



POE'S SHORT STORIES SUMMARY

by: [Edgar Allan Poe](#)

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"The Cask of Amontillado" (1846)

"For the love of God, Montresor!"

(See [Important Quotations Explained](#))

Summary

The narrator, Montresor, opens the story by stating that he has been irreparably insulted by his acquaintance, Fortunato, and that he seeks revenge. He wants to exact this revenge, however, in a measured way, without placing himself at risk. He decides to use Fortunato's fondness for wine against him. During the carnival season, Montresor, wearing a mask of black silk, approaches Fortunato. He tells Fortunato that he has acquired something that could pass for Amontillado, a light Spanish sherry. Fortunato (Italian for "fortunate") wears the multicolored costume of the jester, including a cone cap with bells. Montresor tells Fortunato that if he is too busy, he will ask a man named Luchesi to taste it. Fortunato apparently considers Luchesi a competitor and claims that this man could not tell Amontillado from other types of sherry. Fortunato is anxious to taste the wine and to determine for Montresor whether or not it is truly Amontillado. Fortunato insists that they go to Montresor's vaults.

Montresor has strategically planned for this meeting by sending his servants away to the carnival. The two men descend into the damp vaults, which are covered with nitre, or saltpeter, a whitish mineral. Apparently aggravated by the nitre, Fortunato begins to cough. The narrator keeps offering to bring Fortunato back home, but Fortunato refuses. Instead, he accepts wine as the antidote to his cough. The men continue to explore the deep vaults, which are full of the dead bodies of the Montresor family. In response to the crypts, Fortunato claims to have forgotten Montresor's family coat of arms and motto. Montresor responds that his family shield portrays "a huge human foot d'or, in a field azure; the foot crushes a serpent rampant whose fangs are imbedded in the heel." The motto, in Latin, is "nemo me impune lacessit," that is, "no one attacks me with impunity."

Later in their journey, Fortunato makes a hand movement that is a secret sign of the Masons, an exclusive fraternal organization. Montresor does not recognize this hand signal, though he claims that he is a Mason. When Fortunato asks for proof, Montresor shows him his trowel, the implication being that Montresor is an actual stonemason. Fortunato says that he must be jesting, and the two men continue onward. The men walk into a crypt, where human bones decorate three of the four walls. The bones from the fourth wall have been thrown down on the ground. On the exposed wall is a small recess, where Montresor tells Fortunato that the Amontillado is being stored. Fortunato, now heavily intoxicated, goes to the back of the recess. Montresor then suddenly chains the slow-footed Fortunato to a stone.

Taunting Fortunato with an offer to leave, Montresor begins to wall up the entrance to this small crypt, thereby trapping Fortunato inside. Fortunato screams confusedly as Montresor builds the first layer of the wall. The alcohol soon wears off and Fortunato moans, terrified and helpless. As the layers continue to rise, though, Fortunato falls silent. Just as Montresor is about to finish, Fortunato laughs as if Montresor is playing a joke on him, but Montresor is not joking. At last, after a final plea, "For the love of God, Montresor!" Fortunato stops answering Montresor, who then twice calls out his enemy's name. After no response, Montresor claims that his heart feels sick because of the dampness of the catacombs. He fits the last stone into place and plasters the wall closed, his actions accompanied only by the jingling of Fortunato's bells. He finally repositions the bones on the fourth wall. For fifty years, he writes, no one has disturbed them. He concludes with a Latin phrase meaning "May he rest in peace."

Analysis

The terror of "The Cask of Amontillado," as in many of Poe's tales, resides in the lack of evidence that accompanies Montresor's claims to Fortunato's "thousand injuries" and "insult." The story features revenge and secret murder as a way to avoid using legal channels for retribution. Law is nowhere on Montresor's—or Poe's—radar screen, and the enduring horror of the story is the fact of punishment without proof. Montresor uses his subjective experience of Fortunato's insult to name himself judge, jury, and executioner in this tale, which also makes him an unreliable narrator. Montresor confesses this story fifty years after its occurrence; such a significant passage of time between the events and the narration of the events makes the narrative all the more unreliable. Montresor's unreliability overrides the rational consideration of evidence, such as particular occurrences of insult, that would necessarily precede any guilty sentence in a non-Poe world. "The Cask of Amontillado" takes subjective interpretation—the fact that different people interpret the same things differently—to its horrific endpoint.

Poe's use of color imagery is central to his questioning of Montresor's motives. His face covered in a black silk mask, Montresor represents not blind justice but rather its Gothic opposite: biased revenge. In contrast, Fortunato dons the motley-colored costume of the court fool, who gets literally and tragically fooled by Montresor's masked motives. The color schemes here represent the irony of Fortunato's death sentence. Fortunato, Italian for "the fortunate one," faces the realization that even the carnival season can be murderously serious. Montresor chooses the setting of the carnival for its abandonment of social order. While the carnival usually indicates joyful social interaction, Montresor distorts its merry abandon, turning the carnival on its head. The repeated allusions to the bones of Montresor's family that line the vaults foreshadow the story's descent into the underworld. The two men's underground travels are a metaphor for their trip to hell. Because the carnival, in the land of the living, does not occur as Montresor wants it to, he takes the carnival below ground, to the realm of the dead and the satanic.

TAKE THE "THE CASK OF AMONTILLADO" (1846) QUICK QUIZ

[◀PREVIOUS](#)["THE MASQUE OF THE RED DEATH" \(1845\)](#)

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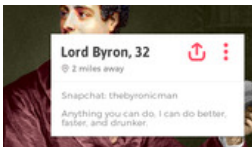
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