

Seeing Poe's Fight with Alcoholism through his Stories "The Black Cat" and "The Cask of Amontillado"

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Edgar Allen Poe's stories "The Black Cat" and "The Cask of Amontillado" are among his most popular. Both of these stories can be read on several different levels causing everyone who reads them to come up with a totally different interpretations, yet none of the interpretations I have read seem satisfying. The two stories at first seem simple enough, with "The Black Cat" reading as a darker version of "The Telltale Heart", this time with the conscience given a physical form, and "The Cask of Amontillado" as a chilling tale of revenge exacted told as a deathbed confession. Yet these simple interpretations leave too many questions. Many reviewers unfairly single Poe's works out as coming directly from his subconscious, ignoring not only how carefully Poe chose his words and phrases but also the sources that inspired the stories (E A Poe Society, "Autobiography"). That being said, I think Poe did deliberately use his stories as a kind of self-therapy thus revealing at least a little about himself. A large constant in Poe's life was his fight with alcohol, which made itself known in his writing in many ways.

The main theme of Edgar Allen Poe's stories "The Black Cat" and "The Cask of Amontillado" centers on the narrators' attempts to wall off, or suppress, his alcoholism, with the narrator succeeding over alcoholism in "The Cask of Amontillado" while the narrator of "The Black Cat" succumbs to alcohol and is destroyed. As a last step I will show that the reason these two stories came to such different conclusions is mirrored in

Poe's attempts to suppress his own alcoholism during the periods of time in which each of these stories was written.

The use of alcohol is very prominent in Poe's story "The Black Cat" which can be read as a morality tale on the evils of alcohol. The narrator goes from being a very kind and gentle lover of animals to being a vicious monster that maims and kills helpless animals and ends up being a remorseless murderer, all because of his "Intemperance" (Poe, "Cat"), or alcoholism. The narrator committed atrocities, such as cutting out Pluto's eye, while under the influence of alcohol and admitted to physically abusing his wife as he sunk lower into alcoholism's grasp. Alcohol not only caused the narrator to destroy everything he knew and loved but ended with his self-destruction (Poe, "Cat").

The narrator in "The Black Cat" claims to be giving a confession, to unburden his soul (Poe, "Cat"), yet really he is blaming his alcoholism for his crimes. From the very beginning the narrator is trying to duck blame as he explains he will give as evidence "household events" that have "destroyed" him (Poe, "Cat"). He goes on to explain how his temperament had changed through alcoholism, even having the insight to call it a disease. After every cruel act the narrator tries to feel bad but cannot, he says his "soul remained untouched" (Poe, "Cat"). After describing his own remorseless murder of his wife, he speaks first of the cat's scream as arising from the demons in hell and then of the cat itself as "the hideous beast whose craft had seduced me into murder" (Poe, "Cat"). In other words, he blames the cat for the murder! It is also obvious that he seems to think of the cat as a demon looking for his downfall despite his earlier denial. Alcohol is often

called a demon and the narrator in “The Black Cat” talks about “the Fiend Intemperance” (Poe, “Cat”). The narrator even talks about the “fury demon” that possessed him, a “gin-nurtured fiendish malevolence” when he maimed the cat (Poe, “Cat”) and a rage that was “more than demonical” when he murdered his wife (Poe, “Cat”). Taking all of the narrator’s words together we find that he thinks of alcohol as a demon that possesses man, he sees that demon in himself, even to the point of exceeding the demons, and he finally blames the murder and his downfall on a demon. Although the narrator is confusing them in his mind, he is really talking about the same thing – the demon of alcohol possessed him leading him to murder. We can also see from this failed confession many signs of his alcoholism. The fact that he refuses to take responsibility is actually quite understandable since that is one characteristic of an alcoholic (NMHA). The narrator also only sees the harm done to himself in the story, almost ignoring the life that he took, self-centeredness being another characteristic of an alcoholic (NMHA).

Looking at the sources for “The Cask of Amontillado” we can see that this tale full of puns and double meanings was meant to be written almost as a joke, but a joke with a point to be made about alcoholism. According to Fisher Poe borrowed from his own work “Bon-Bon (11,12), a story about a man who escaped the devil by becoming too intoxicated, the significance which is increased when we look at another source for “The Cask of Amontillado”. Poe was known to borrow from other sources (E A Poe Society, “Autobiography”) and so, as Shurr points out, it cannot be seen as a coincidence that an English translation of a Benjamin Franklin short story, a joke originally written in French which works on several levels about a deathbed confession from a man named Montresor

who believed he had a place in heaven despite being an atheist, i.e., that he escaped from the devil, was published a short time before “The Cask of Amontillado” (28, 29). “The Cask of Amontillado” seems to be a multi-leveled joke based on these two works and yet there seems to be an incongruity – Fortuna does not escape. This incongruity taken together with the fact that Montresor seems to get away with the crime, adds up to an even larger incongruity – in every other instance of Poe’s horror either the “good guy” escapes, i.e., in “The Premature Burial” and “The Pit and the Pendulum”, or the “bad guy” gets caught, i.e. in “Telltale Heart” and “The Black Cat”. That is, there is a sense of divine justice in Poe. Except for “The Cask of Amontillado”. That is unless we read this story with Montresor as being the “good guy” and the drunken Fortuna as the “bad guy”. To see why Fortuna is so bad we can look at the use of alcohol. We also need to understand that most of Poe’s humor and satire was making fun of excess (E A Poe Society, “Humor”). “The Cask of Amontillado” drips with references and jokes about alcohol and yet, if you read carefully, Montresor never drinks a drop throughout. At one point he responds to Fortuna’s toast with the ironic “And I to your long life.”(Poe, “Cask” 217) and yet, despite how detailed Poe made the story, it is never said that Fortuna handed the narrator the bottle or that the narrator actually drank. You may refute this with the sentence “My own fancy grew warm with the Medoc.” (Poe, “Cask” 217) unless you read this sentence as “The effects of the Medoc on Fortuna heartened me”. This over indulgence leads to Fortuna’s downfall – he could have saved himself yet was led by his lust for alcohol to his death. Fortuna, with his great excess of drinking, is the butt of Poe’s dark jokes and the victim of his own alcoholism, setting the moral tone of alcohol leading to ruination. This interpretation of the story helps answers a great

incongruity of the piece – if Montresor’s revenge on Fortuna is read as his triumph over alcohol we retain Poe’s almost poetic sense of divine justice.

Fortuna represented the physical manifestation of the narrator’s alcoholism which he finally triumphed over and suppressed. Reading through the story we quickly see that Montresor and Fortuna often mirror each other. When one speaks, the other often echoes the words, though usually with different and often ironic meaning (Sweet 10). We can also see both men as being very much the same in many other ways. They are both very wealthy and come from old families. Montresor is named for an Italian fine wine while Fortuna is defined by wine. Through another irony they both call themselves “masons”. They both consider themselves connoisseurs while they prove themselves false connoisseurs, or at least Fortuna is false: they are self-proclaimed experts at Italian wines while only French and Spanish wines are mentioned in the story (Shurr 29; Sweet 10, 11); Fortuna is drunk, while a true connoisseur never lets himself drink to excess; Fortuna twice states that Luchresi “cannot distinguish Sherry from Amontillado”(Poe, “Cask” 217) even though Amontillado is Sherry. The mirror image is not totally perfect. Fortuna is dressed as a fool while Montresor is dressed in a black mask, possibly as an executioner. Also Fortuna is drunk and continues to drink while Montresor stays sober (the connoisseur who does not drink). Montresor calls Fortuna happy while claiming he himself was unhappy, implying this unhappiness was caused by the “thousand injuries”. There are other details that seem to point to Fortuna’s role as the physical manifestation of Montresor’s alcoholism. Would Montresor place a dreaded enemy in the respected crypt of his ancestors, or would he more likely bury a part of himself there? Fortuna’s

lust for alcohol causes his downfall for he could have saved himself many times but alcohol was so much his character that Fortuna would literally die for it. The name “Fortuna” is very interesting. We can take it as meaning “great wealth” since Fortuna was a very rich man. We can also see it as luck, in Fortuna’s case as the end of previous good luck. We might also read it as “fortune” meaning “future”, “fate” or “destiny”, as in the phrase “O Fortuna”. In this case it could mean Fortuna’s fate of being buried alive amongst Montresor’s family or the destiny Montresor felt he was escaping. Another reading of “Fortuna” might be a play on luck in that Fortuna represented Montresor’s “happy-go-lucky” side, his foolish side (he is even dressed as a fool), his less sober side – his alcoholic side. It is this alcoholic side Montresor is trying to bury.

Like “The Black Cat”, “The Cask of Amontillado” is also written as a confession with the narrator seeming unrepentant. Taking Fortuna as the physical representation of Montresor’s alcoholism solves this the problem of Montresor’s triumphant tone in his confession – he uses this tone because he is really relating his triumph over alcoholism and the destiny he would have endured if he had not suppressed the urge to drink. As Shurr reminds us, there has been much debate about Poe’s reason for making Montresor’s deathbed confession in “The Cask of Amontillado” read so much like a triumphal boast (28). Rock’s interpretation of this tone of triumph as Montresor relating to the priest (or even, as Burns claims, Montresor’s buried relatives (19)) his Catholic revenge (and Italian revenge so much a part of mid 19th century literature) against an admitted Mason Fortuna (50) rings false because it ignores so many details of the story. The mention of “Mason” mostly seems to have been included to give Poe another irony that, together

with the revenge theme, seems to be just a backdrop, a detail of the wider story, much in the same way as Poe's borrowing from his own previous works for this story, i.e. "The Premature Burial" and "The Black Cat", are just details and have little to do with the main theme. If read as Montresor's triumph over alcohol the narrator's tone can very easily be understood.

As Fortuna represented Montresor's alcoholism, the cat in "The Black Cat" represents the unnamed narrator's alcoholism. Although Poe uses the cat to represent different aspects of the narrator throughout, it is this representation that becomes most important to the final meaning of the work. The narrator loses his love of his other pets, as an alcoholic loses his love for everything but alcohol (NMHA). The cat bites the narrator in warning, not causing harm, but causing alarm, which forces the narrator, in his drunken state of mind, to take drastic the action of maiming the cat, trying to exert control over it. Maiming the cat only makes the narrator continue to feel worse until, confusing the source of his guilt with the guilt itself, he hangs the cat. If we take the cat as representing alcoholism, the narrator gets in trouble over alcohol and tries to cut back only to feel worse. He then tries to end his alcoholism all together and go "cold turkey". This, of course leads to longing and pain, both for the alcoholic and the former cat lover, and yet there is no remorse. He needs to bring it, either the cat or the alcohol, back into his life even though he knows it will only cause pain. Significantly he finds the second cat in a tavern. Bringing the cat/alcohol home gives it power over the narrator while appearing innocent. The cat, being the wife's favorite, reminds the narrator of what he once was and what he had lost. It also brings back all of the guilty associations over the original

cat, Pluto. The narrator feels himself almost possessed by the cat and begins to feel desperate to free himself from its spell. In the sixth paragraph of the story the narrator admits that alcohol controlled his life (Poe, "Cat"). He must have been desperate to rid himself of the problem and all reminders of his previous, happy self. In the end he tries to end it for good, destroying both the perceived problem and his past, walling them up in subconscious (or his cellar). Yet the "problem" comes back to haunt him and bring about his ruin. Repression rarely works and in this case led to the narrator's downfall.

Further understanding of "The Black Cat" can be gained by looking at Poe's use of the words "eye" and "eyes". Poe often uses "eye" or "eyes" to mean the conscience. He also uses the terms to refer to the "all-seeing eye of God". The idea of the eye as the window to the soul is also not foreign to Mr. Poe. In "The Black Cat" the use of "eye" as the conscience is the most obvious yet not the only way it could be seen. Another way that "eye" is used goes back to the mythology of Western Europe. In Western European pagan mythology many gods and sorcerers have only one eye, usually because they gave up an eye to gain knowledge. The black cat only having one eye makes it stand out even more as an evil spirit. The cat's eye is also the all-seeing eye; the narrator committed every crime under its stare, and in turn the owner of the eye brought down divine retribution on the narrator. I think Poe, who seemed to love multiple meanings (E A Poe Society, "Humor"), even took it a step farther and used the cat's eye as a window into the soul of the narrator. More than just the window into the narrator's soul, he seemed to combine all of the ideas into one unified whole - looking into the fiery eye of this demon that feeds on the head of knowledge (the narrator's wife) we can see the demon of

alcohol in the narrator's soul, "the beast whose craft had seduced" the narrator "into murder" (Poe, "Cat").

The use of the word "eye" is less prominent in "The Cask of Amontillado", though here too it is important in understanding the story. Shortly after following Montresor into the catacombs Fortuna looks into Montresor's "eyes with two filmy orbs that distilled the rheum of intoxication" (Poe, "Cask" 216). "The wine sparkled in his eyes" after drinking the first bottle of Medoc (Poe, "Cask 217). After downing the second bottle of Bordeaux (the ironic De Grave (the real wine has an "s" on the end)) Fortuna's "eyes flashed with a fierce light" (Poe, "Cask 217). In other words, the more he drank the more of a light came into his eyes. For Fortuna the eyes represent the window to the soul of the alcoholic - he comes alive only with drink. Since Fortuna is a mirror image of Montresor, or at least a part of Montresor that he hated in himself, we can see Fortuna as Montresor's own alcoholic tendencies which he is trying to kill and bury.

The walling in of Fortuna into a crypt beneath Montresor's house represented the suppression of Montresor's alcoholism. As Sweet points out, in Poe house equals mind and the cellar is the subconscious (11). Far from condemning the narrator, the walling off frees him. Looking at the victim, Fortuna is much more concerned over drinking alcohol than his own health, a sign of an alcoholic (NMHA) and he walks willingly into his tomb, his cell (as another ironic pun Womack points out that "In pace" in the last line "In pace requiescat!" also refers to a very secure monastic prison (Womack)).

Walling off the victims in “The Black Cat” also has associations with the narrator’s attempts to suppress his alcoholic tendencies. What exactly did the narrator put behind the false wall? Freshnell claims the wife represents the narrator before his fall and also represents destruction of his rationality or reason when she is murdered (44). By walling her in, the narrator tries to free himself from not only his past, but also his capability to reason, thus finishing the job of destroying his humanity (Freshnell 44). He, of course, acts very irrationally afterwards. The cat, which represents the narrator’s alcoholism, is also walled in. The narrator is desperately trying to free himself of both the cat and his alcoholism. He knows he is becoming irrational and violent and hates himself for it. Only by destroying the cat, or the alcoholism, does he feel he can truly be free. Although he means to destroy the cat, or the alcoholism, the best he can do is wall it in and suppress it. This seems to solve the problem, yet it is still there, even if buried and it finally comes back to haunt him and condemn him

We can easily see the “The Black Cat” as a story about a man being ruined by alcoholism, an unshakable demon that haunts him no matter how hard he tries to escape its grasp, no matter how hard he tries to suppress the urges of his alcoholism. We see that the alcohol strips the man of all humanity with the narrator committing a worse crime each time a layer of his humanity is stripped away. Yet when he tries to hide it or destroy it, like a demon it comes back. The narrator feels he is fighting a supernatural power, which alcoholism can seem to be to its victim. No matter how often the narrator tried to kill the cat and how deeply he buries it, it always came back to his (the narrator’s) ruin. If seen as alcohol, that is much how some view this disease. Once an alcoholic always an

alcoholic, or, in the narrator's own words "for what disease is like Alcohol!" (Poe, "Cat"). It takes a very strong person to break it on his/her own without outside help. Even with outside help many can't conquer the "demon". The narrator finally succumbs to the disease and is destroyed by it.

The story "The Cask of Amontillado" makes the most sense when seen as a story about the narrator conquering alcoholism. Alcohol made a fool of the narrator, gave him a thousand injuries finally delivering an unforgivable insult (Poe, "Cask" 216). The narrator finally got the best of alcoholism, burying it with his relatives in the crypt (alcoholism is often genetic) and goes on to live a long and happy life. The narrator is proud of this conquest, as he should be if it is really about alcohol. Montresor escaped his alcoholic destiny, the destiny that hung over (and literally hung) the narrator of the "The Black Cat".

Unfortunately this interpretation leaves a large unanswered question. Although these stories are both about the suppression of alcohol in the narrator, the outcomes are so different – in "The Black Cat" after trying to suppress it the narrator succumbs to his alcoholism and is destroyed while in "The Cask of Amontillado" the narrator escapes his fate and conquers his alcoholism. If Poe was trying to make a point about alcoholism, why did he come to such contradictory conclusions with these two stories?

The reason Poe gave these two stories such different outcomes has to do with the role of alcohol in his life at the time each of these stories was written. In the next three

paragraphs I will place these stories in their historical context to show how much Poe's state of mind with regards to alcohol influenced the outcomes of these stories.

To understand how these stories relate to Poe's life we must understand that, unlike the popular belief, Poe was not a constant user of alcohol. The myth that Poe was fall-down drunk most of the time is based largely on stories told many years after his death, mostly by his enemies. During Poe's lifetime many stories were circulated about his use of alcohol, but most can be proved false by contemporary accounts from those who were close to him during these supposed indiscretions. Also, since even small amounts of alcohol made Poe physically sick, many have taken every slight sickness in Poe's life as a sign that he had been imbibing. The truth is there were long periods when he was sober, often years, followed by short periods of terrible binges. During these binges, sometimes lasting days, sometimes weeks, Poe would lose control and occasionally become fall-down drunk. He knew himself an alcoholic and tried, sometimes unsuccessfully, to control this tendency. Poe's father and brother were both alcoholics so it is very probable that it was a genetic predisposition (A E Poe Society, "Alcohol").

Alcohol seems to gain the upper hand in "The Black Cat" because alcohol had the upper hand in Poe's life at the time the story was written. The story "The Black Cat" was published in 1843. At this time Poe was in the midst of one of his longest and worst series of binges (A E Poe Society, "Alcohol"). His wife, Virginia, had a prolonged sickness and Poe coped (or was unable to cope) by being almost constantly inebriated. Poe understood and hated his alcoholism and during this period he continually swore off

alcohol only to “fall of the wagon” and resume drinking. He later wrote of his desperation during this time period stating, “I had, indeed, nearly abandoned all hope of a permanent cure” for his alcoholism (qtd in A E Poe Society, “Alcohol”). In 1843 an old friend of Poe, Lambert A. Wilmer, stated his belief that Poe was “going headlong to destruction” (qtd in A E Poe Society, “Alcohol”). There is even an 1843 letter from Poe apologizing for his drunken behavior (A E Poe Society, “Alcohol”).

“The Cask of Amontillado” was written in November of 1846 when Poe was in one his more sober periods, which seems to have effect the story’s tone. Although the string of binges that had begun in 1842 officially ended with the death of Poe’s wife Virginia in January of 1847, there is no evidence Poe drank during 1846. The few cases in 1846 claiming Poe was drunk came from third party sources while witnesses to these events claim Poe was sober (A E Poe Society, “Alcohol”). In 1846 Poe even won a court case for slander when a paper published a report that Poe had been drunk while giving a speech (A E Poe Society, “Alcohol”). Poe took his sobriety so seriously in this period that in 1849 he joined the Sons of Temperance, Shockoe Hill Division, in Richmond VA (A E Poe Society, “Alcohol”). If Poe was unable to suppress his alcoholic tendencies when he wrote the “The Black Cat”, he seems to have found a way when he wrote “The Cask of Amontillado”. He may have written “The Cask of Amontillado” to triumphantly show his mastery over the disease, much as the narrator of the story, Montresor, seems to be telling the story to show his triumph over Fortuna.

The “The Black Cat” and the “The Cask of Amontillado” share many surface similarities – both are written in the first person by a murderer that bricks his victim into the wall of his cellar. Another similarity is that both stories seem to make the most sense when interpreted as the narrators’ fight with, and attempt to suppress, alcohol and alcoholism. There is, however, also a big difference between the two – the narrator of the “The Black Cat” is brought to justice for his crimes while the narrator of the “The Cask of Amontillado” lives a long and happy life, i.e., in “The Black Cat” the narrator is unsuccessful in repressing his alcoholism while in “The Cask of Amontillado” the narrator is successful. By looking at the details of the stories and of Poe’s life we can understand that the differences between the stories seem to relate to the different ways Poe related to his alcoholism at different periods in his life.

Notes

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