

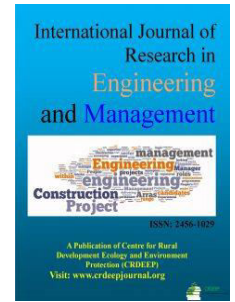
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Short Communication**Teaching American Short Stories to ESL Students: Cask of Amontillado as a Model****Ahmed Gouhar**

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ABSTRACT

In this short critical paper, Edgar Allen Poe's short story "The Cask of Amontillado" will be investigated from a formalistic perspective with an emphasis on the text of the story. Literary works are critically examined through various approaches. The kind of question we ask about a literary work and the way we answer it shapes our approach. Critics emphasize different aspects of the literary work through applying various critical approaches such as the rhetorical, generic, structuralist, Marxist, feminist, formalist, etc. This paper applies the formalist critical approach to the story to underline Poe's use of form as subordinate to meaning or as a vehicle for his ideas. Moreover, the paper analyzes the textual structure of the story, which is roughly divided into four parts: Exposition, conflict, climax and denouement.

Introduction

A careful reading of Poe's short story reveals his deep concern with words, phrases, style and diction. His concern with form is necessary in as much as he wants to emphasize his theme, revenge. The story is narrated in the first person, well organized, with few characters, situation, setting and a simple plot. Poe declares the theme of his story at the beginning. Montresor, the narrator, vows to avenge himself upon Fortunato for insulting him. All through the story, Montresor behaves in a way completely the opposite of his intentions. He argues that he won't give Fortunato cause to doubt his good will. Besides, he smiles to Fortunato's face at the thought of his immolation. In other words, Montresor deceives him to carry out his scheme. It is noteworthy that Montresor's narration of the story reveals his suffering as the avenger and Fortunato as the victim. In order to end his sufferings, Montresor plans to meet Fortunato during the carnival season. So, he encounters Fortunato and leads him to his palazzo where there are no attendants. Then they go to the vaults, descend, catacombs, crypt and niche. Poe emphasizes these aspects of confinement which are linked with premature burial. It is interesting to note that the vault, catacomb, and crypt are Gothic elements. Another thing to note is that Poe's concern with the details of setting makes us aware of the medium in which Fortunato and Montresor move and helps us focus on his theme.

In order to emphasize this theme, Poe allows little development of the action and the characters. Fortunato, dressed like a clown, does not change. Montresor becomes more and more obsessed with revenge and changes psychologically. When he fetters Fortunato and buries him alive, he feels satisfied. Besides, Poe's careful choice of words underscores his theme.

Poe uses the words "injuries", "vow", "punish", "alarming" and "quack". Poe repeats a number of words too. The word "Amontillado" is repeated a number of times to emphasize Montresor's intention to revenge himself. Montresor gives Fortunato a sort of wine which tastes of "Amontillado". This means that this word is associated with death. In order to stress his theme, Poe uses a number of words symbolically. The "skeleton" is a symbol of death; the "serpent" of evil; the "human remains" of death; "bones" of death; "catacomb" of death; "chain" of confinement and restraint. Besides, Poe uses the words "stone", "granite", and "mortar" which are associated with cemeteries. This formalist analysis demonstrates that Poe wants to emphasize the theme of his story, revenge. It is likely that Poe aims at criticizing revenge.

Regarding the textual structure, it is obvious the text of "The Cask of Amontillado" is divided into four parts as follows:

Exposition: It is the introduction of the story and it covers the first three paragraphs. The exposition strikes the thematic note of the story which revolves around the revenge motif. The narrator tells us that he will take revenge upon Fortunato. The motives of the narrator's revenge are not fully revealed: "The hundred injuries of Fortunato I had born as I best could, but when he ventured upon insult I vowed revenge". The verb "vowed" gives an impression that the narrator has come to a point of no return and that he will carry out the revenge plan. However, the narrator's plan of revenge, or the means through which he will achieve his revenge, is not revealed either. The only thing he shows that he will "punish with impunity". Punishing with impunity requires a careful plan of revenge so as not to be discovered. The naive narrator shows that he will not make Fortunato doubt his "good will". The narrator reveals

one of Fortunato's point of weakness which will be manipulated as a part of the narrator's revenge plan. Fortunato's point of weakness confuses me because there are two possibilities: It can be Fortunato's overconfidence in the narrator, and it can be Fortunato's sense of pride ("He prided himself on his connoisseurship in wine"). The exposition also shows the narrator's ambivalent attitude toward his victim: "He had a weak point - this Fortunato - although in other regards he was a man to be respected and even feared." The narrator identifies himself with Fortunato particularly in business. In short, the exposition gives us the thesis of the story, introduces the characters of the victim and victimizer and sheds light upon the relation between them.

Conflict: The conflict starts when Fortunato meets the narrator at dusk "during the supreme madness of the carnival season". It is Fortunato who decides that they should go to the vaults of Montresor to search for the Amontillado. The narrator does not approve the idea of going together to the catacombs because of the dampness and niter. The conflict between the two characters is shown on the verbal level when the narrator and Fortunato show verbal differences about the meaning of the term "masons". The conflict and the coming danger are heightened through images of horror and human remains.

Climax: The climax of the story has been prepared for throughout the exposition and the conflict. It is the peak of the story's action. It is a moment of tension and suspense. The climax of this story happens when Montresor confines Fortunato inside the catacombs. The confinement of Montresor does not only mark the climax of the story, but it also marks the climax of the narrator's plan of revenge.

Denouement: It is the point in which everything is made clear. The denouement takes place just before the end of the story. It is the point in which Montresor discovers that Fortunato dies because of the dampness of the catacombs. There are still some other elements, which are integral to our understanding of the story's text such as ambiguity. The story is marked by its ambiguities which increase the difficulties of analyzing its text. First of all, we do not know anything about Luchesi, or about his relations with the characters in the story. However, I guess there is some sort of hostility between Luchesi and Fortunato. Fortunato tells the narrator, "If anyone has a critical turn, it is the meaning Luchesi".

The catacombs of the Montresor are mysterious, because we do not know what is going inside them. I guess the tombs are used as a hiding place to keep the smuggled wine of both Fortunato and the narrator. This shows that we are dealing with a gang, some sort of a Mafia. The notion of the Mafia is supported by evidences about the story's setting. The incidents of the story are located in Italy, but we do not know where. The last sentence uttered by the narrator is significant: "For the half of century no mortal has disturbed them". The pronoun "them"

shows that there are other Fortunatos who were killed before. This notion can be supported if we regain the images of human bones in the catacombs. The reference to the tombs makes me ask myself why Montresor becomes angry when Fortunato mentions the Montresors, saying that they are a great and numerous families. The story has many ambiguous hints, such as the following: "A huge human foret'd or in a field azure", "the foot crushes a serpent rampant whose fangs arc imbedded in the heel". Fortunato says this statement to the narrator who becomes angry in response. It is significant that before saying this statement, Fortunato was holding the narrator's arm, but from then on Montresor holds Fortunato by an arm above the elbow. We know nothing about such an exchange of positions, and we have no idea either about "the thousand injuries" Montresor mentions in the beginning of the story.

Narration: We have two narrative techniques in this story. The writer uses the first singular pronoun employing what we call the naive narrator to tell us about the incidents. The narrator himself is a character in the story and is involved in its action. The writer, however, lets the characters speak from time to time and express themselves, as when Montresor meets Fortunato for the first time.

Symbolism: Fortunato firstly meets the narrator at dusk "during the madness of the carnival season". Dusk brings about the end of the day or the death of the day on the metaphorical level. So, we have an impression that Fortunato's death is drawing near. The word "madness" signifies the madness of Montresor's plan of revenge. Equally, the human bones and skeletons in the catacombs are symbols of death and decay.

Irony and Sadism: One of the ironies of the story is Fortunato's insistence on going to the vaults with the narrator. If he had not gone, his life would have been saved. However, he ironically goes there to meet his fatal destiny. Further, Montresor's sadistic nature is shown when we see him enjoying and listening to Fortunato's hysteric laughter and cries of pain in the vaults. Montresor knows that Fortunato has lost his wits, but he does not care. Montresor kills Fortunato in a cold-blooded manner, which shows that he is probably a professional criminal.

Conclusion: Gothic Elements and Metamorphosis: The Gothic atmosphere inside the catacombs and the remains of human bodies pave the way for the tragic end of Fortunato. The character of the narrator undergoes some sort of psychological metamorphosis, particularly after he kills his rival.

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