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Poe's Ambiguity

Perhaps one of Edgar Allan Poe's greatest feats has been his ability to firmly connect with his reading audience with unprecedented accuracy for his gothic genre. The topic of many a conversation over Poe's timeless literature has been the question of precisely *how* Poe always manages to pull this off so well. While it certainly is more involved than any one person can pinpoint in 750 words, I believe one of Poe's chief concentrations was remaining particularly ambiguous about conclusions, background, and character in many of his stories which led the reading mice behind piping words to their own grim perverseness. Particularly to illustrate, we can examine both *The Cask of Amontillado* and *Ligeia*.

In the former, there is certainly a lot left to the imagination. While Poe describes very lavish situational details, he neglects to mention any particular information related to the specific backgrounds of Montresor and Fortunato. For the whole of the narrative, they actually remain a mystery which we must draw our own conclusions on from what we witness in Montresor's direct account of it all to us. Frighteningly enough, this story is indeed a framed narrative from Montresor's perspective; consequently, any information we get from the story has the inherent question of reliability, completing Poe's goal in ambiguity.

Montresor asserts that Fortunato has wronged him or his family name greatly at some point in times past. Since Fortunato never acknowledges this either directly or allusively, we are left with an ambiguous detail which could whip the story from one extreme to the other. If Fortunato did, indeed, commit some heinous act against the family of Montresor, we could

conclude that Montresor is justified in punishing him (perhaps not to the extreme of murder, but in some minds that is proportional to the alleged transgression). If Fortunato was actually innocent or ignorant, as many are fond of believing, of his offense, than certainly Montresor is inexplicably wrong to wall him up.

All of these gaps in the story invite a wonderful principal of literature as it pertains to the mind reading: when something is left out, rather than accepting this, most people have the dire urge to fill that space with a conclusive fact. What do most people substitute? What they know best – elements from their own lives and character! When readers do this with Poe, they end up characterizing his narrators unbelievably like themselves which all amounts to the end of the story when sides must be taken. Will the reader be forced to disband a substituted part of himself or mischievously accept his own perverseness as the similarities perceived in the two personalities?

In *Ligeia*, there are many similar missing pieces. Let it never be said that Poe was not thorough because of his ambiguity! *Ligeia* incorporates a much more stunning rendition of the same principals witnessed in *The Cask of Amontillado* – he turns from the characterization of particular persons and histories to the bountiful descriptions of places and things as they pass our linear gaze. What would a reader remember most from the beginning of *Ligeia*? Certainly nothing about what her last name is or how she came to know our poor narrator, since Poe left that out completely (at the narrator's excuse of a bad memory) – rather, one would find a dictionary of adjectives to describe the lost love, well illustrating his feverish obsession.

Most profound in this story are the conclusions Poe leaves to the imagination. He makes no assertion as to whether Ligeia is actually coming back from the dead at then end, nor if any of the signs the narrator experiences along the way are opium-related or vividly real and credible. What are we to believe? Poe gathers his final input implicitly from the reader. Without leaving

some of the sticky details up to the reader, Poe would have no sure-fire way of reaching a large audience with the same story or connecting on such a personal level. Poe puts us in the driver's seat – *we* control the final conclusions and direct our own interpretation of the story.

As I delve further into this course I find myself in awe at Poe's brilliant writing tactics. Not only can he write a gruesomely entertaining story, but he can use what he does not write to his advantage. He connects with his audience on a very personal level largely to the credit of his ambiguity of conclusion, character, and past. Of course that simple knowledge opens the doors for infinitely more interpretations of the same stories which could easily make a Poe reader paranoid!