

The Mask of the Red Death Study Guide

The Mask of the Red Death by Edgar Allan Poe

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The Mask of the Red Death

The Mask of the Red Death Summary

A disease called the "Red Death" had been ravaging the country for many years. The Red Death was so named due to the way it manifests itself in its victims - first there were pains and dizziness, then bleeding from the pores. Red stains on the skin were the mark that alerted everyone to the diseased; death would come within half an hour.

Despite the rampant pestilence, there was a man named Prince Prospero who remained undaunted. As the Red Death swept the country, he gathered one thousand of his friends into his massive castle. He then closed off all doors to all means of entrance or exit. Prince Prospero provided all means of sustenance and of entertainment - within the castle walls, all of their needs were met.

Around the fifth or sixth month, the Prince threw a masquerade ball. The ball was to take place in a suite of rooms the Prince had designed himself. There were seven rooms forming an imperial suite. Unlike most suites, however, which form a continuous line of rooms, these rooms were arranged in such a way that one room was not visible to the other. Each room had one narrow window of stained glass, each a different color. In six of the seven rooms, the décor corresponded to the color of the window: the first was blue, then purple, green, orange, white, and violet. In the seventh room, the décor was black and the windows a deep red color, like blood. There was also in this room a giant black clock; it would toll its chimes in conjunction with the hour, and everyone would pause in their celebration to listen to the chimes. Always the revelers and musicians would vow not to be interrupted at the next hour, but always, they would pause.

Prince Prospero had been the one to direct the terms of the masquerade - he asked that the costumes be "grotesque" (pg. 188), and the partygoers did as he wished. They are described as follows: "There were 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" (pg. 188).

The party raged on until midnight. When the clock chimed again everyone paused, but so many chimes of the clock gave the revelers more of a chance to look around. They notice a strange figure. Even amidst the hundreds of odd, fantastic, and disgusting disguises, this particular costume was too much. This guest had costumed himself as someone afflicted with the Red Death.

Prince Prospero demanded to know who the person was, so that they could hang him at sunrise. Though he was within reach of everyone, the guests all shrank from him as he passed through each room. The Prince finally descended upon him with a dagger, but as he entered the final black room, he fell dead. A crowd of guests rushed forward to unmask the stranger and found there was no mask:



"And now was acknowledged the presence of the Red Death" (pg. 193).

In the end, everyone died, the clock ceased to keep time, and the castle succumbed to darkness.

The Mask of the Red Death Analysis

Of all the stories in this collection, this is the only one told by a third-person narrator. The story itself is almost a fairytale; there is a prince, a castle, and a moral at the end. It is a non-traditional fairytale, but these elements, along with the distant narration, do lend themselves to that genre.

Poe uses many symbols in this tale, and though many are very basic and blatant, they are powerful nonetheless. He starts with his choice of name - Prince Prospero. This is a jab at the idea of "Prince Charming" - Prospero is wealthy and prosperous, and he feels invincible because of it. The positioning and colors of the rooms is significant as well, in that they move from east to west like the progression of the Sun through the sky, finally arriving at black, which is night - and death. The ebony clock, of course, counts down the hours of life, and with each passing hour, its chimes remind everyone of their own mortality. The mysterious guest represents death, and his ability to infiltrate the party when no means of entrance are available drives home the point that death is inevitable.

This allegory seems to be serving two purposes at once. In the first, Poe uses the Red Death (perhaps a symbol itself of the tuberculosis that had struck his beloved Virginia) to represent all death, and the fact that no matter what we do death will find a way in and claim us all in the end. Also, however, he seems to be mocking Prince Prospero and those like him who believe that their wealth, money, and power will somehow render them safe from the fate of those who lack those things.



Characters

Prince Prospero: The Masque of the Red Death

Main character of *The Masque of the Red Death*. His refusal to accept death and his arrogance in thinking his wealth and power render him invincible make Prospero a symbol for not only all who refuse to acknowledge the reality of mortality, but also of the upper class that feels it is untouchable even by death.

Mysterious Guest: The Masque of the Red Death

Represents death and the inevitability of death to "come in," no matter how hard one may try to keep it out.



Objects/Places

Red Death

Term used to describe the disease sweeping the country in which Prince Prospero resides. The Red Death is symbolic of all death and of the mortality of all humans; it is also possibly symbolic of tuberculosis, given that Virginia Clemm suffered for years from TB and was prone to bleeding from the mouth.

Imperial Suite

Suite of rooms, designed by Prospero, in which the masquerade ball is held. These rooms are color-coordinated, with the final room decorated in black with blood-red windows. These rooms represent the progression from birth to death, traveling from east to west as the Sun travels in the sky. It is in the final black room that Prospero dies.

Ebony Clock

Tolls the hour every hour. Located in the black room, the clock's hourly chimes remind the partygoers of the passage of time, symbolically reminding them of their own mortality. It is the pause in the festivities that accompanies the chimes of midnight that alerts everyone to the presence of the Red Death in the form of the mysterious guest.



Themes

Sanity and Insanity

Poe uses the theme of insanity vs. insanity, and all the nuances in between, in many of his short stories, often charging his insane narrators with the futile task of proving that they are not mad. Often, in stories such as *The Tell-Tale Heart* and *The Imp of the Perverse*, though the respective narrators of each claim they are of sound mind and seem completely unremorseful, they are driven to confess by a persistent reminder of their crime. In other tales, such as *The Cask of Amontillado*, the narrator is unquestionably insane, and yet there is no remorse *and* no confession, and though his *actions* are insane, he is very levelheaded when it comes to their execution. Crime is not the only indicator of insanity, however. In *Ligeia*, the narrator commits no crime that is spoken of, yet there is an air of instability to his narrative. He does admit to heavy opium use, but it is his overwhelming grief and obsessive love for Ligeia that cast a questioning light on his state of mind. All this mental instability leads to a stable of unreliable narrators; Poe was a master at creating believable, unreliable narrators, so much so that many historians have cast him as much less stable than he was, instead of recognizing his skill at crafting first-person narration.

Death and Mortality

In almost all of Poe's works, death is a central issue. Whether a tale of murder (*The Cask of Amontillado*, *The Tell-Tale Heart*), a tale of horror (*The Fall of the House of Usher*), a Gothic horror romance (*Ligeia*), or an allegory (*The Masque of the Red Death*), Poe's stories, by nature of his preferred genres, are full of death. Though many of his stories deal with either the murder of someone, the solving of a murder, or the supernatural resurrection of someone who has died, it is his allegorical look at mortality, *The Masque of the Red Death*, which most clearly sums up Poe's themes of death. Here, very simply, death is seen as inevitable, something that can be avoided by no one, no matter what precautions they take or how wealthy they are. Poe used death to terrify people, as he was a writer of horror stories and most people are afraid of death. Yet he seemed fascinated by it, and with his use of dark and Gothic elements seemed to embrace it.

Isolation and Confinement

Throughout many of Poe's short stories, characters are placed in stifling, claustrophobic settings that add to the overall feeling of panic and fear. In some, such as *Ligeia* and *The Fall of the House of Usher*, most of the action occurs in one room or one house, closing off the characters to any outside influence. *The Pit and the Pendulum* takes this idea a step further, imprisoning the narrator in a dungeon. Poe highlights this theme in *The Cask of Amontillado*, in which the murderous narrator literally encloses his victim in



a tomb. In *The Masque of the Red Death*, the castle is completely cut off from any means of entrance or exit. The most intense confinement, however, can be found in the minds of Poe's narrators. While we as readers experience physical isolation (i.e. one, room, one house, one walled-up vault), the intensity of the confinement is exacerbated by the point of view of the narrators. We see the world through one set of eyes, and the thoughts of these narrators, often thoughts that are unstable at best, imprison us in a non-physical "prison" of panic and fear.



Style

Style

Point of View

This is the only story in this collection not told through a first-person narrator. Here, Poe uses a distant third-person narrator to relate his allegorical tale of death and mortality. This technique works because the story *is* allegorical, and being a part of the action would detract from the overall picture and the various symbolic elements.

Setting

The story is set in a mythical castle in an unnamed land. Outside the castle, a disease called the Red Death is ravaging the country, but inside, the Prince and his followers are having every need met while remaining disease-free. On this particular night, the Prince has directed there should be a masquerade ball, and the ball is to take place in a suite of rooms, decorated by color, that represent the progression of life to death. The positioning and colors of the rooms is significant, in that they move from east to west, like the progression of the Sun through the sky. The castle is also significant as a setting because it is another example of a closed in and closed off environment.

Language and Meaning

This story uses words that are more colorful and more vivid than in most of the stories in this collection, which tend to focus on darkness and blackness. Here, the vividness of color and the "voluptuous" (pg. 184) sensuality of the masquerade ball provide a contrast to the outcome of the story - death.

Structure

The story is written in a fairytale-like fashion, with a sort of "once upon a time" beginning and a masquerade ball in the middle. There is no happy ending. Another structural element is in the positioning of the rooms - as the action progresses through the rooms, the stages of life are represented, and as the action moves into the "black" room, the story reaches its climax.



Quotes

These quotes are taken from the Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe.

"True! - nervous - very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why *will* you say that I am mad?" (*The Tell-Tale Heart*, pg. 13)

"'Villains!' I shrieked, 'dissemble no more! I admit the deed! - tear up the planks! - here, here! - it is the beating of his hideous heart!'" (*The Tell-Tale Heart*, pg. 21)

"As the strong man exults in his physical ability, delighting in such exercises as call his muscles into action, so glories the analyst in that moral activity which *disentangles*." (*The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, pg. 22)

"'The riddle, so far, was now unriddled.'" (*The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, pg. 57)

"Of my country and of my family I have little to say. Ill usage and length of years have driven me from the one, and estranged me from the other." (*MS. Found in a Bottle*, pg. 77)

"When I look around me I feel ashamed of my former apprehensions." (*MS. Found in a Bottle*, pg. 92)

"The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could ; but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge." (*The Cask of Amontillado*, pg. 94)

"*For the love of God, Montressor!*" (*The Cask of Amontillado*, pg. 104)

"There was an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart - an unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime. What was it - I paused to think - what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher ?" (*The Fall of the House of Usher*, pg. 106)

"For a moment she remained trembling and reeling to and fro upon the threshold - then, with a low moaning cry, fell heavily inward upon the person of her brother, and in her violent and now final death-agonies, bore him to the floor a corpse, and a victim to the terrors he had anticipated." (*The Fall of the House of Usher*, pg. 133)

"While I gazed, this fissure rapidly widened - there came a fierce breath of the whirlwind - the entire orb of the satellite burst at once upon my sight - my brain reeled as I saw the mighty walls rushing asunder - there was a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters - and the deep and dank tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the *House of Usher*." (*The Fall of the House of Usher*, pg. 133)



"Arousing from the most profound of slumbers, we break the gossamer web of some dream. Yet in a second afterward, (so frail may that web have been) we remember not that we have dreamed." (*The Pit and the Pendulum*, pg. 156)

"Amid the thought of the fiery destruction that impended, the idea of the coolness of the well came over my soul like balm. I rushed to its deadly brink. I threw my straining vision below. The glare from the enkindled roof illumined its inmost recesses. Yet, for a wild moment, did my spirit refuse to comprehend the meaning of what I saw. At length it forced — it wrestled its way into my soul — it burned itself in upon my shuddering reason. — Oh! for a voice to speak! — oh! horror! — oh! any horror but this!" (*The Pit and the Pendulum*, pg. 136)

"The 'strangeness,' however, which I found in the eyes, was of a nature distinct from the formation, or the color, or the brilliancy of the features, and must, after all, be referred to the expression." (*Ligeia*, pg. 163)

"That she loved me I should not have doubted; and I might have been easily aware that, in a bosom such as hers, love would have reigned no ordinary passion. But in death only, was I fully impressed with the strength of her affection." (*Ligeia*, pg. 168)

"I trembled not — I stirred not — for a crowd of unutterable fancies connected with the air, the stature, the demeanor of the figure, rushing hurriedly through my brain, had paralyzed — had chilled me into stone." (*Ligeia*, pg. 182)

"The scarlet stains upon the body and especially upon the face of the victim, were the pest ban which shut him out from the aid and from the sympathy of his fellow-men." (*The Masque of the Red Death*, pg. 184)

"But the Prince Prospero was happy and dauntless and sagacious. When his dominions were half depopulated, he summoned to his presence a thousand hale and light-hearted friends from among the knights and dames of his court, and with these retired to the deep seclusion of one of his castellated abbeys." (*The Masque of the Red Death*, pg. 185)

"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 Masque of the Red Death*, pg. 191)

"And the flames of the tripods expired. And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all" (*The Masque of the Red Death*, pg. 193)

"The intellectual or logical man, rather than the understanding or observant man, set himself to imagine designs — to dictate purposes to God." (*The Imp of the Perverse*, pg. 195)

"Through its promptings we act without comprehensible object; or, if this shall be understood as a contradiction in terms, we may so far modify the proposition as to say,



that through its promptings we act, for the reason that we should not." (*The Imp of the Perverse*, pg. 196)

"They say that I spoke with a distinct enunciation, but with marked emphasis and passionate hurry, as if in dread of interruption before concluding the brief, but pregnant sentences that consigned me to the hangman and to hell." (*The Imp of the Perverse*, pg. 209)



Topics for Discussion

These topics concern the general works of Edgar Allan Poe.

Explain what is meant by the term "unreliable narrator." How does Poe use this technique in different ways with different stories?

Poe has been called "the father of the detective story" - but does he go too far out of the realm of possibility by making an orangutan the killer? Defend your answer.

Are the crewmen on the "Discovery" ghosts? Is there another explanation as to why they do not acknowledge the narrator?

How does Poe portray the doppelganger, or character double, in *The Fall of the House of Usher*?

How does Poe use a closed setting in *The Pit and the Pendulum*, *The Cask of Amontillado*, and *The Fall of the House of Usher*?

What is the role of history in *The Pit and the Pendulum*? How does the reality of the action contribute to the story's terror?

Compare and contrast the narrator of *The Imp of the Perverse* with the narrator of *The Tell-Tale Heart*.

Do you believe Poe meant for us to believe in the resurrection of Ligeia as a means of proving her strength of will and the great love between herself and the narrator, or as a sign of how far the narrator's mind has slipped?

Did Ligeia poison Rowena, or did the narrator?