

To Confine and To Be Confined : "The Pit and the Pendulum" and "The Cask of Amontillado"

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To Confine and To Be Confined: “The Pit and the Pendulum” and “The Cask of Amontillado”

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Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to examine a conflicting motif in Edgar Allan Poe's works, “The Pit and the Pendulum” (1843) and “The Cask of Amontillado” (1846). When turning our attention to the characters in his works, we will find that they reflect the conflicts that Poe himself experienced in his life. The characters' desires imply Poe's desires caused by his experience: a financial difficulty, an arrest and a detention, drinking much alcohol, gambling, and becoming a chief editor. There biographical incidents lead to the coexistence of both sadistic and masochistic desires of his characters, and the idea of perverseness, often pointed out by critics, is the very sublimation of these desires. Accordingly, reading the conflicting desires in his works is the key to understand Poe's most fascinating motif.

In “The Pit and the Pendulum,” the narrator suffers from several tortures and is confined in a torture chamber by the executors, while in “The Cask of Amontillado,” the narrator, Montresor attempts to revenge against his friend Fortunato and confine him in underground graveyard. Observing the characters' actions in each narrative, I would like to show that there are not one-way actions but two-way actions in closed spaces. The two-way actions reflect the characters' opposite desires for avoidance of fear and for destruction. I would like to stress that the opposite desires imply Poe's desires which he conceived through his hard life.

A close look at the conflicting motif in Edgar Allan Poe's works will reveal that the motif shows the characters' desires in each narrative and implies Poe's desires. His idea of perverseness runs through each of the two short tales of this study and is reflected in the opposing sadistic and masochistic desires of the characters.

1. The Relationship between the Closed Spaces in Poe's Works and His Financial Condition

Although the spaces in "The Fall of the House of Usher" express the inhabitants' feelings, the closed spaces in "The Pit and the Pendulum" (1843) and "The Cask of Amontillado" (1846) reflect not merely the character's spirit, but also the narrator's mind. The closed spaces correspond to both.

And then my vision fell upon the seven tall candles upon the table. At first they wore the aspect of charity, and seemed white slender angels who would save me [...] I had touched the wire of a galvanic battery ("The Pit and the Pendulum" 682, emphases are mine).

It was about dusk, one evening during the supreme madness of the carnival season, that I encountered my friend ("The Cask of Amontillado" 1257, emphasis is mine).

Judging from these quotations, the seven candles¹ and a galvanic battery² in "The Pit and the Pendulum" represent the narrator who needs help to escape from a crisis, and the supreme madness in "The Cask of Amontillado" expresses the narrator who is incited to revenge. Added to these, the point I wish to emphasize is that the two-way actions in closed spaces play an important role to examine the characters' spirits more than the exterior or interior atmosphere in each tale, unlike in "The Fall of the House of Usher." It seems that the characters express themselves more directly through their actions than through their surroundings. The two-way actions, to confine and be confined, are brought about by Poe's own experiences and bring

¹ Thomas Olive Mabbott explains this word in his note #5 on "The Pit and the Pendulum": Poe's seven candles may reflect the "the seven golden candlesticks" of Revelation 1:12. Compare also the "frames of the seven lamps," in "Shadow." (Vol.2 697)

² Thomas Olive Mabbott explains this word in his note #6 on "The Pit and the Pendulum": The simile of the galvanic battery is canceled from "MS. Found in a Bottle" and "The Oval Portrait." The galvanic battery, in "The Buried Alive," Blackwood's October 1821, was instrumental in the revival of the narrator. See also "Some Words with a Mummy." (Vol.2 698)

him to the opposite desire for avoidance of fear and for destruction. There is the two-way action in each closed space, and this interactive action reflects not only characters' inside, but also Poe's desire in his life. The spaces in Poe's works express the state of mind of the characters, and they are closed because the character's inside is also closed. The motif of the closed space has provoked a great deal of controversy. The closed space appears in Poe's works besides "The Pit and the Pendulum" and "The Cask of Amontillado," for example, a room where the narrator kills the old man in "The Tell-Tale Heart" and a hold where the protagonist, Pym is confined in "The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket." A large number of studies have been made on the closed space in Poe's work— Richard Wilbur, for example, states as follows:

The most important of these recurrent motifs is that of *enclosure* or *circumscription*; perhaps the latter term[s] preferable, because it is Poe's own word, and because Poe's enclosures are so often more or less circular in form. [...] What does it mean that Poe's heroes are invariably enclosed or circumscribed? The answer is simple: circumscription, in Poe's tales, means the exclusion from consciousness of the so-called real world, the world of time and reason and physical fact (Wilbur 811-12)

Robert L. Carringer suggests as follows, too:

Poe's enclosures suggest his fictional universe of negative possibility and the severely restricted prospects and interest of his protagonists. By the same token, his centers of space are physically threatening to his protagonists because the internal condition that they symbolize is also threatening to the protagonist's rational and moral nature. (Carringer 510)

Both Wilbur and Carringer agree that the closed space is the important motif, and that it is not only the setting for stories.

Poe experienced an arrest, a detention and release in his life, and was in constant fear of the arrest and detention, which provided him with the motif of being confined. Poe himself had been arrested in 1831 for a debt of eighty dollars and was detained in jail. At that time he wrote his adoptive father, asking him to send money so he could be released.

Balt:

Novr: 18, 1831,

My Dear Pa,

I am in the greatest distress and have no other friend on earth to apply to except yourself if you refuse to help me I know not what I shall do. I was arrested eleven days ago for a debt which I never expected to have to pay, and which was incurred as much on Hy's, [Henry's] account as on my own about two years ago.

I would rather have done any thing on earth than apply to you again after your late kindness—but indeed I have no other resource, and I am in bad health, and undergo as much hardship as formerly or I never would have asked you to give me another cent.

If you will only send me this one time \$80, by Wednesday next, I will never forget your kindness & generosity.—if you refuse God only knows what I shall do, & all my hopes & prospects are ruined forever—

Yours affectionately

E A Poe

I have made every exertion but in vain.

(Quinn 189-90, emphases are mine)

It is clear that there is no help for Poe, and that the financial difficulty made him flinch. Poe spent several days in the detention room trembling with fear of being confined because Allan did not reply to him. In fact, although the debt was not Poe's own, but his brother, Henry's, Poe was compelled to be imprisoned since he did not have the ability to repay and receive financial assistance from Allan.

It was not only financial difficulty but also gambling and drinking alcohol that troubled Poe in his life. The wealthy Allan adopted Poe when he was orphaned in his infancy, which allowed him to be raised as a gentleman. For example, Poe was able to tour Europe and go on to a good university. However, Allan gradually stopped giving financial assistance to Poe for the reason that he was deeply involved in gambling and drinking, and acquired debt. Poe often received an enormous amount of money from Mrs. Allan, while he was always refused financial help by Allan. Added to this, the arrest for Henry’s debt, as mentioned above, made Poe’s life harder. Although it is not clear in detail why he was released, Mrs. Clemm urged Allan to write a letter in order to require John Walsh to release Poe. The letter and money were not sent to Mr. Walsh as soon as Mrs. Clemm asked Allan. When Poe wrote a letter to Allan again, Allan remembered his letter to ask Mr. Walsh and sent it. Poe was released from the fear of being confined by means of the letter after several weeks, but in fact he did not know why he was released.

Judging from the above, Poe experienced both adversity and unexpected help through his arrest, detention and release. At the time, it was lucky that Poe was released from detention, but there was the possibility of a second arrest after he started his career as story writer. It is likely that the detention was an unforgettable fear for Poe. The fear of the detention inspired the motif of being confined. Later I shall try to give a more precise account of the possibility that the traumatic fear made Poe have the opposite desires for destruction and avoidance of fear, and brought the characteristic of the interactivity to his works.

2. Poe’s Attempt to Suppress His Fear

In contrast to the idea of being confined, Poe had an idea of confining after he became a chief editor of the *Broadway Journal* in 1845, the year before “The Cask of Amontillado” was published. The difficult life and financial difficulty, as I have mentioned before, was enough to make him worried and to frighten him. Poe lived each day cheek by jowl with fear and anxiety, which persisted even when he was employed as the chief editor. Poe, however, lost this job when the *Broadway*

Journal stopped printing. His only hope of repaying his debt was to publish his own magazine. In 1831, when Poe was arrested in Baltimore, more than half of the prisoners were insolvent debtors. Poe moved from Baltimore to Richmond in 1835. In the same year, Poe asked Mr. Kennedy's help in obtaining a position as teacher in a public school, but he did not secure the post. Poe had a hard time finding a job. Poe was always threatened by poverty, and tormented by chief editors. It is likely that Poe was driven by fear of being confined again because of his debt although he changed his address.

In spite of the crisis of the second arrest, the chance for an economic comfort or a release from financial difficulty allowed Poe to suppress the fear which had worried him for such a long time. In 1837, Poe moved to New York with his family, and attempted to make a living, but the attempt was unsuccessful because of the hard struggle for existence in New York: At that time, the population of New York was so large it could not be compared to Richmond. In this period, due to the lack of international copyright laws, it was common for American writers not to receive their royalty from their publishers. As was usual with Poe, his manuscript fee was much too low. Poe's financial hardship and fear of being confined continued to make him worry after the arrest and release even if he was able to change his house many times. The position of chief editor—short-lived as it was—triggered the attempt to be free from his hardship and fear in his life, but it was not successful. It is not to be denied that the attempt brought the idea of suppression of fear to Poe's writings.

Poe brought ruin upon himself, while he hoped that he was released from the financial difficulty and the fear. Poe routinely drank too much, and he did so to throw off his depression when he sank to a manic-depressive's low point. It seems reasonable to support that his usual overdrinking incurs the worsening of his mental and physical condition. Poe experienced hardship dozens of times which was the root cause of these worsening, and caused second difficulty. It is not too far from the truth to say that Poe instinctively chose a self-destructive lifestyle by himself, while he wanted to avoid his fear.

The narrators in Poe’s works not only are afraid of being confined but also raise the fear in the space by confining their opponent. This, in turn, reflects Poe’s own fearful and self-destructive behavior. Poe states in “The Imp of the Perverse” as follows:

[A]s an innate and primitive principle of human action, a paradoxical something, which we may call *perverseness*, for want of more characteristic term. [...] we may so far modify the proposition as to say, that through its promptings we act, for the reason that we should *not*. In theory, no reason can be more unreasonable; but, in fact, there is none more strong. With certain minds, under certain conditions, it becomes absolutely irresistible. [...] than that the assurance of the wrong or error of any action is often the one unconquerable *force* which impels us, and alone impels us to its prosecution. Nor will this overwhelming tendency to do wrong for the wrong’s sake, admit of analysis, or resolution into ulterior elements. (“The Imp of the Perverse” 1220-21, emphases are mine)

Poe, paradoxically, was attracted to the fear that he sought to avoid. This irrational behavior is played out in his tales. Poe throughout his life was gripped by the fear of the financial difficulty. The fear is evaded by not only Poe, but also the great mass of humanity. When Poe was arrested, he spent a hard time feeling anxiety and impatience, which led him to describe his confined characters. At the same time, Poe wrote the story from the standpoint of characters who confine someone, subconsciously expressing his continuous inner conflict between the desires to avoid fear and the desire for self-destruction. Having observed Poe’s difficult life and noticed the relationship between his biography and his ideas in his writings, we can then go on to consider the closed space in “The Pit and the Pendulum” and “The Cask of Amontillado” in the next section. As we shall see later in the next section, the continual fear caused Poe to desire for avoidance of fear and for destruction of him, and brought the interactive actions to his works.

3. The Desires for Destruction and for Avoidance of Fear

Let us look deeper into the interactive actions in “The Pit and the Pendulum” and “The Cask of Amontillado” that illustrate the point that we have been considering. “The Pit and the Pendulum” is a narrative in which the narrator is put into a torture chamber and suffers from repeated tortures. In contrast to “The Pit and the Pendulum,” Montresor the narrator in “The Cask of Amontillado,” attempts to bury alive his friend Fortunato. To sum up, this narrator, seeking revenge, confines his opponent. Although the two characters seem to play the opposite roles—the avenger and the victim—and they unilaterally use their power in order to afflict their respective opponents, in fact their powers do not necessarily work with effect. To explain the incomplete outcome, a consideration of the opponent’s resistance in several points, especially in the end of each tale may be helpful. It offers the key to an understanding of the interactive actions in closed spaces in each tale.

In “The Pit and the Pendulum” which is a tale about a confined narrator, the relationship between the characters is to confine and to be confined in the closed torture chamber of the inquisition. Indeed, it seems that every detail between the characters is ruled out except for their relationship. Their relationship is clear, while their details are narrated scarcely. The important point to note is that their relationship changes from the beginning to the end of this story, that the person who holds an advantage changes. This story only describes the narrator’s torture by the executors and the executor’s sadistic desire for bringing ruin upon the narrator. The narrator frantically resists when the executors carry on the tortures, but the narrator begins to measure an area of the chamber and falls into a doze in spite of the crisis. We may say that this narrator’s behavior is not performed to survive, in short, there is a masochistic aspect to the narrator’s personality. The narrator is a masochistic person, but it doesn’t mean that the narrator is one-sidedly under the executor’s attack. The point I wish to emphasize is that the actions which occur in the closed space are not one-way, but two-way actions. That is, although it appears that the narrator suffers from the repeated torture by the executors, the narrator acts against them to escape execution. There is enough evidence to show that the narrator resists

torture. It is important to see that the narrator's acts of resistance help him survive even if he seems to be saved by chance occurrences.

I had advanced some ten or twelve paces in this manner, when the remnant of the torn hem of my robe became entangled between my legs. ("The Pit and the Pendulum" 686)

Observing that I remained without motion, one or two of the boldest leaped upon the frame-work, and smelt at the surcingle. This seemed the signal for a general rush. [...] Plainly I perceived the loosening of the bandage. I knew that in more than one place it must be already severed. ("The Pit and the Pendulum" 694)

The first quotation shows that the narrator escapes falling into a pit by tripping on a piece of cloth which the narrator uses to compute the area of the chamber, and the second one shows that the narrator avoids a sharp blade going down from the ceiling toward the narrator by some mice. In this way, the narrator survives the perilous situation several times by means of the tools which the narrator discovers by chance: the piece of cloth that he finds and the mice which are lured by the narrator's fingers that foodstuff has adhered to. Added to these, the torture comes to the following end. "An outstretched arm caught my own as I fell, fainting, into the abyss. It was that of General Lasalle" ("The Pit and the Pendulum" 697). The narrator has the unexpected help by General Lasalle, and escapes death. That is, the narrator survives his ordeal in the unexpected ways. The one-way action against the narrator by the executors leads the narrator's desperate resistance against fear. The executors who confine the narrator push the narrator into a terror many times by forcing the person, shaking with fear into a powerless condition. However, what has to be noticed is that the narrator implies the narrator is a survivor in a passage at the beginning of this story. "They[the lips of the black-robed judges] appeared to me white——whiter than the sheet upon which I trace these words——and this even to grotesqueness" ("The Pit

and the Pendulum” 681, emphasis is mine). The narrator strongly impresses on the reader the fact that the narrator becomes a survivor at the end of the story by referring to the paper on which the narrator’s experience is written. “[W]hiter than the sheet upon which I trace these words” suggests that the narrator writes his experience after the torture, namely the narrator is saved.³ In “The Pit and the Pendulum,” it seems that the executors are provoked a desire for the destruction of the narrator: on the other hand, the narrator feels fear of torture. But we must not forget that the narrator’s survival is suggested by the forth quotation I mentioned in this paragraph. That is, it suggests that all tortures do not work well from the beginning. There are the two-way actions in the closed torture chamber: the executors’ torture and the narrator’s resistance against them. These actions express each character’s desire. In the torture chamber, there are several actions and desires: the executors’ sadistic desire to torture the masochistic narrator is matched by the narrator’s desire to suppress the fear and resist them. The situation in which the narrator finally escapes death implies that the narrator’s desire for survival is keener than the executors’ desire to destroy the narrator.

The narrator in the closed chamber has similar characteristics to Poe’s experience of detention in that the narrator is unexpectedly saved by General Lasalle at the end of “The Pit and the Pendulum,” and Poe was released by Allan’s unexpected help. Both the narrator in “The Pit and the Pendulum” and Poe get through each crisis several times. The narrator, as I have mentioned before, fortunately escapes death by means of a piece of cloth and some mice, while Poe passed through the financial difficulty by Mrs. Clemm’s financial assistance and some unknown procedure. In addition to these, there is one more common point. In terms of resistance, if that Allan did not reply to Poe raised deeper fear that Poe may

³ J. Gerald Kennedy shows in his book: [T]he narrator of “The Pit and the Pendulum” refers to the lips of the black robed judges who sentenced him to the torture chamber as “whiter than the sheet upon which I trace these pages” and thus situates the composition at a later moment that implicitly guarantees his survival. (32)

continue to be confined, that Poe repeatedly sent Allan the letters was resistance not to be a prisoner, likewise, the narrator feels an acute fear when the narrator's repeated survival invites harder tortures. Assuming that Poe described the change from the narrator's hard situation to returning alive in "The Pit and the Pendulum" has been superimposed on Poe's experience, we can say that the narrator's desire reflects Poe's for being freed from continuous fear and anxiety.

Like "The Pit and the Pendulum," the characters' relationship in "The Cask of Amontillado" changes from the beginning to the end of this story, and the change depends on a place. In the place which a carnival is held, the narrator, Montresor is on an equal footing with his friend, Fortunato, while their relationship is not equal but dominant position in the closed underground graveyard. The narrator enacts revenge and confines the friend who he believes has insulted him. In short, this narrative is one which the narrator confines as opposed to "The Pit and the Pendulum." Although it seems that the one-way action in which the narrator buries the victim alive is performed, in fact, we may say that there is another action from the victim toward the avenger in the graveyard. Let us consider the following two quotations.

The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could, but when he ventured upon insult I vowed revenge. ("The Cask of Amontillado" 1256)

"These vaults," he said, "are extensive."

"The Montresors," I replied, "were a great and numerous family."

"I forget your arms." ("The Cask of Amontillado" 1259)

Here we notice that Montresor is afraid of Fortunato. The first of these quotations suggests that the narrator is insulted by the victim, and that there is a vertical relationship between them. The second passage is their conversation carried on just before the vengeance, and the narrator recognizes that the victim's words show contempt for the narrator. These passages imply Montresor's motive for his revenge

against Fortunato. We see, hinted in these quotations, how these insults are unbearable for Montresor, and how he is threatened by Fortunato, who is a sadistic person before they enter the graveyard. The narrator tries to suppress the fear or threat of being insulted by Fortunato through means of burying him alive for revenge. After they enter the graveyard, Montresor becomes a sadistic person. Fortunato's laugh makes Montresor disgusted at the end of this story, as can be seen in the following quotation: "But now there came from out the niche a low laugh that erected the hairs upon my head ("The Cask of Amontillado" 1263). Fortunato's low laugh suggests it has strong power to bring ruin upon Montresor. It is not to be denied that the narrator cannot completely accomplish his revenge because he realizes that he is an extraordinary human being. The narrator himself narrates the following at the end of this story: "I forced the last stone into its position; I plastered it up Against the new masonry I re-erected the old rampart of bones. For the half of a century no mortal has disturbed them" ("The Cask of Amontillado" 1263). This passage suggests that he has been seized with incomplete revenge for fifty years, namely he is not able to avoid fear. Montresor's fear continues to capture him and brings ruin upon him. The narrator and the avenger, Montresor is, as I have mentioned before, the person who confines, but it is not too far from the truth to say that he is confined in a sense. It is interesting to note that he develops his own argument about the vengeance as follows:

I must not only punish but punish with impunity. A wrong is unredressed when retribution overtakes its redresser. It is equally unredressed when the narrator fails to make himself felt as such to him who has done the wrong. ("The Cask of Amontillado" 1256)

Kenji Noguchi states that "Montresor ironically falls into a trap set by himself and does not complete his revenge although subjectively speaking, he satisfies the requirements in order to revenge and accomplish his end" (55-56, translation mine). One can safely state that the narrator is seized with his own argument and results in

an unsuccessful attempt. The narrator, ironically, is confined by himself, even if it is not physically. It is not to be denied that Montresor is a sadistic person for his victim, Fortunato, but Montresor is a masochistic person. It is certainly similar in that Fortunato has these just opposite natures: he is a sadistic person because he consequently lasts to scare Montresor, but he is also a masochistic person because he laughs even when he is confined. The two opposite natures, sadism and masochism, coexist in the two-way actions between the narrator and the victim. The interactive actions between them in the closed graveyard in "The Cask of Amontillado" imply the desire to suppress or avoid fear and to bring about destruction in the same way as in "The Pit and the Pendulum."

"The Pit and the Pendulum" is a narrative which the narrator is confined, while "The Cask of Amontillado" is a narrative in which the narrator confines, and the interactive actions in each work show that there are opposite desires in a closed space. There is, as we have seen, two desires in "The Cask of Amontillado," but it is debatable who desires for destruction of whom. Judging from the above quotation, "But now there came from out the niche a low laugh that erected the hairs upon my head," it seems reasonable to suppose that Fortunato desires to destroy Montresor. However, it is worth examining the subject more closely. The point I wish to emphasize is that the narrator desires to destroy himself, and he projects the desire on the victim. When the narrator carries on his revenge, the victim repeats the narrator's words like a parrot. The repetition of the narrator's words suggests that the victim's desire to ruin the narrator is, in fact, the narrator's desire as if they were integrated. We can say that it is Poe who desires for ruin by reason that he lost his head over the gambling and alcohol. What is important is that Poe chose these difficulties which drove him into destructive life even though he hoped to escape from fear. It follows from what has been said that the two opposite desires for release from fear and for destruction bring about the interactive actions in Poe's works. It seemingly appears that there is only one behavior which the narrator is confined in "The Pit and the Pendulum," and that there is one action which Montresor confines in "The Cask of Amontillado." As has been pointed out, the

closed spaces in which there are interactive actions reflect Poe's exactly opposite desires for avoidance of fear and for destruction.

Conclusion

This thesis attempts to analyze the conflicting motif in Edgar Allan Poe's works, "The Pit and the Pendulum" and "The Cask of Amontillado." We see the interactive actions in closed spaces in the two short stories. These stories are created by Poe's opposite power: Poe wants to be rich in the financial aspect, but he goes to ruin by himself in his mind and physical condition. As a result, we may reasonably conclude that the desires are revealed in the conflicting motif in Poe's works.

Finally, let me stress again that the conflicting motif show the coexistence of sadistic desires and masochistic desires in Edgar Allan Poe's works. As each character's sadistic or masochistic desire is provoked in the closed spaces in each story, Poe's experience of being confined lead his sadomasochistic desires. In other words, the opposite desires or the conflicting matters are described because in Poe's works because his life was filled with the contradictory behavior and his idea of perverseness. Therefore, there is the coexistence of sadomasochistic desires behind the conflicting motif in Poe's two works which we have seen.

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