Edgar Allan Poe was no stranger to the financial hardships that plagued most of America during the Nineteenth Century. Poe consistently found himself struggling to pay his own bills and at some points was forced to beg for handouts in order to keep himself alive. Poe was also at the crossroad of a growing literary industry that sought to cater to the needs of the masses rather than put out substantial and thought provoking pieces of writing. This critical time period is what leads Poe to write his famous short story, “The Cask of Amontillado”. Some may believe that this is a story of revenge and anger, which is directed toward fellow writer Thomas Dunn English during their literary battles. After further studying Poe, however, it appears that his true intention for the short story runs much deeper. “The Cask of Amontillado” reveals the insecurities, frustrations, and paranoia of a man trapped in a world of economic instability and an oppressive class structure. This story conveys these points in a unique and abstract way of thinking, which is what makes this text significant to Poe as an author.

To understand Poe’s stance in his time period, the political and economical scene must be taken into account. In the past, writers were able to keep themselves distanced from the industrious side of literature by providing work as merely a side project and kept their financial burdens out of their writing. An example of this would be the publications of Lucian Minor, who “…like many intellectuals in antebellum America, he distinguished between his salaried work (commonwealth attorney) and his literary donations to the public good” (Whalen 5). Most
writers could no longer afford this luxury. Writers were forced to become apart of the publishing industry and almost forsake their views and style in order to simply make a living: “...all of which tended to undermine traditional standards of literary value by stressing the growing complicity between capitalism and signification” (Whalen 7). Writers began to write for their audience rather than for themselves. They wrote in order to generate sales rather to generate conversation or debate on morality or other pertinent topics.

Poe and his fellow writers fell victim to their employers, their jobs, and to their social class. The literary business operated with one goal in mind: to earn a profit. Poe was put under pressure from his employers to turn out work quickly that would sell: “In a literary workshop overseen by a profit-driven publisher, [Poe] produced texts for a mass of anonymous readers who were distinguished primarily by an act of purchase” (Whalen 6). Poe left behind his beliefs and unique style in order to turn in stories that will give him the ability to make ends meet. Writing for a magazine was just another job in Nineteenth Century America. Poe was frustrated that he did not receive the recognition and attention he thought he deserved. Poe believed the work he was doing was far superior to the work of the average mill worker or farmer: “He always thought of himself as something of an aristocrat—a disinherited one, to be sure—but noble nonetheless” (Hutchisson 60). Poe’s nobility existed, however, only in his own mind. He was seen as just another employee, which meant he was easily replaceable. Poe’s services were consistently taken advantage of by his employers and Poe could do nothing about it: “Each stint would be short-lived—no more than two years or so— but Poe would leave each magazine, and each of its owners, richer than before he came. Poe, for his part, would remain poor” (Hutchisson 46). Poe’s inability to earn money kept him trapped in the lower middle class, slaving away to put money in another man’s pocket. The economy of Poe’s time had failed to produce the
opportunities in order for him to achieve the level of meaning and greatness he desperately sought after: “…Poe felt that he would never properly fulfill any significant artistic ambitions until he had a magazine of his own, a dream project that he would soon undertake but never make a reality” (Hutchisson 82). The lack of funding from private investors and rich business owners kept Poe trapped in the same social class for life.

This perversion of literature by economics and social class is what caused Poe to write his tale, “The Cask of Amontillado” and what makes this particular text so significant as well. Through the use of abstract ideas and symbolism Poe reveals his frustration with the Nineteenth Century American Economy. The setting of Carnival is significant in “The Cask of Amontillado” since it is representative of the control of the upper class. Carnival, which is famous for excessive drinking and parties, is used as an escape from every day life. People who participate in Carnival dress up in extravagant costumes in order to become someone else. It is considered a time where peasants and middle class workers can become something that is normally unreachable in their current status. Noblemen, such as Fortunato, dress as clowns, which is lesser than their status: “The man wore a motely. He had on tight-fitting parti-stripped dress, and his head was surmounted by the conical cap and bells” (Poe 108). This is significant because Carnival is a time where the upper class allows the lower classes to vent their frustration with the way society is operating. They are given a forum to express their displeasure of their lives and then participate in celebrations of excess in order to forget their grief. Carnival is a strategic event used by the upper class in order to control the masses from overthrowing the aristocracy: “Carnival, therefore, might best be viewed as a complex site of contestation and manipulation, transgression and control, in which the terms of negotiation hinge on the specificities of distinct historical circumstances” (Reily and De Ulhôa). The upper class pulls the wool over the eyes of
the less fortunate so that they can keep their high rank in society as well as continue to take advantage of their blindness. The lower class is given a set time period to feel rich and important, before returning to their lowly status without a fight.

With a high social status come privileges, respect, and power. There are multiple times where Poe hints at the correlation between class structure and the reason Montressor had for the premeditated murder of Fortunato. There is discrepancy between Fortunato and Montressor of who is actually of higher standing in the present time the story is taking place. From Montressors opening monologue, it can be seen that Fortunato currently has financial prowess in society. It can also be assumed that Montressor comes from a power family that has lost significance over the generation: “The catacombs of the Montressors are extensive and their vastness genuinely impresses Fortunato” (Baraban 51). Fortunato has recently acquired his fortune, which makes him unaware of the social customs that come with being in the upper class. Those born into money would know the other powerful families, as well as their shields and mottos, where someone who comes from new money would never have learned. Montressor takes this as an insult, since Fortunato doesn’t only replace his presence in society, but he also disrespects his family by failing to pay respects.

Adding to the prevalence of class structure in the “Class of Amontillado” is the mentioning of the character Luchresi. Luchresi is assumed to be another nobleman brought up to entice Fortunato to go into the catacombs when Montressor says: “And yet some fools will have it that his taste is a match for your own” (Poe 109). Montressor knows that Fortunato would refuse to let a man of lesser status supersede him in anything, especially in judging expensive hobbies such as wine tasting. This suggests that the upper class believes that only men of nobility
are the ones who can judge what is genuine and what is false. They believe they are the authority on all subjects and their word and opinion holds more weight than anyone else.

Poe uses these abstract thoughts and comparisons when writing “The Cask of Amontillado” in order to prevent a blatant one to one comparison with a present day topic. The text was written to provoke thought and debate and not to simply entertain and almost spell out Poe’s views in an elementary way. The reasoning behind this delivery and use of symbols can be traced back to Poe’s essay, “The Philosophy of Composition”, where Poe explains how to create a significant piece of literature. According to Poe, the most important part of a story is the way the author conveys it, and whether or not the author is unique with his or her delivery: “Keeping originality always in view — for he is false to himself who ventures to dispense with so obvious and so easily attainable a source of interest” (Poe 163). By writing in this way, Poe leaves his stories open to different interpretation. The use of symbolism in Poe’s writing also allows him to give his stories deeper meaning without them being limited to the thoughts and ideas of the day: “To the symbolist, symbols are multivalent, allowing broad interpretive possibilities” (Symbolism). Poe’s use of philosophical symbols his story to break free from confinement and allows it to become prevalent in society for generations to come.
Works Cited

Baraban, Elena V. "The Motive for Murder in ‘The Cask of Amontillado’ by Edgar Allan Poe."


