
Evaluation of the Role of Montresor in Edgar Allan Poe's Story, The Cask of Amontillado

Movies based on murders are commonplace nowadays, with our society's obsession with gory violence and sophisticated crimes. In a way we worship the likes of Hannibal Lecter, John Doe, and Norman Bates for their stories' complex schemes, intense plots, and witty lines, leaving us yearning for more, wanting to see their next victim inhumanely treated and killed. All of these serial killers have psychopathic tendencies, killing out of pleasure and happiness. And we love it. The insanity of these perpetrators is our bait. At first glance of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado," the murderer Montresor seems to join the ranks amongst the most vicious criminals; however, once the adrenaline of the crime wears, the humane side of the Italian gentleman shows. He becomes ridden with guilt as any person with sympathy would. Because of this glimmer of the true Montresor, we as the readers do not get the effect of a horror story revolving around a psychopathic murderer, but rather a story with a moral: "Think before you do."

Montresor's murder conspiracy parallels that of one of the most popular and gory horror movies of all time *Saw*. In *Saw*, the Jigsaw Killer (the killer in the story) is a terminally ill brain cancer patient whose objective in the remainder of his life is to eradicate all wrongdoing in the world. In the movie, all of his victims are people he has personally had contact with, such as the protagonists: Adam and Dr. Gordon (the man who treated the Jigsaw Killer). Similarly, Fortunato and Montresor had been acquaintances for quite some time and that Fortunato had committed "a thousand injuries" (Poe 62). In *Saw* the Jigsaw Killer chains the men in an unused bathroom with no chance of escape. The only way to survive is to follow his instructions closely and do everything he demands, including killing each other with poison and cutting their feet off in order to liberate themselves from the chain. In the "Cask of Amontillado," Montresor vows a violent revenge upon his enemy saying, "I must not only punish, but punish with impunity" (62). The use of impunity implies that Montresor will carefully plan his act ensuring that he will remain safe and unscathed from the authorities. Montresor's simple although effective plan ensues in the narration. He uses a cask of amontillado as his bait and lures a drunk and unwitting Fortunato. Fortunato, with his love of drink cannot refuse this offer and blindly follows his captor into the crypts deep beneath the surface. Eventually, Montresor finds a niche where he chains Fortunato and walls him in, similar to the bathroom in "Saw." Similarly, the murders in both stories give their victims an opportunity to escape. The Jigsaw killer gives Dr. Gordon the option to kill Adam by 6 o'clock and he will be set free. Montresor repeatedly warns Fortunato the dangers of the cold and damp catacombs inferring that he may become ill. Fortunato, like Dr. Gordon, refuses these opportunities and thus allows the bloodshed to develop. The similarity between *Saw* and "Cask of Amontillado" are striking. Both share the same characteristics of a horror movie in which the antagonist grows close to the casualty, offering them salvation before the kill.

Despite the initial resemblance to *Saw*, the final of emotions of the killers are distinctly opposite. In the movie, the Jigsaw killer is calm and almost excited about killing the innocent people. In fact he had already committed several murders before the one of Adam and Dr. Gordon and continues to do so throughout the movie series. However, in the "Cask of Amontillado" a flicker of guilt is clearly seen in Montresor. Before laying the last brick of the wall to rest, Montresor cries out Fortunato's name to no avail. He tries it again,

'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 Catacombs. (67-8)

It is clear to the reader that Montresor's heart was not sick because of the Catacombs, but rather because he had realized the severity of his actions. The hesitation conveys a sense of self-reassurance of Montresor, who is telling himself that his actions were not horrific, but rather the setting was creating the nausea. Because of this guilt, "The Cask of Amontillado" cannot be classified in the genre of horror because the killer feels guilt in his murder. In reality, adrenaline drove Montresor to commit the crime, and unlike the Jigsaw Killer, he regretted his actions.

Since "The Cask of Amontillado" can no longer be classified as a horror movie,

due to the guilt of Montresor, the theme and genre of the story is drastically changed. Poe's work now fits the blueprint of a parable, or a story with a moral. During Poe's life, the Temperance Crusade was very popular. Its objective was to create an alcohol prohibition in the United States, and succeeded in doing so in the state of Maine. Poe's intention could have been to warn the reader of the dangers of alcohol and the poor decisions associated with drinking. A drunken Fortunato was easily convinced to follow his captor baited by more alcohol. However, this does not explain the emotions of Montresor, which were so clearly present and strong. Instead, Poe was trying to reinforce an age-old moral: "think before you do." One could argue that Montresor had precisely planned his scheme, and therefore he had thought carefully about his actions. However, this can be explained by the adrenaline. Adrenaline allows for excessive focus, energy, and excitement. Montresor was so overcome with adrenaline during his crime that he did not take into account the repercussions of his actions. Instead of Fortunato being blindly led by Montresor, it was in fact Montresor being blindly led by adrenaline. As Montresor lifted the final brick, preparing to seal the wall for eternity, he hesitated as he reflected on the situation. As he yelled out Fortunato's name, the effect of adrenaline had ended and the proceeding actions were all results of conscious decisions. Realizing that he had come too far and there was no turning back, Montresor had no choice but to finish the wall and avoid being charged with crime. Thus, Edgar Allen Poe was not attempting to write a story that would scare the reader, but rather one that would impact their decisions.

Despite the similarities in the beginning with the movie "Saw," "The Cask of Amontillado" lacks an antagonist that enjoys the act of murder in order to be classified as a horror or thriller movie like Saw. Instead it can be categorized as a parable, a story with a moral. Edgar Allen Poe wrote this story to remind the reader to always think before actually performing the action. In some scenarios adrenaline will override your decision-making much like alcohol would (a common problem at the time). The hormone adrenaline is often referred to as the "fight or flight" response, meaning it causes involuntary actions to occur without the brain having to process the stimulus. In this case, the adrenaline impaired Montresor's ability to process his actions. Poe selects a different method of teaching; rather than simply stating his thesis, he tells us in a creative way. It is extraordinary how much situational factors impact our decision-

making. It is important, as people, to be aware of our environment and that we do not put ourselves in situations in which our judgment may not be well advised.

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