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## Letting the Cat Out of the Wall: Irrepressible Perversity in Poe

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Many readers of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado" remember with horror the scene in which Montresor seals the unwitting Fortunato within the walls of his family vaults. The scene is uniquely hair-raising, yet the events of the 1846 tale serve as the culmination of the seeds which Poe had spent years planting. "The Fall of the House of Usher" introduces Poe's fascination with immurement, which is the practice of imprisoning a victim in walls. Poe expands the motif in "The Black Cat" and "The Tell-Tale Heart," where the act of immurement suggests psychological suppression as the narrators physically hide their victims while simultaneously hiding their own self-destructive natures. Poe's stories consider self-sabotage - which he calls "perversity" - to be an inherent human quality, an assumption which lays the foundation for him to criticize contemporary thinkers in "The Imp of the Perverse" for refusing to accept its existence. An analysis of the relationship between immurement and perversity throughout Poe's stories suggests that Poe considers the widespread suppression of perversity dangerous. As "The Cask of Amontillado" indicates, unawareness of the human capacity to self-destruct only guarantees self-destruction. However, another tale, "The Premature Burial," provides an alternative approach toward perversity, exploring the fate of a narrator who escapes being ruined by his perversity by accepting his nature. Poe's motif of immurement demonstrates how human beings tend to tuck the pesky topic of perversity out of sight, but his stories reveal how ignoring the inherent quality of perversity leads to self-destruction.

### **Immurement in Romantic Gothic Fiction**

The verb "immure" means "to enclose within walls; to imprison" and to "entomb in a wall" (*OED*). Immurement wasn't simply used as a wonderfully terrifying form of punishment in the Gothic fiction popular throughout Poe's lifetime, but was also associated with a particular interpretation of European history. As Clare A. Simmons writes, there is no evidence that immurement was routinely practiced during the medieval era, yet the idea of such punishment was accepted as fact and had a strong hold over

the Gothic imagination in the Romantic period (Simmons 148). Immurement was associated with the Spanish Inquisition and “oppressive Roman Catholic law,” so Gothic tales invoked it to explore “the effect of oppression upon individuals” (Simmons 147, 145). Women, especially nuns who had broken their vows, were often victims of immurement in Gothic works such as Frances Trollope’s *The Abbess* and Walter Scott’s *Marmion, A Tale of Flodden Field*

Poe was not immune to the public’s fascination with immurement, though he employed the trope in a unique manner, preferring to focus on perpetrators rather than sufferers. The immured victims in Poe’s tales play very different roles from those in other works of Gothic fiction. In Poe’s works, the victims are typically male and, as even a novice Poe reader can confirm, nuns are never the target of immurement. Though a few perpetrators of immurement in Poe, such as Montresor in “The Cask of Amontillado,” might argue that their victims are being justly punished, the victim’s atonement is never the story’s focus. Rather, the immurement reflects the psychological state of the actor, usually the narrator. In “The Black Cat,” for example, the narrator walls his wife up “as the monks of the middle ages are recorded to have walled up their victims,” a description which suggests how the popular misconception influenced Poe (604). Yet aside from the victim’s gender, the rest of the story swerves from the usual tropes. The narrator’s wife is “uncomplaining” and “patient,” an innocent figure suffering at her husband’s hands — not a deviant in need of reformatory punishment (603). Perhaps, as Ed Piacentino indicates, her good-naturedness is actually what provokes the narrator’s rage, rather than the cat’s irksome presence (Piacentino 161). Even so, this interpretation raises the question of why the narrator finds her good nature so repulsive, placing the story’s focus on his motivation instead of the victim’s supposed crimes.

Even in “The Cask of Amontillado,” where Montresor punishes Fortunato for the “insult” he inflicted on the former, the story’s concern is not so much about Fortunato’s punishment as it is about the narrator’s vengeance (848). The narrator emphasizes that the offense he endured would be “unredressed” if “the avenger fails to make himself felt as such to him who has done the wrong” (848). Montresor’s goal is for Fortunato to know that he has avenged himself - he doesn’t care about making Fortunato understand the error of his ways and instead focuses on making Fortunato feel his indignation. Fortunato’s crimes are not specified in the story, though scholars such as Elena V. Baraban have offered compelling explanations<sup>1</sup> which demonstrate that Montresor’s actions are sufficiently motivated. Yet the story focuses on the effect of Fortunato’s deeds, rather than condemning the deeds directly, a

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<sup>1</sup> Guided by Poe’s technique of including every detail with intention, Baraban analyzes subtle clues in the text which suggest that Montresor is offended because Fortunato insulted him, even though the former “probably has a better aristocratic lineage than him” and is thus “equal or superior to him” (51, 56).

decision which indicates that unlike typical Gothic works, Fortunato's horrifying fate will reveal more about Montresor than himself.

Poe's unique approach to the motif of immurement may have been influenced by a contemporary account of the practice. John Gruesser traces Poe's inspiration for "The Cask of Amontillado" to another text, "A Man Built in a Wall," written by his acquaintance Joel T. Headley about a skeleton walled up in an Italian church. Headley, like Poe, diverges from the typical Gothic tale of immurement as he concocts a story of "vengeance" explaining the dead man's fate (Gruesser 158). Gruesser excavates Poe's relationship with Headley, whom he knew from 1844 to 1846 (160). Headley's literary reputation skyrocketed in 1846 while Poe struggled, arguably making Poe resent the other's success and driving him to channel his frustration through the plot of "Cask." This scenario may suggest Poe's possible identification with Montresor, and thus his decision to explore how immurement affects the narrator rather than the victim, but Gruesser reminds the reader that Poe likely did not view Headley as his own Fortunato. Poe "was often his own worst enemy," and his attacks on others only hurt himself (162). Indeed, Poe's own tendency to self-sabotage may explain why he associated this particular Gothic trope with harmful behavior to oneself, which he identifies as a key component of what he calls "perversity."

The three stories in which Poe describes scenes of literal immurement — "The Tell-Tale Heart," "The Black Cat," and "The Cask of Amontillado" — differ from the standard Gothic approach not only by emphasizing its effect on the villain, but also by speculating about the perverse inclinations driving his behavior. Poe first began exploring immurement and perversity in "The Fall of the House of Usher," published in 1839. Evidently Poe was concerned with the perpetrator's psychology from his very first story on this topic, since "Usher" focuses on Roderick's perverse concealment of the fact that Madeline has been buried alive rather than Madeline's experience. "The Fall of the House of Usher" is narrated by an observer, however, whereas in subsequent stories Poe became more and more interested in how the vicious narrators represent their own experience. Some of the first-person narrators tell the tales of their perverse crimes from prison. Their confinement within the four prison walls can be interpreted as immurement, which strengthens the association between immurement and perversity. The question, then, is how and why immurement and imprisonment are so closely linked to perversity?

### **Perversity and Immurement**

Poe's "The Imp of the Perverse," published in 1845, identifies many of the qualities essential to understanding perversity in Poe's tales. The narrator notes that people who aim to define the human soul "have failed to make room for a propensity" despite the fact that this propensity, perversity, "obviously exist[s] as a radical, primitive, irreducible sentiment" (826). Perversity is an

inherent, observable human trait, but has been overlooked because it is not beneficial. Indeed, it drives humans to act not only “without comprehensible object,” but “for the reason that we should *not*” (827). Perversity is a puzzlingly self-destructive instinct, but Poe’s narrator argues that its role in human behavior cannot be ignored. He details a variety of acts, ranging from trivial procrastination to suicide, to prove that perversity can be clearly observed in human behavior despite the general reluctance to admit its existence.

“The Black Cat” presents a similar definition of perversity, although the destructive behavior manifests differently. As he struggles inwardly with “the spirit of PERVERSENESS,” the narrator brings up many points also raised in “Imp,” such as how “philosophy takes no account” of this spirit despite its innate presence in mankind and how it drives everyone to perform “vile or silly action[s]” (599). The narrator of “Cat,” though, emphasizes self-destruction as a quality of perversity. In “Imp,” the narrator’s perverse confession is conveyed as something harmful to him, but he implies that he did not inflict this situation upon himself by blaming “some invisible fiend” for striking him on the back and causing him to spit out his secret (831). The narrator of “Cat,” however, takes responsibility for injuring himself. The narrator’s mutilation of Pluto’s eye echoes “Imp” in describing how “the fury of a demon instantly possess[e]s” the narrator and “a more than fiendish malevolence, gin-nurtured, thrille[s] every fibre of [his] frame” (598). The narrator’s experience of possession suggests the “invisible fiend” who forced the narrator’s confession in “Imp,” and he has the opportunity to blame his actions on the external forces of the Imp or even on the intoxicating gin he has drunk. Yet the narrator of “Cat” ultimately takes ownership of his actions by describing how “malevolence... thrill[s] every fibre of [his] frame,” indicating that he embraces his vicious inclinations. He goes on to turn this violence against himself, which he demonstrates when he credits his soul’s desire “to offer violence to its own nature” as the primary motivation for him to hang his pet, Pluto, with “the bitterest remorse at [his] heart” (599). His genuine remorse indicates that, in truly perverse fashion, he acts with the *intention* to hurt himself, rather than acting impulsively and happening to hurt himself, as the narrator of “Imp” does.

The self-destructive nature of Pluto’s hanging explains the narrator’s actions at the end of the story, which link the irrepressible nature of perversity with immurement. The narrator, tormented by the presence of Pluto’s replacement, kills his wife for protecting the cat and hides her body in the basement wall. The cat fails to reappear after the murder, so the narrator feels absolutely peaceful, admitting that “[t]he guilt of [his] dark deed” disturbs him “but little” (605). Unlike Pluto’s hanging, his wife’s murder is not a perverse action, because he experiences no remorse. Perversity instead rears its ugly head once the narrator is perfectly secure and content. The police visit his house to investigate his wife’s disappearance, but even in their presence the

narrator feels calm. No guilt eats at him, and he is certain they won't find his wife's corpse. Ultimately, it is the "glee at [his] heart" that overwhelms him (605). The phrase "at [his] heart" echoes the description of his remorse when hanging Pluto, signalling that another moment of perversity has arrived. The narrator sabotages his happiness and confesses to his wife's murder - not out of guilt, but out of perversion. His perversity drives him to knock "upon that very portion of the brick-work behind which stood the corpse of the wife of [his] bosom," which gives him away (605). His actions reveal not only his crime, but also his perverse inability to preserve himself.

Similarly, in "The Tell-Tale Heart," the narrator's confession reveals his immured victim as well as the very perversity that drove the narrator to murder the old man. The narrator has no "[o]bject" for murdering the old man whom he "love[s]," making the murder an act of self-destructive perversity (555). As in "The Black Cat," the narrator feels "perfect triumph" and twice gloats that he has nothing to fear (559, 558). However, the narrator's confession itself doesn't seem to be an act of perversity. An overwhelming anxiety shatters his ease as the sound of a beating heart torments him until he feels "anything [is] better than this agony!" (599). He makes his confession in order to relieve his suffering. The narrator's agony could be seen as perverse, since his secret was secure and the police didn't seem to notice anything; but even if that were the case, he still ultimately confesses in order to alleviate his torment. His confession itself, then, isn't an act of perversity, as is the case in "Imp" and "The Black Cat." It's more accurate to read his outburst as a confession of having acted perversely. The narrator commands the police to "tear up the planks" in order to find the immured corpse of the old man, thus identifying the victim of his earlier perverse action (599). The narrator's confession, in other words, is not motivated by a sense of guilt but instead reveals his inability to suppress his perversity, symbolized by the immurement of the old man.

Significantly, the narrators of "Imp" and "The Black Cat" both write their stories from prison on the eve of their execution. This setting reinforces each story's definition of perversity, demonstrating that it is truly irrepressible and incorrigible. The narrator of "Imp" pens his tale from a "cell of the condemned" after perversely confessing himself to be guilty to a murder of which no one suspected him (830). In a sense, he and the narrator of "The Black Cat" are both figuratively immured in their cells, confined within four tight walls. Neither of them experience guilt over the murder he committed, yet they both feel compelled to write confessions. In each case, the actual secret they divulge is their own perverse behavior. Despite their immured states, their stories have been presumably made available to the public. Their unreliable narrative accounts are like the various immured bodies scattered across Poe's tales, which are discovered because evidence of perversity cannot be contained. "Imp," "Cat," and "Tell-Tale" demonstrate why so many of Poe's reflections on

perversion include the motif of immurement. Just as no body can remain hidden out of sight, the presence of perversity cannot remain unacknowledged.

### **The Cost of Ignorance**

“The Cask of Amontillado” is the outlier among the four tales that explicitly combine perversity, immurement, and first-person confession. In this case, perversity doesn’t drive the narrator’s downfall; instead, his masterful manipulation of *other* people’s perversity secures his victory. When Montresor lures Fortunato to his palazzo, he knows none of his servants are present because he had previously given them “explicit orders” to not leave the house, wryly remarking: “These orders were sufficient, I well knew, to insure their immediate disappearance, one and all, as soon as my back was turned” (849). Montresor could have just given them permission to join in the festivities but instead he forbids them to leave the premises, precisely because this will guarantee their flight to the carnival. His reasoning relies on one of Poe’s tenets of perversity, describing how people are driven to do what they are not supposed to do, precisely because they’re not supposed to. Montresor uses this same tactic on Fortunato with equal success. Montresor could simply lure Fortunato deeper into the catacombs with the promise of amontillado, but instead he provokes Fortunato by imploring him to give up the excursion for the sake of his health. He reminds Fortunato of the reasons he should take care of himself, for “[his] health is precious,” he is “rich, respected, admired, beloved,” and “happy, as once [Montresor] was” (850). The final statement isn’t merely self-indulgence on Montresor’s part, but a warning that one should be careful to protect one’s fragile happiness. Just as Montresor expects, the warning ensures that Fortunato will take his chances. Montresor’s feigned concern could also be read as an opportunity to introduce Fortunato to the Medoc, ostensibly for the sake of his health, but actually in order to intoxicate him and to make it easier to lead him into the catacombs; however, Montresor doesn’t offer the Medoc until after Fortunato affirms that “the cough is a mere nothing” and that he will continue (850). Clearly, Montresor questions Fortunato’s health in order to exploit the latter’s perversity.

Unlike Poe’s other tales, “The Cask of Amontillado” doesn’t operate as the narrator’s confession of perversity. Baraban rejects the theory that Montresor kills Fortunato out of perverseness through her analysis of Montresor’s final words, which affirm that his motive was revenge. Furthermore, she argues that he does not share his story because he regrets his crime. Baraban points out that “[i]f Montresor’s narration is his last confession, he should look forward to being forgiven,” yet he instead “subverts his role as a repentant sinner” and forgives Fortunato (57). In this light, “The Cask of Amontillado” isn’t even a confession. Indeed, Leland Person characterizes it as “an anti-confession - an example of *braggadocio*,” which “play[s] with the irony that committing murder isn’t as much fun if you’re the only one who knows

you did it” (260-261). The question, then, is what Montresor prides himself on. It’s clear that he’s pleased with himself for successfully carrying out his crime, but he seems most proud of the *manner* in which he executed it. When Montresor traps Fortunato, he mocks him: ““Once more let me *implore* you to return”” (852). His earlier entreaties were formulated to spur Fortunato’s perverse response, and Montresor’s taunts now reveal how much he prides himself on his ability to manipulate other people’s propensities to self-sabotage.

Montresor’s narrative demonstrates the cost of ignoring one’s inclination to perversity. As Poe points out in “The Black Cat” and “The Imp of the Perverse,” perversity has been overlooked by philosophers despite being an innate human trait. “The Cask of Amontillado” demonstrates the deepest danger of this attitude - not only do people remain perverse despite their unwillingness to admit it, but their ignorance of their inherent self-destructive behavior can be used against them. If, as this paper argues, Poe uses immurement to demonstrate how people cannot truly suppress their perverse habits, “The Cask of Amontillado” most vividly warns that an unawareness of perversity — the immurement of perversity — will result in a reversal of fortune. At the beginning of the story, Fortunato cannot recognize his own perversity, which causes him to end up replacing it as the thing which is hidden. Baraban points out that carnivals present an occasion where “identities are destabilized and traditional social hierarchy and etiquette collapse” (Baraban 54). “Cask” certainly plays around with the inversion of social identities, but the less obvious inversion of positions is that of Fortunato and his perversity.

It wasn’t enough for Poe to simply depict perverse characters in his tales, but he also seemed determined to dredge up the very propensity which his readers may have themselves suppressed and thus force them into the same positions as his characters. Person argues that in his tales of confession, “Poe plays with his readers, getting us to identify with and even sympathize with his murderous narrators under the guise of hearing them confess,” thus luring “the reader into a perverse identification” (253). Poe’s ability to draw out the reader’s perversity takes his crusade against self-ignorance a step beyond identifying the overlooked propensity. He forces readers to confront their own irrational inclination to self-sabotage and makes it impossible for them to deny its existence any longer. They *will* be perverse, whether they accept it or not, and their ignorance will only guarantee their destruction.

### **Accepting Perversity**

“The Premature Burial” offers readers hope for a happier ending than the one Fortunato experiences. In this story, the narrator avoids being doomed by his perverse nature through confronting it. The narrator, who suffers from catalepsy, is consumed by his terror of being buried alive. He awakens one day to find his greatest fear has come to pass - only to realize that he is merely confined within a narrow bunk on a ship, where he had fallen asleep after

taking shelter from a storm. After his scare, the narrator turns his mind away from his habitual terror, claiming, among other reforms, to no longer read “bugaboo tales - *such as this*” (679). He implicates his own tale as the kind that he now attempts to avoid, calling himself out for acting perversely. It makes the reader wonder whether he has truly ceased to obsess over the topic of being buried alive, but perhaps acknowledging his perversity is actually the key to his success. He knows that he should not engage in behavior that might augment his fear, but his self-awareness protects him from significant harm. After all, perversity may be inescapable, but this narrator suggests that it is manageable, if acknowledged. As he concludes, “the grim legion of sepulchral terrors cannot be regarded as altogether fanciful - but... they must sleep, or they will devour us - they must be suffered to slumber, or we perish” (679). The narrator accepts that “terrors” cannot be dismissed, because they do exist. The narrator cannot escape his perverse inclinations, but he recognizes this inevitability. He expresses his perversity through the composition of his tale, without allowing it to overwhelm him as his terror once did.

Poe’s tales have thrilled and mystified readers and scholars alike in their accounts of how ignoring the human quality of perversity, which Poe symbolizes through immurement and other forms of confinement, leads to self-destruction. Piacentino notes that “[f]ew critics [of “The Black Cat”] seriously accept the narrator’s own dubious rationalizations” that his behavior is motivated by perverseness, but though there are certainly a variety of ways to interpret the narrator’s actions, it is a mistake to assume that perversity in Poe’s stories simply deflects attention away from the real issues at hand (Piacentino 153). Instead, the perverse actions in Poe’s tales invite an analysis of how when humans can’t easily understand their perplexing, irrational behavior, they prefer to simply ignore it. An unawareness of the human capacity for self-sabotage can have dire consequences, which Poe emphasizes through the motif of immurement. As the narrators of “The Imp of the Perverse,” “The Black Cat,” and “The Tell-Tale Heart” demonstrate, characters are unable to truly hide their own self-destructive tendencies, which are revealed alongside their immured victims. “The Cask of Amontillado” deals more directly with the consequences of self-ignorance when Montresor uses Fortunato’s weaknesses against him. “The Premature Burial,” however, gives readers hope that by actually engaging shortcomings such as perversity, rather than hiding it from view, one can avoid their destructive potential.

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