

"the cask of
amontillado" and "the
tell tale heart" essay
sample



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“ The Cask of Amontillado” and “ The Tell Tale Heart” Essay Sample

Edgar Allen Poe is renowned as one of the great suspense and horror writers of the early Americas. Labeled as a prolific poet and master of macabre literature, Poe often used the senses of touch, smell, sight, sound even taste to lure his readers in. Using descriptive language, Poe leaves his readers reeling from the gruesome sights. The reader can almost reach out and touch, smell, and taste a world of decadence, rife with decay. Poe weaves narratives using varying rhyme schemes that leave the reader speechlessly listening for noises outside as the hairs on the back of the neck crawl. Whether it is his poetic verses like “ The Raven” or his sinister suspense like “ The Mask of the Red Death”, Poe uses the senses to mire his readers in the environment of his dark worlds. Two excellent examples of Poe’s use of the senses are “ The Cask of Amontillado” and “ The Tell Tale Heart”.

Poe makes use of all five senses to some extent in “ The Cask of Amontillado”. A murderous narrative about an Italian Merchant, Montresor, who takes revenge on a one time friend named Fortunato by bricking him in the family catacombs while he was drunk and chained to the wall. Poe draws his readers into the world of the story with his introduction to his nemesis, Fortunato, as a connoisseur of wines. Although Poe does not describe the wine’s flavor, he uses the concept of taste and value of the wine as a driving force behind his characters. It is this prized wine that spurs Fortunato to follow Montresor to what becomes his final resting place.

Poe uses the sound of the jingling bells on Fortunato's cap to emphasize the silence around them which is broken occasionally by Fortunato's coughing. Montresor can tell from the jingling of the bells that Fortunato is extremely intoxicated and stumbling through the passageways behind him. Poe also gives details about the final moments of Montresor's recounted disposal of Fortunato in the crypt by describing Fortunato's shrill screams and the rattling of the chains as he tried to free himself. For a moment the reader can almost feel Montresor's hesitation as the screams echo around him and he must reassure himself that Fortunato could not have gotten loose from his restraints.

Poe uses the reader's sense of touch and sight to weave the setting of the Montresor's crypt by using vivid imagery about the decay and damp of the catacombs. His descriptions of the bones and casks stacked around the walls of the crypt and the way that the nitre gleams on the rocks provide the basis for the reader's mental picture of the dark and decrepit passageways leading further and further under Montresor's family palazzo. Poe describes not only the look of this grotesque underworld but also the smells, the stench of dead bodies and the gases created by the corpses, "...in which the foulness of the air caused our flambeaux rather to glow than to burn"(130).

Poe's use of each of the senses in "The Cask of Amontillado" gives the reader a grand scale as to lengths Montresor will go to to exact his revenge. While traveling with the two characters through the catacombs the reader begins to understand the methodology behind Montresor's plan to dispose of Fortunato.

Another of Poe's great works, "The Tell Tale Heart" deals more significantly with the senses of sight and sound particularly in the hallucinations of the stories narrator. The narrator begins the story by explaining that he had no ill will towards his roommate but it was the old man's eye that drove him to kill him. The description of the old man's blind eye gives the reader a sense of uneasiness. Much like the narrator, the reader begins to get a sense that the old man is watching even when he is asleep. The narrator describes the eye and its affect on him by saying it was, "...the eye of a vulture-a pale blue eye with a film over it", and that, "Whenever it fell upon me [narrator], my blood ran cold..."(445). The narrator gives intricate details about how the shadows played a role in the old man's room and how he moved through them to check on the old man while he was sleeping without making any noise.

On the night when he decides to kill the old man the narrator describes how, as he waits in the shadows for the old man to fall asleep, he begins to hear the old man's heartbeat, fearful that someone was intent on harming him. The narrator explains how the old man's racing, pounding heart beat so loud in his ears that he thought the neighbor's would hear it and so he had to silence him quickly. "...I threw open the lantern and leaped into the room. He shrieked once, only once"(446). The killer disposes of the body by placing it beneath the floor boards and comments on the look of triumph that he has in knowing that the old man's eye will never look on him again.

The narrator's description of his initial coolness with the police who question him about the scream heard by his neighbors gives the reader an image of a man who is confident. He even notes that he took them into the old man's room and sat with them talking. But the sound returns and as before grows

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continuously louder until the narrator can no longer stand it. He throws aside his chair and confesses to killing the old man and burying him under the floor demanding that they , "...tear up the planks! - here, here it is the beating of his hideous heart"(448). Poe uses the image of the old man's eye to create the initial uneasiness that drives the rest of the story using the reoccurring of the sound of the heartbeat to and to the suspense and tension of the story. Where the visual stimulation of the eye is the initial factor that draws the reader into the story it is the narrator's response to his own auditory hallucinations that keeps the reader enthralled to the end where our narrator , in the midst of a full mental break down, is screaming confessions at the police.

According to scholar Walter Shear, "...the essential drama of Edgar Allen Poe's fiction is that of the individual mind, orchestrated and ordered by the life of the senses". Through use of visual and tactile references as well as the smells and tastes, Poe creates layers with detailed descriptions of the story's environment through the use of each of the five senses. By using descriptive language to create an entire world of images, sounds, and sensations, Poe opens the reader to the story almost as easily as the reader opens the story.

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