

ENG 2000: Perspectives in Literature

Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Cask of Amontillado"

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Edgar Allen Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Cask of Amontillado" both illustrate a common theme of the evil that is in all of us as a part of human nature through the use of character, central conflict, language, setting, symbolism, and point of view. By implicitly suggesting that anyone can be consumed by the evil within or become a victim of another who has been consumed by this evil, Poe is also illustrating gothic terror or the astonishing fear of the extent of psychological immorality that people are capable of.

Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" tells the story of a man who lives with an old man whom he loves like a family member. However, the man becomes fixated on the old man's eye, which is suggested to be covered by a cataract. The eerie eye, deemed evil, convinces the man to plot the old man's death. For seven long nights, the man would sneak into the old man's room at midnight while the old man slept and slowly light a lantern, stalking the eye. Upon turning on the lantern on the eighth night, the man's thumb slips on the tin fastening and wakes the old man.

The old man tries to dismiss the sound, but even in the darkness the man can tell that the old man is lying in his bed awake. The man becomes consumed with the "ticking" he hears which he determines must be the old man's heart beating with fear. Finally the man kills the old man, dismembers his body and conceals it within the floorboards, believing he has triumphantly murdered the old man. The police officers eventually come to the house to investigate the old man who has gone missing. Initially, the man confidently carries on a casual conversation. As the conversation progresses, the man hears the "ticking" of the dead old man's heart from underneath the floorboards. The "ticking" becomes unbearable and the man, crazed, confesses the murder, telling the officers to tear up the floorboards beneath them.

Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado" tells the story of a man, Montresor, who is consumed with extracting revenge on Fortunato, a man who has vexed him one too many times. Montresor goes to a party and finds Fortunato, a wine connoisseur of sorts, drunk and dressed in motley. Montresor lures Fortunato to the catacombs of his home by telling Fortunato he has procured a rare wine, Amontillado, and he is on his way to Luchesi, another wine connoisseur, to authenticate it. Fortunato degrades Luchesi's abilities and insists that he would be more able in authenticating the Amontillado. Montresor and Fortunato make their way through the catacombs of Montresor's home. Upon reaching the end of the catacombs Fortunato is confused as to where the Amontillado is, and Montresor takes advantage of his confusion, chaining him to the walls. As Montresor bricks up Fortunato into a wall, Fortunato screams and laughs in denial, saying it's getting late and they should leave. Montresor agrees and Fortunato ceases to answer. Montresor places the last brick and boasts that Fortunato's body has not been disturbed for half a century, saying "In pace requiescat!", rest in peace.

Both stories utilize a first person perspective through an unreliable narrator. The narrators are unreliable as they both become consumed with killing their victims, the old man in "The Tell-Tale Heart" and Fortunato in "The Cask of Amontillado", rationalizing and basking in their murders. Through the constant repetition of "I", a first person perspective aids in a suspension of disbelief; this is further bolstered through enabling Poe to reveal information selectively and chronologically. The extent to which both killers rationalize and are obsessed with the murders, along with Poe's choice of first person perspective, emphasize the evil that humans are capable of.

Although both stories deal with paranoid killers who premeditate their murders of victims who were in denial until the very end, the plots are very different.

In Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart", the central conflict involves the killer who is motivated to kill the old man because of his presumably evil eye and the ticking he hears from the death beetles which is presumably the old man's heart. The old man's eye is described as "the eye of a vulture", and with every gaze the man's "blood ran cold". The eye is a symbol for paranoia and the evil we see in others. The man refers to the ticking as "hearkening to the death watches in the wall". The "ticking" of the beetles and presumably the old man's heart in a symbol of the coming of death and humanity's capability to become fixated and consumed by evil.

In Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado", the central conflict involves Montresor who is determined to extract revenge in the form of Fortunato's death. Montresor lures Fortunato to his death using the Amontillado. The Amontillado is a symbol for humanity's gluttony and arrogance. Fortunato is ironically dressed in motley, which can be seen as a symbol for his naivety. Fortunato foolishly allows his gluttony and arrogance to get the better of him, blindly leading him to his death. Montresor only needs to mention the Amontillado and Fortunato invites himself to the catacombs in order to authenticate the wine. Fortunato's name is also ironic as it means luck. In relation to the theme of the evil within us, humans often fall prey to becoming obsessed with getting revenge, as well as being greedy, gluttonous, and naïve.

Poe's language is very much comprised of pacing and foreshadowing. Pacing and foreshadowing creates suspense, which leads to an adrenaline and anticipation in the audiences. This ultimately makes the endings have an even stronger impact. Additionally,

both stories have a similar setting, the killer's home. We can infer that in relation to the theme of the evil within us, that evil can occur even in our own homes.

The gothic terror in "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Cask of Amontillado" is apparent as a man, who loves the old man he lives with, rationalizes and basks in murdering the old man and concealing him beneath floorboards. Montresor becomes so consumed with his psychological evils that he rationalizes and basks in murdering his old friend by bricking him up into a wall. The fact that both killers hid the bodies in their own homes is even more terrifying. Poe's theme about the evil within all of us and the "imp of the perverse", doing the wrong thing just because it's possible, resonates throughout both stories. The killers on some level knew what they were doing was wrong, yet rationalized throughout and triumphantly committed the murders; burying the victims in their homes further illustrates the opposite of normalcy as most murderers would bury the bodies elsewhere.

References

Poe, Edgar. A Cask of Amontillado.

Poe, Edgar. A Tell-Tale Heart.