revenge and mortality justified?