

Monstresor's Neurotic Projections and Paranoia in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado"

Lau Zhe Ming

Department of English, Faculty of Modern Languages & Communication
Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 UPM, Serdang, Selangor, MALAYSIA
E-mail:zheming1988@hotmail.com

Wan Roselezam Wan Yahya (corresponding author)

Department of English, Faculty of Modern Languages & Communication
Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 UPM, Serdang, Selangor, MALAYSIA
E-mail: roselezam@gmail.com; rose@upm.edu.my

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Abstract

Edgar Allan Poe, in his short stories, is well-known for his portrayal of strange behavior among his protagonists who usually commit a series of heinous crimes and either get away with it or are punished severely when discovered. In this paper, the actions of and thoughts spoken by Poe's protagonist in his short story "The Cask of Amontillado" are interpreted in terms of the psychoanalytic concept of projection as articulated by Sigmund Freud. We believe projection is employed by Monstresor as an ego defense to exercise his aggressive drives of hatred and envy towards the victim, Fortunato, which culminates in premeditated murder. Fortunato is unaware of Monstresor's plan to eliminate him permanently, while the reader is not informed about the unforgivable actions which have resulted in so much grievance and hatred in Monstresor's mind, hence leaving the victim helpless and the reader baffled by Monstresor's unjustified crime. By using Freud's concept of projection, we conclude that the projective mechanism is a useful tool for understanding Monstresor's motif in killing one of the social elite, Fortunato, and his actions in committing this gruesome crime. Monstresor is unconsciously projecting his own feelings of jealousy and arrogance onto Fortunato and imagining and believing that Fortunato has those same feelings towards him. So, obsessed with feelings of revenge, Monstresor takes the life of his innocent friend.

Keywords: defense mechanism, ego defense, paranoia, projection, psychoanalysis

1. Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Cask of Amontillado" was written in the mid-nineteenth century and uses a first-person perspective, with Monstresor, the protagonist, narrating the whole story from beginning to the end. It is the story of Monstresor, who bears a long-time grudge against his friend, Fortunato, for what he perceives was an insult thrown at him by Fortunato: "The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could, but when he ventured upon insult I vowed revenge" (Poe, 1994: 374). The perceived insult is not disclosed in the story but the reader is told of Monstresor's intricate plan to exact deadly revenge, which ends in the murder of an unfortunate man, Fortunato. Monstresor devises a plan to lure Palazzo into a trap, tempting him with the pleasure of tasting an excellent vintage wine called Amontillado. Fortunato is attracted by the prospect of the rare pleasure that Amontillado promises and finally agrees to one of Monstresor's persistent invitations. They meet and go through a long underground passage to taste that unique brew. Upon reaching the dead end of the passage, Monstresor surprises Fortunato and chains him to the wall. He then starts to build a wall, one course of bricks after another, eventually covering Fortunato. When the last brick of the wall is laid, Monstresor departs, and Fortunato is left chained and helpless, imprisoned without food or drink, to starve and perish.

For Monstresor, he has had his revenge. "Against the new masonry I re-erected the old rampart of bones. For the half of a century no mortal has disturbed them" (Poe, 1994: 381). In analysing this story we find that Monstresor can be seen as obsessed with getting even with Fortunato, although there is no explanation of the insult he received from Fortunato. However, since the story is narrated by Monstresor, the reader has no way either to ascertain the truth or to determine the falsity of Monstresor's supposed insult by his friend, for we only have his word for it. Many analyses have been done to ascertain Monstresor's motive for committing the crime; among them, Henniger (1970) accepts Monstresor's narration and believes that Monstresor is taking revenge for all the wrongdoings that Fortunato have been done to him by making Fortunato endure a slow death, walled up, alive, in a catacomb; in addition, other researchers, such as Baraban (2004), Nevi (1967) and Schick (1934), confirm that 'vengeance' is the sole motive for Monstresor's murder of Fortunato. However, in this paper, we claim that Monstresor has a chronic personality disorder, and by using Freud's theory of projection it is possible for the reader to decipher the murderer's psyche and unravel his actions in the story.

2. Freudian's Theory of Projection

The psychoanalytic theory of projection was developed by Sigmund Freud (1911) in his letters to Wilhelm Fliess, "Draft H", which deals with projection as a mechanism of defense. This theory was further refined by his daughter, Anna Freud (1936). According to Freud, the theory of projection is a defense mechanism which kicks in when an internal impulse provokes too much anxiety, often when one's positive perception of another person backfires. As a result, the person who experiences the anxiety will tend to project any negative or unwanted impulses onto an external object regardless of whether it is animate or inanimate (Freud, 1911).

Following Freud's theory, projection, which is closely related to paranoia, is most pertinent in "The Cask of Amontillado". It is an example of the projection of traits that one finds objectionable to oneself, projected onto someone else. Projection can also be used as a means to obtain or justify certain actions that would normally be found atrocious or heinous. This often means projecting false accusations, information and so on onto an individual for the sole purpose of maintaining a self-created illusion that one is still perceived as a nice person.

One of the many problems with the process of projection whereby something dangerous that is felt inside can be moved outside – a process of "externalizing" – is that, as a result, the projector may become somewhat depleted and rendered limp in character, as he loses part of his personality. Projection is often argued to be a way in which the ego maintains the illusion that it is completely and constantly dominating (Freud 1936). In addition, those who are engaged in projection can be incapable of accessing truthful memories, intentions and experiences, even about their own nature, as is common in deep trauma.

In short, projection concerns externalizing the issues that one needs to deal with oneself. Usually, one projects onto others issues and problems that one needs to address within oneself, or is unable to manage properly. Projection bias is considered to be among the most profound psychological processes within human beings. It is also complicated and hard to work with. This is because an individual's sense to project is hidden. It is a mechanism via which one keeps oneself uninformed about one's true feelings.

Freud goes further to say that projection is also about perceiving others as having traits that one wrongly believes one lacks. Again, it has to do with feelings of anxiety or suppressing thoughts which are the result of undesirable traits, which one unconsciously has, leading to projection onto others. As an example, when one person is jealous of another, the unpleasant feeling of jealousy makes him deny to himself that he is jealous, and eventually he will say (and believe) that it is actually others who are jealous of that same person he is jealous of. And the person he targets will probably be someone whom he thinks also dislikes the same person. The point here is that instead of directly saying that he dislikes him, or is jealous of him, the defense mechanism makes him attribute his own undesirable thoughts or traits to targets that are perceived to be favorable around him. In "The Cask of Amontillado", Monstresor's obsession with being a proud wine connoisseur is projected onto Fortunato who is then seen as having similar behavior or attributes so that this reduces the stress on Monstresor for being such a proud and egotistical man.

Freud's original view of the theory of projection is translated into seeing the bad traits in another person as the essential means to avoiding seeing them in oneself (1911, 1936). Prior to this, Fortunato appears to be a suitable target for the projection of Monstresor's negative attributes, such as arrogance, envy, practical joking, jealousy and revengefulness. Monstresor has unconsciously suppressed all these negative attributes and hence there arises within him the need to project them onto Fortunato, in order to reduce the stress or feeling of guilt of being such a person, an unlikeable character in the eyes of others.

There is also the possibility of Monstresor having an extreme level of projection too, which is paranoia. Paranoia is a mental disorder characterized by powerful delusions of jealousy and persecution. According to Freud (1911), a crucial distinction between projection and paranoia is that paranoia is always characterized by repressed unresolved homosexual feelings toward the persecutor. In this, Freud also believes that the persecutor might probably be a friend or even a best friend to the projection target, who often appears to be of the same sex. Unconsciously realizing that they have unpleasant thoughts in their mind that trouble them, these paranoiacs will tend to defend themselves by reversing those feelings, then projecting them onto the target. For this, Freud gives the example of a paranoid man who likes a friend of the same sex, and the sequence is as follows: Originally it should be "I love you" but instead of saying so, the paranoiac will say "I hate you." This reduces the feeling of anxiety in him but it is not really sufficient to purge it completely. Thinking that this still produces too much anxiety, it will eventually be transformed into thinking "He hates me", meaning the persecutor himself disclaims all responsibility by projecting all the unpleasant feelings onto the target.

3. Projection in "The Cask of Amontillado"

The story starts off at a carnival somewhere in Italy where both Monstresor and Fortunato meet. As the action of the story progresses, Fortunato is lured into the catacomb in Monstresor's palazzo, and as they journey through the catacomb, Monstresor and Fortunato move into smaller and fouler spaces (Poe, 1994: 378). Slowly,

Monstresor lures Fortunato into the crypt which Monstresor describes as being built of solid granite, with displaced bones in sight. Eventually, Fortunato is trapped in a space that represents the realm of darkness. Upon reaching the end of their path, Monstresor chains Fortunato to the wall and bricks him up inside an airless man-sized crypt with no air and so he is forever constricted within the evil space which Monstresor has built for him. Such a description implies that Monstresor has had that foul plan in mind over the years and has just been patiently biding his time before bringing his plan to fruition. In relation to projection theory, it shows that it is not Fortunato who is evil, it is Monstresor. All of Monstresor's accusations about Fortunato's bad behavior are possibly imagined, and the true face of Monstresor is laid bare with the execution of Monstresor's hideous plan.

In the changes of space from the free area to the catacomb and finally to the airless crypt, one can see Poe's intention of mapping out Monstresor's mental state. This is symbolic of Monstresor's thoughts and his negative attributes which he projects onto Fortunato, such that Monstresor perceives himself as someone with positive attributes until Fortunato comes into the picture and the total evil negativity of Monstresor leads him to murder his friend. Monstresor has harboured thoughts of murdering Fortunato from the very beginning of the story, "At length I would be avenged; this was a point definitively settled" (Poe, 1994: 374). Monstresor, being a wine connoisseur himself, already knows what will lure Fortunato to his doom. Peering into Monstresor's mental state, we realize it is because of this same trait (wine connoisseur) that Monstresor projects his sense of pride as a wine connoisseur onto Fortunato when he says Fortunato is "proud of himself on his connoisseurship in wine" (Poe, 1994: 374). With this projection onto Fortunato, Monstresor believes he is not proud but Fortunato is, and he now sees this negative attribute in his friend. There is evidence that shows Monstresor is a proud man in an exchange with Fortunato, who asks him, "You are not of the Masons... ", to which he answers, "Yes, yes, yes!" (Poe, 1994: 378). This is to prove to Fortunato that he himself is a member of a fraternal order (the Masons). To add to this, Freemasonry is a group which is open only to exclusive members, usually a group of elite people and from the upper classes. In saying that he is a Freemason he portrays himself as haughty, proud and a member of the social and economic elite. Amontillado, which is a special vintage wine only affordable by and available to members of the upper class is used as bait for Fortunato and to give him the impression that he too is a man of success, and wealthy and worthy to partake of such an exclusive wine.

Monstresor mentions that Fortunato has done him a "thousand injuries" but he never provides any details of these and this casts doubts in the mind of the reader as to Monstresor's credibility. We never know what Fortunato has actually done to hurt Monstresor or if in fact he has hurt him in any way at all. The one thing that we do know for sure is that Monstresor's grudge against Fortunato has reached a stage where he is willing to do anything to get rid of that unpleasant sense of feeling hurt. This is seen in the very first line of the story when Monstresor vows revenge towards Fortunato. In saying this, Monstresor is projecting his own unwanted attributes onto Fortunato, making him a person everyone hates, and most importantly, someone he hates. As a result of this grudge, Monstresor plans a murder in the basement of his palazzo, "I vowed revenge. You, who so well know the nature of my soul, will not suppose, however, that I gave utterance to a threat" (Poe, 1994: 374). The utterance of the word "threat" here is rather unconvincing since the reader knows that Monstresor has already exhibited nasty feelings towards Fortunato.

Here we can bring in Freud's theory of neurotic projection to explain Monstresor's behavior. Monstresor's feeling of being threatened by Fortunato is more likely to be self-denial because, as discussed earlier, he never does mention how Fortunato is a threat or what insult was thrown at him by Fortunato. Speaking of which, is he being sensitive towards petty jokes that do not mean to hurt his feelings? We do not know. But what we can witness from the whole story is that Fortunato does not have any voice in the story and he is portrayed as an ignorant defenseless man under the sway of Monstresor. This shows the level of comfort Fortunato has when he is mingling with Monstresor, and that their relationship must be a good one. Thus, we could say that Monstresor, in projecting his own unwanted attributes onto the innocent Fortunato, seeks to justify his hate, and fuel the feelings of revenge against his friend.

Besides being proud and jealous, Monstresor is also portrayed as a cynical man. Although Monstresor has accused Fortunato of insulting him, it is possible to see the opposite when Monstresor comments that: "Fortunato, like his countrymen, was a quack," and laughed at his friend for dressing in a clown suit, "The man wore motley. He had on a tight-fitting party-striped dress and his head was surmounted by a conical cap and bells" (Poe, 1994: 374). Monstresor was also pretentiously trying to persuade Fortunato to stop thinking about tasting the Amontillado, on the pretext that he is concerned about his health, "'Come,' I said, with decision, 'we will go back; your health is precious. You are rich, respected, admired, and beloved; you are happy as once I was. You are a man to be missed. For me it is no matter. We will go back; you will be ill and I cannot be responsible'" (Poe, 1994: 376).

The last projection one can detect in Monstresor is during his attempt to kill Fortunato. Having cuffed and chained Fortunato to the crypt wall, he starts to wall up Fortunato with layer after layer of bricks. As he is doing it, he shouts, "'Fortunato!' No answer. I called again, 'Fortunato!' 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” (Poe, 1994: 380-381). The question is, why is he shouting at Fortunato knowing that he has already planned to kill him? Is it to show that he has in fact no desire to kill him? This behaviour of Montresor may be seen as him being paranoid as he projects his guilt at killing his own friend elsewhere (i.e. onto the dampness of the catacombs) and so he is discharged of any responsibility for his act.

Fortunato, as been mentioned earlier, is a friend of Montresor but one who has no voice in the story because he appears to be just a supporting character onto whom Montresor projects all entire grudges. But according to Montresor, Fortunato is a haughty wine connoisseur. Perhaps, it is his proud personality that invokes Montresor’s uncomfortable feelings towards him, because Montresor himself is a very proud man too. So, when Montresor sees his negativity in Fortunato he goes into denial, as explained by Freud, seeing in others unacceptable feelings or tendencies that actually reside in one’s own unconscious (Freud, 1911). Fortunato is also dressed like a jester, as described by Montresor; he wears motley, has on a tight-fitting party-striped dress and his head is surmounted by a conical cap and bells. Poe’s intention perhaps, by describing him in such a way, is to portray him as someone who likes to play jokes on other people, which is probably what Montresor could not bear.

According to Freud (1922), projected jealousies have many different forms or levels. It may be seen that Montresor has been envious of Fortunato in his competitive attempts to prove that he himself has a lot of possessions that only upper-class people possess. This is a scenario that hints to the reader at how Montresor is intimidated by Fortunato, and therefore the former’s plan to bring Fortunato down. The coat of arms that he possesses, his membership of the Freemasons, possession of Amontillado, the vintage wine, these are all purposely brought in by Poe to show to the reader that Montresor is really a jealous man who needs to feed on status and an aura of superiority and elitism.

Another form of projected jealousy is one which involves repressed homosexual feelings. Earlier it was mentioned that Montresor could be suffering from paranoia. However, most people who have paranoia, referred to by psychiatrists as paranoiacs, have an exotic interest in people of the same sex, which hints at homosexuality. In this sense, we are arguing that Montresor may have a sexual interest in Fortunato. According to Freud (1911, 1922), a crucial distinction between projection and paranoia is that paranoia is always characterized by repressed homosexual feelings towards the persecutor. And the fact that Montresor is a friend of Fortunato’s affirms Freud’s contention that the persecutor is inevitably a former friend of the same sex. We may have been wondering why Montresor would be jealous of Fortunato. Another possibility is that Montresor is envious of Fortunato’s wealth, success and, most importantly, Fortunato’s wife. According to Freud, when homosexual impulses become too powerful, persecuted paranoiacs defend themselves by reversing these feelings and then projecting them onto their original object. It is possible that Montresor loves Fortunato but is trying to deny it, and as a consequence of that denial, it is transformed into hatred. He has affection for Fortunato, but the fact that Fortunato has a wife could have provoked Montresor’s jealousy and so the unpleasant feelings towards Fortunato are activated, unconsciously; Montresor’s defense mechanism reverses it into the illusion that he hates Fortunato. But this statement still makes the paranoid Montresor feel uncomfortable, so he has to resort to reversing the illusion again to “Fortunato hates me”. In this case, Fortunato, being a jester himself, plays jokes on Montresor and this is when Montresor feels that he has been insulted by his friend’s words. All in all, it leads to the major scenario where Montresor eventually exterminates Fortunato.

4. Conclusion

Based on a close study of Montresor’s behavior following Freud’s theory of projection, it is possible to deduce that Montresor is suffering from a serious personality disorder. Fortunato is portrayed as a bad person by Montresor (who is also the narrator). In relation to this, one cannot trust Montresor’s words. Montresor’s egotistical thoughts have led him to perceive that everything Fortunato does or says is insulting to him. But when read using Freud’s theory of projection, Montresor has been unconsciously projecting his own negative attributes onto his friend. It is because deep inside him he has a feeling of discomfort about his friend, and in order to get rid of this discomfort, he projects it onto the friend. And in denying this fact, he projects it onto the other, portraying his friend to be the bad one.

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