

The cask of amontillado



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Poe's Use of Enclosures, Literal and Figurative in The Cask of Amontillado (1846) The devices of Gothic fiction, with haunted castles, eerie sounds, grotesque imagery and enclosed spaces were all part of Poe's mastery of the genre. In 'The Cask of Amontillado', with metaphor, allusion and irony, and the reality of " the colossal support of the roof of the catacombs, backed by one of their circumscribing walls of solid granite" (Poe, 1094) he created horror, murder, madness and revenge. The victim, narrator and reader are enclosed in a sequence of ever-mounting fear and tension, to the final entrapment. Poe used the device of enclosures to force the confrontation of the deepest human fears; death, burial alive, and the potential for wickedness and madness in the human mind.

Figurative enclosure began with the reader, drawn by Montresor into his space, assuming collusion and sympathy: " You, who so well know the nature of my soul" (Poe, 1090), tells the reader " you are with me in this, you understand." Fortunato was trapped too, by his greed and vanity, and into placing himself in the trap.

" Fortunato possessed himself of my arm; I suffered him to hurry me to my palazzo." (Poe, 1091-92)

Montresor was also enclosed in his world of paranoia and revenge, a loner who perceived himself superior, who had no rational cause to kill. The absence of real motive here showed a mind locked into a cold, psychotic personality. He did not explain, " The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne", but provided glimpses of a focused, calculated, mental derangement in " I must not only punish, but punish with impunity." (Poe, 1090). If Montresor was mad, then he was locked in that space, without human feelings, taking victim and reader with him, to the horrific reality of a living

death, enclosed in the catacomb walls. These and the journey to them, represented a metaphor for the convoluted workings of a deranged mind, while focusing on themes, plot, action and resolution.

Literal, real enclosed spaces become smaller and more threatening, reaching the horrific climax. Montresor and Fortunato's meeting in the "supreme madness of the carnival season" (Poe, 1091) put them in a circumscribed place, a crowd of bodies where movement was limited. "The vaults are insufferably damp. They are encrusted with nitre" (Poe, 1091), are literal images of cold, dangerous enclosed spaces. The need to follow each other down the "long and winding staircase" (Poe 1092) created the sensation of restricted room to move, and a potential for falling. The downward movement, the flickering lights suggested claustrophobia, soon confirmed by the reality of the "damp ground of the catacombs of the Montresors." (Poe, 1092).

Poe peopled the vaults with the dead, as the narrator depicted the crowding in on them, "long walls of piled skeletons into the inmost recesses of the catacombs." (Poe, 1093). "Deep crypt" and "foulness of the air" (Poe, 1094) signified how enclosed they were when in that "crypt or recess, in depth about four feet, in width three, in height six or seven" (Poe, 1094). These were the dimensions of a coffin, and these foreshadowing images enclosed reader, victim and narrator in the deep psychological fear of death and being buried alive. The chains, bones, the images up till then, pale against the deepest of human terrors.

Poe has, with enclosure, forced the confrontation with our deepest fears of burial and death, alongside the potential for madness and evil in us all. As Fortunato was finally enclosed in the wall, the reader suffers along with the

victim. The shock and horror of the taunting yells the narrator used to quiet the victim, his coldly efficient completion of the task, suggested a descent into madness. Poe brought us to the most dangerous and unknowable enclosure, the mind of man.

Works Cited

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