The Cask of Amontillado is a stellar example of incredibly effective storytelling from one of the greatest authors of fiction to ever write. The story itself takes place in an incredibly finite timeframe and a specific yet ambiguous setting. The meaning of the tale is somewhat ambiguous and I think it is nestled within a theme of ambiguity. The narrator is not necessarily evil but he performs an objectively evil action. Similarly, Fortunato is declared to be evil but he shows nothing but good will and friendship. This dual sided ambiguity is what stands out to me as the true meaning of the text, that everyone is more and less than they and others make them out to be. The contents of the story are what really make this piece of work stand out. The story revolves around the narrator and his “friend” Fortunato, the relationship progresses swiftly and the narrative moments occur in quick succession. This pace allows the story to be enjoyed thoroughly very quickly and I believe this to be an essential facet of this style of fictional writing. The short story does not have the liberty of building content slowly, Poe serves as a fantastic exemplar for this style and The Cask of Amontillado is one of the best examples. For this reason I wanted to draft a similar short story that focuses on the narrator and his first meeting with Fortunato. I specifically focused on the ambiguity and pacing that I feel make The Cask of Amontillado such a compelling story. I also aimed to emulate some of Poe’s writing style at times but I did not stress that point excessively so the style of writing shifts at some points. By rereading and interpreting the original text in this manner, I gained a new appreciation for the tempo of the actual prose as well as the expertly crafted dialogue. The dialogue found in the original story is perfectly matched with the theme and perfectly paced for the short story archetype. Like so many aspects of the short story, dialogue has to be extremely precise to not be unnecessary. I enjoyed interpreting and emulating the short story prose of Poe but I found it difficult to emulate the style of writing simply due to the vastly different speech styles between our times. Regardless of the time barrier, I felt like I was granted a deeper understanding into Poe’s creative process through this exercise.

A Glass of Amontillado

I think back often to the day I met my friend over a glass of Amontillado, a day not easily left to another’s memory. The memory of another could tell no tale of that day, a day like any other. The sky high and gray, deposited a fine mist on a forgettable day. But not for me, he who drank the Amontillado. For me it was a day like no other.

Far beneath the gray sky I cleaved bodies from my path to see what I had come for. Far down the path and closer to the sky than I, a grand estate sat lonely, apart from its smaller neighbors. The cobbled path beneath my soles wound its way to the lonely gates. Like a comet in the street, a beacon of light wove its way through the tangled mess of crowd. The crimson of her dress stood out like a rose blossom, even as I, the thorn, remained nestled within the brush. My eyes could not lift from her gravity and tracked her through the arch of the lonely estate until the flame of her passing snuffed out.

Just as the fire inside me was winking itself away, an unknown feeling forced my gaze to meet that of a sturdy man staring from within the crowd, another thorn. I met his eyes, both at once, his smirk rekindled my fire and sent it tearing out from within me.

“You there, sir! A look so foul has no place on the face of decent townsfolk.”

The man pulled himself away from the wall where he clung, his smirk flowing fluidly into a smile.

“A fire such as that can burn many bridges for a young sir, but it can also spark great opportunity. What would you say to splitting a cask of Amontillado with one such as I?” He said as he sauntered over.

“Amontillado!?” I exclaimed.

“Amontillado.” He said.

“But… Amontillado? You jest surely.”

“Amontillado, I speak truly.”

Without further preamble, the man I knew now to be a gentleman took my arm firmly. The cobbles slipped beneath my soles as we, the gentleman and I, approached the lonely estate. His palm settled on the gate and I could go no further.

“Sir, but the Montresors! We must hurry away before they see our folly!? Cold panic began to seep its way over my fire.

“Fear not young sir, for we are invited. The Montresors host a ball this evening.”

I paled at the thought, she would be there. The rose to my thorn.

My panic fell away as the butlers ushered us into the great hall, effusive orange light from covered candles blanketed the walls. My elbow, still firmly in the gentleman’s grip, led me to a great table where others were already seated. At the table, my elbow, now free, stretched again and again to my waiting mouth as ceaseless courses cascaded from the kitchen. The luxury of the meal might have drowned me if not for her presence. Even after eating my fill I was hungry for only one thing, her notice. A glance in my direction, a gesture, anything. Before my mind could stray further a hand settled once more upon my shoulder.

“Now young man, for the Amontillado.”

The gentleman stood and led me with him, up a spiral flight of stairs, and then another, and then another. Once more past firm wooden doors before a quaint sitting area opened before us. Balanced in the center of the room was a table laden with treats and morsels and crystal goblets. But in the center, among all the small delights, lay a cask of Amontillado.

The gentleman settled into the far chair before motioning myself into the remaining seat. Once seated he rose to clasp the cask of Amontillado gently, as a priest does a child waiting to be baptized. With the greatest care he gently lowered the golden liquid into the waiting chalices, the liquid flowed with a music audible only to those in the room. With a final delicate twirl both glasses stood full and we grasped the stems.

“To fortuitous friendships.”

I tilted my head back and watched the amber liquid slip onto my tongue. The explosion of flavor was unparalleled, fruits and botanicals floated through my mouth, amber warmth eased its way into my body and my throat. Another gulp vanished before I knew it, and another. Only after finishing my glass could I look up from the crystal. My lips already felt parched being removed from the Amontillado for so long. The gentleman stared at me, grinning effusively as he swirled the remainder of his own glass thoughtfully. Looking at him then, I had to ask.

“Why?”

He paused a moment before answering. “Because I saw your fire. That fire that can burn anything to the ground if aimed properly, fire that needs only opportunity.” He looked out the window with something akin to melancholy before looking back at me. “How would you like to become a Montresor?”

I stared in shock, “Me? A Montresor? Impossible.”

“Not impossible young sir, improbable without my help.”

The revelation shook me, a plot was afoot here. One that I was deeply implicated with regardless of my choices that day.

“And if I agree? If we go through with this, what is in it for you?” I stared at him intently, trying to see any flaw that would leak through his placid expression. “Sir, I don’t even know your name!?

“Why, my apologies young sir, I had assumed I need not share my name.”

“I am of course, Fortunato.”