You Drive Me Crazy: A Psychological Criticism of “The Cask of Amontillado”

Edgar Allan Poe’s stories, which often feature narrators who are strongly emotional if not completely insane, are prime subjects for the lens of psychological criticism. One story that lends itself particularly well to this form of criticism is “The Cask of Amontillado,” a chilling tale of revenge told from the perspective of a crazed narrator called Montresor. Throughout the story, Montresor recalls a severe form of retribution he sought against a man named Fortunato fifty years ago; revenge which entailed leading Fortunato into the Montresor family catacombs and walling him off inside a recess there. The motive for the murder is vaguely attributed to “an insult,” nothing more and nothing less. Due to the severity of the retribution Montresor sought against Fortunato, the reader has to question what would lead a man to commit such an act. Psychological criticism, specifically an application of Freudian psychology, is a useful tool in this regard, as it assists in delving deep into the seemingly unfathomable mind of Montresor.

One of the chief questions that begs an answer in “The Cask of Amontillado” is that of motive. In Theory Into Practice: An Introduction to Literary Criticism, Ann B. Dobie relates psychological criticism to humanity’s innate need to “[speculate] about others’ motives, relationships, and conversations” (53). This truth is made particularly evident in a reading of “The Cask of Amontillado.” What could drive someone to commit an act as unfathomably cruel as burying another person alive, many readers wonder. Although the answer to this question has escaped readers for centuries, an application of Freudian psychology helps to unearth some answers.

Freudian psychology subscribes to the notion that the subconscious – the part of our brain that, unbeknownst to us, controls many of our behaviors – is divided into multiple parts. One of
these parts is the id, the pleasure seeking mechanism that drives impulsive and risky behaviors. The id “will aggressively seek to gratify its desires without any concern for law, customs, or values” (Dobie 57).

Montresor is an example of a character that almost exclusively follows the promptings of his id. His desire for revenge causes him to act in ways that conflict with both morality and the law. In her essay “The Motive for Murder in ‘The Cask of Amontillado,’” Elena V. Baraban describes Montresor’s attitude towards the murder itself. “Montresor is perfectly calm and rational in his account,” she writes. “He never expresses pity for his enemy or feels remorse for what he did...he perceives his murder of Fortunato as a successful act of vengeance and punishment rather than crime” (2). The over-activity of his id drives Montresor to kill Fortunato, but it does more than that. It taints his perception so that he sees himself rather than Fortunato as a victim, therefore deriving satisfaction from committing the deed. The murder is seen as a logical, deserved retaliation for the wrongs Fortunato committed against him.

Montresor not only showcases a susceptibility to his own id, he also displays a keen awareness of the id at work in other people. In order to set the stage for his murder, Montresor lures Fortunato into the catacombs using a story about a rare Amontillado wine that he wants Fortunato to taste. “He had a weak point,” he says. “He prided himself on his connoisseurship in wine” (Poe 14). When Fortunato is introduced into the story, he is dressed like a fool, having recently arrived from “the madness of the carnival season...he had been drinking much” (Poe 14). In her own psychological criticism of the story, Cynthia Bily describes him as “a drunken man with bells on his hat [who is] no match for Montresor...it is hard to imagine Fortunato as ‘a man to be
respected, and even feared’, as he sways and staggers and fixates on the prospect of tasting more wine” (2).

Up until the grisly end of the story, Fortunato’s mounting inebriation is frequently mentioned as Montresor gives him more and more wine. It isn’t until Montresor has nearly finished building the wall to fully encase Fortunato that the drunkenness wears off; and by this point, of course, it is far too late for Fortunato to do anything besides accept his fate. In this way Fortunato’s id, driven to experience greater and greater levels of pleasure through drink, directly contributes to his death at the hands of Montresor.

The psychology behind Montresor’s actions in “The Cask of Amontillado” is complex; however, it can be more easily understood with an application of Freudian psychology. In particular, an examination of the way the Freudian id plays into the story helps readers to unravel the actions of not only Montresor, but of Fortunato as well. Through the events of “The Cask of Amontillado” readers can see the potentially destructive affects of the id taken to a drastic conclusion.
Works Cited

Baraban, Elena V. “The Motive for Murder in the Cask of Amontillado.”

Bily, Cynthia. “Criticism.”

Dobie, Ann B. Theory Into Practice: An Introduction to Literary Criticism.