# The Cask of Amontillado Study Guide

## The Cask of Amontillado by Edgar Allan Poe

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# Introduction

"The Cask of Amontillado" was first published in the November 1846 issue of *Godey's Lady's Book*, a monthly magazine from Philadelphia that published poems and stories by some of the best American writers of the nineteenth century, including Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Harriet Beecher Stowe. The story next appeared in the collection *Poe's Works*, edited by Rufus W. Griswold, Poe's literary executor, in 1850. By the time Poe wrote this story, he was already nationally known as the author of the poem "The Raven" (1844) and of several short stories collected in a book called, simply, *Tales* (1845). These earlier stories were widely reviewed and argued over by critics who found them brilliant and disturbing, and their author perplexing and immoral. Although "The Cask of Amontillado" was not singled out for critical attention when it appeared, it did nothing to change the opinions of Poe's contemporary admirers and detractors. Like Poe's other stories, it has remained in print continuously since 1850.

The story is narrated by Montresor, who carries a grudge against Fortunato for an offense that is never explained. Montresor leads a drunken Fortunato through a series of chambers beneath his palazzo with the promise of a taste of Amontillado, a wine that Montresor has just purchased. When the two men reach the last underground chamber, Montresor chains Fortunato to the wall, builds a new wall to seal him in, and leaves him to die. Several sources for the story have been suggested in the last century and a half: Edward Bulwer-Lytton's historical novel The Last Days of Pompeii (1843); a local Boston legend; a collection of Letters from Italy; and a real quarrel Poe had with two other poets. Wherever Poe got the idea and the impetus for "The Cask of Amontillado," this story and Poe's other short fiction had an undisputed influence on later fiction writers. In the nineteenth century, Poe influenced Ambrose Bierce and Robert Louis Stevenson, among others. Twentieth-century writers who have looked to Poe include science fiction writer H. P. Lovecraft and horror author Stephen King.

According to Vincent Buranelli, Poe's short stories also influenced the music of Claude Debussy, who was "haunted" by the atmosphere of Poe's tales, and the art of Aubrey Beardsley, as well as the work of other composers and artists in the United States, Great Britain, and in Europe. Poe was criticized in his own time for daring to examine a crime with no apparent motive, and a murderer with no apparent remorse. For one hundred and fifty years, these themes have continued to challenge readers, who are attracted and repulsed by Poe's creation.

# Author Biography

Edgar Allan Poe's early life was as strange and unhappy as some of his most famous fiction. When he was born in Boston in 1809, his parents were actors in traveling companies; his father died in 1810 and his mother in 1811. Edgar and his sister and brother were left penniless, and Edgar was taken in by a Virginia merchant, John Allan, whose last name Edgar took as his middle name. Poe lived with the Allans in England from 1815 to 1820 and attended school there. His relationship with Allan was strained, because Allan was rather heartless and unsympathetic to his wife and foster son. When Poe began studies at the University of Virginia, the wealthy Allan refused to help support him, and Poe turned to gambling, with little success.

After a short time at the University, Poe moved to Boston and began his career as a writer. In 1827 he published his first volume of poetry, *Tamerlane and Other Poems*, at his own expense, but found few readers. These early poems were heavily influenced by the Romantic poets. His first paid publication was the short story "MS. Found in a Bottle" (1833), which drew the attention of a publisher who admired his work and who got him an editorial job. He soon lost the job because of his drinking. Shortly afterwards, in 1836, he married his cousin Virginia Clemm, who was thirteen years old.

During the eleven years of his marriage to Virginia, Poe had a series of publishing successes and personal failures. He moved his family to New York and Philadelphia and back again, editing and contributing to various magazines. He published several short horror stories and narrative poems, including "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841), one of the earliest detective stories ever written, the psychological horror story "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843), and the melancholy poem "The Raven" (1845), which brought him national fame. His brilliance as a writer was now firmly established. Still, he could not escape his addiction to alcohol.

In 1846, after losing a series of editorships, Poe retreated with his wife to a cottage in Fordham, outside New York City, where they nearly starved. There Poe wrote "The Cask of Amontillado," its gloomy and cynical tone echoing Poe's own feelings. The Poe biographer William Bittner claims that the two characters in the story "are two sides of the same man Edgar Poe as he saw himself while drinking." A few months later Virginia died of tuberculosis, and Poe became despondent. He wrote several important pieces during this time, but though he tried again to give up drinking, he never succeeded. He died in Baltimore on October 7, 1849, at the age of forty, after an alcoholic episode.

# Plot Summary

As the story opens, an unnamed narrator explains, "The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as best I could; but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge." There is no hint as to whom the narrator is speaking or writing, and the "thousand injuries" and the "insult" committed by Fortunato are never described. Nevertheless, the narrator contemplates his desire for revenge and his plan to "not only punish, but punish with impunity"; that is, to punish Fortunato without being caught or punished himself. Furthermore, he is determined not to act in secrecy, for Fortunato must know that his pain is handed to him by Montresor.

Fortunato has no idea that Montresor is angry with him□Montresor has given no hint of it. When Montresor encounters his "friend" on the street one evening during the carnival season, Fortunato has no reason to be suspicious. Montresor asks Fortunato to come with him and sample a large cask of Amontillado, a type of wine, which Montresor has just purchased. Fortunato is justifiably proud of his ability to recognize good wines, and he is already drunk. He is easily persuaded to follow his friend, especially when Montresor assures him that if Fortunato cannot sample the wine for him, another man, Luchesi, will surely do it.

Montresor and Fortunato, who is dressed in his carnival costume of striped clothing and a conical jester's cap with bells, go to Montresor's palazzo. Conveniently, the servants are away enjoying the carnival, and no one sees them enter. They descend a long, winding staircase to the wine cellar and catacombs, the dark and damp tunnels and caverns beneath the palazzo where generations of Montresors have been laid to rest. As they walk on, they pass piles of bones and piles of wine casks, intermingled in the passageways. Montresor fusses over Fortunato's health and his schedule, knowing that the more he suggests Fortunato give up the quest, the more his companion will be determined to see it through.

As they walk along, the men converse in an idle way, about the potentially hazardous nitre forming on the walls, and the coat of arms of the Montresor family. To protect Fortunato from the damp, Montresor gives him drinks of two wines that are stored in the catacombs. When Fortunato reveals himself to be a member of the Masons, Montresor pulls a trowel from beneath his cape and declares that he, too, is a mason. Always Fortunato is pulled forward by the promise of the Amontillado. Eventually they reach the last chamber, a crypt nearly full of piled bones with only a small alcove of empty space within. When Fortunato steps to the back to look for the Amontillado, Montresor quickly chains him to two iron staples fastened to the wall. He uncovers a pile of building stones concealed beneath some of the bones and begins to build a wall, sealing Fortunato in. As Fortunato recovers from his drunkenness and becomes aware of what is happening to him, he cries out for mercy, but Montresor pays no attention. He still refuses to speak of the offenses that have brought him to the point of murder, and Fortunato does not ask why Montresor is ready to kill him. Montresor finishes his wall and piles bones up against it, leaving Fortunato to die.

In the last lines, Montresor the actor is replaced again by Montresor the narrator, who began the story. Now he reveals that the murder happened fifty years before. In Latin he speaks over Fortunato's body: "Rest in Peace."

# Detailed Summary & Analysis

## Summary

This story is told in the first person by a man named Montresor. Montresor begins by saying that he has suffered a thousand injuries from a man named Fortunato. Montresor has born the injuries the best he could, but he reached a point where Fortunato insulted him, and Montreso vowed to get his revenge. Montresor kept his plan to punish Fortunato to himself, because he knew that he not only wanted to punish him, he wanted to do it at no risk to himself.

Montresor also gave no clue to Fortunato that he had plans to retaliate. He would smile and behave as if nothing were wrong. Only Montresor knew that the smile meant he was thinking of Fortunato's destruction.

Montresor knew that, in many respects, Fortunato was a man who was respected and feared. However, he did have one weakness—he considered himself to be a connoisseur of wine. Being Italian, Fortunato's knowledge was pure. Montresor also bought Italian wines, whenever he could.

So one evening, during carnival, Montresor came across Fortunato dressed in a harlequin suit and hat with the bells on top. They greeted each other warmly—Fortunato especially, because he had been drinking too much already. Montresor complimented him on his healthy demeanor and told him that he had just acquired some Amontillado, but he had some doubts about its authenticity. Montresor could not find Fortunato at the time to ask his advice, but bought it because he did not want to risk losing out on such a bargain. Seeing that Fortunato was having a good time at the carnival, he would go find Luchresi to get his opinion. Fortunato was insulted, because Luchresi would not be able to tell Amontillado from sherry.

Fortunato insists that they go to Montresor's vaults so that he may test it. Montresor protests—he does not want to ruin Fortunato's night at the carnival. Fortunato insists, and they hurry to his home. There were no servants at home, because of the carnival, so Montresor took two torches, one for himself and one for Fortunato, and they passed through several suites of rooms to the archway that led into the vaults. Finally, they arrived at the foot of the catacombs of Montresor's ancestors.

He could hear the bells on Fortunato's cap while he followed behind him through the dark passageways. Montresor pointed out the nitre on the cavern walls and commented that it might be too offensive to Fortunato's cough, but the man wanted to proceed. He would not die of a cough—*true enough*, thought Montresor. Montresor gave Fortunato a drink of Medoc to keep the coughing at bay. Fortunato drank to the buried in the catacombs and Montresor drank to Fortunato's long life.

Fortunato remarked on how extensive the vaults seemed to be—the Montresors must have been a great family. Montresor tells him that their family arms show a huge human foot crushing a serpent, whose fangs are imbedded in the heel. The family motto is *Nemo me impune lacessit*—no on insults me with impunity.

Fortunato's eyes are sparkling from the Medoc and his bells are jingling while they move further and further into the heart of the vault, through walls of skeletons with casks tucked away here and there.

One more time, he tells Fortunato that the air is heavy with nitre and he does not want to be responsible for his getting sick. They should go back before it is too late. Fortunato wants to keep going but would like another drink of the Medoc. They moved deeper and deeper yet, until the foul air doused their torches from flames to mere glows.

Finally, they have come to the end and there appeared a tiny crypt whose walls had been lined with human remains. It measured only four feet in depth, three feet in width, and six or seven feet high. It did not seem to have any purpose, other than the space between two roof supports. It was, however, backed by a solid wall of granite. Fortunato tried to hold his torch up to see how to proceed and realized that they had reached the extent of the passageway.

Montresor immediately chained him to the granite. Imbedded in the granite were two big, iron staples about two feet from each other. A short chain hung from one of them and a padlock from the other. Montresor threw the chains around Fortunato's waist and secured the lock with a key. Again, he asked Fortunato whether or not he would consider returning. Fortunato was too dazed to realize his circumstance and demanded to taste the Amontillado.

Meanwhile, Montresor was uncovering some building stones and mortar he had hidden in a pile of bones. He then began to quickly wall off the entrance of the tiny little crypt. After the first tier, he noticed that Fortunato was beginning to sober up. He could hear the low moans from the darkness. It was not until Montresor had laid four tiers that he heard any noise; this time the jangling of the chains that held Fortunato. The noise lasted several minutes, and Montresor stopped his work. When it was quiet again, he finished up to the seventh tier and held his torch up to look at the chained Fortunato.

The man's screams made Montresor jump back in horror, and he hesitated for just a moment. Then he returned Fortunato's cries with just as much strength and duration and finally they both grew silent. Montresor then completed the eighth, ninth, tenth, and most of the eleventh tiers, but there remained one stone missing.

Montresor lifted the stone and had it partially in place when he was struck by the sound of Fortunato's laugh, and then his sad voice said that this was a very good joke; they would have many laughs over it at the palazzo, and wasn't it getting late—shouldn't they be getting back to the rest at the palazzo? Montresor replied only, "Let us be gone." Fortunato begged one last time… for the love of God, Montresor! Then he was silent.

Montresor called to him again and again and still no answer. So he stuck a torch in the hole and let it fall in. All he heard was the jingling of the bells. Montresor's heart was sick, but determined that it was the dampness of the catacombs and nothing more. So he plastered the last stone in place and rebuilt the rampart of old bones in front of it.

No one has bothered the place for twenty five years. *In pace requiescat*—rest in peace.

## Analysis

It is never defined for us what wrongs and insults Fortunato has perpetrated against Montresor, but he is burning with hatred and revenge. However, he is able to coolly calculate how to take advantage of his adversary's weakness to lure him into this scheme. Montresor is able to put on a good face until the time comes for him to carry out his revenge. It makes the reader wonder if Fortunato even knew what wrongs he had committed or whether Montresor is just mad and everything in his world is taken to extremes. In a way, Fortunato's own greed and ego result in his demise, because he covets the taste of the Amontillado and will not let Montresor bring Luchresi to the estate to evaluate the wine. He thinks himself superior in that area, and it is that very arrogance that ultimately does him in. It is interesting that Poe chose the name Fortunato; it is ironic in that he has been a man of privilege and now ends in such a horrific manner.

Montresor's plan must be carried out in secret too, so that nothing can come back on him. He apparently is a man of ancestry and position and cannot risk any harm to his family name. It seems like vengeance is in his DNA, because the Montresor family motto is, "No one insults me with impunity." He does have a few moments when he hesitates, when it seems that his conscience might get the better of him, but his anger still lingers and propels him to continue with his macabre task. He has committed the perfect crime and, for him, he perfect revenge.

# Characters

## Fortunato

Fortunato is an Italian friend of Montresor's, and his sworn enemy, whom Montresor has planned to "punish with impunity."Although Montresor's explains that Fortunato has committed a "thousand injuries" and a final "insult," no details of these offenses are given. Fortunato displays no uneasiness in Montresor's company, and is unaware that his friend is plotting against him. Fortunato, a respected and feared man, is a proud connoisseur of fine wine, and, at least on the night of the story, he clouds his senses and judgment by drinking too much of it. He allows himself to be led further and further into the catacombs by Montresor, stepping past piles of bones with no suspicion. He is urged on by the chance of sampling some rare Amontillado, and by his unwillingness to let a rival, Luchesi, have the pleasure of sampling it first. His single mindedness, combined with his drunkenness, leads him to a horrible death.

## Luchesi

Luchesi is an acquaintance of Montresor's and Fortunato's, and another wine expert. He never appears in the story, but Montresor keeps Fortunato on the trail of the Amontillado by threatening to allow Luchesi to sample it first if Fortunato is not interested.

## Montresor

Montresor is the "I" who narrates the story, telling an unseen listener or reader about his killing of Fortunato fifty years before. Montresor is a wealthy man from an established family, who lives in a large "palazzo" with a staff of servants. He speaks eloquently and easily drops Latin and French phrases into his speech. He has been nursing a grudge against his friend Fortunato, who has committed several unnamed offenses against him, and has been coldly planning his revenge. Meeting Fortunato in the street one evening, Montresor takes this opportunity to lure his friend into the deepest catacombs beneath his palazzo, and there he chains Fortunato to the wall of a small alcove, seals him in behind a new brick wall which he builds even as Fortunato begs for mercy, and leaves him to die. Montresor's coldness sets him apart from many murderous characters and many Poe protagonists. Even as he tells the story fifty years later, he reveals no regret for his actions, and no real pleasure in them. This lack of feeling made Poe's early readers uncomfortable, and led some to accuse Poe of immorality in creating such a character.

# Themes

## Revenge

The force that drives Montresor to commit the horrible murder of Fortunato is his powerful desire for revenge. His first words in the story speak of it: "The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as best I could; but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge." The idea of revenge is repeated several times in the opening paragraph. Montresor will not rush to act, he says, but "at length I would be avenged"; he is determined to "not only punish, but punish with impunity." The terms of the revenge are quite clear in Montresor's mind. He will not feel fully revenged unless Fortunato realizes that his punishment comes at Montresor's hand; a wrong is not redressed "when the avenger fails to make himself felt as such to him who has done the wrong." In seeking revenge, Montresor is acting out the motto of his people, as it appears on the family coat of arms, *Nemo me impune lacessit* ("No one wounds me with impunity").

As countless critics have pointed out, the nature of the injuries and offenses is never revealed. Montresor appears to be telling or writing his story to someone who has more knowledge than Poe's reader ("You, who so well know the nature of my soul"), and who may be assumed to know something of Fortunato's conduct before the fateful night. Unlike Montresor's audience, however, Poe's audience/reader has no basis for judging the extent to which Montresor's actions are reasonable. The focus, therefore, is not on the reason for revenge, but on the revenge itself, not on why Montresor behaves as he does but only on what he does.

Just as Montresor does not reveal his motive for the crime, other than to identify it as a crime of revenge, neither does he share with his audience his response when the deed is done. Does Montresor feel better once Fortunato has paid for his insult? Does he feel vindicated? Does he go back to his rooms and celebrate the death of his enemy, or smile inwardly years later when he remembers how he was able to "punish with impunity"? He does not say. Nineteenth-century audiences scanned the story for hints of negative feelings. Is Montresor sorry for committing murder? Does he regret his actions? As he nears the end of his life does he look to God for forgiveness? Again, there is no hint or perhaps only the barest of hints. Poe's intention is to focus his story tightly. He does not explore the events leading up to the crime, nor the results of the crime, but focuses the story narrowly on the act of revenge itself.

## Atonement and Forgiveness

Although the action of the story revolves almost entirely around the deception and killing of Fortunato, the questions in readers' minds have revolved around Fortunato's thoughts and deeds before the crime, and Montresor's thoughts and deeds afterward. While the time between their chance meeting and the laying of the last stone would

have taken only five or six hours, the fifty years following are perhaps more intriguing. Is Montresor deceiving himself or his audience when he attributes his momentary sickness to "the dampness of the catacombs"? What has happened to Montresor over the intervening years, and why is he telling the story now? Is he hoping for forgiveness?

For forgiveness to occur, there must first be guilt and then atonement or remorse. Of course, there is no question of Montresor asking forgiveness of Fortunato, or reconciling with him, and no mention is given of Montresor's paying any reparations to Lady Fortunato. Atonement, if there is to be any, must be with God alone. At the time of the murder, however, Montresor hears and rejects Fortunato's appeal that he stop "For the love of God, Montresor!" The murderer replies, "Yes, for the love of God!" but he does not stop building his wall. Surely he does not mean that he is acting for the love of God; instead, he is blatantly and defiantly rejecting it.

In pace requiescat (Rest in peace), are taken from the Roman Catholic funeral ritual spoken in Latin. Critic John Gruesser believes that Montresor tells the story of his crime "as he presumably lies on his deathbed, confessing his crime to an old friend, the 'You' of the story's first paragraph who is perhaps his priest." Clearly Montresor's guilt is established as not just an earthly legal guilt, but guilt in the eyes of a God that both victim and murderer recognize. The question remains: Was Montresor ever sorry for what he did? Poe does not appear interested in answering the question, although he surely knew that he was raising it, and knew that he had placed the answer tantalizingly out of reach.

# Style

## Point of View and Narrator

"The Cask of Amontillado" is told in the first person by Montresor, who reveals in the first sentence that he intends to have revenge from Fortunato. He tells the story to an unidentified "you, who so well know the nature of my soul," but this "you" does not appear to respond in any way as Montresor delivers a long monologue. The most striking thing about Montresor's voice, in fact, is its uninterrupted calm and confidence. He tells the story from beginning to end with no diversion, no explanation, and no emotion. If he is gleeful at gaining his revenge, or if he feels guilty about his crime, he does not speak of it directly, and his language does not reveal it. Even at the most terrifying moment in the story, when Fortunato realizes that Montresor intends to seal him up behind a wall, the narrator is calm and detached: "I had scarcely laid the first tier of the masonry when I discovered that the intoxication of Fortunato had in a great measure worn off. The earliest indication I had of this was a low mourning cry from the depth of the recess. It was not the cry of a drunken man. There was then a long and obstinate silence. I laid the second tier, and the third, and the fourth."

By presenting the story in the first person, Poe avoids hinting at any interpretation of the action. Montresor is in control, deciding what to tell and what to leave out. A third-person narrator, even a limited narrator who could not see into the minds and hearts of the characters, would have presented a more balanced story. An objective narrator telling a terrible story objectively might be frightening, but even more frightening is a man telling without emotion the story of his own terrible crime.

## Setting

The setting of "The Cask of Amontillado" has attracted a great deal of critical attention, because both the location and the time of the story are only vaguely hinted at. To bring touches of the exotic to his murky atmosphere, Poe freely combines elements of different nations and cultures. Fortunato and Luchesi are Italians, knowledgeable about Italian wines. Montresor, as argued convincingly by Richard Benton and others, is a Frenchman. Amontillado is a Spanish wine. Montresor's family motto, Nemo me impune lacessit, is the motto of the royal arms of Scotland. Sprinkled among the Latin motto and other Latin phrases are references to Montresor's palazzo, his roquelaire, his rapier, and his flambeaux. If Poe's readers could not be expected to identify the nationality of each element, so much the better for creating the impression that the story happens "in another place and time."

The time of the story may be guessed at. Montresor's short cape and rapier, the slightly formal vocabulary, and the torches used to light the men's way seem to indicate that the story takes place in the eighteenth or nineteenth century. Scholars tracing the family name of Montresor and the history of laws governing the Mardi Gras carnivals in France

have placed the date of the murder more precisely; John Randall III and others believe the murder occurs in 1796, while Benton argues for 1787-88.

## Gothicism

Poe is often considered a master of the Gothic tale, and "The Cask of Amontillado" contains many of the standard elements of Gothicism. Gothic stories are typically set in medieval castles and feature mystery, horror, violence, ghosts, clanking chains, long underground passages, and dark chambers. The term "Gothic" originally referred to the Goths, an ancient and medieval Germanic tribe, but over time the word came to apply to anything medieval. The first Gothic novel, Horace Walpole's Castle of Otranto (1764), was set in a medieval castle, and later works that attempted to capture the same setting or atmosphere were labeled "Gothic."

Poe was fascinated with the materials and devices of the Gothic novel, although he preferred to work in the short story form. He was a great admirer of Walpole, and of the American Gothic writer Charles Brockden Brown. "The Cask of Amontillado" takes many details from the Gothic tradition: the palazzo of the Montresors with its many rooms, the archway that leads to the "long and winding staircase" down to the catacombs, the damp and dark passageway hanging with moss and dripping moisture, the piles of bones, the flaming torches that flicker and fade, and the "clanking" and "furious vibrations of the chain" that Montresor uses to bind Fortunato to the wall. The overall atmosphere of brooding and horror also come from this tradition.

Some elements of the Gothic, however, Poe intentionally avoided: there is no hint in "The Cask of Amontillado", or in most of his horror stories, of the supernatural. Poe was quite clear on this point, explaining that the plot of a short story "may be involved, but it must not transcend probability. The agencies introduced must belong to real life." Montresor's crime is terrible, but it is believable, and it is committed without magic or superhuman power. Although there may be a hint of the supernatural in his remark that "for the half of a century no mortal has disturbed" the pile of bones outside Fortunato's tomb, those beings that might not be mortal are not described, and indeed Fortunato does not reappear as a ghost or a vampire or a zombie. Poe uses Gothic conventions to create an atmosphere of terror, but then subverts the convention by using only human agents for terrible deeds. For Poe, it is not supernatural beings that people should fear; the real horror lies in what human beings themselves are capable of.

# Historical Context

## The Short Story

Although there have been stories as long as there have been people to tell them, many critics trace the beginnings of the short story as a genre of written prose literature consciously developed as an art form to the nineteenth century. Previously in the West there had been great ages of epics memorized or extemporized orally, narrative poetry, drama, and the novel, but it was not until the early 1800s that critics began to describe the short story as a specific art form with its own rules and structures. In Europe, Honore de Balzac and others were already writing and theorizing about the new form. An early American voice in the discussion was Poe's. In 1842 he wrote a review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* (1842), a collection of thirty-nine brief stories and sketches, many dealing with the supernatural. In his influential review, Poe delineated the differences, as he saw them, between poetry, the novel and the "short prose narrative."

Rhymed poetry, according to Poe, was the highest of the genres. But the "tale proper," he claimed, "affords unquestionably the fairest field for the exercise of the loftiest talent, which can be afforded by the wide domains of mere prose." The novel was inferior because it could not be read in one sitting, therefore making it impossible to preserve a "unity of effect or impression." The ideal short story, one that could be read in thirty minutes to two hours, was created to produce one single effect. If a writer's "very initial sentence tend not to the outbringing of this effect, then he has failed in his first step. In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design." Poe praised Hawthorne and Washington Irving for their skill with the new form, and kept firmly to the goal of the "single effect" in his own fiction. For this reason, his prose is almost exclusively in the short story form, and he limited each story to a small number of characters, simple plots, small geographical areas, and short time frames, as demonstrated in "The Cask of Amontillado."

## National Literature

In the first half of the nineteenth century, there was a great call for Americans to develop a national literature, by which was meant a body of works written by Americans, published by Americans, and dealing with particularly American characters, locales, and themes. The United States was still a young country, and most American readers and writers looked to Europe for great books and great authors, as well as for literary forms and themes. In 1837, Ralph Waldo Emerson gave an influential address titled "The American Scholar," in which he called upon Americans to combine the best of European ideas with a determined self-knowledge, to create the new American intellectual who would best be able to lead the nation. Writers and publishers hoped that a national call

for a national literature would create a stronger market for their products, which were being outsold by European imports.

Poe, although he had the same difficulty supporting himself through writing as his contemporaries, did not whole-heartedly embrace the movement. On the one hand, his published criticism and reviews railed against writers who wrote mere imitations of popular European writers. But neither did he approve of writing that was too patriotic, that offered cliched praise of the United States with little artistic merit. He was also critical of those who praised inferior work simply because it was American. Like Emerson, Poe believed in using elements from Europe if they were useful artistically, and he believed that international settings helped establish universality. Still, he called upon American writers to use their imaginations to produce original and vital works. In "The Cask of Amontillado," therefore, he used a European setting to create his exotic and murky atmosphere, but within the structure of the new and distinctly American short story form.

# Critical Overview

When it appeared in the monthly magazine *Godey's Lady's Book* in 1846, "The Cask of Amontillado," like most short stories published in locally distributed magazines, attracted no special critical attention. A year earlier, Poe had published a collection of *Tales*, which had been widely reviewed. Most of these reviews were favorable, praising Poe's powers of imagination and control of language. George Colton's review in the *American Whig Review* was typical in heralding the volume's "most undisputable marks of intellectual power and keenness; and an individuality of mind and disposition, of peculiar intensity." A few were not only negative but scathing, including Charles Dana's review in the *Brook Farm Harbinger* in which he describes Poe's stories as "clumsily contrived, unnatural, and every way in bad taste." Significantly, the collection of tales was read and reviewed in all parts of the country, and helped bring Poe to a much larger audience than he had previously enjoyed.

After Poe's death in 1849, his literary executor Rufus W. Griswold wrote an obituary in the *New York Tribune*, in which he slanderously exaggerated Poe's weaknesses. He described Poe as a "shrewd and naturally unamiable character" who "walked the streets, in madness or melancholy, with lips moving in indistinct curses." The following year, Griswold published an edition of Poe's Works. In response to the two Griswold projects came a flurry of writing about Poe, much of it praising the writing but condemning the writer. Typical was an unsigned 1858 review in the *Edinburgh Review*: "Edgar Allan Poe was incontestably one of the most worthless persons of whom we have any record in the world of letters." Over the next fifty years, negative writing about Poe focused on his moral character, as presented by Griswold, more than it focused on his work. Critics seemed unable to move beyond the general observation that Poe led a troubled life and wrote troubling stories. Although critics and scholars continued to read and examine Poe's short stories, and although French and German writers continued to admire Poe, his reputation and importance declined throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, much of the public's distaste had worn off, and critics were able to write more objectively about Poe's achievements. In the early third of the century, Poe was widely praised for his poetry, but Gothicism had fallen out of favor and his stories were dismissed by such writers as T.S. Eliot and W.H. Auden. Though the poem "The Raven" had been examined individually from its first publication, "The Cask of Amontillado" had to wait until the 1930s to have critical articles devoted to it. In the 1930s and 1940s, critics focused on tracing Poe's sources, arguing that Poe borrowed his plot from other nineteenth-century writers, a murder case in Boston, a literary quarrel from his own life, or other sources. Writers in the 1990s returned to the question of sources as a way of revealing Poe's intentions. Richard Benton is among those who suggest that the story can be read as historical fiction, based on real historical figures and addressing social class issues of interest to nineteenthcentury Americans.

Other critics at mid-century were concerned with exploring the significance of details in the story that readers might not be expected to understand without explanation. Kathryn Montgomery Harris in *Studies in Short Fiction* (1969) and James E. Rocks in the Poe Newsletter (1972) analyzed the conflict in the story between the Roman Catholic Montresor and Fortunato, a Mason. Rocks concluded that Montresor kills Fortunato because "he must protect God's word and His Church against His enemies." Other writers in the same period explored the significance of the names "Montresor," "Fortunato," and "Amontillado."

The largest body of criticism of the story has examined Montresor's remorse or lack or remorse for his crime. Daniel Hoffman, in his *Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe* agrees with many others that Montresor is consumed by guilt. "Has not Montresor walled up himself in this revenge? Of what else can he think, can he have thought for the past half- century, but of that night's vengeance upon his enemy?" Others find no hint of guilt in Montresor, leading some early readers to reject the story as immoral. Bettina Knapp places "The Cask of Amontillado" among Poe's "shadow tales," which do not "offer values. No judgmental forces are at work. Crime is neither a negative nor a positive act. Poe's psychopaths do not distinguish between good and evil, nor do they usually feel remorse or guilt." This issue has become the central critical question for "The Cask of Amontillado."

# Criticism

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# Critical Essay #1

*Bily teaches English at Adrian College in Adrian, Michigan. In the following essay, she discusses the concepts of duplicity and doubling in "The Cask of Amontillado."*

When Montresor decides that it is time to seek revenge for the "thousand injuries of Fortunato," he does not make his feelings known. Although the honor code of the day might have called for a public challenge and a duel to the death, Montresor decides that he will not give "utterance to a threat." Instead, while he waits for his opportunity, he behaves as though nothing is wrong: "It must be understood, that neither by word not deed had I given Fortunato cause to doubt my good-will. I continued, as was my wont, to smile in his face, and he did not perceive that my smile *now was at the thought of his immolation."*

The word for Montresor's behavior is "duplicitous." It means that he is concealing his true motives and feelings beneath a deceptive exterior, that he is being two-faced. The word, of course, is related to "duplicate" and "duplex" and "double." Montresor is behaving as his own opposite in his dealings with Fortunato. As the story progresses, however, it will become clearer that the other side of Montresor's personality is not the smiling face he offers to Fortunato.

The story is filled with twins and opposites. The characters' names, for example, bounce off each other, two echoes of the same idea. The name "Montresor" carries the idea of "treasure," and "Fortunato" implies "fortune." Two sides of the same coin, as it were. As the two men walk along the damp passageway, Montresor offers Fortunato two bottles of wine: Medoc, thought to have medicinal powers and promising to "defend us from the damps," and De Grave, a wine whose name means "of the grave." Just afterward, Fortunato makes a "gesticulation," a secret gesture that demonstrates that he is a member of the Free and Accepted Masons, a secret fraternal order. In a scene that calls to mind nothing so much as Harpo Marx, Montresor produces a trowel from beneath his cloak, a sign that he, too, is a mason but of a different, deadly variety.

As the story opens, the men seem more different than alike. Montresor is cold, calculating, sober in every sense of the word. Fortunato greets him with "excessive warmth, for he had been drinking much." Montresor wears a black mask, a short cloak and a rapier or sword, the very image of a distinguished gentleman. Fortunato, on the other hand, is dressed for "the supreme madness of the carnival season" in motley, the jester's costume, complete with "tight-fitting parti-striped" clothing and a pointed cap with jingling bells at the tip. A drunken man with bells on his hat seems no match for Montresor, and it is hard to imagine Fortunato as "a man to be respected, and even feared" as he sways and staggers and fixates on the prospect of tasting more wine, the Amontillado.

Montresor continues his duplicity. He suggests that Luchesi could taste the wine instead of Fortunato, knowing that the suggestion will make Fortunato all the more eager to taste it himself. He repeatedly fusses over Fortunato's health, proposing that they ought

to turn back before the foul air makes his "friend" ill, when in fact he intends that Fortunato will never leave the catacombs alive. He emphasizes the ways in which they are opposites: "You are rich, respected, admired, beloved; you are happy, as once I was. You are a man to be missed. For me it is no matter."

Up to this point, even the conversation between the two establishes their different purposes. Looking over Montresor's shoulders, the reader is aware of the irony when Fortunato says, "the cough is a mere nothing; it will not kill me. I shall not die of a cough" and Montresor replies, "True true." Although Montresor's plans have not yet been revealed, the reader knows with growing certainty that Fortunato will die. When Montresor and Fortunato share the therapeutic Medoc, Fortunato drinks "to the buried that repose around us," and Montresor replies, "And I to your long life."

From this point, things begin to change. Montresor's determination to hold himself as unlike Fortunato slips, and he becomes more like him with every step, as the wine works its effect on both of them. "The wine sparkled in his eyes and the bells jingled. My own fancy grew warm with the Medoc." Previously, Fortunato has twice taken Montresor's arm to steady himself as they walk. Now Montresor returns the gesture, "I made bold to seize Fortunato by an arm above the elbow." When they reach the end of the final passageway, Poe presents a flurry of twos: two men in "the interval between two of the colossal supports" confronted with "two iron staples, distant from each other about two feet." But as soon as Montresor fastens the padlock on the chain around Fortunato's waist, the two are one.

The most chilling moment in the story happens, surely not coincidentally, at midnight (the time when the two hands of the clock are in one place), when the two men transcend human speech and communicate their oneness in another voice. Fortunato begins it with "a succession of loud and shrill screams, bursting suddenly from the throat of the chained form." At first, Montresor does not know how to respond to this communication. He moves "violently back," hesitates, trembles. He waves his rapier around, fearing that Fortunato is coming for him, but is reassured at the touch of the solid walls. "The thought of an instant," the realization that Fortunato is tightly bound, makes Montresor feel safe, and his reaction is dramatic and bizarre: "I reapproached the wall. I replied to the yells of him who clamored. I reechoed I aided I surpassed them in volume and in strength." It is difficult to imagine the sounds produced by two men, enemies and opposites, hundreds of feet underground howling at midnight in a damp stone chamber. Surely the volume and the echoes would not yield two distinct voices, but one grotesque sound. For that moment, the two are one.

After the wall is completed, fifty years pass before Montresor tells the story. What has he learned in the intervening years? Has he felt remorse? For most of the story, Montresor's language is clear and direct, although the formality of nineteenth-century speech may seem difficult to modern readers. In the story's opening paragraph, told fifty years after the crime, the language is uncharacteristically convoluted and opaque: "A wrong is unredressed when retribution overtakes its redresser. It is equally unredressed when the avenger fails to make himself felt as such to him who has done the wrong." Most readers pause over these lines, stopping to sort out the redresser and the

redressed from the redressee. If the roles are confusing, it is because in Montresor's mind the lines between avenger and victim are no longer distinct. When Montresor speaks the story's last line, "In pace requiescat" ("rest in peace"), is he speaking of Fortunato or of himself? By the end of the story, the two are so connected that it is all the same.

If Poe did intend the two men to be read as twins or doubles, what can he have meant by it? Critics have been pondering this question for over a century and a half. Daniel Hoffman, in *Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe*, explores Poe's theme of "the fate of the man haunted by his own double, his anima, his weird." When one of Poe's protagonists is wrestling with guilt, Hoffman explains, he sometimes "doubles his character and then arranges for one self to murder the other by burying him alive. In repeatedly telling stories of murderous doubles ( "The Tell-Tale Heart," "William Wilson," and others), Poe was attempting to deal with his own demons, his own repressed guilt. Poe biographer William Bittner claims that Montresor and Fortunato "are two sides of the same man Edgar Poe as he saw himself while drinking." For Betina Knapp, author of a study titled *Edgar Allan Poe*, the "shadow figure emerges as a personification of the narrator's hostile feelings and thoughts, symbolizing the repressed instincts of the personality." In his criticism and his daily life, Poe "felt himself striking back, at those forces in society or particularly individuals who might have wronged him."

Characters encountering and slaying their doubles are found throughout history and throughout the world, from Aristotle's story of a man who could not go out without meeting his "double" to *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* to Luke Skywalker meeting Darth Vader in Yoda's cave, killing him, and seeing that the face beneath the mask is his own. The Germans have a name for the phenomenon doppelganger, meaning "double walker" and psychiatrists have recorded thousands of accounts of people who believe that they have actually encountered mirror images of themselves, usually late at night. Like other archetypal images, the encounter with the double, the other side of oneself, is a powerful image that has attracted and repelled for centuries. Poe anticipated modern psychology with its id, ego and superego by showing through his stories that the monsters outside are nothing compared to the monsters we carry within us.

**Source:** Cynthia Bily, for *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2000.

# Critical Essay #2

*In the following essay, Engel discusses Poe's use of enclosures, both figurative and literal, in "The Cask of Amontillado."*

Edgar Allan Poe used the enclosure device, whether an actual physical enclosure or an enclosure alluded to on the level of image and metaphor, in a highly artistic way. In much of his fiction, and specifically in "The Cask of Amontillado" (1846), the device helps to focus the action, assists in plot development, and has a profound impact on the main character, often affecting his personality. In his essay "The Philosophy of Composition" Poe remarked, "A close *circumscription of space* is absolutely necessary to the effect of insulated incident:□ it has the force of a frame to a picture." A "circumscription of space," that is, an enclosure, I consider to be any sort of physical confinement that restricts a character to a particular area, limiting his freedom. That Poe intended this confinement to have a certain power over narrative action is indicated by the phrases "insulated incident" and "the force of a frame to a picture." But confinement in Poe's fiction, I will argue, also has power over a character and often causes him to do things he would not ordinarily do. Such is the case, I believe, with the tale "The Cask of Amontillado."

Montresor, the narrator, it will be remembered, unlike the narrators in other tales (such as "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat") who have murdered their victims and then tried to conceal their bodies, does succeed in concealing his crime, but it has so obsessed his memory and imagination that fifty years after the act, he is able to render an exact, detailed description as though it occurred the previous day. Like the narrator in "The Black Cat," Montresor uses an enclosure to conceal his victim, but Poe places more emphasis on it in "The Cask of Amontillado" by making it a vault which Montresor fashions himself, within his own family catacombs under the city□an enclosure within a series of enclosures. One might argue that Poe uses the same device in "The Black Cat," for the narrator in that tale conceals his wife's body within a wall of his cellar. The main difference lies in the fact that in "The Cask of Amontillado" Poe centers the entire plot on the journey through the catacombs and into the vault in which Fortunato is finally walled up. In the former tale, Poe, while concentrating on the narrator's neurosis throughout the tale, dramatizes the main enclosure at the climax. In "The Cask of Amontillado," the enclosures are more directly related to the narrator's neurosis.

The journey of Montresor and Fortunato through the catacombs becomes gloomier and more ominous with each step. Montresor relates: "We had passed through walls of piled bones, with casks and puncheons intermingling, into the inmost recesses of the catacombs. . . .'The nitre!' I said; 'see, it increases. It hangs like moss upon the vaults. We are below the river's bed. The drops of moisture trickle among the bones. Come, we will go back ere it is too late. Your cough□' 'It is nothing,' he said; 'let us go on.'"

Furthermore, Montresor's language in the following passage emphasizes the enclosure:

We passed through a range of low arches . . . and . . . arrived at a deep crypt. . . . At the most remote end of the crypt there appeared another less spacious. Its walls had been lined with human remains, piled to the vault overhead, in the fashion of the great catacombs of Paris. Three sides of this interior crypt were still ornamented in this manner. From the fourth the bones had been thrown down, and lay promiscuously upon the earth, forming at one point a mound of some size. Within the wall . . . we perceived a still interior recess, in depth about four feet, in width three, in height six or seven.

When Fortunato, at Montresor's urging, enters this tiny "interior crypt" in search of the Amontillado, Montresor quickly chains him to the granite wall and begins "to wall up the entrance of the niche."

Montresor's last comment and his description of the enclosures indicate a certain relish for the plan, its locale, and the task of walling up his victim. He even pauses at one point to hear more precisely Fortunato's clanking the chain and to take pleasure in it: "The noise lasted for several minutes, during which, that I might hearken to it with the more satisfaction, I ceased my labors and sat down upon the bones." As the narrator in "The Pit and the Pendulum" is the victim of the enclosure, greatly fearing the pit and its unknown horrors, Montresor in this tale is the homicidal victimizer, fully aware of the horrors of enclosure, enjoying them, and scheming to make them as terrifying as possible.

In spite of his quick and effective work, Montresor pauses twice more before he finishes. The first pause occurs when Fortunato releases a "succession of loud and shrill scream." "For a brief moment I hesitated□I trembled. Unsheathing my rapier, I began to grope with it about the recess: but the thought of an instant reassured me. I placed my hand upon the solid fabric of the catacombs, and felt satisfied. I reapproached the wall. I replied to the yells of him who clamored. I re-echoed□I aided□I surpassed them in volume and in strength. I did this, and the clamorer grew still." The frantic screams of Fortunato momentarily disturb Montresor, until he is reassured by the thought of the locale□ the enclosures□and "the solid fabric of the catacombs."

The second disturbance comes when he is nearly finished. He thrusts the torch through the remaining aperture and lets it fall: "There came forth in return only a jingling of the bells. My heart grew sick□on account of the dampness of the catacombs. I hastened to make an end of my labor. I forced the last stone into its position; I plastered it up." At this crucial instant, Montresor tells us, his "heart grew sick"; of course, he is quick to assure us it is because of "the dampness of the catacombs." Although Montresor is obviously fascinated by the deadly enclosure, and uses it with satisfaction in walling up Fortunato, he also experiences moments of horror while within it.

In this story, then, enclosure has a dual aspect. While it is Montresor's main source of delight in planning his revenge, it does create momentary flashes of panic which almost disrupt his carefully planned revenge. One wonders if on a subconscious level Montresor is not trying to isolate, and enclose, a part of himself and a neurosis he hates□symbolized by Fortunato: Once his victim is walled up and Montresor's neurosis is in a sense buried and out of sight, he believes he will probably regain some measure

of sanity. But, of course, Poe does not allow him this luxury, for the conclusion of the tale clearly indicates that even though the long dead Fortunato may be buried, Montresor is still obsessed with the details of the crime and can recite them complete and intact after half a century.

Like the narrators of "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat," Montresor buries his victim on his premises. But Montresor goes much deeper than the other two narrators, deeper than his cellar, deeper even than his family's subterranean burial ground, though he passes through it to reach the tiny crypt he has prepared for Fortunato. It seems as if he is reaching deep into the past, into his ancestral heritage, to deal with his current problem, Fortunato's insult. Like the other two narrators, he could have disposed of his victim in any number of ways having nothing to do with an enclosure, but he used burial and chose his family's catacombs, even his ancestors' bones, to conceal Fortunato's body: "Against the new masonry I re-erected the old rampart of bones." His act indicates that though he wants to be rid of his victim, he wants him to remain within reach, that is to say, among the bones of his ancestral past.

Fortunato, as a character, has little importance; he becomes significant as the object of Montresor's self-hatred, of the projection of his guilt for his aristocratic family's decline. Montresor says at one point, when his unwitting victim remarks on the extensiveness of the vaults, that "the Montresors . . . were a great and numerous family," implying that they once were but no longer are; and Poe is careful not to mention any immediate family of Montresor.

Like the other two narrators, Montresor, while taking pains to conceal his crime, must needs be found out. However, unlike the other narrators, whose crimes are discovered shortly after they are committed, Montresor's is not found out until he informs the reader of it fifty years afterward. So, although the crime appears successful, the revenge is not, because Montresor has not freed himself from guilt□a fact indicated by his rendering of details which have no doubt obsessed him through every day since the deed. His final words, "In pace requiescat!", underscore Poe's irony. Montresor's rest has surely been troubled. Why he has preferred anonymity, while sustaining this obsession during those years, might well be explained by his unconscious fear of the guilt he would, once it was found out, consciously have to accept. And having to accept it might drive him insane, as it does the narrator at the conclusion of "The Tell-Tale Heart," or it might force him to acknowledge the depth of his evil and truly repent□something Montresor is loath to do□as it does the narrator of "The Black Cat," who reveals to the reader that he "would unburthen [his] . . . soul" before he dies.

It appears, then, that Montresor is making Fortunato a scapegoat and symbolically enclosing Fortunato, his own identity, in a hidden crypt deep within his own soul□out of sight but certainly not forgotten. A similar view has been expressed by Charles Sweet: "Montresor's premature burial of his mirror self in the subterranean depths of his ancestral home (house equals mind in Poe) paints a psychological portrait of repression; the physical act of walling up an enemy in one's home duplicates the mental act of repressing a despised self in the unconscious." Montresor, Sweet continues, "buries alive his scapegoat. . . . In Montresor's unconscious mind he is not murdering

Fortunato, but burying/ repressing that dilettantish side of himself he can no longer endure, that side symbolized by Fortunato." The enclosure Poe uses in "The Cask Amontillado," in addition to being the focal point of the plot, providing a journey through a series of enclosures, and adding a sense of pervasive gloom and oppression to the tale, also becomes the central symbol in my interpretation. These enclosures and the crypt in which Montresor buries Fortunato are metaphors for Montresor's obsessive mind and the complex relationship between the reality of his disturbed inner self and his controlled, rational outer appearance. They emphasize his neurosis and symbolize the guilt he wishes to bury. Thus, Poe's enclosures in this enigmatic tale provide it with a thematic unity and an artistic integrity it might not otherwise have.

**Source:** Leonard W. Engel, "Victim and Victimizer: Poe's 'The Cask of Amontillado,'" in *Interpretations: A Journal of Idea, Analysis, and Criticism*, Vol. 15, No. 1, Fall, 1983, pp. 26-30.

# Critical Essay #3

*In the following essay, Cooney discusses the various effects of Poe's ironic plays on religion "The Cask of Amontillado."*

Although readers of "The Cask of Amontillado" have long been aware of the ironies that operate throughout to give special intensity to this tale, an awareness of its Roman Catholic cultural and theological materials adds to the irony and transforms clever trick into an episode of horror.

Throughout the entire episode□its planning, its execution, and its confession□Monsieur Montresor made self-conscious use of cunning, plotting, and irony to wreak his revenge. The French nobleman tells his story of the calmly calculated murder of his Italian aristocratic friend Fortunato. The crime had been perfectly executed; for fifty years now the act has gone undiscovered. Every smallest detail had been so carried out as to satisfy the criminal's two-fold purpose: Montresor would have revenge without himself getting caught; and, as the avenger, he would make quite sure "to make himself felt as such to him who has done the wrong." Thus he followed the motto on his coat of arms: "Nemo me impugne lacessit."

In the course of the narrative we learn how Montresor used the cutting edge of irony to give a surgeon's neatness to his work and to secure the greatest possible delight for himself. With consummate evil he chose the carnival season for his crime. The carnival in question was *Carnevale*, a three days' festivity ending at midnight on Ash Wednesday, during which time, in Catholic cultures, people have one last fling of merriment before beginning the somber Lenten fast. The season afforded a perfect setting for murder: servants were out of the house celebrating, the noise and frenzy of the crowds allowed the murderer to go about his work unnoticed, the high spirits of the season provided an appropriately ironic background for Montresor's playful antics with his victim, and the somber, religious quiet that settled upon the city at midnight was just the right mood for Fortunato's final hour. How appropriate that the victim go to his death in a catacomb while devout Christians were about to gather in churches above to receive blessed ashes, symbol of their mortality, and to hear the warning, "Remember man, you are dust and to dust you will return."

But overlying the story is another irony that Montresor is not conscious of, an irony that the reader is only vaguely conscious of, although its presence is felt quite strongly in several places. Basic to appreciating this irony is a correct understanding of sacramental confession. When Montresor killed Fortunato, he counted upon the judgment of God as the final instrument of revenge. He killed his enemy by leading him into sins of pride, vanity, and drunkenness; and without a chance for confession, Fortunato presumably would have been damned with no capacity for striking back in time or eternity. Moreover, to assure his own salvation, Montresor relied upon the power of sacramental confession for himself. For Montresor is not simply speaking to a sympathetic friend; he is also making his deathbed confession to a priest.

Montresor misses the irony of the phrase at the beginning of his confession, "You, who so well know the nature of my soul," with its implication that the penitent had been confessing to this priest for some time, but had not been confessing all his sins. In theological terms these were bad confessions because the efficacy of the sacrament hinges upon the sincere disposition and sorrow of the penitent for all his sins. When this is lacking, the sacrament, instead of being an instrument of salvation, becomes an instrument of damnation. Such confessions were sins of sacrilege. Montresor, therefore, has been confessing in vain.

And even now, when on his deathbed Montresor confesses all his sins, he is deluded in thinking himself forgiven. He seems to be unaware, but the reader is not, of the gleeful tone of his confession. Montresor is taking delight in the very telling of his crime□hardly the disposition of a truly repentant sinner. Thus, the "In pace requiescat" with which he finishes his confession is ambiguous. We can see it as a superficial expression of sorrow or a quiet satisfaction in the lasting, unchallenged completeness of his revenge. Here, surely, is the irony of a confession without repentance, an irony that makes the entire plan double back upon the doer.

Finally, Montresor's most serious miscalculation was his total failure to understand the ineffable power of God's mercy. Apparently he had forgotten a fundamental lesson of his catechism, that a person in serious sin□even without sacramental confession□ can turn to God, out of love, and in an instant make an "act of contrition" that can win immediate pardon. Fortunato's plea, "For the love of God, Montresor," was directly addressed to his murderer, but implicitly it was a prayer expressing faith in the power of God's loving-kindness. To this, Montresor was deaf; and when the prayer received a merciful hearing in heaven, Montresor's stratagems backfired. Fortunato, lucky as his name suggests, was saved; Montresor, damned. The final effect is one of horror. The ultimate irony is that of a puny creature playing games with God.

**Source:** James F. Cooney, "'The Cask of Amontillado': Some Further Ironies," in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. XI, No. 2, Spring, 1974, pp. 195-6.

# Critical Essay #4

*In the following essay Gargano explores Poe's subtle use of action and dialogue. Gargano contends that action and dialogue that at first appear "accidental" actually carry a great deal of "connotative value."*

"The Cask of Amontillado," one of Edgar Allan Poe's richest aesthetic achievements, certainly deserves more searching analysis than it has received. To be sure, critics and anthologists have almost unanimously expressed admiration for the tale; still, they have rarely attempted to find in it a consistently developed and important theme. Indeed, most criticism of the story has the definitive ring that one associates with comments on closed issues. Arthur Hobson Quinn, for example, pronounces Poe's little masterpiece "a powerful tale of revenge in which the interest lies in the implacable nature of the narrator." More recently, Edward Wagenknecht asserts that the tale derives its value from Poe's "absolute concentration upon the psychological effect."

A few adventurous critics, however, have tried to define the theme of "The Cask of Amontillado" in terms of a split or division within the psyche of the narrator-protagonist or within the author himself. Edward H. Davison has ably related the story to Poe's broad concern with "the multiple character of the self." Davidson concludes that the narrator, Montresor, is capable of becoming two distinct beings with little affinity to each other: "'The Cask of Amontillado' . . . is the tale of another nameless 'I' [sic] who has the power of moving downward from his mind or intellectual being and into his brutish or physical self and then of returning to his intellectual being with his total selfhood unimpaired." On the other hand, William Bittner, unconcerned with the division within Montresor, speculates that the "two characters are two sides of the same man□Edgar Poe." Unfortunately, Davidson weakens his judgment by ignoring the role of Fortunato, and Bittner's opinion, if valid, would tell us more about Poe than about Poe's story. Unfortunately, too, Richard Wilbur makes no mention of the tale in "The House of Poe," a brilliant and perhaps seminal essay in which he characterizes the "typical Poe story" as made up of "allegorical figures, representing the warring principles of the poet's divided nature."

In their emphasis upon the psychological "effect" produced by "The Cask of Amontillado," Wagenknecht and others imply that Poe's story has a great deal of art and little or no meaning. In fact, Wagenknecht goes so far as to categorize it with those tales from which Poe deliberately "excludes the ethical element." Once drained of "thought" or serious implication, "The Cask of Amontillado" becomes little more than a remarkably well-executed incident, a literary tour de force whose sustained excitement or horror justifies its existence. It degenerates into an aesthetic trick, a mere matter of clever manipulation, and cannot be considered among Poe's major triumphs. Perhaps it is this sense of the work's empty virtuosity which leads W. H. Auden rather loftily to belittle it.

I believe that "The Cask of Amontillado" has discouraged analysis because, uniquely for Poe, it makes its point in a muted and even subtle manner that seems deceptively like realistic objec- tivity. Proceeding in a style that Buranelli calls "unencumbered

directness," the narrator does not, like the protagonist in "The Tell-Tale Heart," loudly and madly proclaim his sanity; unlike the main characters in "The Imp of the Perverse," "The Black Cat," and "The Tell-Tale Heart," Montresor never suffers the agonizing hallucinations that lead to self-betrayal; moreover, he does not rant, like William Wilson, about his sensational career of evil or attempt, as does the nameless narrator of "Ligeia," an excruciating analysis of his delusions and terrors. Instead, he tells his tale with outward calm and economy; he narrates without the benefit of lurid explanations; he states facts, records dialogue, and allows events to speak for themselves. In short, "The Cask of Amontillado" is one of Poe's most cryptic and apparently noncommittal works.

Yet, though the tale restricts the amount of meaning directly divulged, almost all of its details fuse into a logical thematic pattern. Action and dialogue that at first appear accidental or merely horrific appear, upon close examination, to have far-reaching connotative value. The usual critical presumption that Montresor and Fortunato provide the narrative with a convenient Gothic "villain" and "victim" must give way to the view that they are well-conceived symbolic characters about whom Poe quietly gives a surprising amount of information. In addition, the setting and pervasive irony of the tale do not merely enhance the grotesque effect Poe obviously intends; more importantly, they contribute their share to the theme of the story. In short, "The Cask of Amontillado" is a work of art (which means it embodies a serious comment on the human condition) and not just an ingenious Gothic exercise.

I should like to suggest that Poe's tale presents an ironic vision of two men who, as surrogates of mankind, enter upon a "cooperative" venture that really exposes their psychological isolation. This theme of mock union disguising actual self-seeking intimates that the placid surface of life is constantly threatened and belied by man's subterranean and repressed motives. It also implies that, no matter how beguiling the surface may seem, human division is more "real" than union. Of course, Poe clearly shows the human affinities that make even a pretense of union possible and convincing, but he also reveals his characters' refusal to recognize or acknowledge the binding quality of those affinities. Moreover, as my consideration of the story will seek to prove, Poe suggests that man's inability to act upon these affinities leads to the self-violation that ultimately destroys him.

All the major facets of "The Cask of Amontillado" □action, the calculated contrast between Montresor and Fortunato, and the setting□emphasize the characters' relatedness and differences. In the first of the main incidents, the two men come together only to maintain their psychological separateness; in the second, they undertake an ostensibly common journey, but pursue divergent goals; and in the denouement, when the murderer should emancipate himself from his victim, he becomes psychically attached to him. Moreover, Poe's almost obtrusive point-by-point comparison of the two characters demonstrates that they possess unusual similarities concealed by incompatibilities. Even the masquerade setting subtly establishes the fact that the two men reverse, during the carnival season, the roles they play in "real" life: Fortunato, normally an affluent and commanding man, dwindles into a pitiful dupe, and

Montresor, who considers himself a persecuted, social nonentity, takes control of his enemy's destiny and is controlled by it.

The masquerade setting is essential to the meaning of "The Cask of Amontillado." Through it, Poe consciously presents a bizarre situation in which the data of the surface of ordinary life are reversed. Fortunato, we learn, impresses the narrator as a "man to be respected and even feared," a man capable of highhandedly inflicting a "thousand injuries" and "insults." His social importance is more than once insisted upon: "You are rich, respected, admired, beloved." In addition, as a member of a Masonic lodge, he obviously patronizes Montresor: "You are not of the Masons . . . You? Impossible! A mason?" With a touch of self-important loftiness, he admits that he has forgotten, perhaps as something trivial, his companion's coat of arms. Yet, Fortunato's supremacy dissolves in the carnival atmosphere: though he is a man of wealth and status, he is, for all the abilities implied by his success, an extremely vulnerable human being whose nature is revealed by his costume, that of a fool or jester: "The man wore motley. He had on a tight- fitting parti-striped dress, and his head was surmounted by the conical cap and bells." Absurdly off guard, he has obviously surrendered to the camaraderie of the occasion; he has drunkenly and self-indulgently relaxed his customary vigilance for the trusting mood of the season.

Montresor, on the other hand, is bitterly obsessed with his fall into social insignificance. He announces to Fortunato, with a submissiveness that masks his monomaniacal hatred, "You are happy, as once I was. You are a man to be missed. For me it is no matter." At another point, when his besotted and insensitive companion expresses surprise at the extensiveness of his vaults, he answers with pride: "The Montresors . . . were a great and numerous family." We must remember, too, that his plan to kill Fortunato, deriving from family feeling and a sense of injured merit, is in accordance with his coat of arms and motto. He regards himself as the vindicator of his ancestors, "The human foot d'or" about to crush the "serpent rampant whose fangs are imbedded in the heel." In other words, Fortunato's prosperity has somehow become associated in his mind with his own diminution. His decision to destroy his enemy, pointedly explained in his motto, "Nemo me impune lacessit," ("No one insults me with impunity") indicates that he suffers from a deep dynastic wound. Montresor, then, feels that Fortunato has, by ignoring his ancestral claims, stolen his birth-right and ground him into disgrace.

Yet, during the carnival, he is transformed into a purposive man to be feared. Intellectual and implacable, he designs his evil as if it were a fine art. He facilely baits his powerful adversary with a false inducement; he lures him deeper and deeper into the sinister vaults with cajolery and simulated interest in his health. The preposterous case with which he manages Fortunato demonstrates how completely he has become the master of the man who has mastered and humiliated him. In the subterranean trip toward the fictitious amontillado, Montresor momentarily regains his birthright and reestablishes his family's importance by giving dramatic substance to the meaning of his coat of arms and motto. Of course, we must ask later whether his triumph is delusive and fleeting or whether, as Davidson declares, he returns to the real world with his "total selfhood unimpaired."

The carnival world, then, inverts and grotesquely parodies the actual world. From the beginning of the tale, when Montresor explains the evil motive behind his geniality toward Fortunato, Poe presents a picture of life in which man is bifurcated and paradoxical, dual rather than unified. We see that casual contacts, like Fortunato's meeting with Montresor, may be deeply calculated stratagems; people who greet each other as friends may be enemies; words of kindness and invitation may be pregnant with deceit; helpless gullibility may be allied with talent and firmness; and love may cloak hatred. Everywhere, opposites exist in strange conjunction. One recalls William Wilson's bewilderment as he contemplates the fact that his benign Sunday minister can "double" as a cruel teacher on weekdays: "Oh, gigantic paradox, too utterly monstrous for solution."

Clearly, the oppositions and disharmonies contained within individual men project themselves into the world and turn it into an ambiguous arena where appearances and words belie themselves. Every aspect of life is potentially deceptive because it has a double face. If universal unity once existed, as Poe speculates in Eureka, such harmony no longer prevails in a world where all is only remotely akin but more immediately heterogeneous and in conflict. Significantly, even in the midst of his bitter feud with his namesake, William Wilson entertains the "belief of my having been acquainted with the being who stood before me, at some epoch very long ago□some point of the past even infinitely remote." Yet, he dismisses this insight as a "delusion" and persists in his enmity toward the second William Wilson. It is not surprising, then, that man's internal discord recreates "reality" in its own image and that single words, like single persons, contain diverse and incompatible meanings. Montresor's wine "vaults," which contain the precious amontillado, become Fortunato's burial "vaults." Fortunato boasts of his membership in a Masonic order, but it is the narrator, who as a different kind of mason, walls up and suffocates his enemy. For Fortunato, Montresor's coat of arms and motto are mere emblems, hardly to be given a second thought, whereas for the latter they are spurs to malevolent action. In one of the most brilliant scenes in the story, the entombed victim's shrieks express his agony; the murderer imitates these shrieks, but his clamor is a gleeful parody of pain. In fact, both men once utter almost identical sentences to express the contrary emotions of terror and joy:

"Let us be gone." "Yes", I said, "let us be gone." *"For the love of God, Montresor!"* "Yes," I said, "for the love of God."

Poe's irony in "The Cask of Amontillado" extends to many details that invest life with an eerie inscrutability. Fortunato, the fortunate man, is singled out for murder. Montresor, "my treasure," locks within himself a treasure of ancestral loathing which impoverishes his nature. Both characters, it soon becomes evident, are intoxicated, one with wine and the other with an excess of intellectualized hatred. Fortunato, on his way to certain death, ironically drinks a toast to "the buried that repose around us." Before his last colloquy with his companion, Montresor expresses a perverse impulse of his being and calls Fortunato "noble." The irony of the last words of the tale, "In pace requiescat," is only too evident. So too is the irony of the method by which the narrator, in ordering his servants to remain at home during his announced "absence," insures that they will be away while he perpetrates his crime safely at home.

Obviously, the ironic pattern of "The Cask of Amontillado" adumbrates a world caught in a ceaseless masquerade of motive and identity. Nevertheless, Poe does not naively cleave the world into two irreconcilable antinomies. Instead, he demonstrates that Montresor's dissimulation is an unnatural and unbearable act. For in spite of himself, the narrator's self-divisive behavior affronts his own need for a unified psyche and conscience. After all, he really longs to be what Fortunato is and what he and his family once were. In short, the major ironies of "The Cask of Amontillado" are that Fortunato represents Montresor's former self and that the latter deludes himself in imagining that he can regain his "fortune" by the violent destruction of his supposed nemesis. Ironically, he turns his energy and genius against himself, against the memory of his lost eminence. Once again, then, Montresor resembles Fortunato in being the dupe of his own crazed obsessions; in the truest sense, he is as much a fool as the wearer of motley. Contrary to Davidson's belief that the narrator recovers his total selfhood after the crime, Montresor is broken on the wheel of a world in which violence is simultaneously an internal and external action. It is in accordance with this principle that the narrator in "The Black Cat" feels that in hanging his pet he is "beyond the reach of the infinite mercy of the Most Merciful and Most Terrible God." Montresor no more achieves his revenge than his victim comes into the possession of the amontillado.

In the final analysis, like so many Poe characters, Montresor fails because he cannot harmonize the disparate parts of his nature and, consequently, cannot achieve self-knowledge. His mind overrules his heart as much as Fortunato's drunken goodfellowship□his trusting heart□has repealed his intellect. Fortunato's ironically meaningful words, "You are not of the brotherhood," imply, on the symbolic level of the tale, that Montresor lives too deeply in his plots and stratagems to have any warm affiliation with mankind; still, though he prides himself that he can commit murder with impunity, he cannot completely eradicate those subconscious feelings which establish□no matter what he wills or intellectually devises□his relatedness to Fortunato. Just as William Wilson's refusal to recognize his "conscience" does not eliminate it or deprive it of retributive power, Montresor's intellectualization of his actions does not divest them of their psychological consequences. He remains so divided against himself that, as he consummates his atrocity, it recoils upon him; the purposefulness with which he initiated his plan almost immediately distintegrates. As his victim screams, he momentarily hesitates, trembles, and unsheathes his rapier. With unwitting self-betrayal, he refers to the buried man as the "noble Fortunato." In addition, he confesses that, at the final jingle of his foe's bells, "my heart grew sick." Even though he obtusely attributes his sickness to an external cause, "the dampness of the catacombs," his rationalization should deceive no alert reader. And lastly, his compulsively detailed rehearsal of his crime after fifty years demonstrates that it still haunts and tortures his consciousness.

The ending of "The Cask of Amontillado" leaves little doubt as to the spiritual blindness of the protagonist. Montresor resembles many Poe characters who, with no self-awareness, project their own internal confusions into the external world. William Wilson, for example, never understands that his conflict with his strange namesake represents an inner turmoil; with almost his last breath, he declares that he is "the slave of circumstances beyond human control." Certainly, the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart"

fails to discover that the insistent heartbeat he hears and cannot escape is his own rather than that of the murdered old man. To cite a final example, the main character in "The Black Cat" never suspects that his mutilation of Pluto is an objective equivalent of his own serfimpairment. Montresor, I am convinced, should be included in Poe's gallery of morally blind murderers; he does not understand that his hatred of Fortunato stems from his inner quarrel with "fortune" itself. Undoubtedly, Fortunato symbolizes Montresor's lost estate, his agonizing remembrance of lapsed power and his present spiritual impotence. With a specious intellectuality, common to Poe's violent men, Montresor seeks to escape from his own limitations by imagining them as imposed upon him from beyond the personality by outside force. But the force is a surrogate of the self, cozening man toward damnation with all the brilliant intrigue Montresor uses in destroying Fortunato.

**Source:** James W. Gargano, "'The Cask of Amontillado': A Masquerade of Motive and Identity," in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. IV, October, 1966 - July, 1967, pp. 119-26.

# Adaptations

The audio cassette collection *The Best of Edgar Allan Poe* (1987), read by Edward Blake, includes "The Cask of Amontillado" and thirteen other stories and poems. The set is published by Listening Library. A radio play version of the story, originally broadcast on the NBC University Theater, is available on the audiocassette *Nosology; The Cask of Amontillado; The Fall of the House of Usher* (1991), part of the Golden Age of Radio Thrillers series issued by Metacom. Other audio presentations include "The Cask of Amontillado" (1987) in the Edgar Allan Poe collection by Westlake House; *An Hour with Edgar Allan Poe* (1979), from Times Cassettes; and *Basil Rathbone Reads Edgar Allan Poe, a record album issued in 1960 by Caedmon.*

The story has also been captured many times on film and videotape. Videotapes include *The Cask of Amontillado* (1991) from Films for the Humanities; *The Cask of Amontillado* (1982) from AIMS Media; *Tales of Edgar Allan Poe* (1987) from Troll; and a three-tape set that includes six stories by six authors, *Classic Literary Stories* (1987) from Hollywood Select Video. Film versions include a 16mm film from BFA Educational Media that is accompanied by a teacher's guide; another 16mm film from Films Incorporated, 1975; and a 35mm film from Brunswick Productions (1967) that analyzes and presents excerpts from the story.

# Topics for Further Study

Investigate the history of the Free and Accepted Masons, a group to which Fortunato apparently belongs. How were Masons perceived in the United States during the nineteenth century? Why might Poe have chosen to make Fortunato a member?

What is nitre (also known as potassium nitrate or saltpeter)? How would it form on the walls of the catacombs? Why might it be harmful?

Research the field of heraldry, the medieval system of assigning and describing symbols displayed on a shield to identify families. Learn enough of heraldry's special vocabulary to explain the conversation between Montresor and Fortunato on the subject of Montresor's "arms."

Learn what you can about European gentlemen's attire in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Fortunato has been enjoying the carnival, and is dressed in motley. Montresor wears a silk mask and a roquelaire. What does the men's clothing reveal about their station in life, or about their character?

# Compare and Contrast

**1830s:** An Anti-Masonic political party is formed in the United States, intended to counterbalance the supposed political influence of the Free and Accepted Masons. It is the first important third party in United States history.

**1990s:** With six million members but no central authority, the Free and Accepted Masons are found in nearly every English-speaking nation, including a large membership in the United States. They are more widely known for social activities and for community service than for political activity.

**1840s:** Poe, who did not graduate from college, is able to read Latin, French, German, Italian and Spanish, and expects his readers to have basic competence in Latin and French.

**1990s:** Most American college graduates have taken two years or less of foreign language study.

**1840s:** Writers are concerned that Americans do not have the attention span required to read long works of fiction. Poe writes, "We now demand the light artillery of the intellect; we need the curt, the condensed, the pointed, the readily diffused in place of the verbose, the detailed, the voluminous, the inaccessible."

**1990s:** Educators and parents complain that young people, raised with televisions and computers, do not like to read for long periods, but prefer to get their information in short, visual forms. Politicians complain that voters will not listen to complex arguments and ideas, but are interested only in "sound bites."

# What Do I Read Next?

*Bodies of the Dead and Other Great American Ghost Stories* (1997) is a collection of thirteen classic stories by Ambrose Bierce, Edith Wharton, Nathaniel Hawthorne and others.

Bram Stoker's *Best Ghost and Horror Stories* (1997) is a collection of fourteen spine-tingling stories by the author of Dracula.

*Restless Spirits: Ghost Stories by American Women, 1872-1926* (1997) collects twenty-two stories by well-known and long-forgotten writers including Zora Neale Hurston and Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

*Behind a Mask: The Unknown Thrillers of Louisa May Alcott* (1995) demonstrates that the author of Little Women had a darker and more humorous side.

"The Premature Burial" (1844), another one of Poe's tales of horror, is a catalog of anecdotes examining the horrors of being buried alive.

"The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843) is Poe's tale of a murderer who, unlike Montresor, is driven mad by guilt.

In "The Imp of the Perverse" (1845), Poe explores a man's uncontrollable impulses to do things that he knows will harm him□a recurring theme in Poe's fiction.

There are literally hundreds of anthologies of Poe's work to choose from. *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Tales* (1998) is widely available, and includes several of Poe's influential horror and detective stories.

Among the many Poe biographies, William Bittner's *Poe: A Biography* (1962) strikes the best balance between the scholarly and the popular.

# Further Study

Botting, Fred. *Gothic*, New York: Routledge, 1996.

A clear and accessible introduction to Gothic images and texts in their historical and cultural contexts. Includes a chapter on twentieth-century Gothic books and films.

Buranelli, Vincent. *Edgar Allan Poe*, Boston: Twayne, 1977.

An overview of the life and work for the general reader, which includes a chronology, a helpful index, and a no-longer-current bibliography of primary and secondary sources

Carlson, Eric W., ed. *The Recognition of Edgar Allan Poe: Selected Criticism Since 1829*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966.

A collection of reviews and commentaries, especially interesting for the remarks by those Poe influenced, including the French poet Charles Baudelaire, Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevski, and British and American writers including Walt Whitman, William Butler Yeats, and T.S. Eliot.

Howarth, William L., ed. *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Poe's Tales: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971.

The articles in this collection are generally insightful and accessible to the general reader.

Quinn, Arthur Hobson. *Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.

At over eight hundred pages, this scholarly work is the definitive and insightful, though difficult-to-read, biography.

Silverman, Kenneth. *Edgar A. Poe: Mournful and Neverending Remembrance*, New York: HarperCollins, 1992.

A psychological approach to Poe's life, focuses on the writer's unresolved mourning as the source of his troubles. Excellent for its description of the literary life of the nineteenth century.

Walsh, John Evangelist. *Midnight Dreary: The Mysterious Death of Edgar Allan Poe*, New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1998.

A factual, not a conjecturing, account of what is known and not known about Poe's last days.

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Randall, John H., III. "Poe's 'The Cask of Amontillado' and the Code of the Duello," in *Studia Germanica Gandensia*, Vol. 5, 1963, pp. 175-84.

Rocks, James E. "Conflict and Motive in 'The Cask of Amontillado,'" in *Poe Newsletter*, Vol. 5, December 1972, pp. 50-51.

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**Introduction**

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

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A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

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We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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