

## A Masonic Interpretation Of The Cask of Amontillado

This paper is meant to examine the masonic implications of *The Cask of Amontillado* by Edgar Allan Poe. This great short story was first published in 1846, only a few decades after the Morgan Affair and while anti-masonic sentiments were still rife. Did Poe write as a Mason; or, if not, was he sympathetic to the fraternity? Or was he expressing anti-masonic sentiments in this story? A simplistic reading infers that Poe intends to portray Masons (represented by Fortunato) in a bad light and suggests that Poe, by having Fortunato entombed, would prefer the end of Freemasonry. The premise of this paper, however, is that Poe is actually satirizing the anti-masons, and is expressing very subtle masonic themes – especially, “what ye sow shall ye reap.”<sup>1</sup>

There is apparently no direct evidence that Poe was a Mason, so any sympathies he might have had for the fraternity must be inferred from the text. But first, his knowledge of masonic ritual is clear – masonic use of identifying words and gestures; the trowel as a symbol; the “winding stair-case” of the Fellowcraft degree; the “range of low arches” in the Royal Arch degree; the numerological significance of 3, 4 and 7 used to describe the dimensions of the “crypt” which also happened to be between two colossal supports of the roof of the catacombs, which supports possibly represent or refer to the two great pillars at the entrance of every Lodge room; and finally “The love of God,” which is central to all masonic ritual. This knowledge of masonic ritual need not have been based on Lodge membership but Poe’s knowledge of these symbols, as well as their use in the story, implies a respect for the fraternity that is antithetical to the simplistic, anti-masonic interpretation of the story.

Perhaps, though, the symbol of greatest significance in this story is that of *building*. All Masons are engaged in “building the Temple of their Life.” By building a wall to entomb Fortunato, Montresor is acting as the agent to deal Fortunato his just fate – just in the sense that his slow death and suffering is recompense for his “thousand offenses” and final “insult,” and, in truth, his other debased behavior. Whether it is suitable or appropriate recompense we must take for granted, as Poe does not provide us insight into the nature of the “thousand offenses” or the “insult.” The very names suggest this interpretation:<sup>2</sup>

Montresor, from the French *montrer* (to show) and *sort* (fate)  
Fortunato, from Latin *fortunatus*, fortune

Montresor is clearly not a Mason, as he does not recognize the “gesticulation,” the “movement,” and fails the ritualistic interrogation by Fortunato to give him a word. Hence, clearly Fortunato is intended to be a Mason, as he is familiar with the modes of recognition. But he is clearly not a particularly observant Mason, as he is guilty of violating one of the Three Principal Tenets and two of the Four Cardinal Virtues.<sup>3</sup>

Fortunato's many offenses and final insult show his disregard for *Brotherly Love*; and his fondness for wine, to the point of inebriation, shows his *intemperance*. Furthermore, his descent into the "vault" with Montresor and his willful pursuit of the fine wine, at the expense of his health, and in disregard for Montresor's failure to identify himself as masonic, is surely *imprudent*! Hence, in one sense, this story can be understood as a warning by Poe to masonic readers of the potential consequences of not heeding masonic teachings. Contrast the building containing Fortunato's ebbing life, his tomb, to that magnificent edifice erected by King Solomon to the service of God.

But why would Poe want to give a warning to masonic readers, unless he himself were trying to evince *Brotherly Love* – hence were himself a Mason?!?!? But even if he weren't masonic, his implicit emphasis on the value of *Brotherly Love*, or fraternalism, shows he is sympathetic with masonic ideals and, in the broader sense, with Freemasonry itself. With this understanding, it becomes clear that Poe is satirizing anti-masonry when he makes reference to a "grotesque" gesticulation. We don't need to know what that particular "movement" is to understand that Montresor is characterizing it in a way that is typical of anti-masonry – that is, in an emotional and unintelligent and uninformed manner; in a manner that overlooks the beauty of masonic ideals (see the Principal Tenets and Cardinal Virtues) because of an apparent or supposed grotesquery. So then we have the anti-Mason (Montresor) behaving himself in a *grotesque* way to have his revenge on Fortunato. Hence, both Montresor and Fortunato have much to learn from masonic ideals – the former foolish for his evil, non-masonic behavior and status, and the latter inept in applying masonic ideals to his life, and thus earning Montresor's mistreatment.

The end of the story provides further evidence in favor of this behavioral interpretation. "For the half of a century no mortal has disturbed (Fortunato's bones)." Since the story was written in 1846, Poe is telling us here that the action of the story occurred long before the anti-masonic movement arose. He was surely aware of the Morgan affair of the late 1820's and its impact on the fraternity. Hence, Poe took pains to help us understand his story in the broader, moral or spiritual context, rather than as simplistic historical commentary. Given his evident and vast knowledge of masonic ritual, with which all men of *good* conscience *must be* sympathetic, Poe is also telling us that anti-masonry is anti-intelligent, amoral (at best) and non-spiritual.

But this story may also be a deeply personal one for Poe. Others have suggested that one element of the story is an implied criticism of the hypocrisy of some Masons and, indeed, of Freemasonry in general. This clearly applies to Fortunato, who was rather defective in applying masonic principles to his conduct. But several characteristics of Poe's personal life may give us further insight: 1) his professional activity as a literary critic; 2) his struggles with alcohol; 3) his attempted suicide; and 4) his cryptographic skills in problem-solving. This story about an alcoholic (Fortunato) was written in 1846, less than two years before Poe attempted suicide, and less than three years before his actual death from unknown causes. Having written many critical essays, Poe was certainly capable, being the brilliant man he was, of being self-critical. So it seems reasonable to conclude that this story is about Poe himself, being self-critical of his own deficient, non-masonic

behavior and foreshadowing his attempted suicide, and death a year later. Fortunato, then, is Poe! And Poe, then, figuratively, if not literally, is a Mason.

The closing declarative “In pace requiescat” now becomes more interesting and understandable. It makes little, if any, sense for Poe to have Montresor wish his victim to Rest in Peace. But by giving the declarative in reverse order (ordinarily it would be given as “requiescat in pace”), he is giving the reader a clue to solving the mystery embedded in the story. By reversing the order of the declarative, Poe is telling the reader that it is he, the author, not Montresor the narrator, wishing the victim (himself as Poe) to rest in peace.

In conclusion, this story is about Poe personally and the human condition, in general. It is NOT a simplistic history essay about the supposed hypocrisy of Freemasonry, which is a stupid premise on its face – not all Masons, nor the institution itself, are hypocrites because of the failings of one member. Poe means this story to be his “Goodbye” to humanity, and he definitely wants his readers to puzzle-out who the persona are. At least, he wants us to know that he, Poe, is indeed the fortunate one, soon to leave this troubled life and spared of its miseries, of which he suffered much.

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<sup>1</sup> The All-seeing Eye: “. . . whom the Sun, Moon and stars obey, and under whose watchful care even comets perform their stupendous revolutions, pervades the inmost recesses of the human heart, and *will reward us according to our merits.*” Source: the hieroglyphical emblems of the Third Degree Lecture. (emphasis mine)

<sup>2</sup> For a psychological interpretation, using these definitions, see **Poe’s Use of Irony in “The Cask of Amontillado”**, by Julie R. Hess, December 2, 2005 at <http://webpages.shepherd.edu/jhess02/The%20Cask%20of%20Amontillado%20by%20Poe.htm>

<sup>3</sup> These Principle Tenets (Brotherly Love, Relief, and Truth) and the Cardinal Virtues (Temperance, Fortitude, Prudence, and Justice) comprise the essential elements of the First Degree Lecture. “By the exercise of Brotherly Love we are taught to regard the whole human species as one family, -- the high and the low, the rich and the poor, -- who, as created by one almighty parent, and inhabitants of the same planet, are to aid, support, and protect each other. On this principle, Masonry unites men of every country, sect and opinion; and causes true friendship to exist among those who might otherwise have remained at a perpetual distance.” “Temperance is that due restraint upon the affections and passions which renders the body tame and governable, and frees the mind from the allurements of vice. This virtue should be your constant practice, as you are thereby taught to avoid excess or the contracting of any licentious or vicious habits...”