

# Writing a Critical Analysis of a Short Story

*Tutorial Services – Mission del Paso Campus*

To write an effective critical analysis, you must first be sure that you understand the question that has been posed, and all literary terms that you have been asked to address. Once you feel you understand the question, reread the piece of literature, making notes. Then look at the notes you've made, consider what connections you can make between observations, and reconsider the question. Try to formulate a rough thesis statement (your "claim"). Now try to select those pieces of evidence that you feel you can most convincingly use to support the claim you made. Next, try to formulate a good introduction, that

- **Names** the work discussed and the author.
- **Provides** a very brief plot summary.
- **Relates** some aspect of that plot to the topic you have chosen to address.
- **Provides** a thesis statement.
- **Indicates** the way you plan to develop your argument (support your claim).

Now proceed to introduce and discuss the evidence you mentioned in your introduction, in the order in which you mentioned it. Ensure that you deal with each kind of evidence in a paragraph of its own, and that you introduce the topic of each paragraph with a carefully-focused topic sentence. Also ensure that you end each paragraph with a concluding sentence that sums up the thrust of that paragraph's argument and possibly paves the way for the next piece of evidence to be discussed. (Alternatively, you can begin the next paragraph with a transitional phrase that links the new piece of evidence with the one you have just summarized.)

Finally, write a conclusion that restates your thesis (but using different words), incorporates a brief restatement of your key evidence, and provides a sense of closure. A good closing technique is to somehow link the claim you have made about this particular piece of literature with the author's general style or preoccupations, or to suggest some way in which the topic you have just discussed relates more generally to some aspect of human existence.

## Model Essay

In the story “The Cask of Amontillado,” by Edgar Allen Poe, a seemingly maddened narrator, Montresor, relates how he managed to wreak revenge on a friend, Fortunato, for some unexplained injustice. The reader learns the narrator lures Fortunato into the Montresor burial vaults and then seals him away to die there. This plot, though relatively straightforward, leads the reader into an experience of horror. And the story’s setting contributes greatly to this ever-increasing, atmosphere of horror, as Poe’s treatments of time and place cause the reader to anticipate, dread, and be absorbed in the unfolding action.

The setting in the “The Cask of Amontillado” induces an element of tension and foreboding to the story. Montresor informs the reader that when he first encounters Fortunato, with revenge on his mind, it is “about dusk, one evening during the supreme madness of the carnival season” (12). As the reader already knows, Montresor intends revenge against his friend, the very mention of “dusk” evokes that sense of darkness, and all that is fearful about the dark, may follow. The added suggestion that this is the season of “supreme madness” introduces an atmosphere of uncertainty and suspense: planted in the reader’s mind is the notion that all is not normal and right with the world. The sense of darkness recurs as Montresor proceeds to describe the indoor setting to which he leads his friend. In the vaults where he eventually entraps Fortunato, the hour is late and the light is “feeble” (15). Not surprisingly, Montresor mentions that it is “midnight” when he puts the finishing touches on the entombment of his prey (16). By setting the narrative at a time of day and of year when darkness and irrational behavior are reigning, Poe causes readers to suspect that something menacing is about to happen.

Just as the time in which “The Cask of Amontillado” is set infuses the story with an atmosphere of dread, so do the physical surroundings in which the bulk of the plot unfolds. Montresor’s “palazzo,” when he and Fortunato reach it, is empty of people and lit only dimly (13) – both things adding to the reader’s sense that all is not normal in this story and that something menacing is about to occur. This atmosphere of menace increases in intensity as Montresor describes his descent with Fortunato into the vaults. There they walk through underground chambers where the “buried...repose around” them, past “long walls of piled skeletons,” into the “innermost recesses of the catacombs” where “drops of moisture trickle among the bones” (14). These descriptions of physical setting turn the atmosphere of foreboding into one of true horror. A nighttime journey through the dark and damp passageways lined with skeletons is gruesome to contemplate. And this journey continues winding through environs increasingly horrific, until the character arrives at the crypt surrounded by “human remains” (15) where Montresor finally achieves his horrible goal – a goal which, though hideous, is no longer a surprise to the reader, who has been led by the story’s setting to expect this evil deed.