

# Baiting the trap in "the cask of amontillado" case study example

[Psychology](#)



In his short story "The Cask of Amontillado," Edgar Allan Poe presents a narrator who entraps an enemy by appealing to the vices of his character. The narrator does not explain very much of why Fortunato is his enemy; he simply notes "The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could, but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge" (p. 191). For most of the story, the reader does not know the name of the narrator, only the name of his enemy. However, it is clear from the first paragraph that the narrator seeks revenge, and not simply with words. He also vows that he will get his revenge without any repercussions on himself. He is unwilling to murder Fortunato in a way that will cause him to go to prison; he wants to get away with his revenge.

The narrator accomplishes his goal through understanding of human psychology. The narrator notes that wine is Fortunato's major weakness, and so it is natural that the narrator uses this weakness against him. He appeals to Fortunato as a wine snob, inviting him to taste a new cask of wine and verify that it truly is a rare vintage. To guarantee that Fortunato will accompany him, he alludes to another wine connoisseur and states that he will consult the other one. As the narrator expected, Fortunato so prides himself on his knowledge of wine that he disparages the other wine connoisseur. The narrator baits the trap successfully; he offers an unusual wine and also offers the chance for Fortunato to demonstrate his expertise about wines. The narrator is quite clever in the way he baits Fortunato; he does not beg Fortunato to come taste the wine and instead implies that Fortunato is too busy to do so. He flatters Fortunato, whose ego is already swollen. He plays Fortunato so cleverly that it is Fortunato himself who

insists on going to the narrator's home to inspect the wine.

Once home, the narrator continues to use psychological insight into Fortunato. When the vaults seem damp, the narrator questions whether Fortunato is well enough to continue. Of course, Fortunato will not admit to any weakness. The narrator disarms Fortunato by giving him a drink. The alcohol makes Fortunato less likely to suspect something is wrong. It is during this point that Poe's tone shifts from suspense about whether Fortunato will fall for the narrator's ruse to increasing horror and tension about what the nature of the narrator's revenge will be. The narrator drops a hint of his own nature when he describes his family's crest: "A huge human foot d'or, in a field azure; the foot crushes a serpent rampant whose fangs are imbedded in the heel" (p. 193). It is apparent that he regards himself as the instrument of justice crushing Fortunato who has been foolish enough to attack him.

At this point the reader is still unsure of what Fortunato's fate will be. It is not until the narrator describes the interior crypt that the reader begins to suspect what the narrator has in mind. But even then, most readers would assume that the narrator intends to kill Fortunato outright and then bury his body or hide his body in the vaults. Poe's narrative technique of not letting the reader know the fate of Fortunato mirrors the way the narrator does not let Fortunato know his fate until the last few minutes. For Fortunato, even once he is shackled he does not quite comprehend what will happen to him. It is not until the narrator begins building the final wall to seal Fortunato inside that Fortunato regains his sobriety and understands what is occurring. Even then, he makes an attempt to treat it as a joke. His mind cannot accept

the reality of his fate. The narrator, though, continues implacably to build the wall that will seal Fortunato in while still alive. Fortunato's acceptance of his fate is evident when he no longer responds to the narrator; the only sound the narrator hears are the bells Fortunato was wearing.

In the final paragraph, one might expect someone who has committed murder to express regret or horror at what he has done. Montresor instead refers to his heart being sick, but attributes it to the damp of the catacombs. He notes quite casually that he did in fact get away with his revenge; it has been 50 years since he buried Fortunato alive. After the tension that Poe builds throughout the story, he relieves the tension by adopting an almost casual tone when he dismisses the result of Montresor's revenge. Poe is known for tales that include an element of horror, usually psychological horror that builds. This story includes those elements of horror; it is difficult to read the story and contemplate Fortunato's fate without a sense of horror. The story itself can be seen as a reflection of Poe's life. He also succumbed to the temptation of drinking excessively and through his excesses created a trap of sorts in which he died.

## **Works Cited**

Poe, E. A. (1984). The cask of amontillado. In *The complete stories and poems of Edgar Allen Poe* (pp. 191-195). New York, NY: Doubleday.