The Masque of the Red Death Study Guide

The Masque of the Red Death by Edgar Allan Poe

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Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Masque of the Red Death" was first published in 1842. In the original publication, the title was given the English spelling of "mask," yet it was changed to "masque" in 1845. In this macabre tale, a Prince Prospero seals himself and a thousand of his friends into the abbey of a castle in order to protect them from a deadly pestilence—The Red Death—that is ravaging the country. But when the group indulge in a lavish costume ball in order to distract themselves from the suffering and death outside their walls, the Red Death, disguised as a costumed guest, enters and claims the lives of everyone present. The story is narrated in a manner which gives it the quality of a myth, allegory or fairy tale, exploring themes of man's fear of death, sin, madness, and the end of the world.

This tale is a prime example of Poe's Gothic horror fiction. Poe evokes a dark and eerie mood in a story that focuses on images of blood and death, while the personification of the Red Death lends an element of the supernatural. "The Masque of the Red Death" embodies Poe's mastery of the short story; in addition, it illustrates his literary philosophy. According to Poe, a short story should be tightly focused so that every word, from beginning to end, contributes to the overall effect. In "The Masque of the Red Death," powerful imagery and an illusive narrative voice are tightly woven into a macabre tale of horror with insight into the human condition.

Author Biography

Edgar Allan Poe was born in Boston, Massachusetts, on January 19, 1809. The son of minor stage actors, Poe was orphaned at any early age, as his father abandoned him and his mother died of tuberculosis when he was still a very young child. He was then adopted by John Allan and Francis Allan, but Mrs. Allan, Poe's beloved foster mother, died of tuberculosis in 1829, when he was still a teenager. Although John never legally adopted him, Poe added the Allan surname to his own.

Poe spent his early adult life in and out of the army, engaging in an ongoing struggle over money with his foster father, and developing the notorious habits of alcoholism and debt. In 1835, at the age of twenty-six, he married his young cousin, Virginia Clemm, who was only thirteen. The exact nature of their relationship is unknown, although it is generally said that his treatment of her was more that of a father than of a husband. Virginia, however, died of tuberculosis in 1847, the third significant woman in his life to have died of the same disease.

Although a controversial figure during his lifetime, Poe's literary contribution to nineteenth and early twentieth century literature has been invaluable. His long poem, "The Raven," launched him into instant national, and eventually, international, success. The poem is perhaps the most famous and widely read of his works. His literary influence, however, derives largely from his numerous innovations in the art of the short story. Poe raised the short story to the status of an art form, solidifying a principle of short-story writing still in practice today: that the short story must be about one central idea or event, and one only.

He is considered to have single-handedly invented the modern detective story, of which the Sherlock Holmes stories are a direct descendent. Furthermore, Poe mastered the art of Gothic fiction in his tales of the macabre; his stories can best be characterized as "dark," focusing on death and taking place primarily at night. In this way, Poe developed the short story into a genre of fairy tales for adults, touching on the mystical and supernatural in stories which reach into the darkest corners of human psychology. Posthumously, Poe's work was also extremely influential on French and Russian literature.

One night in the fall of 1849, Edgar Allan Poe was found lying unconscious on a street in Baltimore. He was taken to a hospital, where he remained in a semi-coma for three days, after which he died. Although a life of heavy drinking certainly did not contribute to Poe's health, it is thought that his death was directly due to a brain lesion, complicated by other long-term illnesses. Obituaries appearing immediately after his death painted Poe's character in a rather unflattering light, a posthumous reputation that proved hard to remedy.

Plot Summary

Poe's story "The Masque of the Red Death" begins with a description of a plague, the "Red Death." It is the most deadly plague ever, as "no pestilence had ever been so fatal, or so hideous." The symptoms of the plague include "sharp pains, and sudden dizziness, and then profuse bleeding at the pores." The "scarlet stains" on the body, and especially the face, of its victims are the "pest ban" or first visible signs of the disease. Once the stains appear, the victim has only thirty minutes before death.

In order to escape the spread of the plague, Prince Prospero invites "a thousand hale and lighthearted friends from among the knights and dames of his court" to seal themselves "in deep seclusion" in an abbey of his castle, allowing no one to enter or leave. With adequate provisions, Prospero and his privileged guests attempt to "bid defiance to contagion," by sealing themselves off from the suffering and disease spreading throughout the rest of their country. The Prince provides for his guests "all the appliances of pleasure" to help them not to "grieve" or to "think" about the Red Death raging outside the walls of the abbey.

Toward the end of the fifth or sixth month, the Prince holds a masquerade ball for his guests, "while the pestilence raged most furiously abroad." The Prince takes elaborate measures in his decorations for the ball, which is to take place in "an imperial suite" of seven rooms, each decorated in its own color scheme. The only lighting in each room comes from a brazier of fire, mounted on a tripod, which is set outside the stained glass windows of each room, causing the color of the glass to infuse the entire room. The progression of rooms is from blue to purple to green to orange to white to violet to black. The seventh room, decorated in black velvet, is lit by the fire burning behind a redstained glass window. But the effect of the red light is "ghastly in the extreme," and the seventh room is avoided by most of the guests.

In the seventh room is a "gigantic clock of ebony" which strikes at each hour. The sound of the clock striking is "of so peculiar a note and emphasis" that all of the guests, as well as the orchestra and the dancers, pause at each hour to listen, and there is "a brief disconcert in the whole company." But the revelers remain "stiff frozen" only for a moment before returning to their music and dancing.

At the stroke of midnight the guests, pausing at the sound of the clock, notice a mysterious "masked figure" in their midst. The figure wears "the habiliments of the grave" and the mask on its face resembles "the countenance of a stiffened corpse." The costume of the mysterious figure has even taken on "the type of the Red Death." Its clothing is "dabbled in blood" and its face is "besprinkled with the scarlet horror."

When Prince Prospero sees this mysterious figure, he orders his guests to seize and unmask it, so that he may hang the intruder at dawn. But the guests, cowering in fear, shrink from the figure. In a rage, Prospero, bearing a dagger, pursues the masked figure through each of the rooms—from blue to purple to green to orange to white to violet. The figure enters the seventh room, decorated in a ghastly black and red, and turns to

face Prospero. The Prince falls dead to the floor. But when the guests seize the figure, they find that, underneath its shroud and mask there is "no tangible form."

The guests realize that the Red Death has slipped into their abbey "like a thief in the night" to claim their lives, "and one by one dropped the revelers in the blood-bedewed halls of their revel." The last line of the story describes the complete victory of the Red Death over life: "And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all."

Summary

In *The Masque of the Red Death*, a prince holds a masquerade ball while a deadly plague is ravaging his country, wiping out half of the population. The prince secludes himself inside his castle while the disease spreads. The castle, designed by the prince, is representative of his odd taste. The castle houses musicians, ballet dancers, wine and other things of beauty, while outside of the castle there is nothing but the Red Death. Iron gates surround the castle, giving the prince the illusion that he is protected from contagion. After half a year of his seclusion, Prince Prospero invites guests to join him for a party in his castle, the one place that he feels safe from contamination.

The Red Death, a deadly plague, hits victims with sharp pains and dizziness and, as the illness overtakes the victim, blood begins to seep out of their pores. Scarlet stains on their body and face identify the ill. Once the disease is passed, the victims die within half an hour. Although it has spread quickly through the countryside, the prince is determined to avoid the disparaging disease. There has never before been a disease in the country that is so fatal and kills the ill so quickly. Blood is the pestilence's signature, given way to its name "Red Death."

The prince's party, a masquerade, takes place in a series of seven connected rooms. The walls each have a tall, narrow, stained glass window looking into adjoining room. The color of the windowpanes in the first six rooms each match the color of room. They are blue, purple green, orange, white and violet. The only windowpane that doesn't match the room is the window leading to the room that is furthest west. This room is cloaked in black velvet, which covers the walls and ceiling, while the windowpane is a deep blood red. There are no lights in any of the rooms but each corridor has a tripod of light that blazes through the windows. The decorations throughout the rooms and corridors mixed with the light that streams through the windows are set up for various affects. The blood-tinted window and black room, however, are particularly frightening, so none of the guest enters this corridor. On the western wall of this room, is a tall, ebony clock with a heavy pendulum. When the clock chimes, it makes such an odd noise that it causes the orchestra to stop playing and the guests to stop dancing. When the chiming is over, the guests return to normal. The guests say that they will not be so startled next time it chimes, but each time the clock chimes the party halts again.

The prince has peculiar tastes, grotesque and distasteful, and the decorations at the party reflect this. Some people think he is crazy. The seven chambers reveal dreamlike settings with movable embellishments and during the time that the clock chimes, these dreams are frozen. When the clock ceases, the prince's fantasies come back to life. All the rooms except the black room are densely crowed. The prince invited thousands of guests. The evening progresses, and, at midnight, the ebony clock chimes twelve times. As before, the party stops and grow quiet. The guests suddenly become aware of a masked figure that was not seen earlier. Quiet whispers and rumors about the intruder quickly spread throughout the party. Impressions of the person are first met with surprise but soon this gives way to feelings of terror and disgust. Although there are seemingly no limitations to the decorations and costumes at the party, the intruder

crosses the line by representing what should not be joked about, the Red Death. The intruder is tall and gaunt. His face resembles a stiffened corpse, as it is shrouded with "the scarlet horror." His clothes are covered with blood. The man walks slowly among the guests.

When Prince Prospero sees the man, he convulses with terror and then with rage. He calls out, asking who insults him in this way. He wants to unmask the man and have him hung at sunrise. The prince is in the most eastern chamber, the blue room, when he says this. However, his words can be heard in every room. In the blue room, courtiers surround the prince. When he finishes speaking, they rush toward the intruder. The intruder walks closer to the prince but, because the courtiers are afraid, no one will come close enough to unmask the man. The man passes close to the prince, but remains untouched. The guests move back against the walls of the room as he passes. The intruder makes his way through the crowd of people. He walks from room to room, beginning with the blue room and through the purple, green, orange, white, and violet rooms.

The prince feels angry and is shamed by his own cowardice. He rushes after the man as he goes through the chambers. No one follows the prince. Prince Prospero draws a dagger and approaches the intruder as he reaches the seventh room, the black room. A sharp cry is heard and the prince falls to the ground, dead. The guests run to the black room and gasp in horror at what they see. They seize the man who stands motionless in the shadow of the ebony clock. There is no tangible form beneath the costume of death. The presence of the Red Death had entered the castle. It had come like a thief in the night and killed the guests, leaving drops of blood throughout the halls of the party. Life went out of the ebony clock with its last chime at midnight. Eventually, the firelight of the tripods went out also. Darkness, decay and the Red Death hold dominion over everything.

Analysis

Like many short stories by Edgar Allan Poe, *The Masque of the Red Death* presents readers with terror and suspense. This story is written as an allegory, expressing the notion that no one can escape death. The first character introduced in the story, Prince Prospero, naively tries to do just this. He imagines that his fortune and the security of his castle will keep him safe from the plague that is rapidly spreading outside the castle. Because of his overconfidence, the prince invites thousands of guests to a masquerade at his house after enduring half a year of seclusion. He decorates seven rooms in an elaborate manner to create the illusion of fantasy and reveal a different dreamlike atmosphere in each room. Given the prince's eccentric nature, his "dreams" may be more like nightmares, as the author describes the decorum as grotesque. Of course, these dreams do turn into a nightmare when an invited guest, death itself, sweeps through the party and kills the partygoers and the prince with the plague of the Red Death.

Poe uses foreshadowing to add suspense to his story. As the prince's party proceeds, the guests are too afraid to enter the seventh room. This room, which is located at the most western point, is covered in black velvet. The windowpane that looks into the room is blood red. This imagery reveals the gothic style of storytelling often used by Poe. An ebony clock in the seventh room causes the party to halt each time it chimes upon the hour, giving forth a horrific noise. The prince dies in this room when he meets the figure; his guests die when they rush into the room after hearing their host cry out. The intruder is then revealed here to be without form or substance.

The location of the room is symbolically significant. Before the price chases after the intruder, he is standing in the blue room, the most eastern room, furthest away from the black room. In addition, there is tie between these locations and the mystical imagery that the author creates in the story. At nightfall, the sun sets in the west. Perhaps the prince's eastern location indicates that he is still safe and when he moves towards the western region of the building he draws closer to the end of his life, to rest in eternal sleep. Similarly the cautioning of the ebony clock is used symbolically. Each time the clock lets out its eerie sound, the party halts into chilling silence. Death sweeps over the party after the clock chimes one final time at midnight. Therefore, the early sounds of the clock sweep through the party as a warning of what is to come. Given Poe's history of using such noises to foreshadow the horror in his stories, it is evident that the clock in this story is used as a sign of foreshadowing for readers of *The Masque of the Red Death.*

The prince is the only named character in the story and his name, Prospero, simply implies his luxurious life. In effect, the prince is so sheltered that he hosts parties while many die outside the gates of his castle. This may reveal Poe's take on the social system in place during the time this story was written in 1842. The notion of the vast indifference of the wealthy to the suffering of the poor is relevant in many periods of history. Also relevant is that, during the time in which Poe wrote the story, tuberculosis had become an epidemic throughout Europe and the United States, taking the lives of nearly one of every seven people. In Poe's story, it is not a person that passes the disease but rather the presence of death or the "Red Death" itself that has arrived at the party incarnate, taking on the appearance of a human. Because the event is a masquerade, the guests and the prince think that the ghastly figure is just an attendee who has chosen an inappropriate costume.

Ultimately, Poe addresses the issue that, in spite of the provisions that the prince thinks he has taken to protect himself, death and disease transcend wealth and status. Prince Prospero is forced to face his own mortality. His demise is not in his control, even though he attempts to control his fate as by secluding himself inside his castle for months on end. Ironically, when the prince gives a party to distract himself from the death that is happening outside the castle walls, he lets death into his home. When Prospero chases after the intruder, he is actually chasing after death or at least coming closer to it. He approaches the man with a dagger in hand, as though to battle death but is ultimately defeated. He cannot fight death. In the end, Prince Prospero meets his inevitable demise.

Characters

The Masked Figure

The "masked figure" that appears at Prince Prospero's costume ball is the most illusive "character" in the story. Upon the stroke of midnight, the guests first notice this "masked figure," who is "tall and gaunt, and shrouded from head to foot in the habiliments of the grave," and looks like the corpse of a body afflicted by the Red Death, its face "besprinkled with the scarlet horror." Prince Prospero orders that the figure be unmasked and hanged at dawn, but his guests refuse to unmask him. The figure then retreats through all seven rooms of the abbey, pursued by Prince Prospero. When the figure reaches the seventh room, it turns to face the Prince, who falls instantly to his death. When the guests rush to seize the figure, they find that, beneath the corpselike costume, there is no "tangible form." The masked figure turns out to be The Red Death itself. It had crept into the sealed abbey "like a thief in the night." The last line of the story indicates that the Red Death has triumphed over life: "And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all."

Prince Prospero

Prince Prospero is the central character of "The Masque of the Red Death." Despite the plague of the Red Death which rages throughout his country, the Prince ignores the suffering of others and invites "a thousand friends" from his court to seal themselves in an abbey of his castle in order to protect themselves from the pestilence. In order to distract them from the death and suffering outside their walls, the prince provides his guests with "all the appliances of pleasure," and holds a masquerade ball after the fifth or sixth month. In all of his arrangements, Prince Prospero's taste is extravagant and "bizarre." When the mysterious figure bearing the masque of the Red Death appears at his masquerade ball, the Prince demands that he be unmasked and hanged "at sunrise." Yet, while his guests shrink in horror from the figure, the Prince, carrying a dagger, pursues it through the first six rooms to the seventh. When he confronts the figure, the dagger drops from his hand and he falls to the floor, dead.

There is some indication that Prince Prospero may be a mad man, and that the entire story is his dream or delusional vision, and all its characters figments of his imagination.

The Thousand Friends

While a deadly plague devastates his country, Prince Prospero invites "a thousand hale and lighthearted friends from among the knights and dames of his court" to escape the plague by hiding in the abbey with him. While there are no individual characters among the Prince's guests, the "thousand friends" share a collective role as characters in the story. The prince holds a masquerade ball, at which his guests appear in outlandish costumes. As none of the guests, also described as "a multitude of dreams," are given

any specific character traits, they could be interpreted as mere "fantasms" of the Prince's imagination, or imaginary projections of the Prince's psyche. When the mysterious masked figure appears at the ball, and Prince Prospero orders his guests to seize the intruder, they collectively shrink back in fear and, when the figure moves past the Prince, "the vast assembly, as if with one impulse" cowers in fear, allowing it to pass them without impediment. Yet they cannot escape the Red Death: "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." Like the Prince, his "thousand friends" cannot escape the inevitability of their own deaths.

Themes

Death

While this story is literally about a pestilence called the Red Death, it can be read at an allegorical level as a tale about man's fear of his own mortality. In the story, Prince Prospero and his "thousand friends" seal themselves into an abbey of his castle in an attempt to "defy contagion" and escape the clutches of the Red Death. The Prince employs "all the appliances of pleasure" in order to distract his guests both from the suffering and death outside their walls and from thoughts of their own vulnerability to the Red Death. The Prince's actions symbolize the ways in which all humans tend to focus on material pleasures in order to distract themselves from the knowledge that everyone, including themselves, eventually must die.

The fact that the Red Death slips in "like a thief in the night" to claim the lives of everyone present symbolizes the fact that no one, not even the powerful and wealthy, can escape death, which eventually claims all mortals. Just as everyone must eventually "face" the fact of their own mortality, the Prince dies the moment he literally "faces" his own Death, and can no longer deny its presence in his castle.

Time

The theme of time in this story is closely linked to the theme of death. Of course, the passage of time signals the approach of death; as the saying goes, each minute that passes brings us one minute closer to our death. Poe at one point capitalizes the word Time, as if it were a proper name, thereby personifying it, which suggests that he is referring to time in a broader allegorical sense, rather than simply in a literal sense. The connection of time with death is indicated by the placement of the "great ebony clock" in the seventh room of the abbey, which is the room associated with images of death. The passage of time marked by the chiming of the clock each hour symbolizes the limited time each person has to live. The guests at the ball are so disturbed by the sound of the clock's chime because it is a reminder to each person of their own encroaching deaths. With the passing of each hour, the guests at the ball are forced to think about their own mortality, despite all the distractions provided by their elaborate festivities, for "more of thought crept, with more of time, into the meditations of the thoughtful among those who reveled."

The hour of midnight, marking the end of the day, thus symbolizes the end of life. Indeed, the Red Death is first noticed among the guests at the ball shortly after the stroke of midnight, signaling the arrival of death for each partygoer. The death of the guests and breakdown of the clock are likewise simultaneous, for "the clock went out with the last of the gay."

Madness

"The Masque of the Red Death" can be interpreted as the interior monologue of a madman, and all its characters figments of his insane imagination. As G. R. Thompson maintains, Poe was "the master of the interior monologue of a profoundly disturbed mind." If this story represents the "interior monologue" of a mad Prince Prospero, the narrator must be Prince Prospero himself. The narrator first mentions the possibility that the Prince may be insane by attributing it to the opinion of others, stating that "there are some who would have thought him mad." But the narrator distances himself from this opinion by then stating that "his followers felt that he was not" mad.

If the entire story represents the figment of one man's mad imagination, then the guests are not real people, but merely characters in his own internal psycho-drama. Indeed, the guests at the masquerade ball are described as "a multitude of dreams" and even as "fantasms." In this sense the "masqueraders" at the ball are merely extensions of the narrator himself, just as the characters in dreams are extensions of the dreamer. It is the Prince himself who dresses his guests, for "it was his own guiding taste which had given character to the masqueraders." And the particular costumes are described as "delirious fancies such as a madman fashions." In other words, the mad Prince designed the costumes of his guests in accordance with his own "delirious fancies," or delusions. If the guests of the Prince are reflections of his own mad imagination, it also makes sense that even they are eventually referred to as "mad," in the phrase "mad revelers." And even the masked figure of the Red Death is described as taking on "mad assumptions."

Apocalypse

The use of language in "The Masque of the Red Death," as well as the nature of the tale, brings to mind a biblical story with apocalyptic implications. The story evokes images familiar from the Bible; the "pestilence" that has devastated an unnamed country described in the opening paragraph recalls images of God having sent a pestilence upon the land as a form of punishment to humans for their sins. Prince Prospero and his "thousand guests" seem like likely candidates for divine wrath, as they exhibit no sympathy for the suffering of their fellow countrymen, instead indulging in "all the appliances of pleasure."

As critic Patrick Cheney has pointed out in his article "Poe's Use of *The Tempest* and the Bible in 'The Masque of the Red Death,'" the final paragraph of the story take on a biblical tone, as "the language, rhythm and allusion are unmistakably Biblical." Most notably, the closing sentence evokes apocalyptic images of complete devastation: "And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all." Cheney, however, argues that, unlike the Bible, where God always ultimately triumphs, in Poe's story it is the forces of evil, "Darkness and Decay and the Red Death," which suggest an unholy trinity winning out over light and goodness and life.

Style

Allegory and Parable

"The Masque of the Red Death" is considered an *allegorical* tale; this means that the literal elements of the story are meant to be understood as symbolic of some greater meaning. *Britannica Online* explains that an allegory "uses symbolic fictional figures and actions to convey truths or generalizations about human conduct or experience." More specifically, this story may be read as a *parable*, a sub-category of allegory in which, according to *Britannica Online*, "moral or spiritual relations are set forth."

As a parable, "Masque of the Red Death" is symbolic of how humans respond to the knowledge of their own mortality. The reaction of Prince Prospero and his "thousand friends" to the presence of the Red Death is an attempt to use their material privileges in order to escape the inevitability of their own deaths. But the fact that the "masked figure" slips into their midst "like a thief in the night" is symbolic of the fact that no amount or wealth or privilege can exempt a person from death, no amount of entertainment or distraction can completely eliminate the fear of death, and no amount of security can keep death from arriving at one's doorstep. "The Masque of the Red Death" affirms the futility of man in his elaborate attempts to deny and defy his own mortality.

Imagery and Symbolism

The seven chambers of the abbey, according to critic H. H. Bell, Jr., in his article "'The Masque of the Red Death': An Interpretation," represent the seven decades of a man's life, so that the final chamber, decorated in red and black, represents death. Bell interprets the seven chambers as "an allegorical representation of Prince Prospero's life span." This view is supported by the fact that the first room is located in the East, which symbolizes birth, because it is the direction from which the sun rises, and that the last chamber is located in the West, which symbolizes death, as the sun sets in the West. Bell interprets each of the colors of the seven rooms—blue, purple, green, orange, white, violet— as symbolic of "Prospero's physical and mental condition in that decade of his life." The seventh room is the location of death, as it is eerily decorated in black and red—black being a color associated with death and night, and red being a color strongly associated with blood, and, in this story, the Red Death. Meanwhile, in the first six rooms "beat feverishly the heart of life."

Located in the seventh room, the clock can be read as a symbol of the limited time each person has to live. Thus, the stroking of the clock each hour is a reminder to the guests of the limited time left in their own lives. Midnight represents the hour of death, because it is at midnight that the "masked figure" is noticed by the guests. These allegorical details culminate in the death of the Prince, in the seventh room, shortly after the stroke of midnight, at the precise moment when he literally "faces" his own death. The clock as

a symbolic representation of human life is also indicated in the closing lines, as "the life of the ebony clock went out with that of the last of the gay."

Narration

At the most literal level, this story is told in the "third person," meaning that the narrator is not a character in the story. However, as critic Leonard Cassuto has speculated, the narrator of the story may be the Red Death itself, since all of the people in the story are dead by the end, and the Red Death is the only one left to tell the tale. On the other hand, if the entire story is interpreted as the dream of a madman (the Prince Prospero), all its characters figments of his imagination ("dreams"), and his death not literal but psychological, then the narrator could be the Prince himself. Finally, because the story is told in the manner of a biblical morality tale, in which God punishes the evil by sending down a "pestilence" upon the land, it could be argued that the narrator is in fact a divine being.

Setting

The story takes place in an unnamed "country," in no specific time period or geographical location, which has been ravaged by a deadly "pestilence." The ambiguity of the exact setting lends the story a "once upon a time" element, and places it in the realm of a parable or fable.

Personification

Personification is the use of metaphorical language that assigns a non- human object or animal human traits. Poe indicates the personification of certain concepts by capitalizing them, as one would a proper name. He thus personifies The Red Death, Time, Beauty, Darkness, and Decay. This lends the story an element of myth or fairy tale, as each term seems to be symbolic of broader concepts that refer to the human condition in general.

Gothic horror

Poe is considered one of the early masters of Gothic horror fiction. The genre was developed in the nineteenth century, originally in the literature of Great Britain, and is characterized by elements of the supernatural, gruesome scenes of horror, dark settings, and a preoccupation with death and madness. "The Masque of the Red Death" contains all of these elements.

Historical Context

Tuberculosis

Three of the most important women in Poe's life died of tuberculosis. Although the "pestilence" in the story "Masque of the Red Death" is not defined, it seems reasonable to assume that it is inspired in some ways by Poe's experience with tuberculosis. The distinguishing mark of the "Red Death" is profuse bleeding, just as the distinguishing sign of tuberculosis is the coughing up of blood. According to *Britannica Online*, tuberculosis, often referred to in literature as "consumption," is "one of the great scourges of mankind." The disease "reached near-epic proportions" in industrializing urban areas in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. During this time, it was "the leading cause of death for all age groups in the Western world."

Impressionism

Much of Poe's writing can be referred to as "impressionist," depicting the subtle details of a sensitive mind from a highly subjective perspective. *Britannica Online* describes an impressionist story as "a tale shaped and given meaning by the consciousness and psychological attitudes of the narrator." Impressionism—a school of thought in the world of painting—emerged primarily in France in the mid-1860s. The most notable impressionist painters were Claude Monet and Pierre August Renoir. Impressionist painters rebelled against the dominant values of painting at the time, which emphasized subjects taken from mythology. Instead, impressionism was, according to *Britannica Online*, "an attempt to accurately and objectively record visual reality in terms of transient effects of light and colour."

Gothic Fiction in England

Poe is considered one of the early masters of Gothic fiction. The term gothic was originally borrowed from architecture, but refers to a style of literature that developed in the late eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth century, particularly in England. Gothic fiction is characterized by a dark, macabre atmosphere, focusing on themes of death, horror, madness and the supernatural. Landmark works of Gothic fiction in England include Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) and Bram Stoker's Dracula (1895).

The Short Story in Russia and France

It wasn't until the nineteenth century that the short story was developed into an art form and a respectable genre of literature. Poe was an early master of the short story, and a considerable influence in formulating a set of aesthetics for its unique form. The form of the short story was also developed around the same time in Germany, Russia and

France. Great French short story writers included Alphonse Daudet and Guy du Masupassant, while many other writers, primarily known for their novels, also experimented with the form. In Russia, Nikolay Gogol, Ivan Turgenev, and Anton Chekov distinguished themselves as masters of the short story. Gogol, in particular, wrote impressionist stories on a par with Poe's. His 1842 story "Overcoat" was one of the most influential Russian short stories of the period.

The Grand Guignol

Poe's stories of Gothic horror contain the roots of modern horror fiction and the modern horror film. However, before the invention of cinema (about 1895), Gothic horror was enacted on the theater stage in a style referred to as Grand Guignol. Originally staged in England, but primarily successful in France, Grand Guignol performances depicted scenes of graphic horror, such as re-enactments of true-crime murders, with an emphasis on the special effects of blood, dismemberment and gore.

Critical Overview

By the time of his early death, Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) had written about 50 poems, 70 short stories, a short novel and over 50 essays. While his literary and personal reputation both during his lifetime and after death was controversial, today Poe is considered to be one of the most influential writers of the nineteenth century. He was a pioneer in the development of several literary genres and styles, including the short story, Gothic fiction, and the detective/mystery story. In addition, critics assert that he mastered the art of the short story, still a relatively new form during his lifetime, and elevated it to the level of a high art.

Poe developed a theory for the art of the short story, asserting that a short story must be tightly focused on one event or duration of time (such as a single day), and that each element of a story must be symbolically and thematically central to its overall effect. According to G. R. Thompson, Poe's ideal for the short story "aimed at an almost subliminal effect through a carefully predesigned and unified pattern." Poe's own stories certainly achieved this ideal in that, as Thompson explains, they "exhibit an architectural symmetry and proportion and careful integration of details of setting, plot, and character into an indivisible whole."

In the realm of the newly developing genre of Gothic fiction, Poe was the American master, viewed as the counterpart to British writers such as Mary Shelley, whose *Frankenstein* signals the early success of the genre. Nineteenth-century Gothic fiction, or Gothic horror, was characterized by a preoccupation with death, madness, and the supernatural. Poe's literary sensibilities were well suited to the development of a Gothic style, as his stories are characterized by the morbid, the macabre, and the eerie. With his adept ability to create a dark, disturbing atmosphere, Poe effectively wrote from the perspective of a delusional narrator overcome with madness. According to Thompson, Poe was "the master of the interior monologue of a profoundly disturbed mind." In addition to "The Masque of the Red Death," "The Fall of the House of Usher" is one of his most famous stories in the Gothic style.

Poe's literary career was prolific but chaotic. He was periodically editor, co-editor and contributor to various literary magazines, controversial for his scathing literary reviews and tendency to feud with his editors or co-editors. Nevertheless, his 1844 poem "The Raven" won him instant national fame and recognition, with international notoriety soon to follow.

Poe, however, a notorious alcoholic and debtor during his lifetime, died in a certain degree of disgrace; his initial biographer, Rufus Wilmot Griswold, contributed to this public perception with his portrayal of Poe as an immoral drunk. While other authors attempted to counteract this image and redeem his reputation, their efforts were unsuccessful. Griswold, on the other hand, was at least temporarily successful in portraying Poe in the worst possible light.

One hundred and fifty years after his death, however, Poe's international influence on the literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries can hardly be underestimated. In Russia, he greatly influenced the novelist Fyodor Dostoyevski. His work was particularly influential in France, where the poets Baudelaire and Mallarme were strongly influenced by Poe in formulating the Symbolist and Surrealist movements. According to Thompson, "The vogue of Poe in France continues today with Poe's works holding special fascination for the structuralist, post-structuralist, and deconstructionist cliques of avant-garde criticism." Interestingly, however, Poe, although a favorite among readers, is not necessarily considered to be a central figure in the tradition of English and American writers.

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

Brent has a Ph.D. in American Culture, with a specialization in cinema studies, from the University of Michigan. She is a freelance writer and teaches courses in American cinema. In the following essay, she discusses three possible interpretations of Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death" in terms of identifying the narrative voice of the story.

Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Masque of the Red Death" may be interpreted variously as a parable for man's fear of death, a moral tale with biblical implications, or the delusional vision of a madman waging an internal battle for his own sanity. Depending on each of these interpretations, the narrator may be identified as a personification of Death, a divine being or an insane individual.

Critical Essay #2

"The Masque of the Red Death" can be interpreted as an allegorical tale about the folly of human beings in the face of their own inevitable deaths. If the Red Death symbolizes death in general, then the Prince's attempt to escape the pestilence, in "defi- ance of contagion," is symbolic of the human desire to defy death. Prince Prospero attempts to create a fortress that will be impervious to the Red Death, providing his guests "all the appliances of pleasure" as a means of distracting them from the contemplation of death. The entire masquerade ball can be read as an allegory for the ways in which humans attempt to distract themselves from thoughts of their own mortality by indulging in earthly pleasures. Yet, the "masked figure" who appears at the masquerade ball is the Red Death itself, which, despite all precautions, slips in "like a thief in the night" to claim the lives of everyone within, just as death eventually claims all mortals. As Joseph Patrick Roppolo has pointed out in his article "Meaning and 'The Masque of the Red Death,"' the Red Death symbolizes "life itself. The one 'affliction' shared by all mankind. Furthermore, because all of the people are dead by the end, and Death is the only one who survives to tell the tale, Leonard Cassuto, in his article "The Coy Reaper: Unmasking the Red Death," has argued that the narrator of the story must be Death itself.

Thus, the masquerade ball may be interpreted as symbolic of human life, the hours during which the ball takes place as symbolic of the limited time each person must live, and the seven rooms of the abbey in which the ball is held as symbolic of the stages in a man's life, from birth to death. In his pursuit of the masked figure through the seven rooms of the abbey, Prospero metaphorically passes through all the stages of life. H. H. Bell, Jr. has pointed out in his article "'The Masque of the Red Death'—An Interpretation" that Poe seems to represent these rooms as "an allegorical representation of Prince Prospero's life span." This is partly indicated by the fact that the first room is located in the Eastern end of the abbey and the last room in the Western end. Because the sun rises in the East and sets in the West, this arrangement is suggestive of the dawn and dusk of life. Bell explains that "these directions are time-honored terms which have been used to refer to the beginning and end of things even of life itself." Furthermore, the seventh room is decorated in black, which is associated with night and death, and red, which the story strongly associates with the bloodiness caused by the pestilence of the Red Death. Out of fear, the guests avoid the seventh room, just as the living tend to avoid reminders of death. In the other six rooms, meanwhile, "beat feverishly the heart of life."

The placement of the great ebony clock in the seventh room connects the passage of time with the progression of the rooms from birth to death. The clock signifies the story's pre-occupation with Time as an instrument of death. That Poe chose to capitalize the word Time, personifying it by giving it a proper name, further suggests that he is referring to "time" not in a literal sense, but as in an allegorical sense. Extending the metaphor of a single day for a life span, as implied by the location of the seven rooms from East to West, the clock marks out the time remaining in the lives of the guests, ending at midnight.

While Prospero's guests dance and the orchestra plays, the striking of the clock each hour is a foreboding reminder that the passing of time brings them all closer and closer to the moment of their own deaths. Each time the clock strikes, and the music and dancing stops, everyone is reminded of their own impending death, the old more acutely than the young, for "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." Bell has suggested that "Poe meant for the clock to count off periods of life—not mere hours." So that when the revelers pause at the striking of the clock "they think not in terms of an hour having passed but rather in terms of just so much of their lives as having passed." While the ball is meant to distract them from thinking about death, the chiming of the clock inspires in the guests "meditation" on the limited time left in their lives.

The clock's chiming midnight signifies the end of life, as it coincides with the guests becoming "aware" of the presence of death amongst them. At the sight of the "masked figure," these thoughts become more persistent: "and thus it happened, perhaps that more of thought crept, with more of time, into the meditations of the thoughtful among those who reveled." The closing lines of the story again suggest that the clock measures the time limit placed on everyone's life, so that "the life of the ebony clock went out with the last of the gay."

Critical Essay #3

"The Masque of the Red Death" in told in such a way that its story takes on an almost Biblical tone, recounting a tale of sin, punishment by God and Apocalypse. The story opens with a description of a "pestilence," which, by the end, has wiped out all human life. Such a devastating "pestilence" evokes biblical implications, as plague or pestilence in the Bible is sent down by God to punish humans for their sins. As a parable reminiscent of a Biblical story, "The Masque of the Red Death" is a tale of a divine punishment of those who are oblivious to the suffering of others less fortunate than themselves.

The response of Prince Prospero to the pestilence of the Red Death which has "devastated" his country is one of decadence. In other words, he responds to the massive suffering of people less privileged and powerful than he by turning a blind eye to their plight and surrounding himself and his friends with extravagant distractions. While a deadly pestilence ravages his country, the Prince remains "happy and dauntless and sagacious," oblivious to the suffering of others. When "his dominions were half depopulated," his response is to retreat with his friends and distract them from "grieving" or "thinking" about the plight of their fellow countrymen by indulging them in lavish entertainment. The response of the general population to those afflicted by the Red Death is also portrayed as selfish and unsympathetic, for the "scarlet stains" which mark the bodies of those afflicted "were the pest ban which shut him out from the aid and from the sympathy of his fellowmen." Yet the Prince, with all his power, goes a step further in this response, as he contrives to "shut out" all those vulnerable to the plague, denying then any "aid" or "sympathy" in the process. The response of the Prince and his privileged friends to this massive suffering is harsh and unfeeling, their attitude being that "the external world could take care of itself."

The final line of the story is Apocalyptic in tone, written in a style reminiscent of the type of statements made in the Bible. As Patrick Cheney has pointed out in his article "Poe's Use of *The Tempest* and The Bible in 'The Masque of the Red Death,'" in the final paragraph, "the language, rhythm, and allusion are unmistakably Biblical." This is particularly so of the closing line: "And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all." As with the word Time, the fact that Poe chose to capitalize the words "Darkness" and "Decay" personifies these elements, thereby elevating them to a level of myth or parable. The personification of Darkness, particularly, calls to mind the Prince of Darkness, a name for the Devil. Cheney in fact refers to the Red Death as an "anti-Christ." Given this ending, it would be possible to conclude that, since evil has triumphed over the land, the narrator of the story may be the personification of evil. On the other hand, however, if this is to be interpreted as a morality tale of Biblical proportions, it could be argued that the narrator is in fact a divine presence, who has punished humanity for its sins.

Critical Essay #4

G. R. Thompson, in *The Dictionary of Literary Biography*, has pointed out that Poe was "the master of interior monologue of a profoundly disturbed mind." "The Masque of the Red Death" may certainly be read on a psychological level as just such an "interior monologue," the delusional nightmare of a madman. The narrator suggests several times that there may be reason to believe Prince Prospero is insane, and that the entire story is his crazy dream. If this is the case, then the narrator of the story may be Prospero himself, describing his own mad vision. This would explain why the narrator distances himself from the statement that Prospero may be "mad" by suggesting that it is only the opinion of "some" people, for he mentions that "there are some who would have thought him mad." However, the narrator just as quickly denies this assessment by calling forth the opinion of his "followers," who "felt that he was not."

Furthermore, the narrator specifically refers to the Prince's "friends" or "followers" as literally "dreams," as "To and fro in the seven chambers there stalked, in fact, a multitude of dreams." The guests are later referred to as "an assembly of fantasms." In other words, the "bizarre" figures which populate the Prince's masquerade ball may merely be figments of his mad imagination. That these "dream" guests may be mere reflections of the Prince's mind is further suggested by the description that "these—the dreams—writhed about, taking hue from the rooms." That is, the guests at the masquerade ball, referred to as "dreams" take their "hue" or color from the reflections of the glass in each room. This could serve as a metaphor for the way in which dreams take their form, or "hue" from their status as reflections of the dreamer's mind. In this case, the chiming of the clock is a reminder not so much of death in particular, but of reality intruding momentarily into the insane dreamworld of the mad man, for, each time the clock chimes, the "dreams are stiff-frozen." At a literal level, the chiming of a clock is generally a sound which awakens people from a dream state. But, once the sound of the clock has died down, "the dreams live, and writhe to and fro more merrily than ever."

Eventually, the madness of the Prince is projected onto the "fantasms" which populate his mind; the "dream" guests are referred to as "mad revelers," indicating that they may be projections of the Prince's own mad mind. The masked figure of Death which appears at the ball even takes on the characteristic of madness, as his "mad assumptions" have the effect of evoking "awe" in the other guests. The madness of the Prince himself again emerges in response to the audacity of the masked figure, as the Prince "maddening with rage," pursues it to the seventh room.

In a psychological reading, the struggle between the masked figure and the Prince Prospero could be interpreted as the internal mental struggle between a man's sense of reality and his insane delusions. Thus, when the masked figure is revealed to have no bodily form, it is because it exists only as an imaginary "fantasm" with no physical existence in reality. In this case, the triumph of the masked figure over the Prince represents a triumph of insanity over sanity; the "death" of Prospero and his "dreams" could represent the death of the self when it is taken over by its own insanity.

Source: Liz Brent, for *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2000.

Critical Essay #5

In the following essay, Cassuto reasons that the narrator of the tale must be Death because he is the only one present at the festivity to survive to tell of the effects of the Red Death."

Much has been written about Poe's narrators, and with good reason. Nearly always unnamed—and therefore seen as somehow unreliable—they also have disturbing tendencies that range from the unstable and the obsessed all the way to the insane. In *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* and several other tales, Poe himself even enters into the fiction, commencing the atmosphere of confusion that pervades throughout. All of this indicates that Poe wants us to pay attention to his narrators. If that is his goal, he has succeeded handsomely, but not completely. "The Masque of the Red Death" is a notable exception. The story has a narrator unique in the Poe canon. The teller of the tale is Death himself.

Substantiating such a claim must begin with locating a first-person narrator in the story. At first there does not appear to be one, but closer study reveals that an "I" is in fact relating the action. Perhaps no one has remarked upon his presence before because, unlike many of Poe's more overtly bizarre narrators, this one never steps up and introduces himself. For all of this seeming reticence, though, the raconteur of "The Masque of the Red Death" makes his presence known on three separate occasions.

The first of these comes after the description of the isolation of Prospero and his followers. After five or six months in the abbey that he has turned into a vault, Prospero has announced the masked ball, and all is being prepared. Here, the narrator steps forward for the first time:

It was a voluptuous scene, that masquerade. But first let me tell of the rooms in which it was held.

Who is this "me"? He must be someone who has seen the inside of Prospero's self-imposed prison, but it has been sealed "to leave means of neither ingress nor egress." This fact points to the narrator's presence in the group inside the walls. One could argue that Poe is simply employing a casual reference, that "me" is simply a figure of speech, but the frequency of the narrator's direct intervention (three times in a seven-page story) precludes this assumption.

The story has a narrator, then, but this narrator may not be a character *in* the story. Perhaps Poe has adopted a familiarly omniscient first person narrator which would allow him to achieve a compromise between first-person involvement and third-person omniscience. This is not a new device, to be sure— Hawthorne, for one, employs it in many of his stories and romances. Maybe Poe does mean to have an "I" telling the story from without. The possibility certainly exists, but not to the exclusion of all others. Furthermore, such a narrator would be unique among Poe's tales of horror. On the few occasions when he does employ omniscient narration, it is always in the third person.

All of his other first-person narrators live and breathe within their own fictional worlds; I submit that the teller of "The Masque of the Red Death" does so as well.

Given the presence of a narrator, it is clear that he can be nowhere else but present at the festivity. There would be no other way for him to describe a pause in the activity at midnight: "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."

The narrator's comparison proves that he has been there since the beginning of the party. His reference to what he has already told hearkens back to a previous description of how the striking of the clock would stop the orchestra. The third and final time he refers to himself further confirms his presence amidst the merriment. He compares the Red Death figure to the other masqueraders at the party: "In an assembly of phantasms such as I have painted, it may be supposed that no ordinary appearance could have excited such sensation."

The Red Death is indeed extraordinary, but so must be the narrator, for he has somehow lived to tell us about it.

The narrator's survival thus presents a contradiction which allows for an alternate reading of the story, one that adds a new dimension to the grotesque scene which Poe describes. According to the narrator's own account, no one survives the Red Death's "illimitable dominion." How could the narrator be present at the ball and then be able to tell about it afterwards? The only one who "lives" is Death. The narrator must be Death himself.

This discovery adds a gruesomely ironic aspect to the entire tale. Death's storytelling is marked by a smooth, deliberate, almost deadpan calm. There is a sense of inevitability to the scene which precludes tension because the narrator already knows what will happen. The outcome is as dependable as the passing time, symbolized by the striking clock which governs the action in the story. No one escapes Death, so it is natural that Death should not perceive any suspense. Nor has Death any need for self-aggrandizement. We see the final confrontation between Death and the pursuing prince from Death's perspective, but description of the moment of truth is carefully avoided: "There was a sharp cry—and the dagger dropped gleaming upon the sable carpet, upon which, instantly afterward, fell prostrate in death the Prince Prospero." Only Death could have seen all of this; Prospero has run through six rooms while the other partygoers remain shrunk against the walls in fear. Death is describing his own actions, but without telling us exactly what happens. His tone as a narrator is consistent with his character in the story: matter-of-fact, final, and anonymous.

As Death remains masked to Prospero, so Death remains masked to us. The mockingly self-deprecatory way that he hides himself in both the action and the narration furnishes a humorous tinge to the macabre that is already present in the story, giving a uniquely grotesque turn to an already grotesque creation. Harpham has elsewhere pointed out various puns in the story's structure (e.g., the guests are "dis-concerted" when the clock

stops). Another can now be added to the list: Death is the author of Prospero's fate in more ways than one.

Source: Leonard Cassuto, "The Coy Reaper: Un-masqueing the Red Death," in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. 25, No. 3, 1988, pp. 317-20.

Critical Essay #6

In the following essay, Cheney argues that Poe's use of allusions to The Tempest *and the Bible reverse their theme of victory over sin, death, and time with the victory of Darkness, Decay, and the Red Death over humankind*.

In "The Masque of the Red Death" Poe's allusions to both *The Tempest* and the Bible have been widely recognized. Briefly, the allusions to *The Tempest* include Poe's use of "Prospero" for his hero's name; his use of the romance "masque" for his story's central event; and his borrowing of Caliban's curse of the "red plague" on Miranda for his story's central idea. Poe's allusions to the Bible include his remarks about the Red Death itself: that the Red Death "out-Heroded Herod"; that he "came like a thief in the night"; and that in the end he has "dominion" over all. As yet, though, no one has examined the relation between these two sets of allusions, as they contribute to the narrative and meaning of the story.

In this essay I suggest that Poe in "The Masque of the Red Death" uses Shakespearean and Biblical allusions to reveal a tragic and ironic reversal of a mythic pattern which *The Tempest* and the Bible have in common. Where the mythic pattern of both *The Tempest* and the Bible depicts man's victory over sin, death, and time, Poe's mythic pattern depicts the triumph of these agents of destruction over man. In Poe's "mythic parable" of man's role in the universe, Prince Prospero becomes an antihero, an image of man misusing his will as he attempts to shape reality; and the Red Death becomes an "anti-christ," an image of the cosmic force conspiring man's failure.

While admitting to the obvious differences between *The Tempest* and the Bible, we can also see that they have much in common. In the Bible, Adam is born into the Garden of Eden; he falls from this paradise when, tempted by Satan, he misuses his will; and finally, through the miraculous powers of the "second Adam" or Christ, he returns to a new Eden. The key to recovering Eden becomes Christ, who uses the miraculous powers of love to triumph over the old law of death, figured in his resurrection. Similarly, in *The Tempest* Prospero was originally the "right Duke of Milan"; but he lost his dukedom when he retreated into the private world of his study, to become the victim of Antonio, Alonso, and Sebastian; eventually, though, exiled on an island in the Mediterranean sea with his daughter, Miranda, he uses his magical powers to triumph over the "three men of sin." In his wedding masque, Prospero uses the spirit Ariel to present a vision of the world he is trying to create: a peaceful world of heaven on earth. Prospero interrupts his masque when he remembers the plot of his slave, Caliban, thus occasioning his famous speech, "Our revels now are ended," in which the "cloud-capped towers" vanish from the world "like the baseless fabric of this vision" (IV.i. 151-152). Despite this apostrophe to man's futile use of his will, Prospero goes on to regain for Miranda her lost inheritance, much as Christ regains for Adam his lost inheritance in the Bible. The mythic pattern of *The Tempest*, then, corresponds to that of the Bible by presenting a view of reality in which man uses his loving will to recreate a "brave new world," invulnerable to time and death.

In "The Masque of the Red Death" Poe's allusions to *The Tempest* and the Bible may suggest that he is responding to this mythic pattern. Like Shakespeare's Duke Prospero, Poe's Prince Prospero uses his will to confront the harsh reality of death, figured in the ghostly apparition of the Red Death itself. But Poe recasts the story so that Prince Prospero's primary action consists of retreating from the reality of the Red Death—the action of retreat being precisely what Shakespeare takes care to emend. Poe also takes away Prospero's magic powers, leaving his hero with an art that most closely resembles interior decoration—a mere "philosophy of furniture." As a consequence, Prince Prospero lacks the supernatural power that enables Shakespeare's Prospero to succeed. Taking refuge in a "castellated abbey," Prince Prospero uses his will to create an earthly paradise that parodies the "brave new world" of *The Tempest*—a world which, rather than transcending time, embodies the very instrument of time, the sinister "clock of ebony": Poe's Prospero, by building time into his abbey, ensures his own destruction. In the world of Prince Prospero, the governing force becomes not that of cosmic harmony and love but that of cosmic "disconcert," the musical instrument for which becomes the clock itself, that grim "sound" which hourly interrupts the dance. In hiding from death in the bosom of earthly pleasure, Poe's Prospero is like Shakespeare's Prospero if he had given up Ariel for Caliban; in a sense, Poe's story embodies Caliban's wish-fulfillment: "the red plague rid you," Caliban says to Miranda, "For learning me your language" (I.ii.364-365). The story's subtitle appropriately becomes "Our revels now are ended"—a powerful overture to the vanity of human wishes. Prince Prospero's artistically inspired masque does not marry earth to heaven, but earth to death, so that the world of the abbey becomes, not a new Eden, but a "valley of the shadow of death."

Poe's use of Biblical symbolism does not become particularly noteworthy until the last paragraph, where the language, rhythm, and allusion are unmistakably Biblical:

And now was acknowledge the presence of the Red Death. He had come like a thief in the night. And one by one dropped the revellers 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.

The sentence structure, with its repetition of the word "And," is like that in the Bible. The Red Death, Poe says, comes "like a thief in the night." The phrase is a direct quotation from 1 Thessalonians 5:2 and 2 Peter 3:10, which both refer to Christ. In Poe's mythology, the Red Death replaces Christ as the reigning force in the universe. Hence, the Red Death is said to have "dominion over all"—a reversal of Paul's statement in Romans 6:9, in which "death hath no more dominion" because of Christ's resurrection. Moreover, the halls of Poe's earthly paradise become "blood-bedewed"—suggesting a conflation of two familiar Biblical images, blood and dew: the blood of Christ's resurrection that redeems man, and the drops of dew that fall from heaven to save man from the harshness of nature. In Poe, the blood and dew of the Red Death replace the blood of Christ and the dew of heaven.

Poe may have in mind here the Pauline conception of baptism, in which man is baptized into Christ through being baptized into Christ's death—a conception that concludes, significantly, with Paul's remark that death will have no more "dominion" because of Christ's resurrection:

Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in the newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection. . . . For he that is dead is freed from sin. Now if we be dead with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him: Knowing that Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more; death hath no more dominion over him.

Poe inverts the Pauline conception of baptism by presenting his characters being "bedewed" in the unholy baptismal "blood" of the Red Death: "For he that is dead is freed from sin." Death becomes the grim "saviour" of this world; appropriately, the Red Death wears a "vesture dabbled in blood"—a grim inversion of Christ in the Book of Revelation:

And he was clothed with a vesture dipped in blood: and his name is called The Word of God.

The Red Death joins Herod in denying Christ as the Messiah; but the Red Death "out-Herod[s] Herod" by spilling the blood, not merely of the innocent first born, but of everyone. The three figures presiding over the "blood-bedewed" halls— Darkness, Decay, and the Red Death—become an infernal triumvirate replacing the divine trinity as the ruling force of the world.

The Biblical counterpart to the romance "masque" or "mask" is the "veil." In the Old Testament, Moses wears a veil when he speaks in the name of Yaweh. In 2 Corinthians 3 Paul says that Moses' veil symbolizes the obscurity of man's knowledge of God given through the old law, which becomes for Paul the law of death. Hence, in wearing the veil, Moses is wearing the veil of death and blinding himself to the truth about man's relation to God. Paul goes on to say that the "vail is done away in Christ", that is, that Christ triumphs over the law of death through his resurrection. In John 20:6-7, the beloved disciple and Simon Peter go "into the sepulchre, and seeth the linen clothes, but wrapped together in a place by itself." The details draw attention to the success of Christ's resurrection: he has taken the veil of death away. The prefigurement for this becomes Christ's raising of Lazarus from the grave: "And he that was dead came forth, *bound hand and foot with graveclothes*, and his face was bound about with a napkin. Jesus saith unto them, Loose him, and let him go."

Poe echoes the Lazarus passage when he makes his Red Death

shrouded from head to foot in the habiliments of the grave. The mask which concealed the visage was made . . . to resemble the countenance of a stiffened corpse.

But Poe rejects the notion that Christ takes the veil of death away by having his masquer, the Red Death, wear a veil that cannot be taken away:

a throng of the revellers at once threw themselves into the black apartment, and, seizing the mummer . . . , gasped in unutterable horror at finding the grave cerements and corpse-like mask which they handled with so violent a rudeness, untenanted by any tangible form.

In presenting an image of man helpless against the apparition of death, Poe suggests the inefficacy of Christ's triumph over death, thus delivering man into the world of the old law: the Red Death denies Christ his power of resurrection.

As such, the Red Death qualifies for what John calls an "antichrist": he who "denieth that Jesus is the Christ . . . is antichrist." John admonishes:

Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. . . . For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof. . . . Little children, it is the last time: and as ye have heard . . . antichrist shall come.

Prince Prospero, who is "of the world" and suffers from "the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life," appropriately becomes the victim of an "antichrist," that figure who in the Bible temporarily replaces Christ as the ruling force of the world. That Poe is responding to Scripture here is further indicated if, as Thomas O. Mabbott says, the story has as one of its bases the clock at Strasbourg Cathedral,

where, shortly before the stroke of the clock, a figure representing Death emerged from the center and sounded the full hour, while at the quarter and half hours the statue of Christ came out, repelling the destroyer.

Not surprisingly, Poe places his grim reversal of the Christian drama in an "abbey"—the Catholic bride of Christ, a holy sanctuary in which man uses religious ritual to commune with God. The abbey has seven rooms, each decked in a different color and having a "heavy tripod, bearing a brazier of fire" opposite a window of "stained glass." Critics have associated the seven rooms with the cycle of nature and the seven ages of man in Shakespeare. In the Bible, though, seven symbolizes fullness, completeness—man's oneness with God. The seven colors also correspond to colors of vestments worn in Catholic liturgy, as well as to the seven colors of the rainbow (Biblical symbol of hope and the new covenant between man and God). And the braziers, which use coals of fire, recall the "censer full of burning coals of fire from off the altar before the Lord" that is brought "within the vail" of the Old Testament temple in Leviticus 16:12, and the "seven lamps of fire burning before the throne" of God in Revelation 4:5. Hence, in the Red Death's destruction of the abbey, Poe seems to suggest the inefficacy of man's use of religious ritual to commune with God, as a means of transcending time and of triumphing over the law of death. Poe's story can be seen to have a basis in Ecclesiastes 6:2: "this is vanity, and it is an evil disease." The "Avatar" and "seal" of Prospero's world are not Christ, as in the Bible, but the "blood" of the Red Death. The

shaping force of Poe's world becomes, not the Lamb of God, as in the Book of Revelation, but that type of antichrist in the fourth seal of God riding the "pale horse": "and his name . . . was Death."

Poe's use of *The Tempest* and the Bible to shape the mythic pattern of "The Masque of the Red Death" is not so much the product of a wild fancy as it is of an astute reading of western literature. For, as J. L. Borges has suggested in his story "The Gospel According to Mark,"

generations of men, throughout recorded time, have always told and retold two stories, that of a lost ship which searches the Mediterranean seas for a dearly loved island, and that of a god who is crucified on Golgotha.

According to Northrop Frye, "Borges is clearly suggesting that romance, as a whole, provides a parallel epic" to the Bible; that, in fact, romance can be seen as a "secular scripture" whose mythic pattern mirrors that of the Bible. Hence, the allusions to *The Tempest* and the Bible in "The Masque of the Red Death" may suggest that Poe responds to the mythic pattern of the two kinds of stories which Borges and Frye suggest form the basis of western literature.

Essentially, then, Poe in "The Masque of the Red Death" reads Shakespeare and the Bible much as Marlowe's Dr. Faustus reads the Bible and Aristotle— out of context. He is attracted to the ideas in two speeches that are secular and sacred correlates of each other: Prospero's "Our revels now are ended" speech and the passage in the Bible about the victory of "antichrist" over man. Specifically, Poe inverts the romantic conventions of *The Tempest* and the religious tenets of the Bible. Prospero becomes, not the unifying force of love in the world, but the mere victim of a demonic opposite, the Red Death. And the Red Death replaces Christ as the shaping force of reality. In Poe's revision of the mythic pattern set forth in the secular and sacred mythologies, man is imprisoned in a world governed by the "law" of death. Hence, man's use of his will to link himself with heaven, as a means of triumphing over sin, death, and time, becomes a "masquerade"—a futile display of self-deception that culminates only in death. Man's final marriage is not with Milan or the Church, with home or heaven—but with the mere "shadow" of these: the Red Death.

Source: Patrick Cheney, "Poe's Use of *The Tempest* and the Bible in 'The Masque of the Red Death,'" in *English Language Notes*, Vol. 20, No. 3-4, May-June, 1983, pp. 31-39.

Critical Essay #7

In the following essay, Wheat argues that the prince attempts to prepare to meet death by assuming a mask of indifference to the effects of the Red Death and to death itself, but he fails to maintain this indifference in the ultimate meeting with death.

When Prince Prospero and his thousand carefree friends shut themselves up in a fortified abbey to escape the fearful Red Death and make merry, they also shut themselves off from the sympathies of critical opinion. Thomas Mabbot believes "one cannot run away from responsibility." Stuart Levine agrees, noting that "The nobles are fiddling while Rome burns; worse, they are fiddling in great style." David Halliburton suggests that Prince Prospero sins by trying "to supplant God's creation with a creation of his own." The Prince is viewed by Edward Pitcher as "arrogantly calculating," with character traits of "egotism, . . . pride, coldness, manic superiority and tyranny." H. H. Bell calls Prospero a "feelingless ruling prince." While it is difficult to entertain feelings of goodwill toward a monarch who deserts his people and stages a festive masked ball in the midst of their exposure to peril, negative attitudes toward Prince Prospero are to be found only in the writings of his modern critics and not in his story or in Poe's attitude toward him. Joseph Roppolo comes closest to Poe's meaning in "The Masque of the Red Death" when he discusses the isolation of man: "In the trap of life and in his death, every man is an island. If there is a mutual bond, it is the shared horror of death." The Prince and his friends have no desire to share death's horror. Poe, however, expresses no disapproval of his character's actions or of his apparent attitudes. Prince Prospero's supposed pride is best seen as a protective mask, a mask of indifference with which he tries to shield himself from death.

Commentaries on "The Masque of the Red Death" often, rightly, describe the story's action in terms of a battle. Walter Blair views it as a battle between death and life, between time and the "gaiety which seeks to kill time by forgetting it." In his comparison of Poe's story to several Hawthorne stories, Robert Regan comments that "the gaiety within is a psychological defense against a menacing antagonist. . . ." The battle is inevitable for all who live. However, from the introduction of the Prince in paragraph two, his defense is not an attempt to win the battle but an attempt to avoid it. He and the courtiers begin by retiring (literally, drawing back) into the "deep seclusion" of the abbey. A strong wall with iron gates surrounds the "amply provisioned" building, suggesting preparations for a siege.

Not only do the inhabitants make physical preparations as they take their stand against the coming onslaught, they must also be as mentally ready as possible. Mentally, as well as physically, the only defense is retreat. The retreat of the mind goes beyond mere forgetfulness or simple escape into "reality-denying fantasies." The Prince and his courtiers, in an unconscious defense mechanism, construct and maintain a pose of indifference to death. Gaiety, merry making, and all the joys of superficial pleasure are allowable under this pose; concern for self or others, serious thought, and strong emotion are forbidden, for they rankle the mind with the agonizing realization that when the battle comes it will certainly be lost. The only way to approximate success is to not

let losing matter. The situation is something like that of the laboratory rat trained to run a maze for a food pellet. When an essential corridor is closed off, the rat will eventually stop trying to run the maze and will sit down in his hopelessness to starve. Prince Prospero differs only in that, as a human, he is able to use his inventiveness to make the best of his hopeless situation.

The weapon of indifference and its association with tightly controlled emotions are seen throughout the story. The victim of the disease is shut out "from the sympathy of his fellowmen." The bolts inside the abbey are welded shut not to keep the Red Death *out*, but to serve as a precaution against the courtiers' own "sudden impulses of despair or of frenzy." They let "The external world . . . take care of itself. In the meantime it was folly to grieve, or to think." Some critics have detected a note of authorial disapproval of the Prince in the first of these last two sentences. But the second invites a more sympathetic interpretation. Grief and thought are not only useless but are destructive, unwise, certainly not consistent with the character of the "sagacious" Prince. The external world here has the dual meaning of the worlds outside the abbey and outside the mind.

The movements of the masked ball, beginning in paragraph three, are dominated by the striking of the ebony clock in the ominous seventh apartment where "few of the company [are] bold enough to set foot." The dancers and musicians alternate between maintaining their pose of light laughter and gaiety and, when the doleful, deep-voiced clock chimes, becoming pale, uneasy, and thoughtful. The clock is the reminder of death, the enemy, and time, his companion. The musicians smile when the striking stops. They repent of their "nervousness and folly" and promise each other to let "no similar emotion" be evinced at the next sounding of the hour. It is foolish to be nervous or to give in to a despairing emotion.

One may ask, if the Prince and his friends truly have a need to feign indifference to an inevitable death, why do they bother to retreat to an abbey? Also, if the Prince wishes to forget the presence of death why has he surrounded himself and his courtiers with reminders of death and the grotesque— rooms strangely situated and lighted only by fiery torches glowing through tinted windows, bizzare masquerade costumes, and the coffin-like black room with its "blood-colored panes"? The answer to both questions lies in Prince Prospero's grand attempts to control his environment. A poor man who has just eaten can tell himself he is not concerned about food. In like manner, only within the relative security of the stone walls can the Prince and his friends act as though they are unconcerned about death. A control over their more hysterical emotions is possible only in the extremely artificial world designed and executed by the Prince. Pitcher believes Prince Prospero deliberately tries to frighten and disturb his guests with reminders of death "to test the courage of his friends and to reveal their relative inferiority" to himself. A more plausible explanation, I believe, is that he is trying to duplicate the outside world on a small scale and in a nontheatening manner. His seven rooms have been often compared to the seven stages of man's life. In an imitation of life's rooms, the apartments are situated so that "the vision embraced but little more than one at a time." However, the rooms are much more fluid and accessible than are the stages of life, which cannot be retraced or explored in advance. Actual death is too horrible to be

greeted with apathy, but a man-made black room, designed and furnished by the Prince himself, can be endured. Glass, even colored blood-red, can be tolerated. The clock is a constant mournful messenger of "the Time that flies," but it is also a man-made device, and within man's control. Prince Prospero, like Mithridates, seems to be taking his poison a bit at a time. Ironically, he is so obsessed with death that all his efforts are aimed at showing how little death matters to him.

There are hints throughout the story that Prince Prospero is insane. Poe says, "his conceptions glowed with barbaric lustre. There are some who would have thought him mad." The masquerade costumes "were delirious fancies such as the madman fashions. . . ." These and similar passages are often offered as additional evidence that Poe disapproves of the Prince. But these lines can also be interpreted as comments on society's view of him, as well as a reminder of the limitations of his power. To those outside the abbey, Prospero would seem mad because his actions and attitudes seem inappropriate for the situation at hand. On another level, his "conceptions," or inventive ordering of the elements of the masquerade, are "barbaric" in that they are crude and simplistic. Prince Prospero has gained temporary control over his limited environment. But his power stops with the natural laws of the world, which are able to invade any man's plans and creations. It is necessary for the Prince to retreat to the abbey and feign indifference to the outside world—he becomes a madman with "delirious fancies" if he deludes himself that he has won the battle with death rather than avoided it.

Avoidance of death can only be temporary, as transitory as the parts of a play. The courtiers become not only guests at a masquerade, but also literally masquers, players in death's court. Before the masque and the assertion of the final royal authority belonging to the Red Death, the guests are acting out a grimly comic anti-masque in a portrayal of "the unruly, of the forces and elements royalty subdues."

The real test—and the final failure—of the mask of indifference comes with the entrance of the mysterious masked figure dressed exactly like the corpse of a Red Death victim. The stranger becomes visible to the masquers just after midnight. The clock, the most powerful reminder of death in the Prince's world, is at its most powerful moment of the night, since it has twelve long, suggestive strokes to sound. The guests have too much time for thought—they slip irretrievably into meditation and become aware of the presence of the stranger who has haunted the abbey from the beginning. Death is no longer avoidable, and in its actual visitation the unfeeling gaiety must give way to feelings "of terror, of horror, and of disgust."

As the company becomes aware of the deathly figure, emotion quickly takes over. The mummer is "beyond the bounds of even the prince's indefinite decorum," and the mask of indifference can no longer be retained. The challenge, the call to battle, is given in this central passage: "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 rooms and the costumes can be carelessly lived with. The chiming of the clock can almost be dealt

with. But the appearance of a representation of the specific type of fatal illness from which Prince Prospero and his friends are physically and mentally trying to escape is too much. Even the Prince has not been hardened enough by his artificial surroundings to endure without emotion the taunting apparition. He has been heretofore "reckless" (literally, without concern). Life and death have been "equally jests" to him as he has convinced himself that he favors neither in his lack of interest. But the one matter which is not laughable has been introduced. The Prince's reaction is that of a man who prepares himself mentally for battle, as awakening emotions can no longer be restrained.

When Prince Prospero sees the intruder his initial reaction is that of the untried soldier going, at last, into a deadly serious battle after a long wait in the camp. He is "convulsed . . . with a strong shudder either of terror or distaste." Like the untried soldier first meeting the enemy, he feels an overwhelming fear which no amount of preparation could forestall. The battle is already on its way to being lost as the Prince next grows red with anger. He is now moving to fight death on its home ground, but he makes several last vain attempts to avoid conflict. His statement, "Who dares?" is at once an acknowledgement of a challenge and impending fight, and an attempt to treat the stranger as merely another courtier, a foolish courtier who has overstepped the bounds of safety for all those in the abbey. He orders the guests to "seize him and unmask him —that we may know whom we have to hang at sunrise, from the battlements!" It is obviously fruitless to try to seize, unmask, and hang a personification of death. But if only this figure can be proven merely human, if only the court can "know whom" the tasteless mocker is, then it cannot be death. Prince Prospero's reluctance for conflict is reflected in his delegation of the seizure to his friends, and in the words "whom we have to hang at sunrise." The hanging is unwanted but necessary. For the mask of indifference to be reassumed the impediment to indifference must be removed.

The Prince's attack upon the mummer is filled with references to intense emotions and hurried actions. He has lost his carefully nurtured selfcontrol and foolishly attacked the unbeatable foe. He maddens "with rage and the shame of his own momentary cowardice." He "rushed hurriedly" to the stranger, approaching him "in rapid impetuosity." The stranger is, throughout, the challenger who need not fight. He approaches the Prince with "deliberate" step and later, when the Prince pursues, he simply turns and confronts him. Prince Prospero is dead before the Red Death can do its work. He is defeated in the quite literal face of death by giving in to his emotions of terror and hysteria. The fear of death has become his master. The courtiers, who summon "the wild courage of despair" and attack the stranger's mask with "so violent a rudeness," meet the fate of their leader immediately thereafter, submitting to the same lack of control over their emotions. Death's victory is complete—a victory over both the minds and bodies of the noblemen.

The Prince has been criticized for his apparent frivolity and lack of feeling. But it is evident that this frivolity, this pretended refusal to take death seriously, is all that separates the Prince from the horror of death. His personality and creations in the abbey provide an excellent illustration of Edward Davidson's description of horror as "the total freedom of the will to function, at the same time that there is nothing to will 'for'

or will 'against.' Its judgments are in a vacuum because it pretends to act in a world where no discoverable controls are operative." Prince Prospero can exercise his will freely within the vacuum of the abbey as long as he can deceive himself that his emotions, the world, life, and death can be controlled. When he allows his emotions to take control, the "nameless awe" of the unknown foe destroys him.

It is natural that Poe should have written a story such as "The Masque of the Red Death" in 1842. By this time he had lost his mother (1811); Jane Stanard, the inspiration of "To Helen" (1824); and his foster mother, Frances Allan (1829). He had experienced what David Sinclair in his biography of Poe calls a "crippling sense of powerlessness in the face of death."

Most critics of "The Masque" interpret it as an allegory and assume that, as such, it must point to a moral truth. But the truth in the story is existential, not moral. Poe as narrator presents characters who arm themselves against death through whatever means possible. Through his art, the author is a more formidable opponent to death than is Prospero. The Prince loses control and faces defeat, but Poe remains far removed. He voices no disapproval of the characters, but neither does he show sympathy for their fate. He maintains in his tone the superiority of what he portrays as the only, although feeble, defense against death—a perfect mask of indifference.

Source: Patricia H. Wheat, "The Mask of Indifference in 'The Masque of the Red Death,'" in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. 19, No. 1, Winter, 1982, pp. 51-56.

Critical Essay #8

In the following essay, Bell interprets time and the seven rooms in Prince Prospero's imperial suite allegorically as periods of a person's life.

If after reading it, one concludes that "The Masque of the Red Death" is nothing more than another of Poe's rather numerous explorations of the general theme of death, then there is little that may be said about its meaning other than that it is a rather good example of grim and ironic humor. However, to the student who inclines his attention toward the allegorical overtones of the work, other possibilities as to its meaning present themselves. It is the writer's belief that the story becomes more interesting, as well as broader in scope, when one concentrates on these allegorical elements.

Examining the text of the work, we discover that Prospero is a feelingless ruling prince. To the discerning reader there is also implicit within the text a strong suspicion that this man is probably insane, for we are told that "Prince Prospero was happy and dauntless and sagacious" even though half the people in his kingdom had been killed by the Red Death. This would hardly be the reaction of a ruler who is in contact with his environment. This same man, motivated by a morbid fear of death, selfishly decides to commit the Hawthorne-like sin of alienation by isolating himself from most of his subjects by retreating with a thousand light-hearted friends into a castellated abbey to escape the Red Death. Assuming that death, even the one that Prospero is trying to escape, is the wage of sin, there would be little allegorical objection to having Prospero seek refuge in an abbey—a monastery.

While in this stage of isolation, as it were, from the majority of his subjects, he entertains his carefully selected guests at a masked ball in the seven rooms of his imperial suite; and from the way that Poe treats these seven rooms, it may be gathered that he views them as the allegorical representation of Prince Prospero's life span. The fact that he does view them thus is further enhanced by his placing the first room in the eastern extremity of the apartment and the last room in the western extremity. These directions are time-honored terms which have been used to refer to the beginning and the end of things—even of life itself.

Since Poe appears to attach so much importance to these rooms, since he devotes so much time to describing them in general, and, furthermore, since he dwells in particular and at great length upon their color and their lay-out within the abbey, a diagram of them as the writer imagines they might be situated is appended to this article with the hope that it may prove helpful to the reader.

As was noted above, the imperial suite consists of seven rooms, and if it is assumed that the entire suite allegorically represents Prospero's life span, then it is logical to assume that the seven rooms allegorically represent the seven decades of his life, which according to the Bible is the normal life span of man—three score and ten. It has also been noted above that there is a possibility that Prospero is insane, and some weight is given to this suspicion when one learns that this personage's life had been

conditioned by his love of the bizarre, and when one learns that the seven rooms which represent his life present a different aspect from that of those rooms which would allegorically represent the life span of another—and perhaps normal—person.

Prospero's apartments were "irregularly disposed" and full of turns which prevented one's seeing from one end to the other. Despite the turns, however, one may infer from Poe's words that they were arranged more or less in a line. That they had a closed corridor on either side of them is definitely known. Likewise it is known that these closed corridors extended the full length of the apartments. In other words, the imperial suite or life span of Prospero is enclosed or embraced by two closed corridors or, if you will, by two unknowns. These two unknowns could very well be thought of as the unknowns of birth and death which in effect enclose or embrace the life of any man.

Poe is careful to point out that in many such palaces "such suites form a long and straight vista" with nothing to hinder one's view from one end to the other; and he is equally careful to point out that this is not true of Prospero's apartments. These he says are crooked and winding with a sharp turn every twenty or thirty yards that prevented one's seeing very far into or through them. By emphasizing the fact that Prospero's apartments differ from similar apartments owned by other people, Poe may well be trying to indicate that Prospero's life differed from that of most people—that it is more crooked and winding, more tortured and stress ridden than the lives of others which are straighter and perhaps calmer.

Each of the seven rooms, with the exception of the last one, has two Gothic windows and two doors. It does not appear that the seventh room—the room of death—would need two doors. An entrance way alone would be sufficient for this one. As for the Gothic windows, each of them has a fire brazier behind it in the closed corridor, and the effect of the fire shining through the colored glass of the windows was productive of "a multitude of gaudy and fantastic appearances." Since the only light in any of the rooms was that of the fires sifted through the stained glass windows, the effect would very likely be an eerie one indeed, productive of "delirious fancies such as the madman fashions." Prospero then perhaps comprehends his life only in terms of the glimmerings of light (knowledge) that emanate from the unknowns of birth and death, and he sees his life as something of a mad drama. At least this line of reasoning provides a *raison d'etre* for the closed corridors and the fire braziers. Otherwise they may just seem to be there as extraneous and more or less irrelevant items.

Poe has so much to say about the colors found in the seven rooms that it is difficult, if indeed not impossible, to think that he meant nothing by them. It has been suggested above that the seven rooms probably represent the seven decades of Prospero's life, and proceeding on this assumption, it is logical to conclude that the color in any given room may be related to Prospero's physical and mental condition in that decade of his life.

Admitting that color symbolism can be rather vague at best, there nevertheless appears to be enough evidence in the text of the story to warrant certain pertinent conclusions concerning Poe's use of such symbolism here. The first room, for example, is located in

the eastern end of the apartments, and it is colored blue. The symbolism regarding Poe's use of the direction east here is rather obvious, and the color blue may be related to the same beginnings and origins that "East" stands for by thinking of it in the sense that it is the residence of the unknown or the unexpected—i.e., such as when we speak of something coming as a bolt out of the blue. Since blue may thus be associated with the unknown, by extension of meaning it may reasonably be associated in this instance with the beginning of life, which is unknown also.

The second room, says Poe, was purple—a color worn by those who have achieved something in the world or in society. Again, by extension of meaning, one may think of this color as being representative of that period in Prospero's life when he has accomplished a little something in life— perhaps moving into maturity.

The third room is colored green, and the writer doesn't think that it requires too much imagination to associate this color with that which is verdant, with that which is full of life and vigor—indeed with a man who is in the prime of his years.

The fourth room is orange and quite easily suggests, at least to the reader focusing on color symbolism, the autumn of life. Prospero could well be considered here to be beyond his prime, but by no means old yet.

The fifth room is white, and if we follow the same train of thought it would suggest the silver or hoary haired period of old age.

The sixth room is violet, a color that is emblematic of gravity and chastity. It appears that it would not be too much to assume that this room then represents the gravity and the soberness of extreme old age as well as the more or less enforced chastity that goes along with it.

Poe tells us that the seventh room is black, a color easily and most often associated with death; but, as if this were not enough, he tells us that this room is the most westerly of all, and the association of conclusions, ends, and death itself with "West" are too numerous to mention.

Most of the dancing and gaiety in the apartment took place in the first six rooms, for as Poe says "in them beat feverishly the heart of life." We are also told that "there were few of the company bold enough to set foot within" the seventh room—the room of death. Also it is to be noted that in the seventh room was to be found the great black clock, which seemed indeed to be more than a clock and to do more than a clock does. It would appear from the way he writes that Poe meant for the clock to count off periods of life—not mere hours. It is perhaps for this reason that he capitalizes the word "Time" at this point in the story and thus personifies it. This is also very likely why all the maskers stop when the clock strikes off the hour. They think not in terms of an hour having passed but rather in terms of just so much of their lives as having passed. Lastly, let it be noted that the clock of death, though it is heard in all the rooms, is heard best in the seventh or room of death.

Enhancing the possibility of considering Prospero insane, Poe indicates that the rooms were filled with dreams such as those a man with a tortured mind might have. He says that in the rooms "there was much of the beautiful, much of the wanton, much of the bizarre, something of the terrible, and not a little of that which might have excited disgust." Amid these revelers and amid these fantastic dreams there appears at the stroke of midnight a masked figure representing death. That there may be no mistaking its identity, Poe clothes it in the "habiliments of the grave" and causes it to wear a mask which resembles the face of a corpse.

Prospero is very angry at the intrusion and asks, "Who dares insult us with this blasphemous mockery?" He also commands his guests to "seize him [the figure] and unmask him—that we may know whom we have to hang at sunrise from the battlements!" It should be noted that Prospero was standing in the blue room when he uttered these words— in that youthful period of life when a man is braver toward death than he is later on, when it is closer upon him.

In his anger Prospero rushes toward the figure of death with the intention of stabbing him to death—irony of ironies! In doing so he runs through every room in the apartment —through every period of life—only to be stricken dead in the seventh room when he catches up with his intended victim. Since Prospero is standing in the blue room when he sees the figure representing death, and since one knows that it is impossible to see very far into this apartment because of its windings, one may conclude that the figure of death is in either the first or second room. Allegorically this could very well mean that one becomes aware of death at a very early age.

Lastly, it might be pointed out that Prospero in his last fateful, headlong rush at death is probably acting from a self-destructive urge—attracted to that which he at the same time mortally fears. In any event, with Prospero's death comes the death of all in the apartment and the tale ends with the morbidity that is so typical of Poe—the victory of death over all.

Source: H. H. Bell, Jr. "'The Masque of the Red Death'— An Interpretation," in *South Atlantic Bulletin*, Vol. 38, No. 4, 1973, pp. 101-5.

Critical Essay #9

In the following essay, Roppolo both reviews many previous interpretations of Poe's tale and offers his own interpretation of the Red Death figure as an allegory of life itself.

Those who seek guidance in interpreting Edgar Allan Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death" are doomed to enter a strange world, as confused and confusing as a Gothic Wonderland and in some respects as eerie as the blighted house of Roderick Usher. Their guides will be old critics, New Critics, scholars, biographers, enthusiasts, dilettantes, journalists, hobbyists, anthologists, medical men, psychologists, and psychoanalysts. From these the seekers will learn that Prince Prospero is Poe himself and that "The Masque" is therefore autobiography; that Poe never presents a moral; that "The Masque" is an allegory and must therefore teach a lesson; that there is indeed a moral; that there are unnumbered morals; that there is no message or meaning; that there is a message; that the message is quite obvious and understandable; and that the meaning of the message transcends human understanding. In the pages that follow I should like to tour, briefly, the tangled world of the critics of "The Masque of the Red Death" and then to explore "The Masque" with the best of all possible guides—Poe himself.

Critical Essay #10

A representative of the psychological guide and of the group which sees no meaning in "The Masque of the Red Death" is Albert Mordell, whose book, *The Erotic Motive in Literature*, widely read since 1919, was reissued in 1962 with a new section on Poe. Mordell writes blithely of Poe's "Loss of Breadth" and of a character named Roger Usher who, "like Poe, had been disappointed in love, and probably also drank." To Mordell, Poe was not only a frustrated lover and a drunkard; he was also a sadist and a masochist, a man who suffered from "a damming of the libido" and who was "so absorbed in his dreams that he never tried to take an interest in reality. Hence," Mordell concludes, "we will find no moral note in Poe's work"—with the single exception of "William Wilson."

In sharp contrast, Vincent Buranelli argues that Poe "was no sadist, no masochist, no pervert, no rake," but was instead "the sanest of our writers"— that he was, in fact, "America's greatest writer, and the American writer of greatest signifi- cance in world literature." Yet, oddly, Buranelli finds himself aligned with Mordell when he, too, asserts sweepingly that "Poe does not touch morality"; and he finds himself involved in something of a contradiction when he describes "The Masque of the Red Death" as "an allegory representing Death itself as one of the dramatis personae." Allegory, typically, is meaningful and moral, but Buranelli does not elaborate upon his statement; nor does he reconcile Poe's well-known detestation of allegory with Poe's use of it in one of his acknowledged masterpieces.

Joseph Wood, Krutch, who saw Poe as incompetent, sexless, and mad, but nevertheless marked by genius, dismissed "The Masque of the Red Death" as "merely the most perfect [sic] description of that fantastic *decor* which [Poe] had again and again imagined." Edward H. Davidson remarks on the paucity of "fact and information" in the piece and reveals that "tone and movement are all." Commenting at greater length, David M. Rein summarizes the narrative and adds that

The prince, of course, represents Poe, once again as a young man of wealthy and distinguished family. Here Poe dreamed of escape from the harsh world, where such evils as the plague were dominant—escape into a secluded place of pleasure he himself designed. But like so many of Poe's fantasies, this dream world would not remain intact; the imaginary refuge, in spite of all precautions, was invaded by Death, whose merest look destroyed him. It may be significant, too, that all in this company fell back to avoid encountering the gruesome figure. The prince alone, unwilling to await the stranger's pleasure, went forth to pursue him. Does not Poe here once again, in fantasy, impatiently seek a danger that seems inescapable?

Avoiding the pitfall of imagining Poe's ratiocinative mind losing control of a carefully imagined dream world, Killis Campbell, among others, contented himself with seeking sources and with attempting to ground the fantasy of "The Masque of the Red Death" in fact. *In The Mind of Poe and Other Studies*, Campbell points out that Poe was "pretty clearly indebted to William Harrison Ainsworth's *Old Saint Paul's*" and then cites an

account by N. P. Willis in the *New York Mirror* of June 2, 1832, in which Willis describes a Parisian ball featuring "The Cholera Waltz," "The Cholera Galopade," and, most pertinently, a masked figure representing the cholera itself. Willard Thorp, in *A Southern Reader*, makes the identity of Poe's Red Death positive: it is, Thorpe says, "undoubtedly the cholera, newly arrived in America"; Poe colors it red to distinguish it from the Black Death—the bubonic plague. In a more literary vein, numerous scholars have pointed out the use of the words "red plague" by Shakespeare in *The Tempest* (I.ii.364), without, however, making useful applications to Poe's "Masque."

Arthur Hobson Quinn is among those who believe that "The Masque of the Red Death" contains a moral or a message (he uses the terms interchangeably). "With a restraint that is one of the surest marks of genius," Quinn says, "Poe gives no hint of the great moral the tale tells to those who can think. For the others, he had no message." Whereupon Quinn leaves his reader to place himself among the thinkers or, unhappily, among the nonthinkers, disdaining to make explicit or even to suggest the "great moral" which Poe shields behind his "Masque."

Patrick F. Quinn agrees that "The Masque of the Red Death" is "one of the few serious moral tales that Poe ever wrote," but he, too, spares the reader the embarrassment of having the moral or morals pointed out to him. Others are less reticent, and their interpretations tend to fall into the familiar pattern of the *memento mori*. Typical are Frances Winwar and Norman Foerster.

To Frances Winwar, "The Masque of the Red Death" is "a compelling fantasy in scarlet and black where every effect stresses the inevitability of final dissolution. . . ." Foerster notes that red is "Poe's most frequent color" and sees in it "the horror of blood." To Foerster "The Masque of the Red Death" is a richly vivid contrast between life and death. Setting dominates, and "magnificence and voluptuousness heighten the sense of worldly pleasure till the heart of life beats feverishly—and stops." The clock symbolizes the processes of time—both life and death.

Three critics, Walter Blair, Harry Levin, and Marie Bonaparte, go far beyond the routine. To Blair, as to many others, there is "allegorical signi- fication" in the seven rooms, which, "progressing from east to west—from blue to black—connote the seven ages of man from the blue of the dawn of life to the black of its night." The clock is, of course, Time; the masked figure is the Red Death; and the revelers are the living, "who seek to bar out and forget death by being gay and carefree," only to discover that death must inevitably conquer all humanity. So far, the critic is in the mainstream of interpretation. But Blair, more perceptive than most, refuses to confine "The Masque of the Red Death" to this moral. The closing note of the last paragraph is "inconsistent with such a meaning"; and Poe, a lover of ambiguity, would probably argue, Blair says, that "The Masque" is "suggestive of implications which cannot be made explicit this side of eternity." Harry Levin makes the venture. "The closing note, echoed from the pseudo-Miltonic last line of Pope's *Dunciad*," Levin says, "predicates a reduction of cosmos to chaos"—a challenging and, I hope to show, a fruitful bit of speculation.

It is left to Princess Bonaparte to lift "The Masque of the Red Death" from the limited realm of allegory to the expansive kingdom of myth. But, having placed "The Masque" among "typical" Oedipus stories, along with "The Cask of Amontillado," the Princess bogs down in a morass of conflicting Freudian symbols. The Prince, of course, is Oedipus, the son. The masked figure is the father. The castle of seven rooms is the body of the mother. The uplifted dagger is a phallus. The dropped dagger is the castrated phallus. And the Red Death— whether father-figure or something beyond that —is both death and castration. We are back in the weird and wonderful world of Albert Mordell, who, not surprisingly, admits owing a great debt to Princess Bonaparte.

Of all the critics mentioned, Blair is the most detailed and in many ways the most convincing. Foerster's brief statement, too, almost compels belief. But I should like to suggest that neither goes far enough. Foerster evades consideration of Poe's final paragraph. Blair acknowledges that paragraph— vitally important because of its position —but leaves all attempts at its clarification to the other side of eternity. If Foerster's evasion is justified (and Levin' remark indicates that it is not), then Poe has failed to follow one of his own precepts, that "In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to be the one pre-established design." And if Blair is correct, then Poe must have sprinkled his page with more than a grain of salt when he wrote that "Every work of art should contain within itself all that is requisite for its own comprehension." I do not believe that Poe was less than a remarkably skilled craftsman, nor do I believe that his critical dicta were deliberate jests. I should like to take Poe at his word in both quoted statements and, with both steadily in mind, study "The Masque of the Red Death" to see what it yields.

Critical Essay #11

In Poe's imaginative prose, beginnings unfailingly are important. "The Masque of the Red Death" begins with these three short sentences:

The "Red Death" had long devastated the country. No pestilence had even been so fatal or so hideous. Blood was its Avatar and its seal—the redness and horror of blood.

On one level, the reader is introduced to a disease, a plague, with hideous and terrifying symptoms, a remarkably rapid course, and inevitable termination in death. But Poe's heaviest emphasis is on blood, not as sign or symptom, but as avatar and seal. A seal is something that confirms or assures or ratifies. The appearance—the presence—of blood is confirmation or assurance of the existence of the Red Death or, more broadly, of Death itself. As avatar, blood is the incarnation, the bodily representation, of the Red Death. It is, further, something god-like, an eternal principle, for in Hindu myth, the word "avatar" referred to the descent of a god, in human form, to earth. Further, "avatar" can be defined as "a variant phase or version of a continuing entity." A second level thus emerges: blood represents something invisible and eternal, a ruling principle of the universe. That principle, Poe seems to suggest, is death.

But is it? The Red Death, Poe tells us, "had long devastated the country." And then: "No pestilence had ever been so fatal"—surely a remarkable second sentence for a man so careful of grammar and logic as Poe. Is or is not the Red Death a pestilence? And does the word "fatal" permit of comparison? I should like to suggest that here Poe is being neither ungrammatical nor even carefully ambiguous, but daringly clear. The Red Death is not a pestilence, in the usual sense; it is unfailingly and universally fatal, as no mere disease or plague can be; and blood is its guarantee, its avatar and seal. Life itself, then, is the Red Death, the one "affliction" shared by all mankind.

For purposes of commenting on life and of achieving his single effect, Poe chooses to emphasize death. He is aware not only of the brevity of all life and of its inevitable termination but also of men's isolation: blood, the visible sign of life, is, Poe says, "the pest ban which shuts him out from the aid and sympathy of his fellow man." In the trap of life and in his death, every man is an island. If there is a mutual bond, it is the shared horror of death.

Out of the chaos that has "long devastated" his dominions, Prince Prospero creates a new and smaller world for the preservation of life. A kind of demigod, Prospero can "create" his world, and he can people it; but time (the ebony clock) exists in his new world, and he is, of course, deluded in his belief that he can let in life and shut out death. Prospero's world of seven rooms, without "means [either] of ingress or egress," is a microcosm, as the parallel with the seven ages of man indicates, and its people are eminently human, with their predilection for pleasure and their susceptibility to "sudden impulses of despair or frenzy." In their masquerade costumes, the people are "in fact, a multitude of dreams," but they are fashioned like the inhabitants of the macrocosmic world. Many are beautiful, but many also are bizarre or grotesque. Some are wanton;

some are "arabesque figures with unsuited limbs and appointments"; some are terrible, some are disgusting, and some are "delirious fancies such as the madman fashions" (and Prospero, the demigod, for all his "fine eye for colors and effects," may indeed be mad). But all of them are life, and in six of the seven apartments "the heart of life" beats "feverishly". And even here, by deliberate use of the word "feverishly", Poe links life with disease and death.

The seventh apartment is not the room of death; death occurs in fact in each of the rooms. It is, however, the room in which the reminders of death are strongest, and it is the room to which all must come who traverse the preceding six. Death's colors, red and black, are there; and there the ebony clock mercilessly measures Time, reminding the revelers hour after hour that life, like the course of the Red Death, is short.

When the clock strikes the dreaded hour of twelve, the revelers become aware suddenly of the presence of a masked figure which none has noted before:

The figure was tall and gaunt, and shrouded from head to foot in the habiliments of the grave. The mask which 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 revellers 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.

Poe does not indicate in which room the awareness of the masked figure occurred first, but Prince Prospero sees this blood-sprinkled horror in the blue, or easternmost, room, which is usually associated with birth, rather than with death The figure moves then through each of the apartments, and Prospero follows, to meet his own death in the room of black and red.

Not once does Poe say that the figure is the Red Death. Instead, "this new presence" is called "the masked figure," "the stranger," "the mummer," "this spectral image," and "the intruder." He is "shrouded" in "the habiliments of the grave," the dress provided by the living for their dead and endowed by the living with all the horror and terror which they associate with death. The mask, fashioned to resemble "the countenance of a stiffened corpse," is but a mask, a "cheat." And all this, we are told, "might have been borne" had it not been for the blood, that inescapable reminder to life of the inevitability of death. The intruder is, literally, "*The Mask* of the Red Death," not the plague itself, nor even—as many would have it—the all-inclusive representation of Death.

There is horror in the discovery that "the grave-cerements and corpse-like mask" are "untenanted by any tangible form," but the horror runs more deeply than the supernatural interpretation allows, so deeply in fact that it washes itself clean to emerge as Truth. Blood, Poe has been saying, is (or is symbolic of) the life force; but even as it suggests life, blood serves as a reminder of death. Man himself invests death with elements of terror, and he clothes not death but the terror of death in garb of his own making—"the habiliments of the grave"—and then runs, foolishly, to escape it or, madly,

to kill it, mistaking the mummer, the cheat, for death itself. The fear of death can kill: Prospero attempts to attack the masked figure and falls; but when man's image of death is confronted directly, it is found to be nothing. The vestments are empty. The intruder in "The Masque of the Red Death" is, then, not the plague, not death itself, but man's creation, his self-aroused and self-developed fear of his own mistaken concept of death.

Death is nevertheless present, as pervasive and as invisible as eternal law. He is nowhere and everywhere, not only near, about, and around man, but in him. And so it is, at last, that, having unmasked their unreasoning fear, the revelers acknowledge the presence of the Red Death. One by one, the revelers die—as everything endowed with life must; and, with the last of them, time, which is measured and feared only by man, dies, too.

Poe might have stopped there, just as he might have ended "The Raven" with the sixteenth stanza. The narrative is complete, and there are even "morals" or "lessons" for those who demand them. But, as Poe says in "The Philosophy of Composition,"

in subjects so handled, however skilfully, or with however vivid an array of incident, there is always a certain hardness or nakedness, which repels the artistical eye. Two things are invariably required—first, some amount of complexity, or more properly, adapation; and, secondly, some amount of suggestiveness— some undercurrent, however indefinite, of meaning.

To achieve complexity and suggestiveness, Poe added two stanzas to "The Raven." To "The Masque of the Red Death" he added two sentences: "And the flames of the tripods expired. And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all."

"Let there be light" was one of the principles of Creation; darkness, then, is a principle of Chaos. And to Poe Chaos is synonymous with Nothingness, "which, to all finite perception, Unity must be." Decay occurs as matter "expels the ether" to return to or to sink into Unity. Prince Prospero's world, created out of a chaos ruled by the Red Death, returns to chaos, ruled by the trinity of Darkness and Decay and the Red Death. But, it will be remembered, Prince Prospero's world came into being *because* of the Red Death, which, although it includes death, is the principle of life. In Chaos, then, is the promise of new lives and of new worlds which will swell into existence and then, in their turn, subside into nothingness in the eternal process of contraction and expansion which Poe describes in "Eureka."

There are "morals" implicit and explicit in this interpretation of "The Masque of the Red Death," but they need not be underlined here. Poe, who had maintained in his "Review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*" that "Truth is often, and in very great degree, the aim of the tale," was working with a larger, but surely not entirely inexpressible, truth than can be conveyed in a simple "Poor Richard" maxim; and in that task, it seems to me, he transcends the tale (into which classification most critics put "The Masque of the Red Death") to create a prose which, in its free rhythms, its diction, its compression, and its suggestion, approaches poetry.

The ideas that were haunting Poe when he published "Eureka" were already haunting him in 1842, when he published "The Masque of the Red Death," and what emerged was not, certainly, a short story; nor was it, except by the freest definition, a tale. For either category, it is deficient in plot and in characterization. Instead, "The Masque of the Red Death" combines elements of the parable and of the myth. Not as explicit or as pointedly allegorical always as the parable, "The Masque of the Red Death" nevertheless can be (and has been) read as a parable of the inevitability and the universality of death; but it deals also with the feats of a hero or demigod—Prospero—and with Poe's concepts of universal principles, and it has the mystery and the remoteness of myth. What Poe has created, then, is a kind of mythic parable, brief and poetic, of the human condition, of man's fate, and of the fate of the universe.

Source: Joseph Patrick Roppolo, "Meaning and 'The Masque of the Red Death,'" in TSE: *Tulane Studies in English*, Vol. 13, 1963, pp. 59-69.

Adaptations

Poe's short stories "The Tell-Tale heart, And Other Terrifying Tales" were recorded on audiocassette by August House in 1995. The stories are read by Syd Liberman.

"Poe Masterpieces" is a collection of Poe's short stories recorded on audiocassette by the Listening Library in 1987.

Poe's detective stories are recorded on an audiocassette entitled "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" by Books on Tape in 1992.

"The Best of Edgar Allan Poe" is a selection of Poe's short stories recorded on audiocassette by the Listening Library in 1987.

Topics for Further Study

Nathaniel Hawthorne was an American writer and a contemporary of Edgar Allan Poe. Hawthorne's short story collection *Twice-Told Tales* is considered to share similar elements of Gothic horror with the short stories of Poe. Read at least one of Hawthorne's stories from this collection for comparison with "The Masque of the Red Death." Discuss the similarities and differences.

Discuss Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death" in terms of how it portrays a societal or group response to illness and plague. What is the attitude of the privileged guests of Prospero's castle toward those outside the castle who are more vulnerable to and afflicted by the Red Death? In what ways can this story function as a parable, or story with a moral, for understanding contemporary societal responses to the disease of AIDS and those infected with HIV?

Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death" is, in some ways, a story about human and societal responses to the inevitability of death. In what ways do Prospero and his guests attempt to deal with, or not deal with, their own impending deaths? Research the psychology of death to learn more about how people in contemporary times attempt to deal with the deaths of others, and with their own mortality.

During Poe's lifetime, tuberculosis was a very common disease, characterized most notably by the symptom of the coughing up of blood. As three of the most important women in Poe's life died of tuberculosis (his mother, stepmother, and wife), one could speculate that the "Red Death" in the story was inspired by his own experience of loved ones suffering from tuberculosis. Find out more about the disease of tuberculosis during the nineteenth century and today.

After his death, Poe came to be a strong influence on the French poet Baudelaire and the Russian novelist Theodore Dostoyevski. Examine the work of one of these writers. In what ways is the influence of Poe apparent in their writing?

The Black Plague (also known as the Bubonic Plague) was one of the worst plagues in human history. Learn more about the Black Plague, such as how societies responded to the problems caused by the plague, what "cures" were attempted.What was its historical impact?

Compare and Contrast

Nineteenth Century: In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, tuberculosis (also commonly referred to as "consumption") reached epidemic proportions, particularly in developing urban and industrial areas. During this time, it was the leading cause of death in the West.

Twentieth Century: Thanks to developments in sanitation and hygiene, the spread of tuberculosis was significantly curbed for most of the twentieth century. In the 1980s, however, the disease began to make a comeback in the West, and is still a threat in developing nations.

Nineteenth Century: Gothic fiction, or Gothic horror, was developed as a literary genre in the nineteenth century. In England, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) was one of the first Gothic novels of note, followed by others, such as Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1895). In America, Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne were notable authors of Gothic fiction.

Twentieth Century: Gothic fiction in the late twentieth century has developed into two distinct genres. On one hand, the modern horror story flourishes, in both the novel form, with such prolific writers as Stephen King, and in cinema, with such films as *Psycho, Night of the Living Dead*, *Friday the 13th*, *Halloween*, and *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. On the other hand, the modern, mass-market paperback romance novel, often referred to as Gothic romance, is also descended from the Gothic novel.

Nineteenth Century: On the stage, tales of Gothic horror were depicted most notably in the style of the Grand Guignol, known for performances which emphasized graphic depictions of gory violence. Grand Guignol theater was performed primarily in France, although it enjoyed a brief popularity in England.

Twentieth Century: The genre of Gothic horror has met with the greatest success in the twentieth Century in the cinema. Beginning in the 1960s, horror films showed increasingly graphic portrayals of blood, gore, and violence.

Nineteenth Century: The HIV virus did not exist.

1990s: Since the epidemic of the disease known as AIDS exploded in the early 1980s, the HIV virus that is believed to cause AIDS has spread throughout the world, reaching epidemic proportions. The spread of AIDS is thought to be the primary cause of the increased prevalence of tuberculosis in the West, as those suffering from AIDS are more vulnerable to infection with tuberculosis.

What Do I Read Next?

"The Raven," one of Poe's most famous works, is written from the perspective of a man remembering his love who has died.

Twice-Told Tales, by Nathaniel Hawthorne, is a collection of short stories by a contemporary of Poe. These stories have elements of Gothic fiction, and are often compared to Poe's Gothic style.

"The Fall of the House of Usher" is another of Poe's famous short stories, and is written in the Gothic style.

Edgar Allan Poe: Chelsea House Library of Biography (1992), by Suzanne Levert, presents a standard biography of Poe.

Twentieth Century Interpretations of Poe's Tales: A Collection of Critical Essays (1971), by William L. Howarth, presents several diverse critical interpretations of Poe's work.

An Edgar Allan Poe Companion: A Guide to the Short Stories, Romances and Essays (1981), by J. R. Hammond, offers an introduction to Poe's fiction and essays.

Further Study

De Shell, Jeffrey. *The Peculiarity of Literature: An Allegorical Approach to Poe's Fiction*, Madison, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickenson Presses, 1997.

Discusses both Poe's detective stories and his horror stories in terms of their allegorical meaning.

Deas, Michael. *The Portraits and Daguerreotypes of Edgar Allan Poe*, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989.

A picture book of daguerreotype portraits taken of Poe.

Silverman, Kenneth. *New Essays on Poe's Major Tales*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Diverse critical interpretations on the short fiction of Poe.

Smith, Don. *The Poe Cinema: A Critical Filmography of Theatrical Releases Based on the Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, 1999.

Lists film and videos based on Poe's works. Includes plot descriptions and themes, mostly in the horror genre.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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