

## COSMIC FEAR

### (THE INFLUENCE OF GOTHIC LITERATURE IN EDGAR ALLAN POE'S "THE CASK OF AMONTILLADO")

#### MEDO CÓSMICO (A INFLUÊNCIA DA LITERATURA GÓTICA EM "O BARRIL DE AMONTILLADO", DE EDGAR ALLAN POE)

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**ABSTRACT:** The following paper aims to identify common points and variations regarding Edgar Allan Poe's short story *The Cask of Amontillado* and the 19<sup>th</sup> century gothic novel. Thus, a comparative basis is established through the comment on the origin and main characteristics of gothic literature. Then, the analysis of the short story is carried out and enables to define how much the gothic novel influenced it and if it is possible or not to categorize the author as a gothic writer.

Keywords: gothic literature; Edgar Allan Poe; *The Cask of Amontillado*.

**RESUMO:** O seguinte artigo pretende identificar as similaridades e as diferenças envolvendo o conto *O Barril de Amontillado*, de Edgar Allan Poe, e o romance gótico produzido no século XIX. Para isso, uma base comparativa é estabelecida através da observação da origem e das principais características da literatura gótica. Em seguida, a análise do conto é realizada e permite definir o quanto o romance gótico o influenciou e se é ou não possível caracterizar o autor como um escritor gótico.

Palavras chave: literatura gótica; Edgar Allan Poe; *O Barril de Amontillado*.

"The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown."  
(H.P. Lovecraft, 1927)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

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Gothic Literature represents a part of Literature that turns itself to the darkest side of life. The gothic writer makes use of all available elements in order to provoke fear. Lovecraft justifies the relevance of what he calls “the weirdly horrible tale” (1927, p. 01) by claiming that fear is a universal and timeless emotion. He also states that the unknown is the origin of deepest fear, since “uncertainty and danger are always closely allied; thus making any kind of an unknown world a world of peril and evil possibilities” (LOVECRAFT, 1927, p. 03) — a statement that Zygmunt Bauman corroborates on his *Medo Líquido* (2008), while also claiming that darkness may not be the origin of danger, but it is the natural habitat of uncertainty and, therefore, fear.

The definition of the term *unknown*, however, changes from time to time; and literature reflects those fears. For instance, in a period in which natural science was developing at a fast pace, and its powers, whose barriers were not yet clear, terrified the 19<sup>th</sup> century population — *Frankenstein* was written. The creature created by Victor Frankenstein may be interpreted as a manifestation of the dangers of leading the pursuit of knowledge through science to a level that surpassed human limits.

Each age had a different relationship with fear, and represented it in a specific way. Although the gothic novel is a characteristic genre of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it is possible to find horror tales in the folklore of every ancient culture. At such primeval period, the unknown world was vast — it encompassed from the origin of the thunder to the effects of love — and people found explanations for what they did not understand by justifying everything as acts of gods and goddesses. Hence, they profoundly believed in those supernatural creatures — and *feared* them. They did all kinds of efforts, such as rituals, sacrifices and offers, in order to please the gods and avoid their rage. A great number of ancient cultures worshipped numerous gods and goddesses, and each god had their own story and specific characteristics. These primeval cultures conveyed their tales and beliefs to the next generations through oral

tradition. Those myths may not have been written in an organized form such as the gothic novel, but they are samples of fictional stories created to depict the relationship between people and the unknown world.

The Middle Ages were still a time of deep fear. Lovecraft (1927) identifies the Medieval Ages as the period in which a great number of horror themes, present in literature until now, were created. It may be a consequence of the darkness that used to, as Bauman (2008) claims, surround humanity. Medieval lore is the product of a world in which the field of the unknown was enormous, and practices such as demonology and witchcraft were taken seriously.

Then, there came the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a period in which the unknown elements, although not as great in number, were more diversified than at the previous ages. At that time, Literature had already reached the novel form, and Romanticism was beginning to spring up. As a result of the romantic taste for dark themes, the gothic novel was created and was greatly accepted by the public. However, as the science of the 18<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries was able to explain the natural phenomena that used to frighten the population, there was no need to use the supernatural to justify it. Hence, the focus of people's fears turned to more specific aspects of the human condition, such as the human psyche (*The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson, 1886); the dangers of the advance of natural sciences (*Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, 1818); the consequences of modernity (*Dracula* by Bram Stoker, 1897); the boundless passion (*Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë, 1847) and so on. The result was a great number of works that, despite exploring diversified themes, had some characteristics in common.

After these initial considerations, some questions may arise: if the gothic novel was how the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century expressed their fears, what comes after that? Then, if a writer who has greatly influenced contemporary literature, as is the case with Edgar Allan Poe — whose work discusses dark themes and sometimes appeals to

horror —, is brought to discussion, what can be stated about him? In his tales and poems, it is possible to identify the cosmic fear described by Lovecraft (1927) as the main characteristic of the horror tale. Regarding this, is it possible to categorize such writer as a gothic writer, based solely on this assumption? His tales certainly have common elements with the earlier gothic novel, but, apart from the similarities, what if the differences turn it into something completely new? In order to address these questions, this paper proposes a comparative analysis between the gothic novel and Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Cask of Amontillado".

## 2. CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT GOTHIC LITERATURE

In order to start a discussion on gothic literature, some information about the origins of this genre and reasons for its name is relevant. The expression "gothic" was originally applied with a pejorative tone. It was used to describe art and culture produced during the Middle Ages, regarding it as an example of an underdeveloped and archaic art. However, the conception of this term has changed, as Maria Leonor Machado de Sousa (1978) observes: "[t]hrough the association of 'gothic' [...] to a literature work, a change on the meaning of the term was reached, and it started to designate a vast literature sector, whose branches have reached the present<sup>2</sup>." "Gothic", thus, became a term used to describe a literary style.

The Gothic school was a branch of Romanticism — a movement that started as a reaction against conventionalism and neoclassical rules. The number of novels labelled as romantic is great, and their forms are diversified. This happens because Romanticism was a movement of denial, and there were many ways to deny the neoclassical artificiality that the romantic artists despised so much. One of the

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<sup>2</sup> In the original: "Por esta associação de 'gótico' [...] a uma obra literária se chegou a uma modificação de sentido do termo, que passou a designar um vastíssimo sector literário, cujas ramificações chegam aos nossos dias" (SOUSA, 1978, p. 33, my translation).

movements that caught romantic artists' attention was the popular literature, in which they expected to find authentic experiences and a real representation of the human soul. Moreover, as Sousa (1978) claims, when the artist realised how corrupted and rotten the society where they lived was, they responded with a melancholic feeling and a desire for isolation. The places where the subject was able to find peace were cemeteries and ruins, and the more suitable time for melancholic reflections was the night. Therefore, the taste for the night and melancholic themes were also romantic characteristics. The pursuit for popular folklore allied to the taste for dark themes resulted in a deep interest for medieval lore. This desire was greatly represented in all forms of art, and the gothic novel was the way in which it was represented in literature — in a way, it was an endeavour to revive the barbaric and dark medieval lore.

If the birth of the Gothic literature had to be dated, it would be the year of 1764, with the publication of *The Castle of Otranto*, by Horace Walpole. However, it was the result of a process that came from ancient times. It is possible to identify traces of cosmic terror in literary texts written many centuries before the modern gothic novel. Shakespeare, for instance, provides several examples; many of his plays, such as *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, were marked by a dark atmosphere coming from supernatural elements. Lovecraft then claims that “[t]he impulse and atmosphere are as old as man, but the typical weird tale of standard literature is a child of the eighteenth century” (LOVECRAFT, 1927, p. 06).

*The Castle of Otranto*, the very first novel to claim itself the label of gothic novel, was firstly published under a pen name. About the novel, Walpole, under the name of William Marshal, affirmed that:

The following work was found in the library of an ancient Catholic family in the north of England. It was printed at Naples, in the black letter, in the year 1529. How much sooner it was written does not appear. The principal incidents are such as were believed in the darkest ages of Christianity; but the language and

conduct have nothing that savours of barbarism. The style is the purest Italian. (WALPOLE, 1994, p. 13)

All these measures were taken due to fear of the public's reception. However, the second edition, released after a great success amongst the public, came with a new preface, in which Walpole claimed it as his work. Although it is a novel of questionable quality, due to its weak plot and poor development, it encompassed all the main characteristics and themes that would influence the gothic school.

Mark Jancovich (1992) identifies two different forms of this earlier gothic novel. One of them, represented by Ann Radcliffe's production, focused on the female point of view. The other, represented by Gregory Lewis's, portrayed the effects of the events on male experience. Thus, although the characteristics remained the same, the change of the point of view resulted in two different styles regarding gender issues, as Jancovich states:

While the Radcliffian or female Gothic can be described as an insider narrative in which the domestic sphere is represented as a prison within which the heroine is locked and repressed, the Lewisite, or male Gothic, takes the opposite perspective. It is an outsider narrative in which the separation of spheres locks men out of the domestic sphere, and makes them exiles, denied the possibility of domestic happiness. (JANCOVICH, 1992, p. 24)

After understanding the context in which this literary school was developed, it is possible to identify some of its characteristics. Lovecraft, for instance, presents the cosmic fear as the main characteristic of the horror tale, stating that atmosphere is far more important than plot.

This type of fear-literature must not be confounded with a type externally similar but psychologically widely different; the literature of mere physical fear and the mundanely gruesome. Such writing, to be sure, has its place, as has the conventional or even whimsical or humorous ghost story where formalism or the author's knowing wink removes the true sense of the morbidly unnatural; but these things are not the literature of cosmic fear in its purest sense. The true

weird tale has something more than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains according to rule. A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint, expressed with a seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain — a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the demons of unplumbed space. (LOVECRAFT, 1927, p. 03)

Some writers have tried to define what characterizes gothic literature. Maria Leonor Machado de Sousa is one of such writers that discuss the main elements that constituted the gothic novel. As a general definition, she states: “[t]he gothic novel is essentially a sentimental novel, whose love intrigues are affected by the supernatural and mysterious, either along with evil powers, which are fought by the virtue of the heroes, or by making use of hidden powers to strengthen and defend said virtues” (SOUSA, 1978, p. 44, my translation)<sup>3</sup>. She claims that the gothic novel plot is basically composed by a virtuous heroin, a sensitive hero in love, and a terrible villain. She also lists a series of fundamental elements present in gothic literature. Those are: an old manuscript; magic as explanation; ghosts; madness; masks (usually worn by members of secret societies); dreams; works of art (animated portraits); deformed figures; crimes; blood; religion; Italy (being usually the villain’s homeland, representing a distant land); Nature; robbers; old castles and rusty armours and swords. According to Sousa (1978), these are the pillars of the gothic novel.

Concerning the development of this movement, Maria Lenor Machado de Sousa (1978) claims that the term “gothic” can only be used to refer to the beginning of this school, and it loses its meaning when applied to later horror literature. In this sense, gothic was a specific movement with specific characteristics that took place in a

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<sup>3</sup> In the original: “O romance gótico é essencialmente um romance sentimental, em cuja intriga de amor intervêm o sobrenatural e o misterioso, ou ao lado das potências malélicas, contra as quais lutam as virtudes dos heróis, ou servindo-se de poderes ocultos para fortalecer e defender essas mesmas virtudes” (SOUSA, 1978, p. 44, my translation).

specific historical period. Some writers label the development of the previous gothic novel as “novel of terror and wonder” (SOUSA, 1978, p. 11).

After this brief description of the gothic movement, a close reading observation of Edgar Allan Poe would allow a comparison between his production and the production of earlier writers. First, however, it would be relevant to make a few observations on the writer’s style. Then, an analysis of one of his short stories would portray how the gothic novel characteristics are present in his work.

### 3. THE SHORT STORY

Although a great part of Edgar Allan Poe’s work deals with dark themes, such as death and madness, it seems difficult to define him as a gothic writer. The first main difference that one may notice between Poe’s production and the earlier Gothic school is the form. In his writing, he transposed the gothic themes and atmosphere to a new genre: the short story.

Poe was not only an exquisite poet and short story writer, but also a literary theorist of recognition. For short stories, not only did he write them, but he also discussed the properties of this type of fiction in various articles. In his text “Review of Twice-Told Tales”, for instance, he claimed the supremacy of the short story over the novel due to its length. According to him, the fact that the short story can be read in one sitting, without interruptions, gives the reader the effect of totality, since “[d]uring the hour of perusal the soul of the reader is at the writer’s control” (POE, 1842, p. 298). Moreover, the short story must have a considerable length — it cannot be too short, since “[e]xtreme brevity will degenerate into epigrammatism” (POE, 1842, p. 298). Therefore, a short story must be short enough to be read in one sitting, but long enough to produce an effect, according to him.

In his theory of the short story, Poe also compares this genre with poetry. He states that while the aim of a poem should be beauty, the aim of a short story must be truth. According to him, the extension of possibilities in a short story is far greater than that of the poem, thus making its products “never so rich, but infinitely more numerous, and more appreciable by the mass of mankind” (POE, 1842, p. 298).

Some of Edgar Allan Poe’s short stories have more characteristics of the detective story, such as “The Murders in Rue Morgue”, and some of them, such as “The Masque of the Red Death”, have more explicit influence of earlier gothic literature. In order to try to portray how much the gothic movement influenced Poe’s work — and how much he distanced himself from his predecessors, the following section presents an analysis of one of his short stories, which is conspicuously a Gothic Novel’s descendant: “The Cask of Amontillado”.

#### 4. THE CASK OF AMONTILLADO

“The Cask of Amontillado” is a short story surrounded by an atmosphere of madness. It is a story of a man who vowed revenge, though the reason is never openly given — the narrator only states that he had borne “thousand injuries”. (POE, 1985, p. 231)<sup>4</sup>. Firstly, the narrator makes it clear that his plan is to murder the man who has offended him — Fortunato. Then, there comes the meeting between the murderer and his victim — they met apparently by accident on a dusk evening “during the supreme madness of the carnival season” (p. 231). The narrator seduces Fortunato to go to his place by saying that he had bought a pipe of Amontillado, but he feared he had been fooled. Completely drunk, Fortunato carelessly falls on that trap and follows the narrator until his palazzo vaults, where the cask of amontillado was supposedly kept. The narrator previously made sure that all the attendants would leave the house so

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<sup>4</sup> All quotations followed only by a page number were taken from the short story itself. Source: POE, Edgar Allan. *Complete Tales & Poems*. New York: Castle Books, 2009, pp. 231-235.

that he could be alone with Fortunato. They go down to the catacombs where the wines were kept, and as they walk deeper into that place, the air grows darker and denser and an atmosphere of madness seems to surround them. Finally, when they reach the deepest place of that catacomb, the narrator locks Fortunato on a rock and builds a wall in order to bury him.

It is relevant to point out that this short story is narrated in first person; therefore, it is not completely reliable, since the narrator is not only able to manipulate the facts, but also to describe the events from his biased point of view. Regarding this, the technique used by the narrator is to address the reader as an accomplice. For this purpose, he frequently interacts with the reader through statements such as “[y]ou, who so well know the nature of my soul, will not suppose, however, that I gave utterance to a threat” (p. 231). Thus, by treating the reader as someone close to him, not only does the narrator bring them closer, but also assumes that they are on his side. Then, on the second paragraph, he states: “I continued, as my wont, to smile in his face, and he did not perceive that my smile now was at the thought of his immolation.” (p. 231) Thus, at the very beginning, the reader is already aware of the narrator’s intentions. It puts the reader in a privileged position in relation to the victim — a position similar to the murderer’s position. In addition, on the way to the place where Fortunato will be murdered, the narrator gives a lot of hints of his real intentions in his speech. For instance, when Fortunato coughs, although it is a mere cough, the narrator ironically implies that he may be about to die, for which Fortunato’s response is: “The cough is a mere nothing; it will not kill me. I shall not die of a cough.” (p. 233), to which the narrator answers: “True, true.” However, only the reader is able to understand those hints — Fortunato is completely unaware of what is going on.

The characters’ profile may be built up through hints given in their conversations, and through discrete comments made by the narrator. The narrator

himself seemed to be a member of a noble family, since he states, justifying the length of his vaults: “‘The Monstresors’, I replied ‘were a great and numerous family.’” (p. 233), and this family had arms and a motto. He also seems to understand the human mind very well, because he manipulates Fortunato all the time, and almost all his statements are imbued with ambiguity. Moreover, he has successfully manipulated the attendants so that they left the house without his order. A completely ironic figure, he keeps anticipating the outcome. He makes use of tons of metaphors for what he has planned to do. The use of irony seems to be one of the most relevant techniques used. For instance, from the very minute they enter the vaults, he keeps pretending to be worried about Fortunato’s health, which could be impaired by the vaults’ nitre. He alludes to webs of nitre, which could be a reference to the “web” he caught Fortunato in. Finally, when he arrests Fortunato and exposes his true intentions, he exclaims: “‘Pass your hand’, I said, ‘over the wall you cannot help feeling the nitre. Indeed, it is *very damp*. Once more I *implore* you to return. No? Then I must positively leave you” (p. 234). He clearly states that he had been fooling Fortunato since the beginning of their meeting.

The narrator never clarifies what Fortunato had done in order to make him plan and execute such a cruel revenge — he only gives evasive tips referring to what had happened, such as “you are happy, as I once was” (p. 232). It is also unclear what kind of relationship they have — or used to have —, but it is possible to infer that they are very close, since the narrator seems to know Fortunato quite well: “He had a weak point, this Fortunato — although in other regards he was a man to be respected and even feared” (p. 231).

The narrative moves from an open space to a closed one. Their meeting occurs outdoors, and they move towards increasingly claustrophobic environments — firstly, the Palazzo, then the vaults, and at last the very final corner in which Fortunato is walled. There is also a time movement — the very first scene occurs at dusk: “It was

about dusk, one evening during the supreme madness of the carnival” (p. 231). As the narrative proceeds, it turns to night, ending up at midnight: “It was now midnight, and my task was drawing to a close” (p. 235). Moreover, the “supreme madness” atmosphere which surrounds the story seems to follow the same increasing movement. It moves from the noisy madness of the carnival, caused by alcohol, to a psychological insanity for both the narrator and Fortunato, expressed by frightening passages, such as: “But now there came from the niche a low laugh that erected the hairs upon my head. It was succeeded by a sad voice, which I had difficulty in recognizing as that of the noble Fortunato” (p. 235). Finally, the story ends in a catacomb, in the middle of the night, and at complete silence.

As could be seen, there are several themes throughout the story. The first one — revenge — is a desire that not only goes throughout the narrative, but is also stated in the very first sentence: “The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could; but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge” (p. 231). The second main theme is the gap between appearances and reality, which is presented in a great number of symbols throughout the story. The main example may be the title itself — although the cask of amontillado that titles the short story never actually existed; it was a mere illusion built up in order to convince Fortunato to go to the Palazzo. In addition, the situation created by the narrator in order to persuade Fortunato is that he had bought a cask of amontillado but he was not sure of its authenticity: “My dear Fortunato, you are luckily meet. How remarkably well you are looking to-day! But I have received a pipe of what passes for Amontillado, and I have my doubts” (p. 231). Moreover, another motif concerning this theme is the mask Fortunato wears: “Putting on a mask of black silk, and drawing a roquelaire closely about my person, I suffered him to hurry me to my palazzo” (p. 232). All these motives seem to refer to the narrator’s personality — the chasm between his appearance and his true personality, his true

intentions: “I continued, as was my wont, to smile in his face, and he did not perceive that my smile now was at the thought of his immolation” (p. 231).

## 5. CONCLUSION

Comparing Poe’s work with the main characteristics that composed the gothic novel, it is possible to perceive that many of them were not portrayed, or were portrayed differently, as will be explained in the following paragraphs. Firstly, he chose the short story form over the novel. Secondly, the essence of the plot in “The cask of Amontillado” differs from the gothic ones. Finally, it seems that the few elements he kept in his work were completely reversed in meaning. However, the influence of gothic literature in his work is still visible.

One of the main bonds linking Poe and gothic novel writers is the fact that he is able to create “[a] certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread”, described by Lovecraft (1927, s/p) as the essence of cosmic fear. In other words, the atmosphere of madness and fear Poe develops in his short story is what Lovecraft defined as the main point of a well written horror story, whether gothic novel or modern short story. Thus, the cosmic fear is an axis that follows the whole tradition of horror literature.

Moreover, some physical elements that figured in the gothic novels are also present in Poe’s work. In “The Cask of Amontillado”, as regarded before, the old castle (the palazzo) that belongs to a traditional and once powerful family, an element so dear to the gothic writers, is present. It is a place involved in darkness, full of secret passages, vaults, and catacombs filled with human bones. This scenery would match the description of an old gothic castle. Furthermore, there is an atmosphere of madness — both the narrator and Fortunato end up crazy — and the theme of revenge figuring as a similarity between these two styles as well.

Evil, however, is portrayed here in a completely different way. While the gothic writers used to present evil as horrible monsters, most of the times related to supernatural forces, in this short story the peril comes from the narrator himself. Gothic, being related to the romanticism, has a strong sense of moral, and the monsters portrayed in the stories were, most of the time, related to vices and moral degeneration, always being punished at the end. The villain in “The Cask of Amontillado”, by contrast, is not only never punished, but also defends his motives and invites the reader to take his side. At the end, the narrator was able to accomplish his revenge, never being punished for it:

No answer still. I thrust a torch through the remaining aperture and let it fall within. There came forth in return only a jingling of the bells. My heart grew sick — on account of the dampness of the catacombs. I hastened to make an end of my labour. 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 half of a century no mortal has disturbed them. *In pace re quiescat!* (POE, 1985, p. 235)

The word “villain”, however, must be applied carefully. The figure of a villain is not clearly drawn — at least not in the models of gothic villains. The narrator is not a ghost seeking revenge upon his murderer, or a monstrous figure living in a distant land. He is an ordinary human being who seeks revenge upon a man who used to be his friend. Also, there is no figure of a gothic hero or heroine in Poe’s short story — Fortunato is an average man, as far from the image of a virtuous and pure man as the narrator. Besides, the murderer’s character is far better developed and interesting, in the sense of depth, than the victim.

On the one hand, due to those discrepancies between Poe and the gothic tradition — which are not few, and operate changes in essential points of the narrative —, the possibility of classifying him as a gothic writer seems absurd. On the other hand, Poe was only able to operate those changes because the elements to be changed already existed. In other words, he was able to write his own original work because he

had collected ideas from gothic writers' works, turning them into something new. Gothic literature took a long time to establish itself as a genre, and the writers — as may be noticed in Walpole's case — felt ashamed of assuming ownership of their work because it was not considered high literature. Poe's view of horror literature was different from his ancestors' views. He was then able to use the gothic themes as a base and go further.

In this sense, it may be possible to state that Edgar Allan Poe updated gothic literature to a new style, according to the needs of his time. The gothic novel was a specific movement that fitted the spirit of its time, and was also the base for the tradition of horror literature that has been developing since then. Humankind has always created fictional stories portraying their fears, and the written form has the gothic novel as its origin and source.

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