

**Waukesha Reads – The Big Read
Flash Fiction Contest
Adult Division Winner
George Hillier**

EDGAR ALLAN POE REVISITED

Were it not for his stay at Fort Independence on Castle Island in Boston Harbor, Edgar Allan Poe might never have gotten to write "The Cask of Amontillado," the short story of a man who was walled up alive in a dungeon.

This tale has been universally acclaimed in the literary world as one of the most perfect short stories ever written. Actually, Poe felt that a short story should be only long enough, at least, to be read at one sitting.

Poe cleverly constructed every word and every sentence in order to achieve the singular effect of horror. After all, his purpose was to keep the readers on their toes or on the grim edges of their chairs. Poe, the man with the jet-black hair and forget-me-not eyes, stirred the imaginations and emotions of his readers by building shadows till everything terminated in a merciless, unforgettable focus. Who can forget the inexpressible aura of mystery and horror of Poe's prose? After reading some of his thrillers, you often become too powerless to speak or too transfixed by fear, that is, once you have been hypnotized by his indelible passions.

This poet enlisted in the United States Army on May 26, 1827, under the pseudonym of Edgar A. Perry. When he registered, he provided these statistics: 22 years of age (he was 18 at the time), Bostonian, 5 feet, 8 inches in height, gray eyes, brown hair, and a fair complexion.

While stationed at Fort Independence for training, Poe was assigned to special duties at

the quartermaster's office. During the summer he had his first book published in Boston. It was "Tamarlane and Other Poems." For some reason or other his name did not appear in the book. Instead it was authorized: "By A Bostonian."

One day when he was casually walking outside the walls of the fort, he saw a small monument that intrigued him. He scrutinized the inscriptions on the gravestone itself. Knowing Poe, his curiosity had to be satisfied.

Kneeling beside a windswept hillside, he scanned the cool Atlantic Ocean, and again stared intently at the words from the west side of the monument. He copied them down in his little black notebook:

'The officers at the U.S. Regiment of Light Artillery erected this monument as a testimony of their respect and friendship for an amiable man and gallant officer.'

On the east panel he recorded the sentimental lines from an old ode:

"Here honor comes, a pilgrim
gray, to deck the turf that wraps
his clay."

Poe's poetic mind was crystallized for a moment. Such words were the phenomena he was privileged to witness. Now Poe was getting caught up in the interlude; his interest was being challenged by the mystery of the man.

He moved toward the north side of the monument and recorded the message on the panel facing South Boston:

"Beneath this stone are deposited the remains of Lieut. Robert F. Massie of the U.S.

Regiment of Light Artillery. Near this spot on the 25th, December, 1817, fell Lieut. Robert F. Massie, aged 21 years."

Poe tasted the sea salt on his lips. He heard the gray seagulls screaming and watched them wheeling away to where the fishermen gathered in Massachusetts Bay. It was summer, but it was Boston, chilly with its winter wind. The poet's eyes had pierced some element in a plot that no eyes had ever touched before. Again and again, he leaned forward to explore more and more till no more convincing was necessary.

Poe's question was: "What happened here? I am stunned as though I should perhaps forget what is being resurrected in my mind." He even inched forward on his knees so he could not be deceived by what he saw. Poe's mind worked overtime. Suddenly his thoughts were filled with regret "So young a man. I must challenge the ethics of it all."

While studying every piece of evidence thoroughly, he learned that in the summer of 1817, Robert F. Massie, a 20-year old from Virginia, was assigned as a new officer to Fort Independence. This young man was known for his friendly and cooperative manner with everyone he met

Poe found out that an officer, a Captain Green, however, detested Massie, perhaps because he was jealous of this new officer. Green was generally known as a bully of the fort.

He was feared by most of his regiment since he was an expert swordsman and was always prepared to display his skills to any soldier who dared to challenge him.

According to Poe's notes, on a certain Christmas Eve night, the soldiers were enjoying their Christmas festivities inside the barracks. Outside the fort the night resounded with

its chorus of cathedral bells. The officers were playing cards to entertain themselves.

It was just before midnight when Capt. Green rose up quickly from his chair, leaned over the table, and slapped Lieut. Massie in the face. He said: "Massie you're nothing but a cheat! And I demand settling a score with you." Massie stared at Green in sudden astonishment: "I'm not a cheat! I don't even know what you are trying to do to me."

Nevertheless, Massie accepted the bully's challenge. Swords were designated as the instruments for a duel to be fought at dawn the next day. Ironically, it seemed so bizarre to have a duel on a day when the world was celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ

The Virginian returned to his barracks and was faced with the sordid facts about his living or dying. Nothing was worse than the long breathless moments of waiting to determine his destiny. He must, though, defend his honor since honor is the inseparable quality of a soldier's spirit.

Capt. Green was left to himself and made his own plans to fight Massie, his nemesis. Before dawn on Christmas Day, Green and Massie, along with their seconds, left the fort for Dearborn Bastion. The air vibrated with the rash of brazen sounds. Though Massie made courageous efforts to ward off Green's advances and thrusts, he was no match for Green.

Green snapped and snarled while Massie inflicted a wound to Green's left shoulder. Green was bleeding, yet it was mostly a superficial wound. Green missed several thrusts. One moment came when Green caught Massie off-guard and ran his sword through the right side of Massie's rib cage. Massie was in a state of shock from his bleeding wound. His skin started to turn corpse-like while his glazed eyes shone through half-closed eyelids, and his efforts to breathe were painful. Massie couldn't clear his

throat to speak. Instead, in a whisper, he managed to say: "O Lord, forgive me!" He never recovered from his wound and died at 3:27 in the afternoon.

Lieut. Massie's friends were jarred by his sudden death. Now they had plans to avenge their friend's murder. On a dark moonless night, Massie's friends were determined to justify an eye for an eye. The officers came together socially in a room where they talked and drank wine. They stood around and made sure that Green had drunk more wine than they drank themselves. Massie's avengers remained cool so they wouldn't lose sight of their mission.

Once Green started to experience a sense of fatigue from the wine, the officers carried him down to one of the ancient dungeons in the fort. By this time Green was far too intoxicated to realize what was happening to him. They shackled his arms and legs to the granite floor of the dungeon.

They were scrupulous in following their details for they never wanted to see Green alive again. Finally, they used bricks and mortar and sealed him up inside the dungeon. As soon as Green recovered from his drunkenness, a deep nausea weakened him. He was now alone in the dark catacombs.

His mind was numbed and he shouted out for mercy: "Please! Please! For God's sake, let me out of here!" His screams reverberated and were returned to him to no avail. All of his pleas were mere echoes and this horrid man at last had tasted some of his own medicine. Green must have died a horrible death several days later.

The environs at the fort buzzed with the latest report of Poe's findings. His diligence paid off since the mystery with its circumstances became clear to him. Word finally got to the

commanding officer of the fort that Poe had learned everything about the fate of both Massie and Green.

The commander was visibly upset about Poe and what he had learned about the goings-on: "I understand you know about the duel between Lieut. Massie and Capt. Green and the consequences of such matters."

"Yes, sir!" replied Poe resolutely.

There was some hint of menace in the commander's tone: "We respect the privacy of this fort. I must warn you that what you know about these incidents, you must keep to yourself. I realize this has come to be a celebrated case. Nevertheless, I want confidentiality here! Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes sir! You make everything clear, and I will accede to your wishes."

When Edgar Allan Poe found time, later in his literary life, he still wanted to relate this unbelievable tale. He did change the setting, the names of the characters involved, and went on to write "The Cask of Amontillado," a model for future tales of horror and revenge.