

MS. Found in a Bottle Study Guide

MS. Found in a Bottle by Edgar Allan Poe

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MS. Found in a Bottle

MS. Found in a Bottle Summary

The narrator begins his tale by explaining that he has received a good education due to his family's wealth, and that though he has always been interested in the mind he has always lacked imagination. He mentions this to lend credibility to the story he is about to tell.

Having spent many years traveling, the narrator set out as a passenger on a ship bound for the Archipelago Islands. The voyage is smooth at first, but after several days he notices strange clouds and a change of weather. He is a bit disturbed by the sudden calmness but the captain doesn't seem worried, even when the narrator expresses concern. Unable to sleep, the narrator starts up on deck. It is then that he hears an odd humming noise. Suddenly, the ship is rocked by a huge wave.

After recovering from the blast, the narrator discovers that only he and an old Swede have survived; everyone else who had been on the ship has been washed overboard. For five days, though they constantly fear being wrecked completely by another massive wave, they are merely swept along by unreasonably strong winds. On the sixth day the sun never rises, leaving the two men to sail along in total darkness.

At times, he says, they are brought to altitudes so high they can hardly catch their breath, while at other times, they find themselves in what appears to be a deep abyss. It is while at the bottom of one such abyss that the old Swede alerts the narrator to a strange reddish glow. When he looks up, a gigantic ship is looming over them. To their horror, it is coming down directly at them, but when it hits their ship the force of the blow hurls the narrator on to the deck of the strange ship.

The narrator lands on the ship undetected and hides himself away unnoticed. He doesn't know why he feels the need to hide, but he hides nonetheless. Soon a man passes by, and the narrator observes from his hiding place that the man seems extremely old.

Time passes, and the narrator is perplexed at the behavior of the crew on the ship. They do not notice or acknowledge his presence in any way; in fact, he says, he walked right into the captain's cabin and took the writing materials he is presently using to record his account, which he plans to stuff into a bottle and cast out to sea at the last possible moment.

In his explorations of the ship, the narrator finds that the ship's name is "Discovery." He also has occasion to survey the material the ship is made of and finds it to be unusual, like Spanish Oak, which would have been a poor choice for building a ship. Again he speaks of traveling unseen among the old, decrepit-looking crew as they continue to



take absolutely no interest in him. They seem intent on making some sort of calculations with the ancient mathematical instruments lying about.

Time passes in this manner, and eventually the crew begins to pace the deck with an expectant look of hope on their faces. Suddenly the ship is sucked into a whirlpool, and they begin going down ... down ... This account, apparently, was the message found in a bottle.

MS. Found in a Bottle Analysis

MS. Found in a Bottle is one of Poe's most celebrated stories of science fiction. Poe was very interested in the South Pole, and of a hole in the South Pole that emptied out to the other side of the world. For Poe, the idea of a whirlpool served as one more element that, due to the lack of knowledge on the part of most people, could be used as a mysterious aspect in a story. The unexplainable elements of the story, such as the whirlpool, the strange storm, and the ancient crew, are all made more fantastic because of the narrator's early emphasis on realism.



Objects/Places

"Discovery"

Second ship that the narrator of *MS. Found n a Bottle* finds himself on. Appears to be made of a strange material and crewed by ancient, ghost-like sailors.

Bottle

Means by which the narrator gets his story to the world.



Themes

Sanity and Insanity

Poe uses the theme of insanity vs. insanity, and all the nuances in between, in many of his short stories, often charging his insane narrators with the futile task of proving that they are not mad. Often, in stories such as *The Tell-Tale Heart* and *The Imp of the Perverse*, though the respective narrators of each claim they are of sound mind and seem completely unremorseful, they are driven to confess by a persistent reminder of their crime. In other tales, such as *The Cask of Amontillado*, the narrator is unquestionably insane, and yet there is no remorse *and* no confession, and though his *actions* are insane, he is very levelheaded when it comes to their execution. Crime is not the only indicator of insanity, however. In *Ligeia*, the narrator commits no crime that is spoken of, yet there is an air of instability to his narrative. He does admit to heavy opium use, but it is his overwhelming grief and obsessive love for Ligeia that cast a questioning light on his state of mind. All this mental instability leads to a stable of unreliable narrators; Poe was a master at creating believable, unreliable narrators, so much so that many historians have cast him as much less stable than he was, instead of recognizing his skill at crafting first-person narration.

Death and Mortality

In almost all of Poe's works, death is a central issue. Whether a tale of murder (*The Cask of Amontillado*, *The Tell-Tale Heart*), a tale of horror (*The Fall of the House of Usher*), a Gothic horror romance (*Ligeia*), or an allegory (*The Masque of the Red Death*), Poe's stories, by nature of his preferred genres, are full of death. Though many of his stories deal with either the murder of someone, the solving of a murder, or the supernatural resurrection of someone who has died, it is his allegorical look at mortality, *The Masque of the Red Death*, which most clearly sums up Poe's themes of death. Here, very simply, death is seen as inevitable, something that can be avoided by no one, no matter what precautions they take or how wealthy they are. Poe used death to terrify people, as he was a writer of horror stories and most people are afraid of death. Yet he seemed fascinated by it, and with his use of dark and Gothic elements seemed to embrace it.

Isolation and Confinement

Throughout many of Poe's short stories, characters are placed in stifling, claustrophobic settings that add to the overall feeling of panic and fear. In some, such as *Ligeia* and *The Fall of the House of Usher*, most of the action occurs in one room or one house, closing off the characters to any outside influence. *The Pit and the Pendulum* takes this idea a step further, imprisoning the narrator in a dungeon. Poe highlights this theme in *The Cask of Amontillado*, in which the murderous narrator literally encloses his victim in



a tomb. In *The Masque of the Red Death*, the castle is completely cut off from any means of entrance or exit. The most intense confinement, however, can be found in the minds of Poe's narrators. While we as readers experience physical isolation (i.e. one, room, one house, one walled-up vault), the intensity of the confinement is exacerbated by the point of view of the narrators. We see the world through one set of eyes, and the thoughts of these narrators, often thoughts that are unstable at best, imprison us in a non-physical "prison" of panic and fear.



Style

Point of View

This is another first-person narrative. He starts off by writing that: "I have often been reproached with the aridity of my genius; a deficiency of imagination has been imputed to me as a crime." (pg. 78) He goes to great lengths to describe the realistic nature of his character as a way of gaining credibility for his unbelievable tale. Poe's narrator looks deeper into his own self throughout the narrative and grows ashamed of his former self: "When I look around me I feel ashamed of my former apprehensions." (pg, 92)

Setting

This story takes place on two different ships; the first is a ship on its way to the Archipelago Islands, and the second, an ancient ship named "Discovery." It is on the first ship that the narrator faces the first days of terror, finally sailing through an unending night. When he is thrown onto the deck of the Discovery, the narrator must abandon all rational thought and hold on for the ride.

Language and Meaning

The importance of language is expressed here by the narrator's recording of the events that transpire during his voyage and saving them in a bottle.

Structure

The structure of this story is that of a typical short story, based on the need for realism in a totally unreal situation.



Quotes

These quotes are taken from the Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe.

"True! - nervous - very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why *will* you say that I am mad?" (*The Tell-Tale Heart*, pg. 13)

"'Villains!' I shrieked, 'dissemble no more! I admit the deed! - tear up the planks! - here, here! - it is the beating of his hideous heart!'" (*The Tell-Tale Heart*, pg. 21)

"As the strong man exults in his physical ability, delighting in such exercises as call his muscles into action, so glories the analyst in that moral activity which *disentangles*." (*The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, pg. 22)

"'The riddle, so far, was now unriddled.'" (*The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, pg. 57)

"Of my country and of my family I have little to say. Ill usage and length of years have driven me from the one, and estranged me from the other." (*MS. Found in a Bottle*, pg. 77)

"When I look around me I feel ashamed of my former apprehensions." (*MS. Found in a Bottle*, pg. 92)

"The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could ; but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge." (*The Cask of Amontillado*, pg. 94)

"*For the love of God, Montressor!*" (*The Cask of Amontillado*, pg. 104)

"There was an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart - an unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime. What was it - I paused to think - what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher ?" (*The Fall of the House of Usher*, pg. 106)

"For a moment she remained trembling and reeling to and fro upon the threshold - then, with a low moaning cry, fell heavily inward upon the person of her brother, and in her violent and now final death-agonies, bore him to the floor a corpse, and a victim to the terrors he had anticipated." (*The Fall of the House of Usher*, pg. 133)

"While I gazed, this fissure rapidly widened - there came a fierce breath of the whirlwind - the entire orb of the satellite burst at once upon my sight - my brain reeled as I saw the mighty walls rushing asunder - there was a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters - and the deep and dank tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the *House of Usher*." (*The Fall of the House of Usher*, pg. 133)



"Arousing from the most profound of slumbers, we break the gossamer web of some dream. Yet in a second afterward, (so frail may that web have been) we remember not that we have dreamed." (*The Pit and the Pendulum*, pg. 156)

"Amid the thought of the fiery destruction that impended, the idea of the coolness of the well came over my soul like balm. I rushed to its deadly brink. I threw my straining vision below. The glare from the enkindled roof illumined its inmost recesses. Yet, for a wild moment, did my spirit refuse to comprehend the meaning of what I saw. At length it forced — it wrestled its way into my soul — it burned itself in upon my shuddering reason. — Oh! for a voice to speak! — oh! horror! — oh! any horror but this!" (*The Pit and the Pendulum*, pg. 136)

"The 'strangeness,' however, which I found in the eyes, was of a nature distinct from the formation, or the color, or the brilliancy of the features, and must, after all, be referred to the expression." (*Ligeia*, pg. 163)

"That she loved me I should not have doubted; and I might have been easily aware that, in a bosom such as hers, love would have reigned no ordinary passion. But in death only, was I fully impressed with the strength of her affection." (*Ligeia*, pg. 168)

"I trembled not — I stirred not — for a crowd of unutterable fancies connected with the air, the stature, the demeanor of the figure, rushing hurriedly through my brain, had paralyzed — had chilled me into stone." (*Ligeia*, pg. 182)

"The scarlet stains upon the body and especially upon the face of the victim, were the pest ban which shut him out from the aid and from the sympathy of his fellow-men." (*The Masque of the Red Death*, pg. 184)

"But the Prince Prospero was happy and dauntless and sagacious. When his dominions were half depopulated, he summoned to his presence a thousand hale and light-hearted friends from among the knights and dames of his court, and with these retired to the deep seclusion of one of his castellated abbeys." (*The Masque of the Red Death*, pg. 185)

"There are chords in the hearts of the most reckless which cannot be touched without emotion. Even with the utterly lost, to whom life and death are equally jests, there are matters of which no jest can be made." (*The Masque of the Red Death*, pg. 191)

"And the flames of the tripods expired. And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all" (*The Masque of the Red Death*, pg. 193)

"The intellectual or logical man, rather than the understanding or observant man, set himself to imagine designs — to dictate purposes to God." (*The Imp of the Perverse*, pg. 195)

"Through its promptings we act without comprehensible object; or, if this shall be understood as a contradiction in terms, we may so far modify the proposition as to say,



that through its promptings we act, for the reason that we should not." (*The Imp of the Perverse*, pg. 196)

"They say that I spoke with a distinct enunciation, but with marked emphasis and passionate hurry, as if in dread of interruption before concluding the brief, but pregnant sentences that consigned me to the hangman and to hell." (*The Imp of the Perverse*, pg. 209)



Topics for Discussion

These topics concern the general works of Edgar Allan Poe.

Explain what is meant by the term "unreliable narrator." How does Poe use this technique in different ways with different stories?

Poe has been called "the father of the detective story" - but does he go too far out of the realm of possibility by making an orangutan the killer? Defend your answer.

Are the crewmen on the "Discovery" ghosts? Is there another explanation as to why they do not acknowledge the narrator?

How does Poe portray the doppelganger, or character double, in *The Fall of the House of Usher*?

How does Poe use a closed setting in *The Pit and the Pendulum*, *The Cask of Amontillado*, and *The Fall of the House of Usher*?

What is the role of history in *The Pit and the Pendulum*? How does the reality of the action contribute to the story's terror?

Compare and contrast the narrator of *The Imp of the Perverse* with the narrator of *The Tell-Tale Heart*.

Do you believe Poe meant for us to believe in the resurrection of Ligeia as a means of proving her strength of will and the great love between herself and the narrator, or as a sign of how far the narrator's mind has slipped?

Did Ligeia poison Rowena, or did the narrator?