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Original Paper

An Existentialist Enactment of Revenge in *The Cask of Amontillado*

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Abstract

Edgar Allan Poe's renowned short story The Cask of Amontillado centers on the cold and calculated revenge enacted by Montresor, revealing profound existential motivations underlying his actions. This paper employs Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist philosophy as a theoretical lens, focusing on Montresor's active construction of his existential essence, his resistance against the gaze of the Other, and his assumption of absolute responsibility throughout the process of vengeance. On the one hand, within the existential arena of the underground catacomb, Montresor autonomously forges and confirms his identity as an avenger through meticulously rational actions. On the other hand, the enclosed, antagonistic binary relationship between Montresor and his victim, Fortunato, vividly embodies Sartre's dictum that "hell is other people". Ultimately, while Montresor evades legal retribution, he cannot escape the "absolute responsibility" articulated by Sartre, becoming eternally imprisoned by the weight of his avenger identity and perpetual anxiety. Poe's narrative ambiguity deliberately strips away traditional attributions, rendering Montresor's revenge an existential practice in the Sartrean sense: an individual's free choice within an absurd world, demanding the full bearing of its consequences.

Keywords

Edgar Allan Poe, The Cask of Amontillado, Jean-Paul Sartre, existentialism, revenge motive

1. Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe, a giant of 19th-century American literature, is known for his mesmerizing and disturbing stories. He was particularly adept at depicting the dark depths of the human heart and the atmosphere of suspenseful thrillers; his short stories are like elaborate labyrinths that draw readers into profound contemplations about death, madness, and the nature of humanity. *The Cask of Amontillado*,

his most frequently studied short story of a gothic nature, is told from the first-person point of view of Montresor, the avenger, as a fallen aristocrat, exacts deadly revenge on his rival, Fortunato.

At present, extensive research has been carried out in academic circles on the novel's writing techniques and creative intentions, focusing on the core issues such as the rhetorical effect of irony, the function of space, the horror-rendering effect of gothic elements, and analyzing in depth the principle of unity of effect proposed by Poe; at the level of the impact of the works on the readers, the novel's role in moral edification is another important aspect of the academic circles' attention. With the increase of domestic attention to Poe's works in recent years, all kinds of interdisciplinary perspectives have been applied, including the industrial civilization perspective, the linguistic perspective, and the cross-cultural perspective. All these explorations have greatly deepened our understanding of this short novel, and thus contributed to the deepening of the interpretation. This high degree of focus on the only two characters makes Montresor's motivation for revenge, which is at the center of the story, a key issue in understanding the work. The fact that Montresor claims to have been insulted by Fortunato, and therefore retaliates, yet Poe's silence on the nature of the insult is not only intriguing, but also makes Montresor's motivation for vengeance difficult to adequately explain by external factors such as traditional religion-political conflicts, class humiliation, and so on. Although there are critiques (Fletcher, 1973, p. 167; Peithman, 1981, pp. 168-174) arguing that Montresor is vengeful due to madness and insanity, Levine (1972, p. 80) notes that "The Cask' has no passage to tell the reader that the narrator is mad"; Elena V. Baraban (2004, pp. 47-62) builds on this by offering further new speculation that Montresor's calm planning and rational narrative in the story reveal that his actions are more likely to be active choices based on family honor rather than irrationally driven by insanity. Felheim et al. (1954, pp. 447-449) and Rocks (1972, p. 50) speculate that revenge is motivated by religious-political incompatibility based on the historical conflict between Catholicism and Freemasonry, but their explanatory power is insufficient due to the omission of some textual details. None of these speculations is right or wrong, but they all fail due to insufficient textual evidence resulting from the design of narrative ambiguity. The study of the question of revenge motives will not be fruitful if it seeks answers from external factors.

The central concern of Sartre's existentialist philosophy—the individual's definition of his or her essence and absolute responsibility through free choice and action in a world without a priori meaning—fits well with the narrative kernel of *The Cask of Amontillado* as well as the practices of its characters. In fact, the novel's deliberate ambiguity of motivation precisely strips away the explanatory power of traditional attributions (e.g., religion, class) on the characters' behavior, forcing readers to focus on Montresor's act of vengeance itself and its process. In the symbolic existential theater of the underground cellar, which is isolated from social norms and moral scrutiny, Montresor demonstrates pure free will: he plans carefully, executes calmly, and ultimately confirms his identity as an avenger through the narrative. This individual-driven practice of shaping one's existence through concrete

actions and bearing their consequences is precisely what Sartre's philosophy describes as existence precedes essence. Thus, Sartre's existentialist framework provides an apt theoretical lens to get to the heart of Poe's motivational puzzle.

By integrating existing studies and exploring new textual details, this paper explores a philosophical consistency to understand the worldview of Montresor, the avenger, to provide new ideas for understanding the deeper motivation of Montresor's revenge. That is, how Montresor freely chooses to reduce himself to the status of avenger in the process of revenge, how he resists the gaze of the Other, and how he finally assumes the absolute responsibility brought about by this choice, to reveal that Montresor's vengeance is a practice of existentialist nature. This will break through the traditional limitations of external attributions such as religion and politics, and provide a new path for solving the puzzle of ambiguity of motive in Poe's writing.

2. Forged by Deed: The Avenger's Existential Foundation

In Montresor's vengeful actions, he makes choices in a state of rationality rather than insanity, and it is these choices and actions that truly define him as an avenger. Existence precedes essence (Sartre, 1989a, p. 6) is the cornerstone of Sartre's existentialist philosophy, which emphasizes that man's existence comes first and essence comes second. "Man first of all exists, encounte6rs himself, surges up in the world and defines himself afterward" (Sartre, 1989, p. 6). That is, Being-for-itself exists first, and man, as a conscious subject, defines himself afterwards through free choice. This principle implies that subjectivity and freedom are the starting points for the study of human existence, and emphasizes the individual's unique position in the world and his capacity for self-determination (Shen, 2006). In this novel, Montresor's entire revenge process is a rendition of the principle that existence precedes essence. Poe does not give Montresor a predetermined avenger situation because he does not provide an external reason for Montresor to take revenge. In fact, the reason why Montresor becomes the avenger is gradually shaped and confirmed by every rational choice and concrete action of revenge.

Montresor is not inherently or a priori defined as an avenger. His nature as an avenger is shaped and confirmed by a series of highly rational, autonomous, and purposeful choices of action under a particular situation. In the beginning, Montresor reveals his purpose of revenge: "I must not only punish but punish with impunity. A wrong is unredressed when retribution overtakes its redresser. It is equally unredressed when the avenger fails to make himself feel as such to him who has done the wrong" (Poe, 1846, p. 4). This declaration is usually regarded as Montresor's code of action or statement of motivation. But from an existential perspective, it is itself a unique moral code and a set of values customized by Montresor for the essence he has created, the avenger, through his being, the verbal declaration. He does not follow some socially acceptable standard of revenge. Instead of following a socially accepted ethic of revenge, such as an eye for an eye, he defines what constitutes proper vengeance in a completely autonomous manner: it must be blame-free and the victim must

perceive the identity of the avenger. This creed has no external basis (religion, law, custom); it is purely a product of his subjective will, the meaning and value of the actions that he sets for himself as being-for-itself in planning his own avenger's nature. The content of the creed is the specific content of the essence of the perfect avenger that he wants to become. Therefore, the manifesto is not only an action guide, but also a key step in Montresor's active construction of the core definition of his avenger essence through his verbal action, which manifests his being. He legislates for himself.

In order to practice this creed, he carefully planned the whole process of revenge: choosing the chaotic Carnival as the background of revenge, luring Fortunato to the cellar by wine, intentionally mentioning another wine-tasting counterpart, Lucchesi, to arouse Fortunato's passion, and sending away the servant in advance. The design of the cellar is also full of precise calculations, "In its surface were two iron staples" (Poe, 1846, p. 8), which sealed Fortunato forever in the cellar's darkness almost before he could react.

Montresor's sculpting and manipulation of language in the narrative also confirms that existence precedes essence. The way he refers to Fortunato as "my friend" is not an objective description of the relationship between the two, but an elaborate linguistic trap. This linguistic strategy is not determined by the a priori status of friend or foe, but is a tool actively chosen in action for the purpose of revenge. Just as Sartre emphasizes that man defines himself through his actions, Montresor portrays himself as a disguised avenger by playing with language. For example, he pretends to care about Fortunato's health in the cellar: "we will go back; your health is precious. You are rich, respected, admired, beloved; you are happy, as once I was. You are a man to be missed. For me it is no matter" (Poe, 1846, p. 6). These words appear to be caring, but they are a precise grasp of Fortunato's vanity, reinforcing his existence as a manipulator through verbal actions.

In the arena of vengeance—in the dark, isolated cellar—Montresor's actions acquire a certain existential purity. The darkness of the wine cellar and the enclosed space exclude any interference from social norms, moral judgments, or any pre-existing values, and Montresor can choose and act in absolute freedom, achieving what Sartre called a state of pure subjectivity (1989a, p. 2). He is the director, who plans the murder; the actor, who plays the role of friend; and the audience, who remembers the pleasure of revenge through the narrative. As Liu Si-qin (2013) points out, "the author presents the story directly to us by way of self-referential narration, and our mind jumps around as if we were watching a play". We, as the audience, can only remain silent. Sartre's central proposition that existence precedes essence is eerily exemplified in Montresor's actions: he is not defined a priori as an avenger, but rather, through a series of choices and actions that are cold, rational, and entirely dominated by him, he completely shapes and identifies himself in the closed cellar of the wine cellar. Subjective will and freedom of action are the fundamental characteristics of his way of being.

3. The Cellar Gaze: Fortunato as Hell

In his book *No Exit*, Sartre elaborated the second basic principle, "Hell is other people"—that in a society where everyone competes for the subjectivity of themselves and others, there is bound to be perpetual conflict between people. It is in this process that the gaze arises: "shame, ... is the recognition of the fact that I am indeed that object which the Other is looking at and judging" (Sartre, 1956, p. 484). In *No Exit*, Sartre describes three dead men trapped in a hellish chamber and realizing that torture is not a torture device, but an eternal mutual gaze and judgment of each other. "There's no need for grills. Hell is other people" (Sartre, 1989b, p. 43). This relationship of contradiction and struggle reflects the fact that the relationship between people is always one of gaze and counter-gaze.

This picture of hell, full of conflicts and stares, is vividly embodied in the closed and antagonistic binary relationship between Montresor and Fortunato. When Montresor initiates his stare, judgment crystallizes and revenge unfolds. As Fortunato "turned towards me, and looked into my eyes with two filmy orbs that distilled the rheum of intoxication" (Poe, 1846, p. 6), the visceral discomfort arises not merely from Montresor's objectifying gaze—which reduces Fortunato to a grotesque physiological specimen—but from the existential nausea provoked by their reciprocal gaze. This nausea, as Gibbs (2011) defines it, stems from "the awareness that everything (including the individual) exists and is thus contingent, superfluous and absurd; the revelation that there is no reason for one's existence" (pp. 61-74). Here, Montresor's disgust at Fortunato's corporeal decay mirrors his horror at confronting the contingency of all being—a horror intensified when Fortunato's drunken gaze reflects Montresor's own absurdity back onto himself. The mutual stare thus becomes an ontological mirror, forcing both characters to witness existence stripped of justification.

This conflict of subject-object rivalry runs through the history of their relationship. According to the textual hints, Montresor's self-satisfaction comes from three main sources: firstly, his wine-tasting expertise; secondly, his aristocratic birth, and thirdly, his grasp and exploitation of human nature—he uses Fortunato's competitive spirit to lure him into the trap, and the psychological trait of pretending to be submissive by the servants to lure them away. However, Fortunato's behavior constitutes a continuous violation and denial of Montresor's subjectivity: when Montresor intentionally belittles himself to elevate Fortunato's wine-tasting ability, Fortunato does not object in the least and shouts, "Amontillado! You have been imposed upon" (Poe, 1846, p. 5), believing that Montresor knows little about wine and has been deceived. It can be inferred from this that Fortunato usually looks down on Montresor's ability; in addition to this, Fortunato shows contempt for Montresor's origin by saying "I forget your arms" (Poe, 1846, p. 6). This is a disregard for the popularity and dignity that Montresor has inherited from a family that has fallen into disrepute, and therefore constitutes a disregard for and a violation of Montresor's subjective rights.

Among Montresor's motives for revenge against Fortunato is another very strong emotion: fear, which completely deprives Montresor of his freedom and subjectivity—one is completely incapable of

rational thought in fear, and as a result loses his freedom. While delving into the cellar, Montresor hands Fortunato a bottle of wine, and Fortunato drinks it in one gulp. After drinking it, Fortunato just "laughed" (Poe, 1846, p. 7), and even thought that Montresor was a member of the fraternity, which shows that at that time, Fortunato had no suspicion at all about his "brothers." In this case, his eyes are less likely to be aggressive, and can even be described as amiable. However, from Montresor's perspective, what he saw was that "His eyes flashed with a fierce Light" (Poe, 1846, p. 7). This inevitably makes Montresor feel fearful, suspicious, and unpredictable. Furthermore, while Montresor is obsessed with building the wall, "A succession of loud and shrill screams, I trembled" (Poe, 1846, p. 9). As he was about to seal the wall with the last stone, "There came from out the niche a low laugh that erected the hairs upon my head" (Poe, 1846, p. 9). These three places show Montresor's fear. But why? In fact, it is because he is afraid of the power of Fortunato. Although Fortunato is at an absolute disadvantage being chained, he has the subjectivity, which eluded Montresor.

Montresor's revenge is a process of reclaiming the rights of the subject. He psychologically manipulates Fortunato, utilizing the latter's personality flaws such as vanity and triumphalism to put him in a difficult situation, and hints at his ill-will many times during his vengeance, mentioning "You are rich, respected, admired, beloved; you are happy, as once I was" (Poe, 1846, p. 6), and draws a knife. However, all are ignored by Fortunato. This leads to Fortunato be murdered by Montresor more as if it were due to his own stupidity and vanity, and his character is trampled upon as a result. For the reader of this article, perhaps the most striking feature of Montresor's eccentric and insane personality is his response to the yells of Fortunato: "I replied to the yells of him who clamored. I re-echoed, I aided, I surpassed them in volume and strength. I did this, and the clamorer grew still" (Poe, 1846, p. 9). In Montresor's strong voice, he could hear his voice overshadowing Fortunato to make himself live in a world where he can only hear his own voice, and thereby gain autonomy and is not disturbed by the presence of others.

4. Bell and Damp: Weight of Freedom and Eternal Responsibility

On the surface, Montresor's vengeance is seamless in that he escapes the sanction of the secular law. However, the profound insight of Sartre's existentialism lies precisely in the revelation that, on the back of absolute freedom, there is an inescapable absolute responsibility. As Sartre emphasized, freedom does not come without a price; in fact, "Man is condemned to be free…he is responsible for everything he does" (1989a, p. 10). Every choice man makes is followed by a corresponding responsibility; any attempt to shirk his responsibility is nothing more than bad faith, which means deceiving himself. Poe's narrative design allows Montresor to achieve success in revenge, but also to fall into the abyss of responsibility dug out by his own free choice. Sartre's existentialist philosophy shows here that it is not passive and avoiding the world: with almost cruel sobriety, it asks people to face up to and bear the weight of their own choices by pointing out that "through bad faith a person seeks to escape the

responsible freedom of Being-for-itself" (Sartre, 1956, p. 197). It regards recognizing and shouldering responsibility as a requirement and dignity of human beings.

From the beginning, Montresor refuses to confess the actual content of the thousand injuries and insults, perhaps because he realizes that there is no good reason to carry out such brutal revenge against Fortunato, and that the insults are just an excuse. The Amontillado is the key bait for Montresor to lure Fortunato to the cellar to kill him, yet the barrel has a sacred name, meaning "from the holy mountain" (Stott, 2004, pp. 85-88). This choice of imagery creates a strong ironic effect and at the same time reflects the absurdity of Montresor's revenge: his revenge is unjust, blasphemous, and undeserved. Yet the choice of vengeance does not bring absolute freedom, but rather a responsibility that must be borne—Montresor is not only responsible for the consequences of his actions but also for the eternal responsibility for the existential state of the avenger, a responsibility that brings with it inescapable anxiety. Raymond DiSanza speculates that what may be most chilling is the fact that Montresor forgets what the insult was and what motivated him to carry out his insane revenge fifty years after murdering Fortunato, although he can recall the details of the killing (2014, pp. 194-204). And while recounting his memories as if by rote, Montresor delves deeper and deeper into the dark, damp, suffocating stagnation of his own story and thoughts, searching in vain for his motive for revenge. He also seems to be horrified by his own actions at the end of his act of vengeance, "I hastened to make an end of my labor" (Poe, 1846, p. 9), hurrying to finish the last of the walling work; and, though laying layer after layer in front of him and reveling in it, he mentions when piling up the last stone that "I struggled with its weight" (Poe, 1846, p. 9), referring to both the weight of the stone and the weight of his identity as an avenger. When he finishes the last brick, he also completely seals off the possibility of his existence as a free man. He says that the humidity of the catacombs makes him feel sick and that this discomfort is not penitence or moral condemnation for the murder, but the anxiety of becoming avenger and murderer forever now of completing his vengeance.

Although Montresor's decisive motive for killing Fortunato is not certain, jealousy is undoubtedly one of the key driving forces. This jealousy is existential in nature, secret, hidden, and quiet, characterized by despair, anger, hatred, and the desire to be destroyed by the jealous person (Francisco, n.d., pp. 126-140). Montresor is outwardly immovable and even to "smile in his [Fortunato's] face", but inwardly he plots to kill Fortunato by brutal means. At the same time, the text implies that Fortunato connoisseurship is famous in the upper class to which he belongs, while Montresor, as a fallen aristocrat excluded from the social circle of the celebrities and the powerful, is ignored and denied, even though he thinks that he "did not differ from him [Fortunato] materially" (Poe, 1846, p. 9), and is equally adept at appreciating wine. In this case, the contrast between Montresor's and Fortunato's situations generates his jealousy of the latter. As Montresor declares, "your health is precious. You are rich, respected, admired, beloved; you are happy, as once I was. You are a man to be missed. For me it is no matter" (Poe, 1846, p. 6), it suggests his feelings of depression and injustice as the descendant of

a fallen family, and his envy of Fortunato in all aspects.

Man is the product of his own choices, and there are various ways in which Montresor could have gone from a state of jealousy, loathing, and fear of Fortunato to a state of reclaiming his subjectivity; physically destroying Fortunato to erase the effects of his existence would have been the most extreme of all, yet Montresor chose to do so. He allows himself to go to the extreme, being haunted by the memory of revenge for fifty consecutive years, and personally blocking the possibility of his freedom.

5. Conclusion

All along, the reason why Montresor's motivation for revenge is difficult to fully explain by traditional frameworks such as religion, politics, and class is that Poe's narrative ambiguity, which, coupled with the short length of the novel, suggests that it is difficult for us to learn about the motivation for revenge by tracing back the character's characterization or past experiences, and that we should turn to explore the character's present state of existence. We argue that Montresor is essentially a dramatization of existential freedom—he is neither the passive counterattack of the insulted and damaged nor the out-of-control behavior of the mentally ill, but an individual who confirms "I exist, I choose, and I am responsible" by making extreme choices in a dystopian world. By shifting the focus of the study from why the character revenges to how he revenges, we can find that Montresor is not a puppet of the environment or genes in the process of revenge and that his many autonomous choices reveal his thinking and weighing of his existence, of self and the world, and of self and others. In the end, by resorting to revenge, he plunges himself from the existential dilemma of being reduced to an object into another dilemma—confined to the identity of an avenger, and forever linked to the damp and dark cellar.

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