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Poe's Unexpected Gothic Comedy In *The Cask of Amontillado*

Edgar Allen Poe's *The Cask of Amontillado* is one of the author's most renowned gothic tales, though there is much debate over how it should be interpreted. Unlike most of Poe's gothic texts, it contains several comic elements, raising the question whether or not the story should be read 'seriously'. I suggest that no singularly directed reading is the proper approach, and that both the comic and the serious gothic readings must be considered simultaneously to experience the stories full effect. Furthermore, I argue that the comic elements in the tale exist deliberately to evoke laughter and amusement from the reader, an otherwise natural reaction that Poe transforms into abjection by the story's end. By turning the reader's laughter against them, Poe is able to stress the tale's gothic elements in an unexpected manner.

Before exploring *The Cask of Amontillado*'s comic elements, I should first outline what I mean by the term 'abject'. Abjection in this sense is best described by Julia Kristeva in her essay "Powers of Horror", where she defines it as something of us (the human body or humanity in general) that we try to reject and are simultaneously frightened by the existence of. Kristeva summarizes this reaction as "Not me. Not that." (Kristeva 2). While Kristeva's examples of things that cause abjection include corpses and bodily fluids/refuse, the definition can be applied to anything that comes from us and correspondingly makes us uncomfortable.

In preparation of discussing the story's comic elements in terms of structure and language, it is first pertinent to examine the comic heritage of the main characters. The tale is set

within “the supreme madness of the carnival season” and Fortunato is appropriately dressed as a jester for the festivities (Poe 667). In his essay “The Use and Importance of the Comic in the works of Edgar Allen Poe” César Coria equates Fortunato’s appearance and general behavior with the *Comedia dell’arte* personage of ‘Batocio’, a slapstick jester figure associated with bells and the ridicule of others. Montresor is correspondingly compared to the melancholic personage ‘Pulchinella’, who is reflexive and philosophical. The relationship between the two presents a classic *Comedia* situation: the act of turning the ridicule against the ridiculer. Aside from overt suggestions that Montresor’s revenge will be violent in nature, the tale is almost entirely framed as a jest, or what John Clendenning calls a “burlesque joke” in his article “Anything Goes: Comic Aspects in 'The Cask of Amontillado'” (Clendenning 24). Clendenning reinforces Montresor and Fortunato’s roles as comic characters by pointing out since they “mistreat” the wines (in consumption, apparent storage, and in the case of Montresor as the narrator, spelling) that they both claim to be experts about, they are ironic and therefore comic authority figures meant to be laughed at (24). Poe’s use of comic irony extends much deeper than his portrayals of his main characters, however.

Present in both the narrative premise and much of the dialogue, irony constitutes *The Cask of Amontillado*’s most prominent comic device. In the first sentence of the tale, Montresor establishes his desire for revenge against Fortunato due to some unknown “insult” that has been done to him (Poe 666). The details that Montresor provides further set the scene before the narrative action truly begins: Fortunato is portrayed as a fool who drinks too much and suspects no ill-will, and the revenge-killing has been meticulously plotted against such that Montresor will never be implicated in the crime. Placing these details at the beginning of the tale privileges the reader with more information than Fortunato has access to, and creates an environment of

dramatic irony perfect for comedy. It is also worthwhile to mention that since Montresor is the only voice that the reader encounters through the opening of the tale, the fee for entry into the narrative, so to speak, is some level of acceptance of his worldview. In the most face-value reading, the reader enters the narrative acknowledging that Montresor has indeed been wronged, his revenge is fully justified, Montresor is smarter than Fortunato, and that Fortunato deserves what he has coming to him. Though the reader certainly need not ascribe to everything Montresor asserts at the beginning of the tale, his biases as narrator nonetheless force a closer alignment to him than Fortunato, and cause everything Fortunato does (and everything said about him) to be interpreted in relation to Montresor.

With the opening of the tale thus established, everything that is said by either of the characters (including Montresor in the figure of the narrator) is considered through both its literal meaning, as well as any potential double meaning with relation to the impending plotted revenge. This trend is seen within the first few lines of narrative action, as Fortunato accosts Montresor with “excessive warmth” and then Montresor replies that Fortunato is “luckily met” (667). As previously mentioned, the comic elements in this situation derive from Fortunato’s lack of knowledge, for if he knew of the plot at hand he certainly would not embrace his would-be assassin, nor would he consider himself lucky to meet him. This theme of ironic double-meaning follows the narrative action nearly to its completion, and increases in strength along the way to amplify the comic effect, at times nearing absurdity. Along the way to the ‘cask’, for example, the two characters discuss the Montresor family coat of arms, which Montresor states portrays a heel crushing a snake, an image which corresponds to the family motto “Nemo me impune lacessit” (loosely translated to ‘No one provokes me with impunity’) (669). Here Montresor essentially says the same words to Fortunato that he as the narrator relates to the reader to

announce and justify his revenge plot at the beginning of the tale, but Fortunato is blind to the statement's target. The comedy of Fortunato's obliviousness is further compounded by his insistence to continue on their journey, despite his apparent illness and Montresor's repeated entreaties to turn back. From Montresor's and the reader's position, Fortunato's repeated requests to continue equate to him asking to die again and again, as Montresor advises him against it all the while.

The ironies inherent to the scenes that show Fortunato's resolution to continue connect to another comic tool that Poe employs through his language: repetition. There are a number of words that are repeated numerous times through *The Cask of Amontillado* which serve either a direct comic purpose, or develop an environment of comic timing. The word that is repeated most frequently through the tale, unsurprisingly, is 'Amontillado'. Aside from the cask being the main driving point of the narrative action, the repetition of this word has a comic effect due to the previously discussed theme of double-meanings. When Fortunato says 'Amontillado' he refers to wine, while when Montresor does the word instead means murder. The comedy of this miscommunication comes to a head near the conclusion of the tale when the dialogue between the characters devolves to nearly single words: "'The Amontillado!' I said. 'He! he! he! [...] yes, the Amontillado [he said]'" (671). Though the exchange consists of only two words (nervous laughter notwithstanding), the meanings are many. The numerous 'he's in this quote are also an example repetition, though in this case it's utilized for timing and drawing out the moment for comic effect. A more direct use of this type of repetition is found earlier in the tale when Fortunato suffers a coughing fit. The word 'Ugh' is repeated fifteen times over, and the fit supposedly lasts "for many minutes" (668). Considering how long this scene is drawn out for

(both for the reader, and in terms of narrative time), Fortunato's immediate assertion afterward that "It is nothing" is a comic falsehood that exaggerates his foolhardy stubbornness (668).

Having taken inventory of the prominent comic elements that constitute the majority of *The Cask of Amontillado*, the conclusion seems inappropriately brutal by comparison. The tale's more lighthearted comic elements like ironic duplicitous puns and winks to the reader presuppose a similarly lighthearted ending, but as soon as Fortunato is chained into the niche and Montresor starts laying bricks there is an apparent tonal shift. There are no more puns like Montresor drinking to Fortunato's "long life", or Fortunato assuring Montresor that his cough will not be the death of him (668-9). All jesting is drowned out by Fortunato's "loud and shrill" screaming, and Montresor's wit is exchanged for a fearful determination (671). As Montresor lays the final bricks and admires his work, the transition is completed; the tale has become something else entirely. Here I will pull Kristeva's abject back into the conversation and suggest that this unease at the tale's seemed new direction is exactly what Poe was trying to achieve from the beginning.

Let me clarify and assert that the tale's eventual landing point should not necessarily detract from its comic elements. Up until the bricks and mortar are revealed, the story is meant to be funny; Poe wants us to laugh and feel good about doing it. When Fortunato is being walled-up, however, the reality of the situation starts to sink in. It must not be forgotten that Montresor announces his intentions from the tale's outset. The reader is fully aware of what he intends to do the entire time he is leading Fortunato on, though the comic elements work to obscure the gravity of the situation. Once the comic 'shroud' is dropped in the final paragraphs, the full cost of all the jokes had at Fortunato's expense becomes clear. The reader has been laughing at a grisly murder and now there's no turning back. Coria regards the reaction to the conclusion as "an

uncomfortable feeling of guilt” that comes along with the realization that the reader has been “deceived” into thinking the tale was something it is not (Coria 214-5). I disagree with Coria’s claim because Montresor’s intentions are too transparent throughout the narrative to warrant a deception: the reader is in on the murder from the start. Instead of guilt, I think this realization is best described by Kristeva as “a massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness” (Kristeva 2). The laughter had earlier in the tale is abruptly viewed as something foreign and unclean. *Normal people* don’t laugh at serious depictions of murder! Just as Montresor “[grows] sick” momentarily when he reflects on what he’s done, so too does the reader (Poe 671). The horror of the situation is amplified by the reader’s earlier bemused complaisance. Laughter had at Fortunato’s expense becomes the abject.

Considering the question of whether *The Cask of Amontillado* should be regarded as a comic or a horror tale, my answer is: yes. The many comic elements in the tale are too prominent to ignore, while the ending is too brutal and tonally different from the rest of the work to be considered comic. I argue that this juxtaposition is a deliberate choice by Poe to generate feelings of discomfort and abjection in the reader. Poe takes great care to write a (mostly) comic tale, and then turns the natural reaction to it, laughter, against the reader and makes it something grotesque, making the conclusion all the more frightening. At the end of the tale the reader is forced to realize that the joke wasn’t on Fortunato at all - it was on them.

Works Cited

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