

Analysis of Unity of Effect in *The Cask of Amontillado*

Tao Zhou

School of Foreign Languages, South China University of Technology, Guangzhou 510641, China

Abstract: Unity of Effect is a literary theory proposed by Edgar Allan Poe, an American short story writer of the Romantic period. The theory holds that characters, setting, plot and theme of a fiction should serve to achieve the designed effect of the fiction. Edgar Allan Poe puts his self-invented theory into practice by applying it to his short stories. This paper focuses on the application of Unity of Effect in Poe's short stories. As one of Edgar Allan Poe's most famous short stories, *The Cask of Amontillado* is short but compact. Through textual analysis, this paper studies this book to prove that the characterization, plot and other relevant elements in *The Cask of Amontillado* are the embodiment of Unity of Effect while using Unity of Effect as the guiding theory. This paper firstly introduces research background and then the author as well as his theory. After that, it analyzes the embodiment of the Unity of Effect in *The Cask of Amontillado*, ranging from the character's personality, plot to some artistic techniques.

Keywords: Unity of Effect; *The Cask of Amontillado*; Edgar Allan Poe.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

Being a writer, poet and literary critic of the American Romantic period, Edgar Allan Poe has won worldwide acclaim for his unique creative style and artistic characteristics in his works, enjoying the title of "Father of the Short Story". He puts forward Unity of Effect and has successfully applied it to his works, making each work complete, unified and distinctive. Being one of Edgar Allan Poe's most popular masterpieces of short stories, *The Cask of Amontillado* has always been the center of study by scholars worldwide. The focus of their analysis has mostly been on the themes, horror and literary techniques of Poe's works, such as death, ugliness and symbolism. For example, Chinese scholar Sun Feng studies symbolism and horror effect of Poe's work in his paper *Perspective, Symbol and the Establishment of Horror Effect in The Cask of Amontillado* [14]. Another scholar, Cao Man, pays attention to Poe's themes of death in her paper *Poe's 'Unity of Effect' and the Representation of the Theme of Death in His Stories* [8].

These days, the emergence of streaming media gives birth to the rampancy of on-line fast-food culture. Media articles tend to be showy and devoid of content [15]. In such case, it is necessary to revisit Unity of Effect, proposed by Edgar Allan Poe and learn how to exercise desired and united effect on modern articles and stories.

1.2. Purpose and Significance

From the perspective of Poe, since he has emphasized that "I prefer commencing with the consideration of an effect" [4], this paper will take a different look at how tragic effect is achieved in *The Cask of Amontillado*. Unity of Effect is a literary theory proposed by Edgar Allan Poe and has always been the guiding principle in his literary creation. This paper will combine his theory and work and analyze Unity of Effect from three perspectives, including the main character's personality, the plot of the text and other elements pertaining to reach desired effect. From the aspect of other elements, it will take a deeper look at the techniques of foreshadowing and contrast employed in the story, which have been rarely

analyzed.

This paper is to evoke people's awareness over Unity of Effect on modern stories and articles to better appreciate them. United effect matters more than those flashy words.

2. The Author and the Theory

2.1. Edgar Allan Poe and The Cask of Amontillado

After the colonial period, it came the Romantic period. The United States welcomed a deep liberation of body and mind. Since people's bodies were unfettered, intuition started to grow. Literary creation surged to a new peak, generating a large number of talented writers in the field of literature. With immense creativity, they successfully gave birth to a number of works that have influenced not only America, but also the whole world. Edgar Allan Poe is one of these writers, who has experimented in poetry and fiction, and has especially excelled in fiction writing.

Poe is a writer, who not only inherits the writing technique of traditional literature but dares to challenge it. He incorporates in his novels a great number of elements and expressions that have not been used by his predecessors [14]. He weighs ugliness of human nature over justice and beauty, creating his own aesthetic principle. In addition, he has made many comments on the works of his contemporaries throughout his life. The contemporary American literary critic Edmund Wilson once said, "Edgar Allan Poe's literary comments are indeed the unprecedented masterpiece in American literature." [20]. In this sense, Poe is revolutionary.

"Poe's short life is full of controversy. He is ostracized and treated badly in the field of literature during his lifetime. He is even misunderstood after his death because of the connection between his real life and the characters in his imaginary world." [12] Poe experiences many ups and downs throughout his life, which may well explain why he always drinks heavily until he finally dies on the street, with no one paying any attention to him. He suffers from nervous breakdown from time to time and he knows that he "could spend a century waiting for his readers" [3]. Some people support what Liu Junmei has said, that Poe's life experience has too many similarities with the experiences of the

characters in his imaginary fictions. [12] Both of them are the same abnormal and erratic, with similar unstable mental state. Just as Poe is ostracized in the real world, the characters in the imaginary world are not received either. But in fact, Poe doesn't create characters by simply copying his own experience. On the contrary, in the process of creation, he has his own principles to follow. "The aesthetic principle of Edgar Allan Poe's creation is the pursuit of the united effect or impression in literature." [12]

The Cask of Amontillado, published in 1846, with a total of 4,200 words, is one of Poe's most famous short stories. It carries a reflection of the aesthetic principle and united effect that Poe has always pursued. Short in length and compact in plot, *The Cask of Amontillado* tells the story of how the revenge-obsessed Montresor, once insulted by Fortunato, claims that he gets a cask of Amontillado at a high price but cannot identify the quality of wine and of how he uses the wine as an excuse to lure Fortunato to the niche in order to implement his plans of murder. [16]

Edgar Allan Poe is significant in the field of literature, therefore the study of his literary works is meaningful. Based on the text of *The Cask of Amontillado*, this paper will analyze the role that major elements of the story play in contributing to the realization of Unity of Effect.

2.2. Unity of Effect

Unity of Effect is a literary theory proposed by American writer, Edgar Allan Poe. In *The Review of Hawthorne's Twice-Told Tales*, Poe stated his principles in this way:

A work of fiction should be written only after the author has decided how it is to end and which emotional response, or "effect", he wishes to create, commonly known as the "Unity of Effect". Once this effect has been determined, the writer should decide all other matters pertaining to the composition of the work, including tone, theme, setting, characters, conflict and plot. [16]

This is the first mention of Poe's principle, Unity of Effect, and this statement also reflects that Poe is not only a writer but also a literary critic. It is not difficult to find that almost all of Poe's short stories follow Unity of Effect, enabling all works to be compact and distinctive. Compactness is exactly the feature that media articles in today's modern world lack.

At the same time, Poe's theory also influenced the principles of writers' creation in the late Romantic period. In addition, Poe's works are abundant in writing techniques. Except for Unity of Effect, his works contain a great deal of embodiment of symbolism. And since symbolism and allusion later became the main creative techniques of modernist literature [11], one may say that Poe is the forerunner of modernism.

The influence of Edgar Allan Poe on world literature is enormous. Titled with "Father of the Short Story", he gains popularity for his short fictions. Besides, the literary theories he puts forward are also far-reaching. Therefore, it is meaningful to study him and the valuable literary wealth he has left to the world.

3. Analysis of Unity of Effect in The Cask of Amontillado

3.1. Protagonist's Personality

The story is set in Italy and depicts the vicious methods of

Montresor, an Italian man, for revenge. [10] This part explores the psychological changes of Montresor during the process of the murder, which work to deliver a tragic effect for the story.

3.1.1. Surliness Shown at the Beginning

The beginning part of *The Cask of Amontillado* is meaningful, which goes like this:

THE THOUSAND injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could; but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge. You, who so well know the nature of my soul, will not suppose, however, that I gave utterance to a threat. [2]

The author gives a lot of information at the beginning of the novel. For example, the story is written in the first person point of view, "I". More information is presented by "me" screaming for revenge against a man called Fortunato. And the reason for revenge is that Fortunato has insulted "me". When readers read this part, he or she will have strong doubts about who "I" am, without knowing what is going on in the following parts. They will also doubt that what the specific reason for revenge is. After that, readers will understand the author's intention of capitalizing the first two letters of the story. That is to highlight the hatred of "me" to Fortunato. Then readers will be aware of the extent to which Fortunato has insulted "me" that "I" even swear to take revenge.

The author has successfully arranged this paragraph in the beginning, which not only well attracts the readers to read, but also get the readers involved in the surly emotion of "me". The word "surly" is defined as: menacing or threatening in appearance [17]. This word "surly" can well show the image of the main character in the opening speech. From his words, one can find him to be a person who is determined to take revenge regardless of any good manners he may have. Poe creates an image of a mad man here, for ordinary people will not do what he does. Most people follow the way of negotiation to settle problems to avoid tragedy.

He had a weak point--this Fortunato -- although in other regards he was a man to be respected and even feared. He prided himself on his connoisseurship in wine. [2]

In painting and gemmery, Fortunato, like his countrymen, was a quack-but in the matter of old wines he was sincere. In this respect, I did not differ from him materially. [2]

From the first three lines, one can easily find out that Fortunato should be a businessman of considerable acumen and fame. This fact has also been affirmed by the protagonist since he says that "but in the matter of old wines he was sincere" [2]. At the same time, these words also show the self-aggrandizement of the protagonist, who believes that he is as excellent as Fortunato in tasting old wine and that he should receive the same reputation as Fortunato. What makes the protagonist more surly and perverse is that he unrelentingly disparages Fortunato as a quack in painting and gemmery. On the other hand, The image of Fortunato seems more tragic in that although he enjoys honors in many fields, he is worthless in the eyes of the protagonist.

With sick and twisted mind, the protagonist believes that the real revenge is not only to let the enemy know who he is, but also to protect himself from being caught [9]. The protagonist is determined, surly and cynical, which suggests that the story's tragedy is inevitable. On the other hand, the

tragic effect has been triggered here because readers have no idea of what misery will fall on Fortunato.

3.1.2. Shrewdness in Luring the Victim

After having a basic understanding of the motive of the main character's revenge, readers are brought into a series of dialogues between the protagonist and Fortunato. One thing to mention is that these dialogues are meaningful. A close reading can reveal the sophisticated planning of the protagonist in carrying out the revenge. For example:

"How?" said he. "Amontillado? A pipe? Impossible! And in the middle of the carnival!"

"I have my doubts," I replied; "and I was silly enough to pay the full Amontillado price without consulting you in the matter. You were not to be found, and I was fearful of losing a bargain."

"Amontillado!"

"I have my doubts."

"Amontillado!"

"And I must satisfy them."

"Amontillado!"

"As you are engaged, I am on my way to Luchesi. If any one has a critical turn, it is he. He will tell me--" [2]

Fortunato is a skilled taster of good wine and boasts of being a genius of wine. Montresor, knowing Fortunato's weakness, catered to his interest in wine [7]. It is clear from these dialogues that the protagonist is well aware of Fortunato's preferences and he plans to use Fortunato's preferences as a bait to lure him into the "Amontillado" or a trap. And so far, there is actually no information about whether the "Amontillado" really exists or not. Here, both characters have different purposes. The protagonist lays out a plan of seducing Fortunato, while the latter feels no signs of danger, only eager to taste good wine. The contrast made between their purposes deepens the protagonist's cruelty and paves way for the realization of tragic effect on the part of Fortunato.

Dictionary gives "shrewdness" its definition as: given to wily and artful ways or dealings [18]. This word better depicts the psychological state of the protagonist to this point. He doesn't answer Fortunato's questions directly. Rather, he keeps violating the cooperative principle so that he can make the presence of Amontillado more real. Fortunato, to some extent, pushes the development of tragic effect in that he knows how hard it is to get Amontillado in the middle of carnival. But he is still controlled by the desire to have a taste of the good wine. No wonder he falls into the trap.

The shrewdness of the protagonist is also reflected in the process of luring Fortunato. He first compliments Fortunato, saying that "I was silly enough to pay the full Amontillado price without consulting you in the matter [2]" to let Fortunato feel smug and that his opinion really matters. Then, the protagonist is seemingly unintentional to throw out the topic of Amontillado. He pretends to be bothered to find a skillful person to taste Amontillado, which successfully attracts Fortunato. After that, the protagonist decides to look for another man to taste the wine to avoid bothering Fortunato. This undoubtedly gives Fortunato a sense of crisis. Under the effect of alcohol, Fortunato is unable to reasonably judge the intention of the protagonist's words, only passively walking into the protagonist's carefully designed snare. This part not only shows the shrewdness of the protagonist, but also provides the prerequisites for the tragedy to happen.

3.1.3. Pathology during the Process of Murder

The first appearance of the protagonist's name is juxtaposed with his family's grave, exerting an inexplicably eerie feeling. In addition, it seems to suggest a transformation of the protagonist's psychology, as he wants to choose the family's cemetery as the location of murder, conveying a sense of madness. After that, here comes the scene of murder:

I had scarcely laid the first tier of my masonry when I discovered that the intoxication of Fortunato had in a great measure worn off. The earliest indication I had of this was a low moaning cry from the depth of the recess. It was not the cry of a drunken man. There was then a long and obstinate silence. I laid the second tier, and the third, and the fourth; and then I heard the furious vibrations of the chain. The noise lasted for several minutes, during which, that I might hearken to it with the more satisfaction, I ceased my labors and sat down upon the bones. [2]

This part follows how Montresor uses appreciation of Amontillado as the pretext to successfully lure Fortunato into a damp, dark vault and to carry out his revenge. He chains drunken Fortunato in the deepest place of the vault and then seals the place bit by bit, trying to suffocate Fortunato. Montresor's mind has been occupied by hatred and is crazy beyond control. This way of presenting the innermost sins of the murderer to readers from the beginning to the end in an unabashed manner is mind-blowing and thought-provoking [14]. In the whole process of murder, Montresor's words and actions seem to be rational, but those seemingly rational movements actually kill a "rich, respected, admired, beloved and happy man" [2]. Montresor is pathological to this point.

Dictionary gives "pathology" definition as: deviation giving rise to social ills [19]. Montresor's pathology is reflected in his cold-bloodedness during the murder process, especially when sealing the damp room in which Fortunato is in. Fortunato sobers up from the drunken state and lets out a "low moaning cry" [2]. But Montresor does not give up a single thought of revenge. He still closes the room. He sits outside to listen to Fortunato's voice getting weaker and weaker until it finally disappears. Such a pathological and anti-social Montresor pushes the achievement of tragic effect to the climax. Montresor becomes a murderer, while the rich and respectable Fortunato leaves the world forever.

3.2. Plot

3.2.1. Story Setting

After Montresor reveals that he will secretly kill Fortunato in the beginning, the author also reveals the general environment or setting of the story. It takes place during carnival when people will be wearing diverse costumes and walk on the street. Some people wear masks so that they cannot see each other clearly to remain a sense of mystery. It is against such setting that Montresor meets Fortunato. But for Montresor who is such a shrewd, pathological person, the encounter may be seemingly accidental. Perhaps, Montresor has planned for a long time for this moment.

The author deliberately emphasizes the costume of Fortunato and Montresor. About Fortunato, the author describes him as a man who "wore motley" [2], with a bell in his cap and tight striped dress. In a word, he wears in a ridiculous manner. In contrast with him, Montresor wears more decently, all in black. But this is carnival, the best day to wear all sorts of strange costumes. It is also because of

carnival that every absurd thing becomes reasonable, including Montresor's plan of inviting Fortunato to his family catacombs, the damp vault to taste valuable Amontillado.

One thing that should be noticed is Montresor's action after he successfully draws Fortunato's attention to Amontillado. The author describes it as:

Thus speaking, Fortunato possessed himself of my arm. Putting on a mask of black silk, and drawing a roquelaire closely about my person, I suffered him to hurry me to my palazzo. [2]

Montresor wears a black outfit at the carnival, which should have been normal against the setting of carnival. But in combination with his motivation, black here may foreshadow something bad to happen. Montresor's donning of the "mask of black silk" represents his appropriation of blackness and his use of common minstrel devices [6]. What's shown in this paragraph is that before Montresor is about to take Fortunato home, he puts on the mask. This action may prove that he is about to transform or be another man, who no longer pleases Fortunato. He will take Fortunato away in front of so many people under the cover of the mask. And then, he will kill Fortunato. Since it is carnival, no one will pay attention to them. Such background facilitates Montresor's murder process and provides more possibilities for the tragedy to occur, realizing the application of Unity of Effect.

3.2.2. The Process of Murder

The author writes in great detail about Montresor's murder process, from leading Fortunato to the vault to telling Fortunato the meaning of the Montresors' family motto. It is especially presented to readers about how Montresor seals Fortunato in deep and damp niche permanently. Tragedy occurs:

I laid the second tier, and the third, and the fourth; and then I heard the furious vibrations of the chain.

I resumed the trowel, and finished without interruption the fifth, the sixth, and the seventh tier.

I had completed the eighth, the ninth, and the tenth tier. I had finished a portion of the last and the eleventh... [2]

Montresor uses some mortar to cover the space where Fortunato is in. The protagonist puts on the mortar tier by tier until the whole space is completely closed up. Then, he waits outside the space so that he can know how Fortunato is suffocated to death. The increasing height of the stone wall is a countdown to Fortunato's life, and his death is imminent [13]. But Montresor doesn't finish his project at a time. He is interrupted for many times. The first time is when Fortunato gives a "low moaning cry" that makes him uncomfortable. The second time is because Fortunato's yell before death makes him fear and even tremble. But Montresor is determined. So, he also yells back until Fortunato's voice became still. The last interruption is due to the final conversation between the protagonist and Fortunato. Fortunato is already delirious at this point. After that, Montresor throws the torch into the niche and starts to apply the last tier to complete his long-planned revenge plan.

Throughout the whole process, Fortunato is miserable, being manipulated and handcuffed to chains, witnessing himself being buried alive, trying to resist but of no avail, and finally dying of suffocation. Fortunato's tragic experience drives effect to a new level and even makes one feel

deeply sympathetic for him. In a word, the arrangement of the process of murder builds up the achievement of Unity of Effect.

3.2.3. Open Ending of the Story

A novel is usually composed of a beginning, a climax, and an end. As for the end, it usually explains the suspense and ambiguity built in the text. However, in *The Cask of Amontillado*, the author ends the entire story with an open ending, not revealing any mystery but leaving the reader with infinite imagination. The last three sentences of the story goes like this:

Against the new masonry I re-erected the old rampart of bones. For the half of a century no mortal has disturbed them. In pace requiescat! [2]

From the three sentences at the end of the story, readers can grasp that Montresor's murder conspiracy is so perfect that no one finds Fortunato's death in Montresor's vault even if half a century has passed. Also, readers can imagine how Montresor disguises his innocence in the face of others asking about the disappearance of Fortunato. In the end, the protagonist ironically expresses his wishes for Fortunato, hoping that Fortunato's soul can rest in peace. This is what is shown in the end of the novel. But there are more things that cannot be perceived. Montresor recalls of the process of murdering Fortunato half a century ago, reliving the commitment of the crime. It is a sudden, unpredictable, understated revelation that the murder, recounted in its every lurid detail, occurred not yesterday or last week, but a full fifty years prior to the telling [5]. There are two ways to interpret this recalling. One is that he is arrested after half a century, so he is recalling the murder process to the police. The other is that he is not arrested. He recalls the murder process just to savor the thrill of killing at that time. In this sense, this is an open ending with various interpretations. If the protagonist is arrested, it will convey more justice, while if it is the other way around, the murderer is still not punished so many years after the death of Fortunato, making Fortunato a most tragic man in this story. The open ending in turn increases the tragic effect of the story. The author's arrangement of the ending also plays a role in the realization of the Unity of Effect.

3.3. Other Elements

This part will look into foreshadowing and contrast employed in the novel. It will especially make a contrast between the status of the two characters to see how it activates the tragedy.

3.3.1. Foreshadowing

There are many hints foreshadowing the tragedy in the story. The beginning of the story is the most obvious foreshadowing of the entire text. The protagonist screams for revenge and swears he will kill Fortunato in an outrageous tone, which foreshadows the tragedy. Later, against the setting of carnival, the protagonist lures Fortunato with the pretext of Amontillado when the latter is already drunk and not able to think independently. It also foreshadows that Fortunato puts himself in danger because of his preference of wine. In the vault of the Montresors, the protagonist presents Fortunato with more wine, of which the name is meaningful. The wine is called "De Grave", which is a French word meaning "go to the grave". The name also serves as a foreshadowing, to some extent, that Fortunato will be taken to grave by the protagonist. In the niche, Montresor and Fortunato have a series of

conversations about the Montresors' motto. The protagonist eventually informs Fortunato that the meaning of the motto is "Nemo me impune lacessit" [2], which is translated as anyone who hurts me will be severely punished. This motto also foreshadows the tragic ending, for the protagonist says in his monologue at the beginning of the story that Fortunato has insulted him. He, therefore, following his family motto, will definitely take revenge. All these clues foreshadow the tragic ending of Fortunato and help explain the narrow-mindedness of Montresor, making the murder inevitable and contributing to the atmosphere of tragic effect.

3.3.2. Contrast of Status

Edgar Allan Poe's short fictions have one feature in common which is that they use horrific scenes to suggest the mutilation and darkness of human nature, thus inspiring readers to think and reflect [10]. That's true in *The Cask of Amontillado*.

To explore the roots of this tragic story and the reasons for the crippled nature of the characters, it is necessary to study the social background and social status of the characters.

Montresor is a fallen aristocrat, who has many "attendants" at home and owns a "palazzo". He claims to be skillful in the Italian vintages and wine, which is confirmed by the fact that Fortunato believes that he is capable of storing Amontillado at home in carnival. It shows that Montresor is a person of certain status and fame so that Fortunato bears no doubt that he is able to get valuable wine, thus walking into the his trap. On the other hand, Fortunato is a far more prestigious businessman in that even Montresor himself describes Fortunato as a "rich, respected, admired, beloved and happy" man [2]. So, here lies a difference in social status between the two. The contrast is that one is a rising aristocrat and the other is fallen.

As the fallen aristocrat adheres to the family motto, "Nemo me impune lacessit" [2], he is born narrow-minded and cannot accept that Fortunato enjoys so much more praise and reputation than him. So he plans to kill Fortunato. As for the rising aristocrat, he is too flamboyant and self-centered. When Montresor deliberately says he will get Luchesi to taste Amontillado, Fortunato comments Luchesi as "ignoramus" in a disrespectful manner. The mutilation of Fortunato's personality leads to his tragedy.

Poe actually opens a relationship between himself, his "reader", and whatever human being happens to actually be holding a copy of his tales[1]. His description of darkness of Montresor and mutilation of Fortunato fit human beings. The two characters' personalities are shaped by the social background and their different social status. Such contrast to some extent determines the occurrence of this tragic story.

4. Conclusion

Edgar Allan Poe is a determined practitioner of Unity of Effect. In his writing, he pays great attention to a high degree of unity. All the elements he mentions have to serve the Unity of Effect in his works, including the character, plot and theme. In the case of *The Cask of Amontillado*, these elements serve the designed effect, which is tragic from the perspective of the two characters. From the change of mood of the protagonist, to the time and place of the story setting, and to the contrast of the social status of the two characters, all contribute to the development of the tragic effect.

Poe's writing style is diverse or even strange, which is not understood by the period which he is in. But Poe still adheres

to his principles of literary creation and completes his works. He has successfully applied Unity of Effect to his works, making each work complete, unified and distinctive. These days, people pay much attention to his works and literary theories, which is confirmed by the increasing studies by scholars at home and abroad.

Poe's works are advanced and modern. Human beings' shortcomings reflected in *The Cask of Amontillado* are worthy of introspection. And Poe's Unity of Effect still has a place in guiding contemporary works, media articles and stories. Therefore, in modern society, it is necessary to understand the use of Unity of Effect and learn to apply it on articles and stories to bring out the designed effect.

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