

Before You Read

The Cask of Amontillado

Meet **Edgar Allan Poe**

(1809–1849)

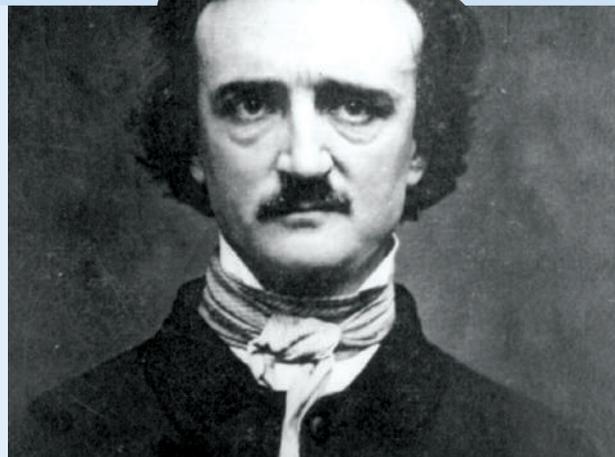
Crumbling mansions, hearts that continue to beat after death, and insane killers are just a few of the ingredients in Edgar Allan Poe’s fiction. His stories are not simple spine-tinglers, however. Poe travels deep into psychological territory, exploring guilt, rage, sorrow, madness, and fear.

A Loner Poe’s life itself was a dark and often haunting tale. His parents were poverty-stricken actors. Poe’s father left when Poe was two years old, and his mother died when he was three. Separated from his siblings, Poe was raised by John and Frances Allan. As Poe entered adolescence, he had a serious falling out with his foster father, who disapproved of his desire to write. Poe spent a few years in the army to try to regain his foster father’s approval, but once it was clear that Allan was through with him, Poe moved to Baltimore and focused on writing.

*“From childhood’s hour I have not been
As others were—I have not seen
As others saw—”*

—Edgar Allan Poe, “Alone”

Turmoil and Grief Poe began to write poetry as a teenager and published his first collection of poems in 1829. His short stories began appearing in magazines, and in 1833, one of his tales won a prize. This led to a job as a literary editor, a position that brought him great success, but which he lost due to his changeable nature and alcoholism. Most of the



remainder of Poe’s short life was spent in poverty and pain. He continued to work, but he did not achieve the public success he felt he deserved. Alcohol remained a problem, and he was often ill. He watched the love of his life, his wife Virginia Clemm, waste away and die from tuberculosis. Poe’s loneliness, pain, and general inability to connect with others helped forge his uniquely dark vision.

A Literary Giant Poe’s essays and reviews are still read today for their literary insights. His poetry, including such famous works as “The Raven” and “The Bells,” lives on in countless collections of America’s best writing. Perhaps most of all, his fictional works continue to frighten and delight readers worldwide.

Poe is classified as an American Romantic writer, a detective fiction writer, and a Gothic writer. Some critics refer to Poe as the first truly modern writer because he probed the individual and the mystery of the self.

LOG
ON



Literature Online

Author Search For more about Edgar Allan Poe, go to glencoe.com and enter QuickPass code GL49787u1.



The Cask of Amonillado

Edgar Allan Poe

The thousand injuries of Fortunato¹ I had borne as I best could; but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge. You, who so well know the nature of my soul, will not suppose, however, that I gave utterance to a threat. *At length* I would be avenged; this was a point definitively settled—but the very definitiveness with which it was resolved, **precluded** the idea of risk. I must not only punish, but

punish with **impunity**. 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.²

It must be understood, that neither by word nor deed had I given Fortunato cause

1. *Fortunato* (fôr' tōō nă' tō)

Vocabulary

preclude (pri klōōd') *v.* to prevent; to make impossible

2. [*A wrong is . . . done the wrong.*] These sentences might be rephrased this way: "A wrong is not avenged if the avenger either is punished for taking revenge or does not make the wrongdoer aware that he is taking revenge."

Vocabulary

impunity (im pū' nă tē) *n.* freedom from punishment, harm, or bad consequences

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.³

He had a weak point—this Fortunato—although in other regards he was a man to be respected and even feared. He prided himself on his connoisseurship⁴ in wine. Few Italians have the true virtuoso spirit. For the most part their enthusiasm is adopted to suit the time and opportunity—to practice imposture upon the British and Austrian *millionnaires*. In painting and gemmary Fortunato, like his countrymen, was a quack—but in the matter of old wines he was sincere. In this respect I did not differ from him materially: I was skillful in the Italian vintages myself, and bought largely whenever I could.

It was about dusk, one evening during the supreme madness of the carnival season, that I encountered my friend. He **accosted** me with excessive warmth, for he had been drinking much. The man wore motley.⁵ He had on a tight-fitting parti-striped dress, and his head was surmounted by the conical cap and bells. I was so pleased to see him, that I thought I should never have done wringing his hand.

3. Here, *immolation* means “death or destruction.”

4. *Connoisseurship* (kən' ə sur' ship) is expert knowledge that qualifies one to pass judgment in a particular area.

5. *Motley* is the multicolored costume of a court jester or clown.

Matters of Life and Death *What is the narrator's attitude toward the destruction of Fortunato?*

Vocabulary

accost (ə kōst') *v.* to approach and speak to, especially in an aggressive manner

“How remarkably well you are looking today!”

I said to him: “My dear Fortunato, you are luckily met. How remarkably well you are looking today! But I have received a pipe of what passes for Amontillado,⁶ and I have my doubts.”

“How?” said he. “Amontillado? A pipe? Impossible! And in the middle of the carnival!”

“I have my doubts,” I replied; “and I was silly enough to pay the full Amontillado price without consulting you in the matter. You were not to be found, and I was fearful of losing a bargain.”

“Amontillado!”

“I have my doubts.”

“Amontillado!”

“And I must satisfy them.”

“Amontillado!”

“As you are engaged, I am on my way to Luchesi.⁷ If anyone has a critical turn, it is he. He

will tell me——”

“Luchesi cannot tell Amontillado from Sherry.”

“And yet some fools will have it that his taste is a match for your own.”

“Come, let us go.”

“Whither?”

“To your vaults.”

“My friend, no; I will not impose upon your good nature. I perceive you have an engagement. Luchesi——”

“I have no engagement;—come.”

“My friend, no. It is not the engagement, but the severe cold with which I perceive

6. A *pipe* is a wine barrel that holds 126 gallons. *Amontillado* (ə mōn tē yā' dō) is a kind of pale, dry sherry from Spain.

7. *Luchesi* (lōō kā' sē)

Mood *How would you characterize this opening exchange between the two main characters?*

Carnival in Rome, 1839. Aleksandr Petrovich Myasoedov. Oil on canvas. State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.

View the Art This painting depicts a street scene during Carnival. How would you describe the atmosphere in this painting? How does it compare with the opening scene from this story?

you are afflicted. The vaults are insufferably damp. They are encrusted with niter.”⁸

“Let us go, nevertheless. The cold is merely nothing. Amontillado! You have been imposed upon. And as for Luchesi, he cannot distinguish Sherry from Amontillado.”

Thus speaking, Fortunato possessed himself of my arm. Putting on a mask of black silk, and drawing a *roquelaure* closely about my person, I suffered him to hurry me to my palazzo.⁹

There were no attendants at home; they had absconded to make merry in honor of the time. I had told them that I should not return until the morning, and had given them **explicit** orders not to stir from the house. These orders were sufficient, I well knew, to insure their immediate disappearance, one and all, as soon as my back was turned.



I took from their sconces two flambeaux,¹⁰ and giving one to Fortunato, bowed him through several suites of rooms to the archway that led into the vaults. I passed down a long and winding staircase, requesting him to be cautious as he followed. We came at length to the foot of the descent, and stood together on the damp ground of the catacombs of the Montresors.

The gait of my friend was unsteady, and the bells upon his cap jingled as he strode. “The pipe?” said he.

“It is farther on,” said I; “but observe the white web-work which gleams from these cavern walls.”

8. *Niter* is a salt-like substance found in cool, damp places.
9. A *roquelaure* (rôk ə lor') is a knee-length cloak that was popular in the 1700s. A *palazzo* (pə lät'sō) is a mansion or palace.

Paraphrase Restate this sentence in your own words.

Vocabulary

explicit (eks plis' it) *adj.* definitely stated; clearly expressed

10. *Sconces* are wall brackets that hold candles or torches, and *flambeaux* (flam' bō') are lighted torches.

He turned toward me, and looked into my eyes with two filmy orbs that distilled the rheum of intoxication.¹¹

"Niter?" he asked, at length.

"Niter," I replied. "How long have you had that cough?"

"Ugh! ugh! ugh!—ugh! ugh! ugh!—ugh! ugh! ugh!—ugh! ugh! ugh!—ugh! ugh! ugh!"

My poor friend found it impossible to reply for many minutes.

"It is nothing," he said, at last.

"Come," I said, with decision, "we will go back; your health is precious. 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. We will go back; you will be ill, and I cannot be responsible. Besides, there is Luchesi——"

"Enough," he said; "the cough is a mere nothing; it will not kill me. I shall not die of a cough."

"True—true," I replied; "and, indeed, I had no intention of alarming you unnecessarily; but you should use all proper caution. A draft of this Medoc¹² will defend us from the damp."

Here I knocked off the neck of a bottle which I drew from a long row of its fellows that lay upon the mold.

"Drink," I said, presenting him the wine.

He raised it to his lips with a leer. He paused and nodded to me familiarly, while his bells jingled.

"I drink," he said, "to the buried that repose¹³ around us."

"And I to your long life."

He again took my arm, and we proceeded.

11. [*filmy orbs* . . . *intoxication*] This phrase describes Fortunato's eyes as clouded and watery from excessive drinking.

12. *Medoc* (mā dōk') is a French red wine. A *draft* is the amount taken in one swig or swallow.

13. To *repose* is to lie at rest, either sleeping or in death.

Mood What words in this passage suggest danger?

"These vaults," he said, "are extensive."

"The Montresors," I replied, "were a great and numerous family."

"I forget your arms."

"A huge human foot d'or, in a field azure; the foot crushes a serpent rampant¹⁴ whose fangs are imbedded in the heel."

"And the motto?"

"*Nemo me impune lacessit.*"¹⁵

"Good!" he said.

The wine sparkled in his eyes and the bells jingled. My own fancy grew warm with the Medoc. We had passed through walls of piled bones, with casks and puncheons¹⁶ intermingling, into the inmost recesses of the catacombs. I paused again, and this time I made bold to seize Fortunato by an arm above the elbow.

"The niter!" 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. But first, another draft of the Medoc."

I broke and reached him a flagon¹⁷ of De Grâve. He emptied it at a breath. His eyes flashed with a fierce light. He laughed



Visual Vocabulary

Arms is short for "coat of arms," an arrangement of figures and symbols on or around a shield that, along with a motto, represents one's ancestry.

14. The Montresor family's coat of arms includes a golden foot on a sky-blue background and a snake rising up.

15. The *motto* is Latin for "Nobody provokes me with impunity."

16. *Casks* and *puncheons* are large containers for storing liquids.

17. The *flagon* is a narrow-necked bottle with a handle.

Matters of Life and Death How do these details add to the growing sense of entrapment in the story?



and threw the bottle upward with a gesticulation I did not understand.

I looked at him in surprise. He repeated the movement—a grotesque one.

“You do not comprehend?” he said.

“Not I,” I replied.

“Then you are not of the brotherhood.”

“How?”

“You are not of the masons.”¹⁸

“Yes, yes,” I said; “yes, yes.”

“You? Impossible! A mason?”

“A mason,” I replied.

“A sign,” he said.

“It is this,” I answered, producing a trowel from beneath the folds of my *roquelaure*.

“You jest,” he exclaimed, recoiling a few paces. “But let us proceed to the Amontillado.”

“Be it so,” I said, replacing the tool beneath the cloak, and again offering him my arm. He leaned upon it heavily.

We continued our route in search of the Amontillado. We passed through a range of low arches, descended, passed on, and descending again, arrived at a deep crypt,¹⁹ in which the foulness of the air caused our flambeaux rather to glow than flame.

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 thus exposed by the displacing of the bones, we perceived a still interior recess, in depth about four feet, in width three, in height six or seven. It seemed to have been constructed for no especial use within itself, but formed merely

18. Here, *masons* is short for “Freemasons,” an organization of stonemasons and bricklayers that was formed in the Middle Ages. By the time of this story, the masons had become a social group with secret rituals and signs.

19. A *crypt* is a burial chamber.

Mood What emotion does the description in this paragraph create?

the interval between two of the colossal supports of the roof of the catacombs, and was backed by one of their circumscribing walls of solid granite.

It was in vain that Fortunato, uplifting his dull torch, endeavored to pry²⁰ into the depth of the recess. Its termination the feeble light did not enable us to see.

“Proceed,” I said; “herein is the Amontillado. As for Luchesi——”

“He is an ignoramus,” interrupted my friend, as he stepped unsteadily forward, while I followed immediately at his heels. In an instant he had reached the extremity of the niche,²¹ and finding his progress arrested by the rock, stood stupidly bewildered. A moment more and I had fettered²² him to the granite. In its surface were two iron staples, distant from each other about two feet, horizontally. From one of these depended a short chain, from the other a padlock. Throwing the links about his waist, it was but the work of a few seconds to secure it. He was too much astounded to resist. Withdrawing the key I stepped back from the recess.

“Pass your hand,” I said, “over the wall; you cannot help feeling the niter. Indeed it is *very damp*. Once more let me **implore** you to return. No? Then I must positively

leave you. But I must first render you all the little attentions in my power.”

“The Amontillado!” ejaculated my friend, not yet recovered from his astonishment.

“True,” I replied; “the Amontillado.”

As I said these words I busied myself among the pile of bones of which I have before spoken. Throwing them aside, I soon uncovered a quantity of building stone and mortar. With these materials and with the aid of my trowel, I began vigorously to wall up the entrance of the niche.

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 moaning 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; and then I heard the furious vibrations of the chain. 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. When at last the clanking subsided, I resumed the trowel, and finished without interruption the fifth, the sixth, and the seventh tier. The wall was now nearly upon a level with my breast. I again paused, and holding the flambeaux over the mason-work, threw a few feeble rays upon the figure within.

A succession of loud and shrill screams, bursting suddenly from the throat of the chained form, seemed to thrust me violently

“Indeed it is
very damp.”

20. Here, *pry* means “to look closely; peer.”

21. Here, the *extremity of the niche* (nich) is the farthest spot inside the recess.

22. *Fettered* means “bound with chains or shackles; restrained.”

Paraphrase Restate these sentences in your own words.

Vocabulary

implore (im plôr') *v.* to ask earnestly; to beg

Matters of Life and Death What does Fortunato finally realize?



Visual Vocabulary

A *rapier* (rā' pē ə) is a long, light-weight sword with a sharp point but no cutting edge.

back. 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.

It was now midnight, and my task was drawing to a close. I had completed the eighth, the ninth, and the tenth tier. I had finished a portion of the last and the eleventh; there remained but a single stone to be fitted and plastered in. I struggled with its weight; I placed it partially in its destined²³ position. But now there came from out the niche a low laugh that erected the hairs upon my head. It was succeeded by a sad voice, which I had difficulty in recognizing as that of the noble Fortunato. The voice said—

“For the love of God, Montresor!”

“Ha! ha! ha!—he! he!—a very good joke indeed—an excellent jest. We will have many a rich laugh about it at the palazzo—he! he! he!—over our wine—he! he! he!”

“The Amontillado!” I said.

“He! he! he!—he! he! he!—yes, the Amontillado. But is it not getting late? Will not they be awaiting us at the palazzo, the Lady Fortunato and the rest? 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!”

But to these words I hearkened in vain for a reply. I grew impatient. I called aloud: “Fortunato!”

No answer. I called again:

“Fortunato!”

No answer still. I thrust a torch through the remaining aperture and let it fall

within. 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. Against

the new masonry I re-erected the old rampart²⁴ of bones. For the half of a century no mortal has disturbed them. *In pace requiescat!*²⁵ 

23. Here, *destined* means “intended for a particular purpose or use.”

24. A *rampart* is a protective barrier or fortification.

25. *In pace requiescat* (in pä'chā rek'wē es kät') is Latin for “May he rest in peace.”

Paraphrase Restate these lines, and then explain why Montresor is doing what he is doing.