

# Overlapping Spaces: Illusion or Reality——Analysis of Spatial Metaphor in The Cask of Amontillado

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**Abstract:** Edgar Allan Poe's *The Cask of Amontillado* breaks the traditional narrative structure of time and space and has a unique spatial construction. This article is from a perspective of spatial metaphor, finding that: Poe creates a spatial metaphor composed of three dimensions: physical, psychological, and social. Within the continuously overlapping spaces, he gradually reveals the relationship states between humans and nature, humans and society, and humans and themselves. This not only deepens the complexity of the story plot but also prompts readers to contemplate the desires deep within the human psyche through the use of language.

**Keywords:** The Cask of Amontillado; Allan Poe; Spatial Metaphor

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## Introduction

Narrative work is inevitably a combination of time and space, and takes place within a certain time and space. Any narrative phenomenon that transcends time or space is impossible (Liu Xiaoling, 2006), *The Cask of Amontillado* employs spatial metaphors not only in the alteration of physical settings but also in the abundance of spatial metaphors. As the reading progresses, particularly when the phrase *a half of a century* is introduced, the readers quickly epiphany that the preceding narrative is not solely the subjective perspective of the deranged Montresor but also the spatial recollection of Montresor fifty years later. The narrative of recollection further enhances the unreliability of the previous narrative, prompting the question: Is the constructed space in question real or illusory? In my view, the story's spatial construction is a joint creation of the subconscious of the author, Edgar Allan Poe, and the protagonist Montresor's mental world, exhibiting strong metaphorical qualities with three overlapping layers of space: the physical space composed of catacombs, the mental space dominated by the consciousness of Montresor, and the social space reflected in the subconscious of Edgar Allan Poe.

## 1. Physical space metaphor

The spatial metaphors in the fiction are primarily evident in the physical space metaphor constituted by the catacombs. It is possible that there was indeed a murder fifty years ago, and thus the entire narrative is a product of Montresor's recollection based on this real murder incident, forming the first layer of space. Architects and artists often regard landscapes, including residential buildings, as symbols of personal and national identity, believing that the spatial artistic form of architecture aligns perfectly with the language design and narrative form of the novel, embodying the author's creative style and cultural ideas (Fu Shuqin & Yuan Xuesheng, 2014).

The catacombs, as the main physical space, are endowed with rich connotations, symbolizing not only Montresor's character but also hinting at Fortunato's fate. Firstly, the catacombs are an underground tomb, dark, damp, and sinister, mirroring Montresor's twisted psyche filled with hatred and anger, and his revenge plan takes place in the catacombs. The darkness and gloom of the catacombs correspond to the darkness and distortion deep within Montresor. Secondly, the catacombs foreshadow Fortunato's fate. Fortunato, being a wine merchant, has a great pursuit and passion for Amontillado wine. Montresor lures Fortunato into the catacombs, telling him that there is a cask of Amontillado there, an irresistible temptation for Fortunato. However, once Fortunato enters the catacombs, his fate is sealed. The narrow, cold, and enclosed catacombs represent fear and death. Fortunato is trapped in the tomb and unable to escape. The physical space constituted by the catacombs not only helps readers enter Montresor's mad and chaotic inner world but also aids in understanding the development of the story.

## 2. Mental space metaphor

The spatial metaphors in the novel also manifest in the metaphor of the character's mental space. Lefebvre (1991) suggests that psychological space is the space of human thought, an "encrypted reality" that can be deciphered through literature, texts, discourse, and language, as well as a space of utopian thought and pure imagination for artists and poets. Poe is seen more as a scientist than an artist, reducing his own self as a scientist would reduce a salt in a crucible. It is an almost chemical analysis of the soul and consciousness (Lawrence, 2014:66).

Edgar Allan Poe's focus in this work is on using language to depict characters' thoughts and consciousness, and the subsequent impact of these thoughts and consciousness on their recollection of the story, showcases the repressed instincts of aggression and desire for revenge within the individual's unconscious mind, as well as the relentless struggle between the identity representing instinct and desire, and the superego representing moral conscience (Lu Quanzhi, 2019). For instance, the line *The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could, but when he ventured upon insult I vowed revenge* provides a glimpse into Montresor's psyche. He exaggerates the injuries inflicted by Fortunato in his own mind, placing himself in the position of a victim and justifying his subsequent act of revenge, thus revealing his cunning nature. During the implementation of the murder, Montresor once again alters his tone, abandoning the exaggerated and affected manner: *Once more let me implore you to return. No? Then I must positively leave you.* This simple self-questioning and self-answering effectively convey the character's sarcasm and murderous intent at that moment. A character with such a crazy, fragmented, and dark psyche also exhibits a strong personal style in the construction of his mental space.

In the catacombs, phrases such as *long walls of piled skeletons, a range of low arches, walls lined with human remains*, and Fortunato's *loud and shrill screams* create an atmosphere of gloom and horror, which I believe stems from Montresor's mental space. This layer of sinister and terrifying ambience overlays the first layer of physical space, and the journey through the cellar can be seen as a descent into the depths of the human soul, where desires and darker impulses lie hidden. Even during their encounter in the carnival season, in a relatively lively setting like *a man wear motley. He had on a tight-fitting parti-striped dress, and his head was surmounted by the conical cap and bells*, there is a bittersweet feeling reminiscent of a clown. In Montresor's recollection, he leads the readers to step by step into the profound spiritual realm and inner depths of the human psyche, exposing the most primal instincts, needs, and fears. Therefore, Montresor's mental space and the narrative space of the novel form a mutually causal relationship. It is in this sense that the narrative meaning of the text cannot be separated from space; space constantly transcends meaning, generates meaning, and meaning also constantly transcends space, overflowing from it (Zhang Deming, 2012).

## 3. Social space metaphor

The metaphor of spatial representation in the novel is also reflected in the representation of social space. The author, Edgar Allan Poe, had a tumultuous life, marked by poverty and destitution. His father left home when he was one year old, and his mother passed away when he was two due to illness. His works, personality, and private life were subjected to public ridicule and severe criticism, labeling him as mad, alcoholic, and deranged. By the time he wrote this article in 1846, he had discovered that his wife had contracted tuberculosis. Perhaps it can be argued that a nearly twisted heart sought to vent its grievances through his creations, depicting the ugliest, secretive, and cruel aspects of human nature in order to find solace.

In *The Cask of Amontillado*, one can almost see the reflection of human society in Montresor and Fortunato at every turn. Fortunato represents those in society who appear to be prosperous, having achieved some success but being arrogant and conceited. From Montresor's own account, *In this respect, I did not differ from him materially; I was skillful in the Italian vintages myself, and bought largely whenever I could*, it can be inferred that Montresor's wine-tasting abilities are not necessarily inferior to Fortunato's, yet he is subjected to countless insults from Fortunato. The flaws in both characters' human nature further contribute to the ethical complexity and multifaceted nature of this story. Perhaps Poe intended to vent his dissatisfaction with his own fate and society by portraying Montresor's successful murder of Fortunato, and this intense emotion serves as the true expression of Poe's subconscious (Guo Lei, 2000).

In this story, Montresor leads Fortunato into the catacombs and executes a brutal murder. This act goes beyond the individual's moral boundaries, revealing the darkest and cruelest aspects of human nature. Poe's exploration of moral values and ethical complexity

begins with the character of Montresor. As the protagonist and narrator, Montresor displays a distorted moral compass. He harbours deep-seated resentment towards Fortunato, which drives him to seek revenge through murder. By plotting and executing this heinous act, Montresor violates societal norms and ethical principles. The deliberate and premeditated nature of his crime highlights the depths to which human beings can sink when driven by personal vendettas and unchecked desires. The moral ambiguity in the story is further exemplified by Fortunato's character. Although he is depicted as a respected and successful figure in society, Fortunato's arrogance and hubris contribute to his downfall. His sense of entitlement blinds him to the danger lurking beneath Montresor's facade of friendship, leading him unwittingly into his own demise. This portrayal suggests that social status and accomplishments do not necessarily align with moral integrity or ethical conduct. Poe suggests that moral values can be subjective, varying from person to person, and influenced by individual experiences, perceptions, and motivations.

#### 4. Discussion

*The Cask of Amontillado* gradually reveals the relationship states between individuals and nature, individuals and society, and individuals and themselves through the rich displacement of space and the overlapping metaphors of natural space, mental space, and social space. It achieves the spatial construction of the novel, leaving readers with a feeling of having gone through a "nightmare". In terms of spatial displacement, on the one hand, narrative development is driven by the transformation of space, and on the other hand, narrative time is manipulated through changes in space. In terms of spatial metaphors, Edgar Allan Poe constructs a spatial metaphor consisting of three dimensions: physical, psychological, and social, through the construction of scenes, exploration of the depths of the mind, and reflection of social life. The overlapping dimensions of reality and illusion created by *The Cask of Amontillado* not only deepen the complexity of the story's plot but also allow readers to contemplate the desires deep within the human psyche through written words.

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