

ENG 1020

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Binary Oppositions in Short Stories: Edgar Allan Poe's

"The Cask of Amontillado," James Joyce's "Araby," and John Updike's "A&P"

David Shane

Within short stories, binary opposites are commonly used as polemics to present the superiority of one idea over another. Sophisticated writers sometimes take this literary motif to the extreme by employing binary opposites on the literary and abstract levels¹ in tandem (Klages). This internally-reinforced structure serves the author's purpose by providing the reader with several noticeable archetypes on the literary level that are inextricably linked with a thematic binary-pair that is embedded at the abstract level. Edgar Allan Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado," James Joyce's "Araby," and John Updike's "A&P" all utilize the theme of binary opposites to that effect. An analysis of "The Cask of Amontillado" reveals that Edgar Allan Poe holds the view of *Das Unheimliche*² for the human psyche, which is materialized through the pairing of good and evil. For the turn-of-the-century story "Araby," James Joyce argues for the abandonment of Catholicism in order to embrace modern secularity through the binary opposites of secular and religion. Lastly, John Updike expresses his approval of the American

¹ This essay utilizes the term "literary level" to signify binary opposites found amongst the plain text of the story and the term "abstract level" to signify a theme that is deduced through the grouping of binary opposites on the literary level (i.e. the collection of daytime and nighttime symbols in a story which relates to a secular versus religion theme on the abstract level).

² *Das Unheimliche* ("The Uncanny") is a psychological term coined by the 20th century psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud. Doctor Freud proposed that "the uncanny" is a familiar yet incongruous thought pattern that creates cognitive dissonance (a paradoxical state where someone is attracted to repugnant feelings). For more information see Sigmund Freud's "Das Unheimliche."

social reform movements of the 1950s through the binary set of “Marxian” social classes: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat³.

Readers of Edgar Allan Poe are keenly aware of Poe’s gothic style, his extensive use of symbolism, and his classic first-person narration style. Yet, the abstract level of Poe’s work is often overlooked because of these and similar Poe-hallmarks found at the literary level (Nevi 461). It is true that the symbolic imagery found in “The Cask of Amontillado” is worthy of its own praise. However, an exhaustive analysis of the symbols penned by Poe reveals that these elements can be combined to support a larger message: *Das Unheimliche* is an essential part of the human psyche and humans should embrace it. Edgar Allan Poe experienced this inner-darkness first hand as he lived “a difficult life and faced many adversities from a young age” (Giammarco 6) which include the hardships of alcoholism and mental illness⁴ (Magistrale 90). This biographical information coupled with the noticeable parallels between Edgar Allan Poe’s work and life leads to no surprise that within “The Cask of Amontillado” lays Poe’s pre-Freudian thoughts about *Das Unheimliche*.

The binary pair that Poe uses to relate to *Das Unheimliche* is good versus evil and a cursory glance shows that the names of the main characters follow this very theme. The protagonist’s name is “Fortunato” which means “fortunate, happy, blessed,”⁵ and even though the family name of Montresor does not appear to have any etymological significance, Poe indirectly supplies the Montresor family coat-of-arms: “a huge human foot [that] crushes a serpent rampant whose fangs are imbedded in the heel” (Poe 192). Several critics, like Paul

³ The Bourgeoisie and Proletariat are the upper (wealthy) and lower (poor) social classes of a society, respectively. Refer to “The Communist Manifesto” by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.

⁴ It is impossible to ascertain Poe’s mental health while he was living, but most researchers claim, at a minimum, depression. See “Edgar Allan Poe: A Psychological Profile” by Erica Giammarco.

⁵ The name Italian name Fortunato is derived from the Latin name *Fortunatus*.

Moliken, have rightly argued that the serpent represents Montresor, who is vengefully striking back at Fortunato (the human heel) after being stepped on (58). Furthermore, Edgar Allan Poe purposefully used the image of a serpent in order to make a biblical allusion: the story of “Adam and Eve” uses a serpent to represent the vilest of all creations, Satan. The personalities of Montresor and Fortunato, likewise, bolster the overarching pair of opposites: Montresor is engrossed with sinister thoughts and seeks revenge against Fortunato, while Fortunato’s actions throughout the story suggest that he is friendly, kind, and innocent. Thus it stands that Montresor is an evil person aligned to an evil name and Fortunato is a good person aligned to a good name. Several minor good versus evil parallels also aid in the formation of the abstract binary pair. For example, Fortunato is wearing clothes of a court jester while celebrating the carnival, which signifies Fortunato’s liveliness and friendliness. In addition to his festive attire, Fortunato is described by Montresor as being “respected, admired, and beloved”⁶ (Poe 192). As for Montresor, his comments are full of derision, he lies on several occasions, and he is vindictive. Additionally, the settings in the story parallel the good versus evil theme: Montresor lures Fortunato out of the “supreme madness of carnival” (Poe 190) which is full of life, down into the lonely “most remote end of the crypt” (Poe 192) which is full of death. “The Cask of Amontillado” concludes with evil triumphing over good as Montresor seals Fortunato in the catacombs. On the abstract level of “The Cask of Amontillado,” “the uncanny” eclipses the goodness of human nature and validates Poe’s claim that there is a dark side to mankind’s heart.

⁶ Montresor’s account of the story is usually viewed skeptically by critics because Montresor is an unreliable narrator. However, this remark about Fortunato fully integrates into the good versus evil theme.

In the short story "Araby," James Joyce skillfully uses the theme of binary opposites in order to promulgate anti-Catholicism. Unlike Edgar Allan Poe's use of binary opposites where evil triumphs over good on the literary level and the abstract level is completely removed from the text, Joyce uses several allegories that blatantly link to the binary pair on the abstract level, as well as, utilizing a parallel theme of lightness versus darkness to convey his message.

"Araby" explicitly contains several allegories that implicate the Roman Catholic Church with corruption. For example, the narration immediately begins by reflecting upon a priest linked to novels of romance and deception (Joyce 220). Tim Cairney observes that this allusion "serves to point out the inadequacy and hypocrisy of the priest" (11). Ironically, the priest's backyard is a biblical allusion to an untended Garden of Eden: "the wild garden behind the house contained a central apple tree and a few straggling bushes under one of which I found the tenant's rusty bicycle pump" (Joyce 220). While the degeneracy of the priests is sufficient to relay a message on its own accord, a positive portrait of secularism is developed simultaneously. For example, the narrator describes an outing filled with secular activities rife with noise, action, and vivacity:

We walked through the flaring streets, jostled by drunken men and bargaining women, amid the curses of labourers, the shrill litanies of shop-boys who stood on guard by the barrels of pigs' cheeks, the nasal chanting of street-singers, who sang a come-all-you about O'Donovan Rossa, or a ballad about the troubles in our native land. These noises converged in a single sensation of life for me... (Joyce 221).

Furthermore, “Araby” culminates on a day where the narrator lifelessly starts off at religious⁷ school but ends with the excitement of a trip to the bazaar. While it is true that the trip ends in bitter disappointment, it by no means represents secular inferiority. On the contrary, the excitement, the experience, and the opportunity all present a unified desire for secularism. Additionally, James Joyce ties the abstract level’s secular and religious binary pair to the lightness and darkness binary pair on the literary level. In particular, “Araby” contains several contrasting adjectives where the binary tones independently serve to engender the imagery: “dark muddy lanes” (Joyce 220), “dark rainy evening” (Joyce 221), “white curve of her neck” (Joyce 221), etc... Moreover, the reader experiences most of the narrative time during “dark” nighttime where the narrator plays in the streets, talks to Mangan’s sister, and journeys to the bazaar. This is in stark contrast to his mundane daytime activities of watching Mangan’s sister through the window, mindlessly attending school, and watching the clock while waiting to go to the bazaar.

The work of unambiguous, controversial writers contains blatant messages that are easily discernible. However, quieter works can also carry an equally potent message about controversial or debatable topics too. John Updike’s “A&P” occurs within a Postwar-American⁸ town and generates nostalgia for the average American reader. During an interview, John Updike commented that his stories are about “the American small town, Protestant middle class... it is in middles that extremes clash, where ambiguity restlessly rules” (Lehmann-Haupt). The binary pair that John Updike uses in “A&P” is the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. These

⁷ The story doesn’t state the type of school that the narrator attends, but it is not all that presumptuous to assume that it is a religious school as Joyce attended one as a child (Gray 5).

⁸ Postwar-America refers to the years proceeding after the end of World War II until the beginning of the ‘60s: ≈1945-1962 (Digital History)

two parties embody the epic struggle between different socioeconomic classes and directly relates to the social movements occurring during the postwar era. After World War II, “movements for civil and social rights, equality, and justice swept the United States” (Calisphere) and had a profound impact on the artists of the time. The binary opposites of “A&P” undoubtedly relate to the social changes through Sammy’s actions, which “foreshadows the mood of the rebellious generation to come, which would refuse to conform” (Kirsznner and Mandell 132).

The storyline of “A&P” is an allegory for the binary opposites of Marxian classes. The all-male workers of A&P are attentive, clothed in work uniforms, and are bossed by the female customers: “I ring it up again and the [female] customer starts giving me hell” (Updike 131). The story’s climax even pivots around the confrontation between Queenie and Lengel, where the proletariat/female prevails over bourgeoisie/male:

“We *are* decent,” Queenie says suddenly, her lower lip pushing, getting sore now that she remembers her place, a place from which the crowd that runs the A&P must look pretty crummy...“Girls, I don’t want to argue with you. After this come in here with your shoulders covered. It’s our policy.” [Lengel] turns his back (Updike 133).

Oppositely, the all-female shoppers are carefree, casually dressed, and maintain an aristocratic presence throughout the store. The only other shopper⁹ that appears is also a female who scoffs at Sammy for making a mistake with her groceries. This introductory spat between the woman and Sammy is an allegory for the resentment that the bourgeoisie have for the

⁹ “A couple of customers” (Updike 134) appear at the end of the story but they take on a genderless, silhouetted form. These customers symbolize that “production” must continue hence, Lengel takes over Sammy’s duties.

proletariat in that the oppressed bourgeoisie are voiceless and stuck in a life of servitude. Besides the characters of the story, several other elements are polarized with a binary effect. For example, the A&P store itself is symbolic of the rejected, socially conservative, American lifestyle. The “Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company,” formerly the “Great American Tea Company,” is a symbolic industrial-cornerstone of the United States. The A&P in the story is “pretty empty [with] nothing much to do except lean on the register and wait for the girls to show up again” (Updike 132). Furthermore, Sammy narrates that the name “A&P” will be changed to the “Great Alexandrov and Petrooshki Tea Company or something” (Updike 132) in the future. Here, John Updike cleverly makes an allusion to the cold war for the purpose of using the America-Russia binary pair to parallel the social tensions of his abstract message. Although it is narrated by Sammy in an ironic way, Sammy asserts that A&P will be replaced by another owner. Hence, the old, conservative lifestyles of America will morph into new ones.

Even though these three authors are famous for a cornucopia of innovations in the literary world, their refined usage of binary oppositions equally attests to their great literary mastery. Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Cask of Amontillado” uses the classic theme of good and evil to support the philosophical notion that mankind has an inherent evil. This belief in *Das Unheimliche* counters the popular 19th century movement of Transcendentalism, which peaked during Poe’s lifetime. Similarly, James Joyce builds an argument on the abstract level of “Araby” through the use of innuendos and double entendres on the literary level. This complex network of light and dark images combined with several inverted church references unmistakably broadcasts Joyce’s revolt of Catholicism. John Updike’s usage of binary opposites in “A&P” declares his support for the social movements in America during the 1950s. In order to

accomplish this, Updike creatively uses the allegory of a mundane-life episode to nourish the “Marxian” pairing found on the abstract level. In short, “The Cask of Amontillado,” “Araby,” and “A&P” are the quintessence of binary oppositions in short stories.

Annotated Bibliography

Cairney, Pat. "James Joyce's Quarrel with Catholicism." Diss. Emporia Kansas State College, 1977.ESIRC. Web. 2 October 2015.

Pat Cairney's dissertation reviews several of James Joyce's works along with biographical information in an attempt to explain the ever-present anti-catholic message that Joycean critics have unveiled. Cairney's dissertation is exhaustive and thorough: it points towards the combination of immoral church leaders and the disjoint social conditions of Dublin as Joyce's source of motivation. Of particular merit is Cairney's identification of the "priestly degeneracy" that exists in the majority of James Joyce's works. This theme takes on a systematic formula that is useful in finding Joyce's allegories, such as "dead" linked to "priest." While critics are divided over James Joyce being anti-catholic or not, Pat Cairney's work provides compelling evidence to support the notion. One aspect that was not covered by Cairney was the pitting of secular versus religious imagery. While Pat Cairney discusses a plethora of anti-catholic examples, his dissertation doesn't consider the pro-secular images that are found in "Araby" and Joyce's other works.

Klages, Mary. *The Structural Study of Myth' and Other Structuralist Ideas*. University of Idaho, n.d. Web. 02 Oct. 2015

To support the argument that "Araby," "A &P," and "The Cask of Amontillado" contain binary opposites at an abstract level, it is necessary to comprehend the basics of structuralism in literary theory: Doctor Mary Klages's lecture introduces the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss and his contributions to literary theory. More specifically, Mary Klages covers the theme of

binary pairs and how they are built into the structural nature of a story. In her lecture, Doctor Klages does an excellent job of breaking down the evolution of Levi-Strauss's structuralism and identifying the salient points: units can be broken down into binary pairs, the relationship amongst pairs is more important than what they represent, and narratives can be analyzed as a multi-dimensional product. Even though Claude Levi-Strauss's theory only considers the mythical genre, his systematic approach can be effectively applied to other types of literature. In other words, Doctor Klages's lecture proves to be beneficial for anyone interested in learning more about the subject of structuralism within literary theory. In short, Doctor Mary Klages's lecture provides a practical lesson for literary theory novices and laymen who have not been introduced to the more sophisticated concepts of literary criticism.

Li, Kangqin. *Vision and Form in John Updike's Short Fiction*. Diss. University of Leicester, 2014.

Web. 25 Sep. 2015

Li Kangqin's dissertation is a multi-faceted case study on the short fictional works of American author John Updike. Although Li Kangqin's work focuses primarily on the visual and structural forms of Updike's stories, it periodically discusses Sammy's change in "A & P." In particular, Li Kangqin covers Sammy's rejection of society (exemplified via Sammy quitting his job) and places emphasis on the final scene of the story. This point of the story receives a lot of criticism from scholars because the meaning of Sammy looking back at the store is contingent upon the analytical lens which one uses to interpret the story. Kangpin's thorough dissertation is also helpful in that it contains a trove of literary criticisms for John Updike and the story "A & P." For example, Kangpin references Kasia Boddy and her work that compares "A & P" to James Joyce's

“Araby” (which are focal points in my essay). While “Vision and Form in John Updike’s Short Fiction” traverses on a tangent to the main ideas found in this essay, it is a fertile work that contains a plethora of leads for John Updike criticism.

Magistrale, Tony. *Student Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001.

ProQuest ebrary. Web. 22 Oct 2015

“The Student Companion to Edgar Allan Poe” is an introduction to the life, times, and work of the American author / poet Edgar Allan Poe. In particular, Tony Magistrale’s comments on “The Cask of Amontillado” are insightful, straightforward, and easily digestible. For example, he breaks the short story down into the basic literary elements (such as characters, themes, and setting) and demonstrates how they function in the story. By writing at a general level, Tony Magistrale effectively relays to the reader several themes and motifs that occur in the story. One key idea that is presented is the intricate use of irony. With Edgar Allan Poe’s works being notoriously rife with irony, Tony Magistrale highlights several small, subtle, details that reveal a highly complex network of the irony theme. This material supports the very core of the binary opposition argument because irony is a quintessential form of opposites. And even though “The Student Companion to Edgar Allan Poe” is not as technical as some of the more specialized articles on Poe, the amount of information included is satiating.

Nevi, Charles N. “Irony and ‘The Cask of Amontillado’.” *The English Journal* 56.3 (1967): 461-463. Print.

Charles Nevi's article, "Irony and 'The Cask of Amontillado'," identifies several different ironies that can be found in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado." This article specifically concentrates on Poe's employment of the irony theme, and serves as a logical progression from Tony Magistrale's book. Charles Nevi is extremely cognizant of irony's abstractness and dedicates almost a third of his essay stressing this point: Nevi believes that readers of "The Cask of Amontillado" can extract the true worth of the story only if they have a solid grasp on irony beforehand. One interesting portion of the article is Nevi's remark that the story of "The Cask of Amontillado" is only concluded when irony is no longer possible. Even though this appears to be an exaggeration, it is suggestive that the irony theme exists at multiple levels of the story. Alternatively, what this essay gains from being full of rich content is somewhat lost due to its brevity. It is evident that Charles Nevi is a skillful writer and educator, but the amount of information presented here leaves the reader in want of additional material.

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