
“Two Tales of Retribution”

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The *Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture* (1992) defines the word *retribution* as follows: “deserved punishment”. Retribution is the theme that constitutes an inextricable bond between two short stories --*The Cask of Amontillado* and *Emma Zunz*-- written by two masters of this type of fiction: Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), and Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986). The aim of this analysis is to draw a parallel between both stories, focusing on the retribution theme as the centre of the comparison.

Not only did Poe and Borges live in different centuries and countries, but their lifestyles also differed remarkably. Nevertheless, they both thought of themselves as southerners; Poe because he was brought up and educated in Virginia, and Borges because of the attraction the southern outskirts of Buenos Aires held for him (Irwin, 1994). Each of them in his own fashion, they both shared a passion for the short story, which Poe referred to as *tale*, and the two of them excelled at poetry. Poe’s *The Raven* and *Annabel Lee*, as well as Borges’s *Poema conjetural* and *Poema de los dones*, to name just a few examples, immediately come to mind when we think of them as poets.

Neither of them was a novelist. Poe, together with other nineteenth-century writers such as Washington Irving, Guy de Maupassant and Nathaniel Hawthorne, laid the foundations of the type of fiction known as short story today. Current- García and Patrick (1974) point out that, in Poe’s view, the aim of the short story was to achieve a totality of effect. It should be read at one sitting, and the author should have a clear idea of its *dénouement* before he actually started writing it. Borges, who acknowledged Poe’s influence on his work, adhered to this theory of having the end of the short story in mind from the very beginning. Poe invented the detective story --the Dupin stories--, and Borges wrote some memorable detective stories himself (e.g. *La muerte y la brújula*, and *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*). He once declared that Poe considered himself a poet whom life had forced into writing short stories, but that it was mostly because of his short stories that he had become immortal: “Poe se creía poeta, sólo poeta, pero las circunstancias lo llevaron a escribir cuentos, y esos cuentos, a cuya escritura se resignó y que debió encarar como tareas ocasionales, son su inmortalidad” (Borges, 1949).

The Cask of Amontillado (Speare, 1973), regarded by many as Edgar Allan Poe’s most perfect short story, is set during Carnival time in an Italian city, probably in the eighteenth century --according to the Random House College Dictionary, the *roquelaure* worn by Montresor, the main character, is “a cloak worn by men in the eighteenth century” (1975)-- but the story is told by Montresor as a first-person narrator fifty years later, supposedly to his confessor (“You, who so well know the nature of my soul...”). On the other hand, Borges’s *Emma Zunz*, one of the short stories which make up *El Aleph* (1955), takes place in Buenos Aires in 1922. The story is told by an omniscient third-person

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narrator: “*El catorce de enero de 1922, Emma Zunz, al volver de la fábrica de tejidos Tarbuch y Loewenthal, halló en el fondo del zaguán una carta, fechada en el Brasil, por la que supo que su padre había muerto*”.

The Cask of Amontillado and *Emma Zunz* are stories whose main characters seek retribution. Both Montresor and Emma embody the vindictive side of human nature. The reader of *EZ* has more information about Emma’s motives for revenge than the one who undertakes the reading of Poe’s story. Emma’s father has been convicted of embezzlement, even though he is not guilty, as a result of which he kills himself. The night before dying, he assures Emma that the one who has actually committed embezzlement is Aarón Loewenthal, a former manager and now one of the owners of the textile mill where she works. By contrast, in *TCA*, Montresor’s motives are rather vague --the reader just gets to know that he has been insulted by Fortunato, with virtually no further details. The only instance of Fortunato’s disdainful attitude to Montresor may be the fact that he does not remember --or at least he pretends not to remember-- what the Montresors’ coat of arms looks like, even though he knows that Montresor is proud of his illustrious family.

“The Montresors,” I replied, “were a great and numerous family.”

“I forget your arms.”

“A huge human foot d’or, in a field azure; the foot crushes a serpent rampant whose fangs are imbedded in the heel.”

Some underlying degree of competitiveness between the two characters, especially in the spheres of art and old wines, might be construed as the possible issue leading to the insult that Montresor regards as the last straw (“He prided himself on the connoisseurship in wine [...] I was skillful in the Italian vintages myself.”), but in the story there is no concrete reference to this rivalry as being Montresor’s motive for revenge.

In the very first paragraph of *TCA*, Poe (through Montresor’s words) sets forth the tenets that are essential for one’s revenge to be flawless:

- The redresser should not threaten the wrongdoer, who should not entertain any suspicion as to the avenger’s real intentions.
- The possibility of risk should be ruled out.
- The redresser should not act on impulse. He should take as long as he needs in order to achieve his aim.
- The redresser should not be punished.
- The redresser should not be taken by surprise at any moment.
- The wrongdoer should feel that the redresser is taking revenge upon him.

The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could, but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge. You, who so well know the nature of my soul, will not suppose, however, that I gave utterance to a threat. *At length* I would be avenged; this was a point definitely settled—but the very definitiveness with which it was resolved precluded the idea of risk. I must not only punish, but punish with impunity. A wrong is unredressed when retribution overtakes its redresser. It is equally unredressed when the avenger fails to make himself felt as such to him who has done the wrong.

Likewise, achieving retribution is the rationale behind Emma Zunz’s behaviour. She is determined to take revenge upon Loewenthal, as he is to blame for her father’s suicide. The plan she devises in order to succeed in her undertaking tallies with Poe’s basic tenets of perfect vengeance at the beginning of *TCA*. Let us concentrate on some examples of this.

Montresor never utters a threat. He shows no hint of his feelings and intentions to the unfortunate Fortunato (the choice of the character's name is one of the examples of Poe's irony in the story).

It must be understood that neither by word nor deed had I given Fortunato cause to doubt my good will. I continued, as was my wont, to smile in his face, and he did not perceive that my smile *now* was at the thought of his immolation.

Montresor patiently waits for the right moment to act. (*"At length I would be avenged."*) Hypocritically, on the pretext of needing Fortunato's connoisseurship in the matter of vintage wines, Montresor cajoles Fortunato into accompanying him to the vaults of his *palazzo*, where his revenge will be accomplished.

I have received a pipe of what passes for Amontillado, and I have my doubts (...) I was silly enough to pay the full Amontillado price without consulting you in the matter. You were not to be found, and I was fearful of losing a bargain.

In *EZ*, Emma does not show Loewenthal the slightest sign of her intentions. Like Montresor, she never utters a threat. She does not rush into retaliation. She takes her time to make sure that there are no loopholes in the plan she has carefully woven, which "precluded the idea of risk." There are rumours of strike at her workplace, and she conveniently claims to be against any kind of violence. Accompanied by one of her friends, she signs up at a sports club, where she has to spell out her full name. They have to undergo medical check-up, and Emma gives proof of her virginity, a fact that will turn out to be crucial as her plan evolves.

A las seis, concluido el trabajo, fue con Elsa a un club de mujeres, que tiene gimnasio y pileta. Se inscribieron; tuvo que deletrear su nombre y apellido, tuvo que festejar las bromas vulgares que comentan la revisión. [...] En abril cumpliría diecinueve años, pero los hombres le inspiraban un temor casi patológico.

She reads in the newspaper that the *Nordstjärnan*, a liner from Malmö, is setting out from Dock 3 that night. Next she phones Loewenthal and arranges to meet him at his office at dusk. The pretext she resorts to is that she wants to tell him something about the strike. (*"Insinuó que deseaba comunicar, sin que lo supieran las otras, algo sobre la huelga, y prometió pasar por el escritorio, al oscurecer. Le temblaba la voz; el temblor convenía a una delatora."*). After hanging up, she goes to the *Paseo de Julio*, near the port, in search of the men from the *Nordstjärnan*, as she still needs some plausible justification for killing Loewenthal.

Entró en dos o tres bares, vio la rutina o los manejos de otras mujeres. Dio al fin con hombres del Nordstjärnan. De uno, muy joven, temió que le inspirara ternura y optó por otro, quizá más bajo que ella y grosero, para que la pureza del horror no fuera mitigada [...] El hombre, sueco o finlandés, no hablaba español. Ella sirvió para el goce y él para la justicia.

After having intercourse with the stranger, Emma manages to leave the place unnoticed. It is dusk, time to meet her boss (*"el último crepúsculo se agravaba"*). She knows that Loewenthal lives alone on the top floor of the textile mill. When Emma takes a tram that will lead her to him, she chooses a seat where no one can see her face. (*"Emma pudo salir sin que la advirtieran; en la esquina subió a un Lacroze, que iba al oeste. Eligió, conforme a su plan, el asiento más delantero, para que no le vieran la cara."*).

The above-mentioned examples show that the importance of impunity ("I must not only punish, but punish with impunity") is not neglected either by Montresor or by Emma Zunz. To leave no trace of any incriminating element, the latter even makes a point of tearing up the letter in which

a friend of her father's lets her know that he has committed suicide by taking an overdose of veronal.

De pronto, alarmada, se levantó y corrió al cajón de la cómoda. Lo abrió; debajo del retrato de Milton Sills, donde la había dejado la antenoche, estaba la carta de Fein. Nadie podía haberla visto; la empezó a leer y la rompió.

In *TCA*, to secure his impunity, Montresor makes sure that all the servants have left by the time he and Fortunato arrive at his *palazzo*.

There were no attendants at home; they had absconded to make merry in honor of the time. I had told them that I should not return until the morning, and had given them explicit orders not to stir from the house. These orders were sufficient, I well knew, to insure their immediate disappearance, one and all, as soon as my back was turned.

Similarly, in *EZ*, Emma also makes sure that Loewenthal is alone when she goes to his office to carry out the final stage of her plan. Her excuse is that she does not want the other workers to learn that she is an informer. She needs everything to go ahead like clockwork. It is evident that in both stories the main characters leave no room for loose ends. ("A wrong is unredressed when retribution overtakes its redresser.") The fact that in *TCA*, thanks to Montresor's extreme precautions, Fortunato's remains have not been found in fifty years goes to prove that retribution has been accomplished without the redresser being punished.

No answer still. I thrust a torch through the remaining aperture and let it fall within. There came forth in return only a jingling of the bells. My heart grew sick —on account of the dampness of the catacombs. I hastened to make an end of my labor. I forced the last stone into its position; I plastered it up. Against the new masonry I re-erected the old rampart of bones. For the last half of a century no mortal has disturbed them. *In pace requiescat!*

In keeping with Montresor's idea of vengeance, after killing Loewenthal Emma leaves nothing to chance in order to avoid facing punishment.

Los ladridos tirantes le recordaron que no podía, aún, descansar. Desordenó el diván, desabrochó el saco del cadáver, le quitó los quevedos salpicados y los dejó sobre el fichero. Luego tomó el teléfono y repitió lo que tantas veces repetiría, con esas y, con otras palabras. Ha ocurrido una cosa que es increíble...El señor Loewenthal me hizo venir con el pretexto de la huelga... Abusó de mí, lo maté.

La historia era increíble, en efecto, pero se impuso a todos, porque sustancialmente era cierta. Verdadero era el tono de Emma Zunz, verdadero el pudor, verdadero el odio. Verdadero también era el ultraje que había padecido; sólo eran falsas las circunstancias, la hora y uno o dos nombres propios.

At the moment they carry out their vindictive act, neither Emma nor the redresser in Poe's story deem what they have done to be a crime. Since retribution, the word used by Montresor, is a *deserved* punishment, both characters think that they have acted in the name of justice. ("No por temor, sino por ser un instrumento de la Justicia, ella no quería ser castigada"). However, in retrospect, Emma seems to regret what she has done. (*¿cómo recuperar ese breve caos que hoy la memoria de Emma Zunz repudia y confunde?*). The fact that Montresor, now an old man, perhaps on his death bed, feels the need to speak to someone (probably his confessor) about what he did fifty years before, suggests that, in his heart of hearts, he may feel remorseful as well.

Finally, Montresor's last tenet of impeccable retribution in *TCA* ought to be considered: "It is equally unredressed when the avenger fails to make himself felt as such to him who has done the wrong." Fortunato, astonished beyond belief at first ("He was too much astounded to resist"), becomes fully aware of the situation as Montresor builds up the wall behind which he is doomed to stay forever. Montresor indulges in mocking his victim. ("I replied to the yells of him who clamoured. I re-echoed –I aided—I surpassed them in volume and in strength. I did this, and the clamourer grew still.")

The redresser relishes when Fortunato, helpless, begs for mercy.

"For the love of God, Montresor!"

"Yes," I said, "for the love of God!"

Once more, Emma Zunz acts in accordance with Montresor's guidelines. She thinks in advance of the words she is going to use in order to let her boss know that her purpose is to avenge her father's death. (*"Los labios de Emma se atareaban, como los de quien reza en voz baja; cansados, repetían la sentencia que el señor Loewenthal oiría antes de morir."*) She is a redresser and wants to make herself felt as such to the one who has done the wrong. Even though she never gets to know whether Loewenthal actually hears her final speech, what really matters is that Emma –the same as Montresor *vis-à-vis* Fortunato-- does everything in her power to make him aware of her intention. Loewenthal, infuriated, nonplussed and powerless, sees her when she is shooting at him, pulling the trigger twice, three times. At this climactic moment, the motto in the coat of arms of the Montresor family holds true for Emma as well: *"Nemo me impune lacessit."* [No one dare attack me with impunity].

Logró que Loewenthal saliera a buscar una copa de agua. Cuando éste, incrédulo de tales aspavientos, pero indulgente, volvió del comedor, Emma ya había sacado del cajón el pesado revólver. Apretó el gatillo dos veces. El considerable cuerpo se desplomó como si los estampidos y el humo lo hubieran roto, el vaso de agua se rompió, la cara la miró con asombro y cólera, la boca de la cara la injurió en español y en ídich. Las malas palabras no cejaban. Emma tuvo que hacer fuego otra vez. En el patio, el perro encadenado rompió a ladrar, y una efusión de brusca sangre manó de los labios obscenos y manchó la barba y la ropa. Emma inició la acusación que tenía preparada ("He venido a vengar la muerte de mi padre y no me podrán castigar..."), pero no la acabó, porque el señor Loewenthal ya había muerto. Nunca supo si alcanzó a comprender.

The differences between *TCA* and *EZ* are manifold (chronological, geographical, cultural, etc.). Moreover, Emma's reasons for killing Loewenthal may be deemed more complex than Montresor's motives, especially if one bears in mind that she has "an almost pathological fear of men," and that at the moment she loses her virginity she thinks of her father inflicting the same torment upon her mother. (*"Pensó --no pudo no pensar-- que su padre le había hecho a su madre la cosa horrible que a ella ahora le hacían."*). This may imply that –subconsciously– by killing Loewenthal she was also avenging the outrage her mother had suffered, in which case Loewenthal would also be playing the role of her father, and, to some extent, Emma would be taking revenge not on just one man but on all men. Having said this, one fact should be highlighted: despite all these differences, a comparative analysis of both stories allows the reader to infer that, with regard to her conception of retribution, Emma Zunz wholly adheres to Montresor's guidelines. As the examples mentioned in this paper help to point out, the plan she meticulously devises bear a striking resemblance to Montresor's vindictive scheme. Thus, when analyzing the retribution theme as conceived by Poe and Borges in these two remarkable short stories, one comes to the conclusion that the old saying proves to be true once

again: great minds think alike, at least as far as their view of short fiction is concerned.

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