

“The Masque of the Red Death”

By Edgar Allan Poe (annotations and literary analysis by Mrs. Calorio)

1.

The rapid pace of the disease adds to the heightened drama of the tale.

The "Red Death" had long devastated the country. No *pestilence* had ever been so fatal, or so hideous. Blood was its *Avatar* and its seal—the redness and the horror of blood. There were sharp pains, and sudden dizziness, and then profuse bleeding at the pores, with dissolution. The scarlet stains upon the body and especially upon the face of the victim, were the pest *ban* which shut him out from the aid and from the sympathy of his fellow-men. And the whole seizure, progress and termination of the disease, were the incidents of half an hour.

This pestilence is an *allusion* to the Black Plague and possibly the smallpox epidemic of Poe's lifetime.

Verbal irony

2.

Prospero and his court believe they will be immune to the disease.

But the Prince *Prospero* was happy and *dauntless* and sagacious. When his dominions were half depopulated, he summoned to his presence a thousand hale and light-hearted friends from among the knights and dames of his court, and with these retired to the deep seclusion of one of his castellated abbeys. This was an extensive and magnificent structure, the creation of the prince's own eccentric yet august taste. A strong and lofty wall girdled it in. This wall had gates of iron. The courtiers, having entered, brought furnaces and massy hammers and welded the bolts. They resolved to leave means neither of ingress nor egress to the sudden impulses of despair or of frenzy from within. The abbey was amply provisioned. With such precautions the courtiers might bid defiance to contagion. The external world could take care of itself. In the meantime it was folly to grieve, or to think. The prince had provided all the appliances of pleasure. There were *buffoons*, there were improvisatori, there were ballet-dancers, there were musicians, there was Beauty, there was wine. All these and security were within. Without was the "Red Death".

Foreshadowing

Yes, but will it be a false security?

3.

It was towards the close of the fifth or sixth month of his seclusion, and while the *pestilence* raged most furiously abroad, that the Prince *Prospero* entertained his thousand friends at a masked ball of the most unusual magnificence.

Over the top extravagance!

4a.

The layout of the rooms makes it impossible to see from one to the other.

It was a voluptuous scene, that masquerade. But first let me tell of the rooms in which it was held. These were seven—an imperial suite. In many palaces, however, such suites form a long and straight vista, while the folding doors slide back nearly to the walls was very different, as might have been expected from the *duke's love of the bizarre*. The apartments were so irregularly disposed that the vision embraced but little more than one at a time. There was a sharp turn at every twenty or thirty yards, and at each turn a novel effect. To the right and left, in the middle of each wall, a tall and narrow Gothic window looked out upon a closed corridor which pursued the windings of the suite. These windows were of stained glass whose colour varied in accordance with the prevailing *hue* of the decorations of the chamber into which it opened. That at the eastern extremity was hung, for example in blue—and vividly blue were its windows. The second chamber was purple in its ornaments and tapestries, and here the panes were purple. The third was

Duke and Prince are the same person—just different titles

4b

Setting, such as the "blood-stained" looking windows, is crucial to the development of the rising terror.

orange—the fifth with white—the sixth with violet. The seventh apartment was closely shrouded in black velvet tapestries that hung all over the ceiling and down the walls, falling in heavy folds upon a carpet of the same material and hue. But in this chamber only, the colour of the windows failed to correspond with the decorations. The panes here were scarlet—a deep blood colour. Now in no one of the seven apartments was there any lamp or candelabrum, amid the profusion of golden ornaments that lay scattered to and fro or depended from the roof. There was no light of any kind emanating from lamp or candle within the suite of chambers. But in the corridors that followed the suite, there stood, opposite to each window, a heavy tripod, bearing a brazier of fire, that projected its rays through the tinted glass and so glaringly illumined the room. And thus were produced a multitude of gaudy and fantastic appearances. But in the western or black chamber the effect of the fire-light that streamed upon the dark hangings through the blood-tinted panes, was ghastly in the extreme, and produced so wild a look upon the countenances of those who entered, that there were few of the company bold enough to set foot within its precincts at all.

Poe appears to be playing around with the motifs of the number 7 and the colors black and red.

The 7th most western location room is so creepy, no one wants to go into it.

A huge, grandfather style hall clock that is all black.

It was in this apartment, also, that there stood against the western wall, a gigantic clock of ebony. Its pendulum swung to and fro with a dull, heavy, monotonous clang; and when the minute-hand made the circuit of the face, and the hour was to be stricken, there came from the brazen lungs of the clock a sound which was clear and loud and deep and exceedingly musical, but of so peculiar a note and emphasis that, at each lapse of an hour, the musicians of the orchestra were constrained to pause, momentarily, in their performance, to harken to the sound; and thus the waltzers perforce ceased their evolutions; and there was a brief disconcert of the whole gay company; and, while the chimes of the clock yet rang, it was observed that the giddiest grew pale, and the more aged and sedate passed their hands over their brows as if in confused reverie or meditation. But when the echoes had fully ceased, a light laughter at once pervaded the assembly; the musicians looked at each other and smiled as if at their own nervousness and folly, and made whispering vows, each to the other, that the next chiming of the clock should produce in them no similar emotion; and then, after the lapse of sixty minutes, (which embrace three thousand and six hundred seconds of the Time that flies,) there came yet another chiming of the clock, and then were the same disconcert and tremulousness and meditation as before.

"brazen lungs of the clock" is an example of personification

Foreshadowing: At each hourly chiming of the clock, the revelers become quiet and a bit freaked out. But once the chiming stops, they start partying again.

6.

But, in spite of these things, it was a gay and magnificent revel. The tastes of the duke were peculiar. He had a fine eye for colours and effects. He disregarded the decora of mere fashion. His plans were bold and fiery, and his conceptions glowed with barbaric lustre. There are some who would have thought him mad. His followers felt that he was not. It was necessary to hear and see and touch him to be sure that he was not.

Classic Poe—he imbeds the notion that the protagonist is possibly mad (crazy)!

7a.

He had directed, in great part, the movable embellishments of the seven chambers, upon occasion of this great fête; and it was his own guiding taste which had given character to the masqueraders. Be sure they were grotesque. There were much glare and glitter and piquancy and phantasm—much of what has been since seen in "Hernani". There were arabesque figures with unsuited limbs and appointments. There were delirious fancies such as the madman fashions. There were much of the beautiful, much

All the party-goers are in scary, yet bright, fancy costumes that a "madman" would enjoy.

7b

might have excited disgust. To and fro in the seven chambers there stalked, in fact, a multitude of dreams. And these—the dreams—*writhed* in and about taking *hue* from the rooms, and causing the wild music of the orchestra to seem as the echo of their steps. And, anon, there strikes the ebony clock which stands in the hall of the velvet. And then, for a moment, all is still, and all is silent save the voice of the clock. The dreams are stiff-frozen as they stand. But the echoes of the chime die away—they have endured but an instant—and a light, half-subdued laughter floats after them as they depart. And now again the music swells, and the dreams live, and *writhe* to and fro more merrily than ever, taking *hue* from the many tinted windows through which stream the rays from the tripods. But to the chamber which lies most westwardly of the seven, there are now none of the maskers who venture; for the night is waning away; and there flows a ruddier light through the blood-coloured panes; and the blackness of the sable drapery appalls; and to him whose foot falls upon the sable carpet, there comes from the near clock of ebony a muffled peal more *solemnly* emphatic than any which reaches *their* ears who indulged in the more remote gaieties of the other apartments.

The constant mention of the chiming of the clock is not only *repetition*, but also likely *foreshadowing*. Could time be running out for the revelers?

Repetition—the narrator keeps mentioning the 7th room, the red windowpanes, blackness of the room, and chiming of the hours.

8.

But these other apartments were densely crowded, and in them beat feverishly the heart of life. And the revel went whirlingly on, until at length there commenced the sounding of midnight upon the clock. And then the music ceased, as I have told; and the evolutions of the waltzers were quieted; and there was an uneasy cessation of all things as before. But now there were twelve strokes to be sounded by the bell of the clock; and thus it happened, perhaps, that more of thought crept, with more of time, into the meditations of the thoughtful among those who reveled. And thus too, it happened, perhaps, that before the last echoes of the last chime had utterly sunk into silence, there were many individuals in the crowd who had found leisure to become aware of the presence of a masked figure which had arrested the attention of no single individual before. And the rumour of this new presence having spread itself whisperingly around, there arose at length from the whole company a buzz, or murmur, expressive of disapprobation and surprise—then, finally, of terror, of horror, and of disgust.

Uh-oh!! Nothing good ever happens at midnight in a Poe story.

A new twist, but not an uncommon *motif*...an unwelcome, frightening stranger appears at the party.

9.

In an assembly of phantasms such as I have painted, it may well be supposed that no ordinary appearance could have excited such sensation. In truth the masquerade license of the night was nearly unlimited; but the figure in question had *out-Heroded Herod*, and gone beyond the bounds of even the prince's indefinite decorum. There are chords in the hearts of the most reckless which cannot be touched without emotion. Even with the utterly lost, to whom life and death are equally jests, there are matters of which no jest can be made. The whole company, indeed, seemed now deeply to feel that in the costume and bearing of the stranger neither wit nor propriety existed. The figure was tall and concealed the visage was made so nearly to resemble the *countenance* of a stiffened corpse that the closest scrutiny must have had difficulty in detecting the cheat. And yet all this might have been endured, if not approved, by the mad revelers around. But the *mummer* had gone so far as to assume the type of the Red Death. His vesture was dabbled in *blood*—and his broad brow, with all the features of the face, was besprinkled with the scarlet horror.

No one is laughing now as all the guests are frightened by this sudden stranger.

The term "mummer" tells the reader that the guests believe the stranger is an actor.

Allusion to the hated King Herod from the Bible.

The "costume" is too real looking, like that of a corpse stricken by the Red Death.

At first, the Prince is very scared, but then angry that this stranger is ruining the feel-good atmosphere of his party.

10

When the eyes of the Prince Prospero fell upon this spectral image (which, with a slow and *solemn* movement, as if more fully to sustain its role, stalked to and fro among the waltzers) he was seen to be convulsed, in the first moment with a strong shudder either of terror or distaste; but, in the next, his brow reddened with rage.

11

"Who dares,"—he demanded hoarsely of the courtiers who stood near him—"who dares insult us with this *blasphemous* mockery? Seize him and unmask him—that we may know whom we have to hang, at sunrise, from the battlements!"

Prospero feels that the unwelcome stranger has gone too far by dressing like a victim of the Red Death.

12

It was in the eastern or blue chamber in which stood the Prince Prospero as he uttered these words. They rang throughout the seven rooms loudly and clearly, for the prince was a bold and *robust* man, and the music had become hushed at the waving of his hand.

Prospero is in the far eastern room as he shouts to the stranger who is close by. Everyone is listening and watching as the stranger comes towards Prospero and then moves beyond them all through the other rooms.

13

It was in the blue room where stood the prince, with a group of pale courtiers by his direction of the intruder, who at the moment was also near at hand, and now, with deliberate and stately step, made closer approach to the speaker. But from a certain nameless awe with which the mad assumptions of the mummer had inspired the whole party, there were found none who put forth hand to seize him; so that, unimpeded, he passed within a yard of the prince's person; and, while the vast assembly, as if with one impulse, shrank from the centres of the rooms to the walls, he made his way uninterruptedly, but with the same *solemn* and measured step which had distinguished him from the first, through the blue chamber to the purple—through the purple to the green—through the green to the orange—through this again to the white—and even thence to the violet, ere a decided movement had been made to arrest him. It was then, however, that the Prince Prospero, maddening with rage and the shame of his own momentary cowardice, rushed hurriedly through the six chambers, while none followed him on account of a deadly terror that had seized upon all. He bore aloft a drawn dagger, and had approached, in rapid impetuosity, to within three or four feet of the retreating figure, when the latter, having attained the extremity of the velvet apartment, turned suddenly and confronted his pursuer. There was a sharp cry—and the dagger dropped gleaming upon the sable carpet, upon which, instantly afterwards, fell prostrate in death the Prince Prospero. Then, summoning the wild courage of despair, a throng of the revelers at once threw themselves into the black apartment, and, seizing the mummer, whose tall figure stood erect and motionless within the shadow of the ebony clock, gasped in unutterable horror at finding the grave ceremonies and corpse-like mask, which they handled with so violent a rudeness, untenanted by any tangible form.

No one has the courage to stop the stranger.

Prospero takes off after the stranger, going through all the rooms and ending at the 7th creepy room that is in the most western part of the castle.

Prospero falls dead upon trying to attack the stranger with a dagger.

When the guests then lunge for the stranger, he disappears leaving nothing but his mask and shroud.

14

And now was acknowledged the presence of the Red Death. He had come like a thief in the night. And one by one dropped the revelers in the blood-bedewed halls of their revel, and died each in the despairing posture of his fall. And the life of the ebony clock went out with that of the last of the gay. And the flames of the tripods expired. And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all.

"like a thief in the night"... Biblical allusion to the Second Coming

Darkness and death triumph and all who foolishly thought they could escape death quickly fall victim to Death's power.

Literary Elements within “The Masque of the Red Death”

Historical allusion: - Poe often imbedded historical references into his stories, and in this one, Poe appears to capture the terror of past pandemics such as the Black Plague of the Middle Ages and, also, very likely, more recent epidemics of his time such as smallpox. Though it is alluded to indirectly, Poe recreates the historical accuracy of the Black Plague when his narrator tells of Prince Prospero’s plan to avoid the Red Death by retreating to his country estate and holing up there far away from the poorer people of his village. This mimics the behavior of wealthy landowners during the Black Plague who were able to survive by sequestering themselves in their lavish countryside homes, far away from the masses.

Biblical allusion - Poe’s reference to Herod (Tyrannical Jewish King who ordered the death of all male children under age 2 in an effort to kill the Messiah) and the quote “*He had come like a thief in the night*” are direct references to Biblical stories. The narrator states that all the party-goers were so shocked and disgusted by the grotesque appearance of the uninvited guest, that he is immediately hated and feared, as was Herod. The quote about the “thief” is taken from a biblical verse that refers to death occurring for non-believers when Jesus returns in the Second Coming. Poe is using this quote to illustrate how these hedonistic party-goers fall dead in the presence of The Red Death and that they never see it coming for them.

Foreshadowing - There are many elements early on in the story that suggest the danger to come. The most obvious is the sealing off of the castle to any other persons other than the invited guests. No one else may come in, but then again, no one within can leave either. The repeated mention of the 7th foreboding room and the hourly chiming of the hall clock also suggest an element of fear and doom.

Motif – There are several motifs in this story such as the gothic castle-like dwelling of the Prince, the mysterious party guest, and most obviously, the use of the colors red (blood) and black (evil), and the numbers 7 and 12 within the story. Both of these numbers appear in many of Poe’s stories, but are universally used by other writers, especially when the topic is the macabre or horror driven. The number 12 is accentuated when the ebony (black, of course) hall clock strikes midnight (the bewitching hour) and, literally, all hell breaks loose. The number 7 is used to detail the number of chambers/rooms that are set up for the party. The number 7 is a motif that is thought to hold some mystical power: In Christian faith, God creates the world and rests on the 7th day; 7 days a week in a calendar; 7 deadly sins; 7 years of bad luck; 7 Christian sacraments; 7 stages of life, and the list goes on. Lastly, the mysterious stranger is a motif that occurs in numerous stories. Sometimes this stranger character comes to represent good, but in other tales, the character embodies evil or danger.

Personification – There is not much that is personified in this tale except for the mention of the “lungs” of the clock as though it has the capacity to breath. As mentioned, the clock symbolizes the remaining time of life slowing ticking away (breath expiring).

Symbolism – The way in which the 7 rooms are navigated is from east to west. The symbolism is that just as the sun rises in the east and sets in the west, (a new and promising day eventually comes to an end) the evening of the masked ball begins with frivolity and brightness and ends in darkness and death. Also, the symbolism of the chiming clock strongly suggests that time is running out for Prospero and his guests.

Irony (Verbal): Poe appeared to love to infuse his writing with ironic names (when he actually chose to use names for his characters). In this story, the main character is name Prospero. Poe was one bright guy, and he used his knowledge of Latin to give the protagonist a truly ironic name, as the Latin meaning is “fortunate.”

Situational Irony: Poe sets up the night of the masked ball as a glorious, free-for-all night of wild partying, complete with clown-like characters (buffoons) and actors set to improvise skits on the spot. Prospero and his lofty friends think they are the ones in control, and that they are better than everyone else (the poverty stricken and diseased dominions left outside of the castle), but in truth, they are the buffoons—the ones who will be so easily surprised and brought so suddenly to their death.

Setting: Setting is often very important in Poe’s tales, and this one is no different. The Gothic backdrop of the castle, a place where no one can enter nor leave, presents a haunting image for the reader. The time element of being set during the raging Red Death that is consuming the land around them also promotes the horror within the story.

Lastly, no Poe tale would seem complete without at least one reference to “madness,” and sure enough, this one does not disappoint. In paragraph 6, “*There are some who would have thought him mad. His followers felt that he was not. It was necessary to hear and see and touch him to be sure that he was not.*” So, once again, the readers of Poe are left to wonder about the mental state of the protagonist. Is our protagonist insane or just the life of the party? This is left for the reader to determine. You can’t blame Poe for sticking with a recurring literary “hook” that works very well for him, again, and again, and again...

"The Masque of the Red Death" by Edgar Allen Poe	
Vocabulary	
ban	a decree that prohibits something
blasphemous	grossly irreverent/disrespectful toward what is held to be sacred
buffoon	a person who amuses others by ridiculous behavior
dauntless	invulnerable to fear or intimidation
hue	the quality of a color determined by its dominant wavelength
lapse	a break or intermission in the occurrence of something
pestilence	any epidemic disease with a high death rate
robust	sturdy and strong in form, constitution, or construction
solemn	dignified and somber in manner or character.
writhe	to move in a twisting or contorting motion
Bonus	
countenance	the appearance conveyed by a person's face
emanate	give out, as breath or an odor