Love and Desire

Are what humans cherish nothing more than fast lanes to death? Individuals often allow objects or feelings to overcome even the most basic instincts. This lust for both physical and emotional entities are often classified as desires. In both Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Casket of Amontillado” and Tim O’Brien’s “The Things They Carried,” life and death are simply hidden by love or desire that the characters in both stories experience. These acts of wanting found in the stories involve a materialistic good or a physiological feeling, which ultimately leads to tragedy. Desires can be found in everyone and can be simple and harmless, or they can lead to harm, even to the point of death. Almost always, the desires people have will ultimately hurt someone.

Should anyone be trusted with the life of another? Too many people that claim they want to “help” others are only in it for self-interest. With Jimmy Cross in “The Things They Carried,” Cross could have only joined the war to try and win Martha over, seeing that most women find a man in uniform more attractive. This silly act of an attempt to win Martha over could very easily lead to tragedy, and, in Ted Lavender’s case, it absolutely did. Just before Ted had been shot in the head, Cross had been daydreaming about his lust for Martha. A quote from O’Brien’s story reads, “Lieutenant Cross felt the pain. He blamed himself” (O’Brien 14). Cross had even stated that “he had loved Martha more than his men, and as a consequence Lavender was now dead, and this was something he would have to carry like a stone in his stomach for the rest of the war”
Cross’s unbreakable lust for Martha was the cause of his fellow soldier’s death, which was the simple result of self-interest. Consequently, Cross’s feverish lust for Martha lead to Ted Lavender’s death as well as his own emotional destruction.

The saying goes that revenge is a dish best served cold. The killer of Fortunato in “The Cask of Amontillado” found this statement to especially be the case. Would it have been so easy if Fortunato had no desire to be better than Luchresi? Fortunato’s competition against Luchresi created a single-minded effect for identifying the Amontillado. Fortunato’s killer knew that the best way to lead Fortunato down into the catacombs was to tell him that he was going to go to Luchresi for help with the wine tasting. The killer even states that Fortunato “prided himself on his connoisseurship in wine.” (Poe 1). This meant that the pride of Fortunato would lead him into the catacombs without questioning the fact that the Amontillado could easily be brought from the catacombs for a tasting. Fortunato had been so determined to distinguish the taste of the Amontillado that he never thought that he might be walking right into a trap. Even after discovering nitre in the catacombs, Fortunato continues to press his killer closer and closer towards his tomb, even after the killer says that “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. We will go back; you will be ill, and I cannot be responsible. Besides, there is Luchresi --” (Poe 1). His determination had made him blind, and he suffered because of it. Once again, blinding desire led to someone getting hurt.

Obviously, desire influenced the actions taken by both main characters in the story. But, why did their desires for the love of a girl or the boasting rights of identifying wine overtake the fundamental actions that would have normally occurred if neither character had these cravings? Research by Kavanagh and his colleagues has suggested that, “the duration, frequency, and
intensity of craving may be the result of the combination of conditioned and voluntary cognitive processes. According to this view, termed the elaborated intrusion theory, when information about a desired target intrudes into consciousness it is perceived as spontaneous and induces craving” (Caselli 1). Another study by Kavanagh and her colleagues states that, “Craving is viewed as an intense desire or urge rather than a qualitatively different phenomenon. Desires to obtain appetitive targets are distinguished from intentions, and from thoughts about negative consequences of consumption (e.g. social approval or health enhancement)” (Kavanagh 2). Both Cross’s and Fortunato’s desires were overtaken by this “elaborate intrusion theory,” causing them to worry more about their cravings than their surroundings involuntarily. Once the thought of being able to mock Luchresi’s wine-identifying skills to the townspeople entered Fortunato’s mind, it escalated and induced his cravings to go down into the catacombs to taste the wine, disregarding the safety of his own health. Very similarly, Cross’s longing for Martha’s affection entered his mind before the time of Ted’s death, involuntarily keeping Cross from being able to watch his post in case of an attack. Perhaps, if their desires hadn’t been so strong, Ted would not be directly responsible for the death of a Ted, a fellow soldier under his command, and Fortunato might have lived.

What if desire hadn’t cost the destruction of Ted or Fortunato? Would they both be alive to tell tales of their own? Thanks to the hedonic treadmill theory, they likely would not. According to studies published by the American Phycologist Journal, the hedonic treadmill theory states that “good and bad events temporarily affect happiness, but people quickly adapt back to hedonic neutrality” (Diener 1). Even if Cross had gotten a letter from Martha confessing a slight affection towards him, he would only have been temporarily satisfied by this before he would once again begin daydreaming about her while out in the field of battle. Even if Fortunato
had not been trapped in the catacombs and was able to boast about identifying the Amontillado, soon his lust to outshine Luchresi another time would take over his instincts. As stated in an article published by *Business Insider*, “Setting and achieving goals is important, but single-minded focus on them can blind people to ethical concerns” (Groth 1). Undoubtedly, both characters would desire more sooner or later, and both would put themselves or others at risk to fill those desires.

Indefinitely, desire was the cause of both deaths in the stories “The Cask of Amontillado” and “The Things They Carried.” Ted Lavender lost his life because of Jimmy Cross’s fascination with Martha, which left him daydreaming about her rather than being attentive to his surroundings. Fortunato also met a similar fate simply because of his desire to prove that he was better than Luchresi, leaving him blind to all of the noticeable oddities in the situation. Today, and for the rest of the existence of humanitarian society, there will always be an issue of lust, greed, desire, and self-interest. Both Poe and O’Brien caution against unchecked desire in their tales. Self-reflection and expressing those thoughts are the only aspects that separate man from animals and offer any defense against blind desire.


