

ANALYSIS

“The Cask of Amontillado” (1846)

Edgar Allan Poe

(1809-1849)

“The Cask of Amontillado” is Gothic black humor similar to later such fiction in the 1960s-70s, except that Postmodernists are atheists whereas Poe believed in God, though not in individual human immortality. Amontillado is a real wine named after its place of origin in Spain. The unfortunate Fortunato wears a fool’s cap with bells on it that jingle on his way to getting buried alive. His coughing becomes a joke, as is Montresor’s toast to his long life, from a flagon of *De Grave*. Montresor the murderer begins his account by saying, “You, who so well know the nature of my soul...” He is confessing, apparently to a priest, since the setting is a Catholic country. Christianity is evoked by (1) his coat of arms showing a serpent (Satan) being crushed, (2) the sacramental wine, and (3) the walling up comparable to the burial of Christ.

Like a serpent in his deception, Montresor reverses the Christian meaning of his coat of arms and punishes an unintended insult with death, as if the fool Fortunato is the serpent. Fortunato will not rise again and Poe implies by analogy that Christ did not rise either. Fortunato cries out, “For the love of God, Montresor!” But his love of God is futile. And yet since Montresor is confessing to a murder that occurred “half a century” before, he was clearly not able to escape his conscience, no more than did Poe’s “William Wilson” (1840). The last laugh is on him. Poe hated Christianity but could not escape it--all around him and conditioned inside him as a conscience.

Michael Hollister (2015)