



A Narrative Analysis of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Cask of Amontillado*: Applying Roland Barthes' Five Narrative Codes

Maheen Mahar¹, Arisha Shaikh²

¹BS Student, Department of English Language and Literature, The Shaikh Ayaz University, Shikarpur, Pakistan,
Email: maheenmahar5@gmail.com

²BS Student, Department of English Language and Literature, The Shaikh Ayaz University, Shikarpur, Pakistan,
Email: arishashaikh270@gmail.com

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Corresponding Author:

Arisha Shaikh

Email:

arishashaikh270@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This study examines Edgar Allan Poe's *The Cask of Amontillado* through the lens of Roland Barthes' Five Narrative Codes to demonstrate how the story constructs suspense, shapes reader expectations, and produces multiple layers of meaning. While Poe's tale has been extensively studied from psychological, Gothic, and symbolic perspectives, comparatively little attention has been given to its narrative organization using Barthes' structuralist framework. Adopting a qualitative textual analysis, the study applies Barthes' hermeneutic, proairetic, semic, symbolic, and cultural codes to investigate the mechanisms through which the narrative generates mystery, foreshadows revenge, and engages readers in the interpretive process. The analysis reveals that the hermeneutic code sustains suspense through delayed disclosure, whereas the proairetic code advances the plot via a sequence of carefully orchestrated actions leading to Fortunato's entombment. The semantic code enriches the text through recurring motifs of wine, carnival, darkness, and catacombs, while the symbolic code highlights the binary oppositions of life and death, sanity and madness, power and vulnerability, and appearance and reality. The cultural code reinforces the narrative by drawing upon historical, social, and literary conventions associated with revenge, aristocratic honor, carnival traditions, and Gothic architecture. Together, these codes demonstrate that the story's enduring impact lies not only in its shocking conclusion but also in its intricate narrative design, which actively invites readers to construct meaning through textual clues and cultural knowledge. The study contributes to Barthesian narratology by illustrating the applicability of the Five Narrative Codes to Gothic fiction and offers a comprehensive structural interpretation of one of Poe's most celebrated short stories. It further highlights the value of structuralist narrative analysis as an effective approach for examining reader engagement, textual ambiguity, and meaning-making in literary studies.

Introduction

Fictions are not just delivered; they are constructed. The way a writer provides, conceals, or prolongs information changes how readers comprehend the story. Authors have been sharing stories from very beginning. These stories upgrade over time over the centuries. Stories develop into different forms like poetry, novels and more. This paper focuses to study the short story *The cask of Amontillado* first published in 1846 by Edgar Allan Poe. It is one of the most prominent short story about revenge, conveyed by a narrator the reader cannot fully rely on.

In the story, Montresor, the narrator, lures his friend into his family's subterranean catacombs, saying he wants Fortunato's judgment on a rare wine called Amontillado. But this is a ploy. Montresor entombs Fortunato alive in the catacombs. Most research on this tale looks at Montresor's character, his motives for revenge, and whether the reader can trust him. Fewer scholarship looks at how Poe builds the narrative, piece by piece, to construct tension and apprehension. This paper centers on the structure of the story, not just its themes.

To examine the structure of this story, the paper uses Roland Barthes' five narrative codes from his book *S/Z* (1970).). These five codes are: the hermeneutic code (how questions and puzzles are created and answered), the proairetic code (how deeds and events are placed in order), the semic code (how fine details build a character), the symbolic code (how antithetical ideas and symbols are used), and the cultural code (how the story uses shared knowledge and social ideas). This framework fits *The Cask of Amontillado* well because the story is built around one implicit question (why is Montresor punishing Fortunato, and how), one long, extended action (the walk into the catacombs), and a narrator whose personality is depicted mainly through small, ironic elements rather than explicit description.

This examination has two main objectives: first, to show how each of Barthes' five codes operates inside *The Cask of Amontillado*; and second, to show how these codes interact to create suspense, irony, and significance. Based on these aims, the study asks two research questions. RQ1: How does each of Barthes' five codes shape interpretation in the story "The Cask of Amontillado"? RQ2: How do these five codes work together in the story to create the story's overall atmosphere of suspense and irony?

The rest of the paper is structured as outlined below. Section 2 surveys past research on Poe, narratology, and Barthes' codes, and clarifies the research gap. Section 3 explains the approach used in this study. Section 4 explains the theory underlying the five codes. Section 5 gives a close plus detailed analysis of the story using the five codes. Section 6 ends with the main findings, their meaning, the boundaries of the study, and ideas for future research.

Literature Review

Studies on Edgar Allan Poe

Research on Poe's short fiction frequently centers on the psyches of his narrators, particularly the fusion of calm thinking and psychological obsession evident in stories like "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843) and "The Black Cat" (1843). likewise, this story "The Cask of Amontillado" is generally analyzed via the ideas of retribution, remorse, and the unreliable narrative voice. Literary critics commonly raise the question whether Montresor feels guilty when he narrates the story fifty

years later, or whether he still feels gratified with what he did. Newer studies also connect the story to ideas of class standing and personal dignity, As Montresor's revenge is closely linked to safeguarding his family's image.

Narratology and Structuralism

Narratology developed out of structuralism, a perspective that studies the hidden structure and arrangement inside stories, instead of only looking at what happens in the story. Structuralist theorists argue that stories and fiction can be broken down into smaller parts which are patterns, event, and codes that repeat in many different texts and works. Meaning, from this perspective, comes from how these small details work together, not simply from what the author meant to say. This idea is the base for code-based analysis, including the technique employed in this paper.

Roland Barthes' Five Codes

Roland Barthes' book *S/Z* (1970) is the primary work behind code-based story analysis. In this book, Barthes proposes that a text or literary composition can be segmented into minor reading components called *lexias*. Each *lexia* can then be connected to one or more of the five codes: the hermeneutic code (questions and mysteries), the proairetic code (actions and their order), the semic code (character traits shown through small details), the symbolic code (opposite ideas and symbols), and the cultural code (shared knowledge and social ideas). Many researchers have used this model on their short stories, especially stories that rely on suspense, because the hermeneutic and proairetic codes explicitly explain how suspense is built. The framework continues to be applied productively to short fiction: Jamil, Mubashir, and Ahmad (2024) use it to understand Oscar Wilde's "The Doer of Good," arguing that the hermeneutic code can prevail even writerly texts, while a similar application to Melville's short fiction (Grigoryan, 2023) confirms the model's continued applicability to structuralist readings of the genre.

Previous Analyses of the Cask of Amontillado

Prior studies on this story have examined its irony, especially through Fortunato's clown-like attire and Montresor's family symbol, and at how the story is slowly sequenced toward the final episode. However, most of these studies discuss themes and do not use a full, structured approach. When Barthes' codes have been used on Poe's work before, the attention has usually been on his more famous or longer stories. "The Cask of Amontillado" has not received the same level of attention using this specific method.

Büyükkarcı (2021) provides the study most aligned with the present analysis, while reading "The Cask of Amontillado" through the interaction of narratology and arguing that the narrative's significance is created through an unfolding structure of signifiers that build an atmosphere of foreboding. This semiotic focus on structure, rather than the theme alone, reinforces the present study's decision to apply Barthes' five codes methodically rather than partially. Francisco (2021) treats the story mainly through the inner workings of its narrator, portraying Montresor's calm and controlled narration as a mask for a deeper and more "lamentable" psychological cover. Waters (2018) takes a notably distinct, culturally focused, positioning the story within nineteenth-century American entertainment practice and arguing that the story's visual language is molded in the part by the norms of blackface minstrelsy popular in Poe's time. More broadly, Torres-Toukoumidis, León-Alberca, and Henriquez-Mendoza (2024) explore how Poe's Gothic

inheritance, encompassing stories such as "The Cask of Amontillado," continues to be reworked across modern transmedia forms such as film and video games. Their study shows that the story's suspense-based model has an enduring flexibility rather than the printed medium, which indirectly reinforces the claim that the story's structural mechanisms, rather than its theme alone, are the cause of its continued cultural significance. Finally, McQuillan (2011) offers a wider overview of Barthes' intellectual undertaking, situating S/Z and the five narrative codes within Barthes' wider corpus and affirming that the code-based method used in this study represents a core and widely recognized strand of Barthes' theoretical input, rather than minor notion.

Collectively, these studies show that "The Cask of Amontillado" has been treated from sign-based, psychological, cultural, and adaptation-oriented perspectives, but not through a complete, code-by-code use of Barthes' framework of the kind conducted here.

Research Gap

On the whole, past research shows considerable engagement in the themes and psychology of "The Cask of Amontillado," and there is also an established tradition of using Barthes' five codes on short stories in general. What is missing is a full, careful study that applies Barthes' five codes directly to this story not just to point out where each code emerges, but to explain and examine how the five codes work together to create the story's suspense and irony. This paper aims to fill that gap.

Methodology

Research Design

This study uses a qualitative textual analysis structure. This kind of design is used when a study wants to understand how significance is constructed inside a text, rather than quantify textual characteristics with numbers. It enables the researcher to read closely and construe the language, structure, and writing methods used in the story. This is the most common technique used in studies that apply narrative codes like Barthes' framework.

Data Source

The main basis of data for this study is the text of Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Cask of Amontillado" (1846), which is now free to use as public domain literature. This story was chosen because it is short, has a sole clear plot, and is told by one narrator whose honesty is in question. These aspects make it a good, tractable text for studying how Barthes' five codes work and interact.

Analytical Framework

The analytical model used in this study is Roland Barthes' five narrative codes from S/Z (1970): the hermeneutic code, the proairetic code, the semic code, the symbolic code, and the cultural code. Each code provides a different way of looking at the story like mystery, action, character, symbol, and cultural sense and together they aid to explain how the story creates its overall impact.

Analytical Procedure

The analysis follows three steps. First, the story was segmented into small reading parts, called lexias, following Barthes' method. Second, each lexia was examined to see which of the five codes it mainly connects to, and particular attention was given to parts where more than one code emerges at the same time. Third, the lexias were organized thematically so that each code could be addressed clearly throughout the whole story, and so that the connections between codes for example, how the hermeneutic and proairetic codes work together to build suspense, could be explained.

Theoretical Framework

Structuralism

Structuralism looks at literature as a mechanism with its inherent rules and arrangements, rather than as a basic, direct statement from the author. When applied to stories, structuralism tries to find the reiterated parts like actions, codes, patterns that create meaning. It regards each individual story as one case of a bigger, collective system of storytelling.

Roland Barthes' S/Z

In *S/Z*, Barthes shifts past prior theories that tried to find one single set of conventions for all stories. Alternatively, he asserts that a text is made from multiple codes working together at the same time. In his study of a story called *Sarrasine*, Barthes demonstrated that meaning does not simply reside within the text; it is created as the reader moves through these different codes while reading.

Lexias

A lexia is a piece of text it can be as short as one word or as long as a few sentences. It is chosen because it is the exact place where one or more of the narrative codes becomes active. Dividing a story into lexias lets the researcher point to the exact point where each code is working, instead of just talking about the codes in a general way.

Readerly vs. Writerly Texts

Barthes divides texts into two types: “readerly” work, where the reader mostly gains a stable, ready-made meaning, and “writerly” texts, where the reader must purposefully help produce the meaning. “*The Cask of Amontillado*” sits between these two types. Its storyline ends in a clear, readerly way the reader comes to understand exactly what happened. But Montresor's untrustworthy recounting, and the fact that his final words to Fortunato are never fully explained, force the reader to actively judge Montresor's motives and ethics, which is a more writerly kind of reading.

Functions of the Five Codes

The hermeneutic code (HER) creates, and ultimately answers the questions or mysteries in a story. The proairetic code (ACT) arranges actions and behaviors into a clear, logical order that readers identify as part of a familiar structure. The semic code (SEM) collects small cues and elements that slowly build a character or a tone. The symbolic code (SYM) organizes the story

around contrasting concepts and symbols. The cultural code (REF) connects the story to shared knowledge and information about historical, social, or general idea that readers are expected to already know. Together, these five codes form what Barthes calls the “braid” of a text the woven-together strands that give a story its full, multilayered significance.

Analysis and Discussion

The Hermeneutic Code: Building and Delaying the Mystery

The hermeneutic code commences in the very first sentence, when Montresor says he has resolved to seek vengeance for specific “injuries” and a final “offense” from Fortunato. Poe never clarifies what these injuries or this insult actually were. This is not a small gap; it is effective device. Because the motive is hidden, the reader is compelled to direct close concentration to everything Montresor’s words and actions reveal, searching for evidence about his true intentions. This enigma is not solved in the midpoint of the narrative. Instead, it deepens as Montresor feigns apprehension about Fortunato’s health, telling him to turn back because the catacombs are humid. As the reader already knows from the opening line that Montresor is plotting revenge, these sympathetic remarks are read as fake and manipulative. The mystery is only partly closed at the final moment, when Montresor says that fifty years have passed and no one has ever found Fortunato’s remains. This answers the query of what took place, but it still does not explain why the initial offense was so severe, or whether Montresor feels any remorse. This unresolved part of the mystery is a key impact of the story, not a weakness.

The Proairetic Code: Ordering the Walk into the Catacombs

The proairetic code orders the story’s central actions the walk into the catacombs into clear steps: the summons, the descent, the entrapment of Fortunato, and Montresor’s exit. Every phase is made up of smaller, well-known actions that readers recognize as typical components of courtesy and betrayal, such as the presenting of the wine, showing apprehension, and continuing forward even after an alert. The way Poe controls the tempo of this sequence is what creates progression. The walk down is stretched across several named parts of the catacombs, and it is often halted by dialogue that risks stopping the actions like Fortunato’s coughing, or Montresor’s insincere suggestions to turn back before the walk continues again. This continuous stopping and starting is what builds tension. The proairetic code does not just tell us what happens; it governs how slowly or quickly the reader is allowed to reach the final, grim act, which is deferred until the very end of the story.

The Semic Code: Building Montresor’s Hidden, False Character

The semic code builds persona through small, recurring cues rather than direct portrayal. Montresor’s character is built this way: through his calm and composed way of narrative style, through his family motto, “Nemo me impune lacessit” (meaning “no one attacks me without punishment”), and through his repeated, disingenuous expressions to Fortunato, which the reader understands are inauthentic. Each of these small details adds one more fragment of the image of Montresor as a duplicitous, two-faced character, until this becomes the main perception the reader has of him, even though the story never outright says “Montresor is deceptive.” Fortunato, on the other hand, is built through hints of pride and carelessness: his self-regard for his expertise

about wine, and also his choice to keep walking into the catacombs even while coughing badly. These small details make Fortunato's demise feel, within the story, like a natural result of his own character, and not only the result of Montresor's scheme.

The Symbolic Code: Costumes, Wine, and Opposite Ideas

The symbolic code organizes the story around dualities of opposite ideas. Fortunato's carnival attire a jester's vibrant outfit with bells represents the opposite of Montresor's plain black robe and mask. This creates a visual antithesis between the fooled and the fooler, foolishness and careful planning, and this contrast carries on throughout the walk into the catacombs. The Amontillado wine itself works as a symbol of a false pledge: something which is usually connected to delight and fellowship instead used as the ploy that results in Fortunato's death, so that courtesy and murder are joined together as one deed. The catacombs, lined with the bones of Montresor's family, are also symbolic as they show the considerable burden of ancestral honor pressing down on Montresor's present actions, connecting his individual vengeance to his family's long legacy and reputation.

The Cultural Code: Honor, Social Class, and Freemasonry

The cultural code uses collective awareness that this story assumes its readers to already grasp. The mention of the Montresor family's symbol and maxim that connects to old ideas of elite family honor, where even a small insult could be seen as a good enough grounds for serious revenge. There is also a moment when Fortunato asks Montresor to prove that he is an affiliate of the Freemasons, a well-known association at the time, and Montresor answers it by displaying a trowel, a tool for laying bricks, instead of a real Masonic gesture. This moment uses the reader's knowledge of Freemasonry, and it is also deeply ironic, since the trowel actually signals Montresor's true plot to snare Fortunato behind a brick wall. This use of mutual cultural knowledge connects Montresor's private act of revenge to larger social framework of class, brotherhood, and honor that readers of Poe's time would have readily grasped.

How the Five Codes Work Together

Individually, each code explains one aspect of the story. Together, these codes, explain how the story builds its full outcome of suspense and irony. The latent mystery from the hermeneutic code gives genuine tension to the step-by-step actions of the proairetic code, since every step of the walk feels like it is advancing toward an unknown, anticipated conclusion. The semic code shows Montresor as deceptive, and Fortunato as vain and reckless, which makes the story's acts seem plausible. The symbolic code's contrasting pairs costume versus cloak, wine versus revenge, hospitality versus murder lend the story's strong sense of irony, letting readers notice the difference between what is said and what is really implied there is almost every time when the characters speak. Finally, the cultural code gives the social logic honor, class, brotherhood that makes Montresor's act feel, within the world of the story, like warranted revenge rather than a random malice. It is this collaboration between all these five codes, not any one code alone, that explains why this story continues to sustain the audience's lasting fascination.

Conclusion

This analysis used Roland Barthes' five narrative codes to study Edgar Allan Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado," in order to understand how the story's suspense, irony, and deeper meaning and understanding are developed through its framework. The study revealed that the hermeneutic code keeps readers invested through a mystery that is never completely resolved; the proairetic code governs the tempo of the walk into the catacombs through a pattern of halting and continuing; the semic code slowly builds Montresor's misleading character and Fortunato's proud, careless character; the symbolic code arranges this story through contrasting images like costume, wine, and space; and the cultural code connects the story's private retribution to shared concepts of honor, class, and brotherhood. Most importantly, the study found that these five codes do not work independently; they work jointly, with the hermeneutic and proairetic codes generating suspense, and the semic, symbolic, and cultural codes creating the story's pronounced sense of irony.

Theoretically speaking, this study shows that Barthes' code-based framework works well for short, closely written stories, especially stories built around a core mystery. Practically speaking, this analysis can help teachers show students that tension and irony are not unclear; they come from specific, recognizable techniques in how a story is built.

This study is constrained because it looks at only one story, so its results may not fully apply to Poe's other work or to Gothic short stories in general. Also, splitting the text into lexias and matching them to codes requires some subjective judgment by the researcher, even when done carefully and methodically. Forthcoming research could apply Barthes' five codes to more of Poe's stories to see whether the recurring pattern found here, especially the combination of the hermeneutic and proairetic codes to build suspense surfaces again as a common feature of Poe's authorial style

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