

Repression of sexuality in "the cask of amontillado"

[Literature](#), [American Literature](#)



Edgar Allan Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado" features a unique symbolism of the repression of homosexual desire and of the damaging effects of a society that promotes repressive behavior. This short story details the process of imprisoning that which the narrator despises—both literally and metaphorically. Yet a queer analytical lens brings the figurative homoerotic undertones of the tale to light; focusing predominantly on sexuality illuminates the metaphorical imprisonment and repression of the narrator's same-sex desires. Ultimately, the narrator suppresses his sexuality and displaces his hatred onto Fortunato due to societal pressures, thus acting to stifle something considered taboo and heinous.

Queer theory analyzes the role of sexuality in literary works and its influence on characters' identities. Whether a character's sexuality is blatantly stated, subtly alluded to, or completely ignored in a text, its presence or lack thereof presents an intriguing analytical lens through which to dissect a piece of literature. Johanna Smith's article "What Are Gender Criticism and Queer Theory" describes queer theory as an "emphasis on sexuality and on its broader insistence that the multifaceted and fluid character of identity negates efforts to categorize people on the basis of any one characteristic" (388). The sexuality of a character can exist on a spectrum, as that character can have queer characteristics without being labelled gay, and can experience same-sex desire while existing outside of the binary categories society creates. A character does not need to form his or her entire persona around that aspect of identity, or even to accept that aspect.

A character's identity consists of many qualities; however, the repression and denial of any aspect can detrimentally affect well-being and mental

state. If the character lives in a society where going against the norm of heterosexuality is considered detestable, then “homosexual panic, the revelation of an unspeakable same-sex desire” (Smith 391) can cause distress, and an anxious desire for repression. Once a character recognizes innate same-sex desire, that character enters a state of dread, of fear of being discovered and ostracized by society—leading to the unsuccessful suppression of sexuality. Such anxiety, combined with repression, can drastically impact a character’s mental state. That character comes to despise his or her sexuality merely for its peculiarity and society’s taboos, and for an inability to be rid of it—creating an internal conflict.

Poe’s story features numerous elements that suggest same-sex desire and symbolism for sexuality itself: “It was about dusk, one evening during the supreme madness of the carnival season, that I encountered my friend. 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. I was so pleased to see him that I thought I should never have done wringing his hand” (Poe). This portion of Poe’s story relies heavily upon juxtaposing amiable and aggressive words and imagery. Poe uses words generally associated with violence such as “accosted” and “wringing” to describe the cordial actions of hugging and shaking hands—customs generally expressing friendship. This harsh contrast not only conveys the narrator’s literal hostility towards Fortunato, but also the opposing forces of love and hate that reside within him. The narrator is torn between the love and desire that come with sexuality and his hatred for homosexual desire, and for the confusion and problems it brings to his life.

His constant switching between hostile and friendly words displays the internal conflict within the narrator due to his same-sex desire, which he considers madness.

Since the narrator finds his sexuality to be disorienting, it is only befitting that he executes his plan to completely rid himself of it during a carnival—the epitome of foolishness and insanity. He then finds a person to personify his sexuality—his friend, Fortunato—a man known for improper antics and who is literally wearing clothing worn by fools. The narrator's focus on the clothing emphasizes how Fortunato represents something ridiculous and strange, an image of how Montresor views his same-sex desire. Although he wishes to completely rid himself of his sexuality, and subsequently the man who represents it, Montresor cannot help but feel a slight joy in allowing himself to stop repressing his desire for a moment. The pleasure that the narrator apparently gleans from seeing Fortunato also translates into his joy upon letting his desire out into the open.

Montresor allows his homoerotic desire to escape, for he knows that, to completely rid himself of it, he must confront and capture it. He cannot take action against this desire while denying its existence. Once he fully acknowledges his sexuality, his hatred for having such a scandalous desire bubbles to the surface and he projects his harsh emotions onto Fortunato. Having a person as the personification of his sexuality gives Montresor a physical entity on which to focus his rage and confusion. The contradicting phrases that the narrator uses to describe Fortunato support the notion that Montresor does not hate him as a man, but merely hates what he represents.

He describes Fortunato as a friend many times, and as he finishes trapping him inside the catacombs, his “ heart [grows] sick” (Poe), a sentiment which he weakly attributes to the mugginess of the tunnel. Montresor feels such pain after completely sealing off Fortunato because he has hurt his friend, and has also lost a part of his identity.

Despite the projection of hate onto Fortunato and the desire to be rid of something that causes suffering, Montresor does not want to completely distance himself from his sexuality. He recognizes that his same-sex desire is part of his sense of self, and that completely suppressing it would cause him to lose a piece of himself. Even though he wishes to destroy his source of shame, Montresor does not violently murder Fortunato—and subsequently his sexuality—but constructs an elaborate plan to literally wall up his feelings and the man. He chooses his own family catacomb to become the resting place of his sexuality—a place close by, and reserved only for those dear to Montresor. Montresor also has second thoughts about finishing the wall as his goals start to become reality; he even calls to Fortunato, as he realizes that his metaphorical sexuality is leaving him. These small details reveal that the narrator does not innately hate his homoeroticism, nor truly want to rid himself of it.

Although he does not inherently despise his sexuality, Montresor cannot explore his feelings and thus feels ostracized, causing him to project his hatred of society and himself onto Fortunato. By sealing away Fortunato, Montresor literally and figuratively walls up his desire and removes the source of his frustration and of his feelings of being different. Montresor

forces himself to completely seal off his sexuality so that he will no longer be separated from the norm and can reintegrate himself back into society. His intense distress over something unspeakable in his society causes him to experience homosexual panic, go slightly mad, and construct a scheme to rid himself of a strong desire.

Montresor's suppression of his sexuality due to living in a culture that admonishes such behavior leads to the events described in the story. In an effort to be "normal," the narrator constructs a plan to forever rid himself of his same-sex desire. He personifies his sexuality as his friend Fortunato, towards whom he then directs all of his hatred for having homoerotic aspects and the ostracization that comes with them. Montresor's literal sealing away of Fortunato symbolizes the complete suppression of that aspect of his identity, something that he does not truly despise nor want to lose, but that he knows he must eliminate in order to function as a social being. The distress that Montresor experiences symbolizes the detrimental effects of a society that promotes the repression of sexuality.

Works Cited

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