Nemo Me Impune Lacessit: Human Nature and Revenge

“The Cask of Amontillado” by Edgar Allan Poe is a tale of how one man gets the revenge he believes he deserves. The short story follows the execution of his carefully thought-out plan from start to finish. To intensify the depiction of perfected revenge, Poe heavily uses both dramatic and verbal irony. He also includes foreshadowing to show that the need for revenge seals one’s fate even before events transpire. In addition, the setting shows the dark nature of revenge. Through his use of these many literary elements, Poe describes the essence of revenge and how it manifests itself in the mind and actions of man. Revenge is an element of human nature that only completion can satiate.

Dramatic irony plays a major role in “The Cask of Amontillado.” It enhances the revenge that Montresor inflicts on Fortunato. One key example is how Poe depicts Fortunato. He says of him, “The man wore motley. He had on a tight-fitting parti-striped dress, and his head was surmounted by the conical cap and bells” (166). In juxtaposition with Montresor, who wears “a mask of black silk and… a roquelaire” (167), Fortunato dresses as a fool. Later, he becomes the fool as Montresor bests him when he takes his life. Even his name is ironic. Fortunato is not, in this story, a fortunate individual. In fact, the entire plot of the story in itself exhibits dramatic irony. From the start, the reader knows of the hatred Montresor has for Fortunato and his intent to murder him. The first two paragraphs alone relay that “[a]t length [Montresor] would be avenged… [Fortunato] did not perceive that [Montresor’s] smile now was at the thought of his
immolation” (166). However, Fortunato is unaware of Montresor’s feelings toward him. The narrator indicates this by his use of the word “friend” multiple times in both dialogue and narration when he first meets up with Fortunato. Fortunato realizes that Montresor has deceived him only at the end of the story. Poe weaves dramatic irony into “The Cask of Amontillado” to augment his idea that satisfaction comes from ultimate revenge.

Like dramatic irony, verbal irony is significant to the enrichment of the story. Poe’s use of verbal irony is a constant reminder that Fortunato is completely unaware of his inevitable demise, compounding the cruel yet captivating idea of revenge. For example, Fortunato refers to Luchresi as “an ignoramus” (169) as Montresor leads him foolishly to his execution. As the two are walking through the catacombs, Montresor pulls out a bottle of wine, which he gives to Fortunato. In response, Fortunato says, “I drink… to the buried that repose around us” (168). In only a short time, he too will join “the buried.” According to James F. Cooney, “Throughout the entire episode – its planning, its execution, and its confession – Monsieur Montresor made self-conscious use of cunning, plotting, and irony to wreak his revenge” (324). A prime example of this is when, after a vicious coughing fit, Fortunato says, “[T]he cough is a mere nothing; it will not kill me. I shall not die of a cough” (168). In turn, Montresor declares, “True—true” (168), knowing the actual method of Fortunato’s death. Perhaps the best instance of verbal irony occurs when the two discuss the Montresor family. Fortunato asks what the motto is, to which Montresor replies, “Nemo me impune lacerat” (168). Fortunato does not realize these words and the idea they possess lay behind his untimely death. This phrase closely aligns with the theme of the story and serves to show just how much pleasure Montresor receives from his witty use of irony. It, along with the several other instances of verbal irony, compounds the idea that the voracious notion of retribution is ever-present in human nature.
Foreshadowing in the story makes it clear that Fortunato will meet an undesirable fate. The first line of the story reads, “The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as best I could, but when he ventured upon insult I vowed my revenge” (166). Early in the story, the narrator makes his intention to harm Fortunato evident. The reader becomes aware that something is going to happen to Fortunato. It is not long after that that the narrator says, “There were no attendants at home… These orders were sufficient, I well knew, to insure their immediate disappearance, one and all, as soon as my back was turned” (167). With no witnesses around, Montresor can exact vengeance on Fortunato with more ease and less risk. To reach the Amontillado, the two must travel through the catacombs that lay under the Montresor abode. The isolation of the location once again foreshadows the approach of an unfortunate event. Then, as the two walk through the catacombs, Montresor continually provides him with wine. By increasing his alcoholic intake, he ensures that Fortunato’s guard will be down. The more he drinks, the more susceptible he is to the horror Montresor has in store for him. The conversation the two have about masonry is yet another example of foreshadowing (169). Montresor reveals a trowel from beneath his cloak, the very instrument he uses to wall-up Fortunato. These instances of foreshadowing show that revenge is inescapable when an avenger sets his mind to it. It decides one’s fate even before the avenger takes action.

“The Cask of Amontillado” takes place mainly in a cemetery underneath the Montresor estate, most likely in an Italian town, during the season of carnival. This setting works to illustrate just how sinister revenge is. Cooney describes the aspects of the temporal setting that play into the revenge Montresor exacts on Fortunato:

With consummate evil [Montresor] chose the carnival season for his crime… The season afforded a perfect setting for murder: servants were out of the house celebrating, the
noise and frenzy of the crowds allowed the murderer to go about his work unnoticed, the high spirits of the season provided an appropriately ironic background for Montresor’s playful antics with his victim, and the somber, religious quiet that settled upon the city was just the right mood for Fortunato’s final hour. (325)

The spatial setting is just as key. It is very unlikely that anyone will find Fortunato chained to a wall far below the city in an isolated location. Also, the location that Montresor chooses has a frightening, gruesome quality that mimics the nature of revenge. The narrator describes the underground burial site as being “lined with human remains, piled to the vault overhead, in the fashion of the great catacombs of Paris” (269). Like the setting, revenge gives off an air of uneasiness and horror. Nothing good can happen for the person at its mercy. Both the temporal and spatial settings add to the cruelty of Montresor’s revenge and serve to mirror its dark qualities.

Poe uses the story of Montresor’s vengeance on Fortunato to explain that revenge is an undeniable feature of human nature. And completion is the only thing that satisfies it. Dramatic irony, verbal irony, foreshadowing, and setting all play a part in conveying the complexion of revenge. Irony shows just how sweet revenge can be for the one who exacts it. It adds to the quality of the vengeance Montresor exacts on Fortunato. Foreshadowing elucidates just how compelling revenge is. It dictates one’s destiny the moment an avenger decides on giving retribution for a wrong that has impacted him. And finally, the setting of the story reveals the ominous characteristics of revenge. “The Cask of Amontillado” serves to show the voracious nature of the vengeful mind that only completed revenge can calm.
Works Cited
