

# **The Cask of Amontillado by Edgar Allan Poe**

from Highlights of American Literature

This Level 2 ELLSA lesson can be accessed on the internet at

[http://www.rdlthai.com/t2/ellsa\\_cask1.html](http://www.rdlthai.com/t2/ellsa_cask1.html)

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## **1. The author**

Poe believed that strangeness was an essential ingredient of beauty, and his writing is often exotic. His stories and poems are populated with doomed, introspective aristocrats. These gloomy characters never seem to work or socialize; instead they bury themselves in dark, moldering castles symbolically decorated with bizarre rugs and draperies that hide the real world of sun, windows, walls and floors. The hidden rooms reveal ancient libraries, strange art works, and eclectic oriental objects. The aristocrats play musical instruments or read ancient books while they brood on tragedies, often the death of loved ones. Themes of death-in-life, especially being buried alive or returning like a vampire from the grave, appear in many of his works, including "The Premature Burial," "Ligeia," "The Cask of Amontillado," and "The Fall of the House of Usher."

VanSpankeren, 1994: 41 Outline of American Literature, USIA

## **Orphaned at an early age**

Orphaned at an early age, Edgar Allan Poe was born in Boston, Massachusetts. His father, David Poe was a stage actor of third or fourth generation Scottish-Irish descent. His mother, Elizabeth Poe, nee Arnold, was an actress who had been born in England, but moved to America to pursue her acting career. She had been married previously to an Englishman named C.D. Hopkins, another actor whom she had met in America, but Hopkins died three years after the marriage, leaving her a childless widow. A year after her first husband's death, she met David Poe while the two were performing together in a play in and in that same year, the two were married.

The couple had three children: William Henry Leonard, born in Boston in 1807, Edgar, born in Boston in 1809 and Rosalie, born in Norfolk, Virginia in 1810. In the summer of 1809, the Poes moved to New York where David Poe died, prior to the birth of their daughter. Because of their extreme poverty, William Henry had been left with his grandparents, and Mrs. Poe was left with Edgar, giving birth to Rosalie sometime after her husband's death. From 1810 on, Mrs. Poe's health began to decline and she died of a fatal illness in 1811. Orphaned after their mother's death. Edgar and Rosalie were brought up by different foster parents. Edgar, about two years old at this time, was taken into the home of John Allan, a Scottish merchant. The Allans moved to Great Britain in 1815, and spent time in London, Glasgow and Irvine. The Allans regarded Edgar as their son and sent him to boarding school in Chelsea and then later to the Manor House School. This time spent in England and Scotland would

have a lasting impression on young Edgar, and would figure in his short story, William Wilson.

1. How and when did Edgar's mother become a widow?
2. How many brothers and sisters did Edgar have, and what were their names?

### **The women in his early life**

The Allans returned to America in 1820, and although John Allan's businesses were failing, they lived a comfortable life. Edgar enrolled at William Burke's Academy in Richmond, where he excelled in languages, drama, and swimming. He began to write poetry early on and in 1823, composed 'For Helen'. The poem was inspired by his schoolmate's mother, Jane Stith Stanard, with whom the brilliant young Edgar had become romantically involved. Mrs. Stanard went mad and died shortly afterwards, a tragic loss which Edgar had difficulty overcoming. He was reported to have held late night vigils at her grave for some time afterward, until he developed an interest in girls his own age, for whom he also composed lyric poetry.

Of the women in Poe's life, much has been written. His mother died an early death, leaving him an orphan. Mrs. Stanard, his first love, went mad and died. His sister Rosalie was retarded and Edgar neglected her as a mere memory of an increasingly troubled past. Later, before enrolling at the University of Virginia at Richmond, he had another forbidden affair with a young neighbor, Elmira Royster, whose parents would have nothing to do with Edgar after they discovered that his foster-father had cut him out of his will.

1. Which sport did Edgar excel at?
2. Who was the inspiration for "For Helen"?
3. What was Edgar's relation to this woman?

### **On his own: the wild years**

John Allan continued to pay for Edgar's tuition, but after an argument with his wife in which Edgar had sided with his step-mother, Mr. Allan began cutting back on his financial support for Edgar. Edgar began gambling and drinking heavily at school

and ran up debts in his step-father's name for \$2500, a considerable sum at that time. In 1826, John Allan pulled Edgar out of the university and refused to pay any of the gambling debts he had accumulated. He insisted that Edgar give up his literary aspirations and study law. This led to a quarrel between the two and Edgar packed his bags and left for Boston, then the literary capital of the United States.

In Boston, Poe published his first collection of poems, "Tamerlane and Other Poems", under the pseudonym, Henri Le Rennét. Although it made him no money, it began to build a reputation for him under his pen-name. But he could not support himself. In Desperation, he joined the United States Army, enlisting under the name Edgar A. Perry on May 26, 1827. He spent two and a half years in the army and apparently had quite a bit of free time on his hands for he continued to write. It was during this time that he wrote "The Gold Bug", his classic detective story about code-cracking and treasure-hunting.

1. What were Edgar's two main vices?
2. Under what pen-name did he publish his first collection of poetry?
3. Under what name did he enlist in the army?
4. What famous story did he write during his first two and a half years in the army?

### **His foster mother's death**

In 1829, Edgar was promoted to the rank of Sergeant-Major and was posted to Fort Monroe, Virginia, just a few miles from Richmond. He had begun thinking about enrolling at West Point, the prestigious American military academy. Meanwhile back in Richmond his foster mother, whom he loved deeply was dying and wanted to see her 'dear boy' before she died. After much delay, John Allan, who had all but disowned Edgar, sent for him, but it was too late. She died before Edgar arrived, and despite her request not to be buried until her foster son returned, her husband went ahead with the funeral without waiting for Edgar's return. When Poe finally arrived, the person he loved most was already buried underground. He grieved deeply at the cemetery, and his graveside manners, echoing his vigils of Mrs. Stanard's grave, seem to anticipate the stories of prematural burial, such as "The Tell-Tale Heart", "The Premature Burial", as well as the living entombment of Fortunato in "The Cask of Amontillado" and the walling up of the corpse in "The Black Cat".

1. Who did Edgar love most up to this point in his life?
2. What is a foster parent?
3. Which events were the inspiration for Edgar's various stories about burial, walling-up and entombment?

## **West Point**

Prior to her death, Mrs. Allan made her husband promise never to abandon Edgar. Edgar moved to Baltimore and John Allan continued to send him small sums of money, just barely enough for Edgar to get by. On July 1, 1830 Edgar was admitted as a cadet at West Point. However, Poe was not suited to the military and did not even last one year. Early on, he wrote to his foster-father requesting permission to drop-out. Then, in early 1831, Poe received a letter from John Allan who, furious at Poe's desire to quit the academy, disowned him once and for all. Realizing how completely cut-off he now was from his past, Poe decided to leave West Point to pursue a full-time literary career.

1. What is West Point?
2. How long did Edgar last at West Point?
3. Why did John Allan finally disown Edgar?

## **Baltimore**

After leaving West Point, Poe went to live in Baltimore with his aunt, Mrs. Maria Clemm, where he went to work for the Southern Literary Messenger. In 1835, he became editor of this magazine and also married his cousin, Virginia, who was only thirteen years old at the time. The couple stayed with Mrs. Clemm who was a devoted mother to both of them. But the money Poe earned, even as an editor, was inadequate. Poverty, combined with frequent drinking binges, began to take their toll on Poe's physical health and emotional equilibrium. He became progressively more detached

from reality, in pursuit of vague literary goals and unrealistic business plans. He left *The Messenger* in 1837 with unrealistic plans of establishing his own magazine and getting rich.

1. Who did Edgar finally marry?
2. What were two of his most serious problems?
3. What was his great ambition at this time?

### **Poverty & Death**

For the rest of his life Poe worked off-and-on as a writer and editor for various magazines in Philadelphia and New York. He wrote many of his best stories over the next few years, but earned very little money from them ("Ligeia", one of his finest stories earned him only ten dollars.) His steepest downward descent began when his wife became seriously ill, and then later contracted tuberculosis and died in 1847, at the age of twenty-four. Poe stumbled through several more relationships with women, vainly trying to stabilize himself, and was engaged to be married twice during the last year of his life. His second engagement was to a Richmond widow who had once been his childhood sweetheart. Just before he was to be remarried, he was on his way back north from a business trip to Richmond, and he decided to stop off in Baltimore, presumably for a last binge before he got married. Nobody knows what he did there or who he was with, but he was found six days later, lying unconscious in the rain with his clothes badly ripped as though he had been in some sort of fight. Though still alive, he never regained consciousness and died shortly after he was found by the authorities.

1. What event really caused Edgar to lose morale and slip into a decline?
2. What is a drinking binge?
3. How do you believe Edgar actually died?

## Pre-story

Edgar Allan Poe's gothic tale, *The Cask of Amontillado*, is really a story about the loss of face, or "amor propio". Face is a very important aspect of all Southeast Asian cultures.

What is the expression in your language for the loss of face? What other English words come to mind when you think of the word "face" in this sense? Think of as many words as you can, or consult the thesaurus in the pull down menu under Tools in your word processor.

Which of the words below seem closest to your culture's notion of face? Check a thesaurus for synonyms if you are not sure.

- pride r
- self-esteem r
- self-respect r
- amour-propre r
- self-love r
- self-confidence r
- dignity r
- honor r
- respectability r
- nobility r

Discuss these ideas with a friend. Think of some ways that people in your country try to gain, or maintain, face with friends, colleagues and strangers. How can a person lose face among friends, colleagues or strangers?

Again, think of some examples. Think of a time when you did something to gain face. Was there any single time in your life when you gained the most face among your friends, family, teachers or colleagues? Can you think of an embarrassing incident that happened to you, or to somebody you know, in which you or the other person lost face? Are there times when a foreign visitor to your country might cause somebody to lose face without knowing it? Think of some advice that you give a foreign visitor about your country's culture.

An excellent synopsis of *The Cask of Amontillado* can be found at:  
<http://www.nadn.navy.mil/EnglishDept/poeperplex/thepoepe.htm>

## In-story

### The Characters

1. How many characters does Poe include in The Cask of Amontillado? What are their names?
2. What drink are the French most famous for?
3. Does Montresor have something of great value to him which we might consider to be his treasure? Hint: It is not the Amontillado wine (which is Spanish anyway, not French, and doesn't really exist—it is merely a trick to get Fortunato to go down into the catacombs).

Poe is not easy reading. His language is old-fashioned and his sentences are long and often complex. One of the main purposes of this on-line lesson is to guide teachers and students through the events of the story, and their interpretations.

### The Insult

How did Fortunato cause Montresor to lose face in the story?

The third paragraph of the story appears in full below. Read it carefully and try to imagine how Fortunato might have insulted Montresor.

"He had a weak point—this Fortunato—although in other regards he was a man to be respected and even feared. He prided himself on his connoisseurship in wine. Few Italians have the true virtuoso spirit. For the most part their enthusiasm is adopted to suit the time and opportunity to practice imposture upon the British and Austrian millionaires. In painting and gemmery Fortunato, like his countrymen, was a quack, but in the matter of old wines he was sincere. In this respect I did not differ from him materially;—I was skillful in the Italian vintages myself, and bought largely whenever I could."

Does Montresor seem to have much respect for Italians? Which lines in the paragraph above reveal his contempt?

What was Fortunato's insult?

### Vengeance: The trail of bottles

Edgar Allen Poe was fond of drinking alcohol and knew his wines as well as the characters in The Cask of Amontillado. As they go deeper and deeper into Montresor's catacombs, they drink two bottles of French wine and Fortunato believes they are on their way to find a third bottle of fine old Spanish wine.

Find the names of the two wines, they drink and the one that Montresor uses to lure Fortunato into the catacombs.

Why does Montresor entertain Fortunato with wines from his collection?

In what two ways does Montresor imprison Fortunato?

The story, *The Cask of Amontillado*, first appeared in an anthology of Poe's stories entitled *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*. Arabesque comes from the word Arab and refers to ornaments, decorations and motifs in Arabic art, where figures of flowers, fruits and sometimes animal outlines appear in elaborate patterns of interlaced lines, particularly those which have been borrowed by other cultures. Such arabesque patterns are reflected in some of the designs and motifs of the batik of Indonesia and Malaysia.

By analogy, then, an arabesque story is one of intricate design, which is told through the use of fanciful language. Because arabesque graphic designs sometimes depict fantastic creatures, Poe and others also applied this term to tales that dealt with fantastic or supernatural happenings. Grotesque refers to something distorted, ugly, abnormal, fantastic, or bizarre to the point of being ludicrous or absurd. In a grotesque story, characters are physically or psychologically deformed and engage in actions which may be abnormal or comically absurd.

In what ways is *The Cask of Amontillado* grotesque? First, which of Montresor's actions are abnormal?

Is there anything grotesque about Fortunato?

## Humor Hunt

There are also numerous comic touches which Poe adds to this grotesque tale. Try to find 10 examples of Poe's use of grotesque humor. Follow this trail of humor chronologically through the story.

- Fortunato's name means lucky in Italian. This is ironic language play, as he was hardly the lucky one in this story.
- Fortunato is dressed in a court jester's or fool's garb, complete with striped outfit and cap and bells.
- The jingling of the bells of the cap in the catacombs.
- Montresor's exaggerated concern for Fortunato's health.
- A joke: Not knowing Montresor plans to kill him, Fortunato says, I shall not die of a cough. To which Montresor replies, True-true.
- Pun: Montresor telling Fortunato he is a mason. (Fortunato was referring to members of the society of Freemasons). Montresor reveals the trowel (a tool used to apply mortar or cement) which he will use to build the wall which entombs Fortunato.
- Fortunato's drunken condition.
- Fortunato bumping into the dead end of the niche where he will be entombed and then looking bewildered.
- Fortunato's delirious laughter at the end.
- Another pun: Let us be gone. Montresor repeats Fortunato's words, not saying that they shall leave together, but that Fortunato will be gone from this life.



## Exercises

### Testing Poe's Theory of the Short Story on his own writing

Many critics consider Poe to be the father of the modern short story. He was the first writer to define the short story as a distinct literary form. In a review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's anthology, *Twice-Told Tales* in *Graham's Magazine*, May 1842, he described his personal theory on how to construct a "tale":

### 5 rules of short story writing following Poe's principles

Try to make a list of 5 rules for writing a short story as implied in Poe's essay. A keyword has been given below to help with scanning the text. Try writing your answers down.

"A skillful literary artist has constructed a tale. If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents: but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single effect to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents—he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect. If his very initial sentence tends not to the outbringing of this effect, then he has failed in his first step. In the whole composition there should be no work written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design. And by such means, with such care and skill, a picture is at length painted which leaves in the mind of him who contemplates it with a kindred art, a sense of the fullest satisfaction."

1. **Keyword:** effect
2. **Keyword:** establish
3. **Keyword:** first sentence
4. **Keyword:** pre-established
5. **Keyword:** satisfaction

### **How well does Poe follow his own rules?**

1. What is the single effect of the story on the reader?
2. How do all incidents help Poe to establish this effect?
3. How does the first sentence bring out the horror of the tale?
4. How does the whole story follow a single pre-established design?
5. Does the reader feel satisfied at the end of the story?

### **Follow-up**

1. Dramitization: Re-write The Cask of Amontillado as a play in dialog form with the two characters, Montresor and Fortunato and then stage a play version of the story.
2. Modernization: Divide the story up into equal sections of 3 or 4 paragraphs and give each section to a group of students or teachers to rewrite and modernize into a simpler and more contemporary prose style.
3. Shift the Point of View: Rewrite the story from Fortunato's point of view.
4. Design a story grammar chart for another story in the ELLSA site or from one of the e-text links.

## **ANSWER KEY**

### **2. Author**

#### **Orphaned at an early age: answers**

1. His mother became a widow when her husband died three years after their marriage.
2. Edgar had one brother and one sister. His brother's name was William, and his sister's name was Rosalie.

#### **The women in his early life: answers**

1. He excelled at swimming.
2. Jane Stith Stanard.
3. She was his classmate's mother.

#### **On his own: the wild years: answers**

1. Drinking and gambling.
2. Henri le Rennét.
3. Edgar A. Perry.
4. The Gold Bug.

#### **His foster mother's death: answers**

1. His foster mother.
2. An adoptive parent.
3. His mother's burial before his arrival at her funeral and also Mrs Stanard's death and the vigil he kept over her grave.

#### **West Point: answers**

1. A military academy for officers.
2. Less than a year.
3. Because Edgar wanted to quit West Point.

#### **Baltimore: answers**

1. His 13 year old cousin.
2. Drinking and poverty.
3. To start his own literary magazine.

## Poverty and death: answers

1. His wife's illness and death.
2. A prolonged period of alcohol consumption.
3. Just a week before he was found unconscious, he went on another drinking binge during a business trip to Philadelphia. There was an election going on at the time of Edgar's final, fatal visit to Baltimore. Some people believe that he got drunk and was beaten up, either over an election issue, or in an attempt at vote-buying.

## In-story

**Answer 1** Montresor, Fortunato and Luchesi

Montresor is a French name meaning "my treasure".

**Answer 2** Wine

**Answer 3** His pride and the pride of his French family heritage. Perhaps his devious plot of revenge.

**Answer 4** Montresor does not have much respect for Italians. He feels the French are superior, especially with respect to wine. The following lines reveal this (p135, paragraph 3): "Few Italians have the true virtuoso spirit. For the most part their enthusiasm is adopted to suit the time and opportunity to practice imposture upon the British and Austrian millionaires. In painting and gemmery Fortunato, like his countrymen, was a quack..."

**Answer 5** Poe does not tell us directly, but only implies it in the third paragraph (p 135, paragraph 3): "...but in the matter of old wines he was sincere. In this respect I did not differ from him materially;—I was skillful in the Italian vintages myself, and bought largely whenever I could." Poe reveals a potential source of rivalry or competition between the two: their expertise in wine. Fortunato probably insulted Montresor's knowledge of vintage Italian wines. By insulting Montresor, Fortunato has insulted Montresor's family name and the French race.

**Answer 6** "Medoc" and "de Grave" (the French wines) "Amontillado" (the Spanish wine); Montresor's ruse to lead Fortunato down into the catacombs.

**Answer 7** Montresor wants to get Fortunato drunk enough to be able to trap him in his plan of vengeance.

**Answer 8** He fetters (chains and locks) Fortunato to the wall of the catacombs. He builds a wall to close Fortunato off in a small corner of the catacombs, where Montresor will leave him to die.

**Answer 9** The whole obsessive plot of vengeance. The fettering and entombment of Fortunato. Montresor's sick sense of humor.

**Answer 10** His obsession with alcohol. His drunkenness. His tendency to berate Luchesi (he may have been drunk and may have insulted Montresor in a similar fashion). His manic laughter.

## Exercises

1. A story should try to achieve a single effect.
2. All incidents and events of a short story should help the author to establish this effect.
3. The very first sentence of the story should bring out this effect.
4. The whole composition should follow the author's pre-established design.
5. A reader should feel a sense of full satisfaction from having read the story.

**Answer 1** Shock, horror (at Montresor's elaborate and mad plot to avenge his wounded pride against Fortunato).

**Answer 2** Montresor has everything planned out carefully, and we descend into the catacombs with Montresor as our guide. He leads us directly to his crime of vengeance with no detours.

**Answer 3** Montresor tells us in the very first sentence that he has vowed to seek revenge against Fortunato. The crime and madness move forward immediately from there.

**Answer 4** Poe's plot is the same as Montresor's plan. Although we don't know at first how his revenge will be exacted, Montresor hints (the trowel) and then realizes his horrible plan to entomb Fortunato alive in the catacombs.

**Answer 5** Montresor vowed that he would get his revenge against Fortunato. By the end of the story, we have watched his plan unfold and witnessed his crime of vengeance. As the last stone goes into place, Montresor replaces the bones against the new wall (Fortunato's tomb) and Poe closes with a ubiquitous "Rest in Peace". This is like "The End" rolling across the screen at the end of a film.