

The Masque of the Red Death

Short Story by Edgar Allan Poe

LITERARY ANALYSIS: ALLEGORY

You can enjoy this story by Poe for its thrills, or you can read it as an **allegory**, a work of art with two levels of meaning. In an allegory, characters and objects stand for ideas outside the work, such as good and evil. Often meant to teach moral lessons, allegories typically feature simple characters and unnamed settings, somewhat like fairy tales.

The “Red Death” had long devastated the country.

In early allegories, ideas were **personified** as characters and given proper names (Good, Evil). As you read, note how Poe uses allegorical elements to suggest a moral lesson.

READING STRATEGY: CLARIFY MEANING

Poe’s unusual, archaic vocabulary reinforces this story’s feeling of antiquity. The following strategies can help you clarify the meaning of difficult words and phrases:

- Consult the side notes for helpful information.
- Use **context clues** in surrounding phrases to figure out unfamiliar words.
- **Paraphrase** difficult passages, using simpler language.

As you read, pause to write summaries of each paragraph. Note which parts of the story require further clarifying.

VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT

Poe used the following words in his eerie tale. Complete each phrase with an appropriate word from the list.

WORD LIST	blasphemous	disapprobation	propriety
	cessation	impede	reverie

1. wandered the halls lost in a _____
2. a peace treaty following the _____ of hostilities
3. her friends’ _____ after her unwise decision
4. tried not to _____ the flow of traffic
5. deeply offended by his _____ arguments
6. acted with decorum and _____

Explore the Key Idea

Is SAFETY an illusion?

KEY IDEA We like to feel that there are steps we can take to keep ourselves safe. To protect ourselves from theft, we can install an alarm or add high-security locks. To protect our health, we can exercise and eat healthy food. But do our precautions really keep danger away, or do they just give us an illusion of **safety**?

PRESENT Work with a small group to develop an argument for or against the question, *Is safety an illusion?* Choose at least two examples to support your argument. Then, taking turns with other groups, present your case to the class.

POSITION:

Safety is NOT an illusion.

ARGUMENT:

People can take steps to protect themselves from danger.

EXAMPLE:

A vaccine can provide nearly complete protection from a disease.

THE
Masque
OF THE
RED DEATH

Edgar Allan Poe

BACKGROUND Around 1350, Europe was struck by an epidemic of bubonic plague (Black Death) that killed more than a quarter of its population. The plague killed its victims quickly—within three to five days—and there was no cure. Artwork from that time is full of haunting symbols like the Dance of Death, where Death, personified as a skeleton, whirls anonymous figures to their graves. These grisly allegorical images spoke to the deepest fears of their audience, for whom death was a nearby presence. Note how Poe borrows from this history in his own tale of death.

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

But the Prince Prospero was happy and dauntless and sagacious. When his 10 dominions were half depopulated, he summoned to his presence a thousand hale and lighthearted friends from among the knights and dames of his court,

2 Avatar (äv'ə-tär'): the physical form of an unseen force.

5 pest ban: announcement of infection with the plague.

A CLARIFY MEANING

Use the **side notes** to help you restate lines 1–8. What can you **infer** about the mood of the country from this description?



and with these retired to the deep seclusion of one of his castellated abbeys. This was an extensive and magnificent structure, the creation of the prince's own eccentric yet august taste. A strong and lofty wall girdled it in. This wall had gates of iron. The courtiers, having entered, brought furnaces and massy hammers and welded the bolts. They resolved to leave means neither of ingress or egress to the sudden impulses of despair or of frenzy from within. The abbey was amply provisioned. With such precautions the courtiers might bid defiance to contagion. The external world could take care of itself. In the meantime

20 it was folly to grieve, or to think. The prince had provided all the appliances of pleasure. There were buffoons, there were improvisatori, there were ballet-dancers, there were musicians, there was Beauty, there was wine. All these and security were within. Without was the "Red Death." **B**

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

It was a voluptuous scene, that masquerade. But first let me tell of the rooms in which it was held. There were seven—an imperial suite. In many palaces, however, such suites form a long and straight vista, while the folding

30 doors slide back nearly to the walls on either hand, so that the view of the whole extent is scarcely **impeded**. Here the case was very different; as might have been expected from the duke's love of the *bizarre*. The apartments were so irregularly disposed that the vision embraced but little more than one at a time. There was a sharp turn at every twenty or thirty yards, and at each turn a novel effect. To the right and left, in the middle of each wall, a tall and narrow Gothic window looked out upon a closed corridor which pursued the windings of the suite. These windows were of stained glass whose color varied in accordance with the prevailing hue of the decorations of the chamber into which it opened. That at the eastern extremity was

40 hung, for example, in blue—and vividly blue were its windows. The second chamber was purple in its ornaments and tapestries, and here the panes were purple. The third was green throughout, and so were the casements. The fourth was furnished and lighted with orange—the fifth with white—the sixth with violet. The seventh apartment was closely shrouded in black velvet tapestries that hung all over the ceiling and down the walls, falling in heavy folds upon a carpet of the same material and hue. But in this chamber only, the color of the windows failed to correspond with the decorations. The panes here were scarlet—a deep blood color. Now in no one of the seven apartments were there any lamp or candelabrum amid the profusion

50 of golden ornaments that lay scattered to and fro or depended from the roof. There was no light of any kind emanating from lamp or candle within the suite of chambers. But in the corridors that followed the suite, there stood, opposite to each window, a heavy tripod, bearing a brazier of fire that projected its rays through the tinted glass and so glaringly illumined the room. And thus were produced a multitude of gaudy and fantastic appearances. But in the western or black chamber the effect of the firelight that streamed upon the dark hangings through the blood-tinted panes, was

12 castellated abbeys (kās'tə-lā'tīd äb'ēz): castle-like buildings once used as monasteries ("abbeys").

16–17 ingress (ĭn'grēs') or **egress** (ē'grēs'): entry or exit.

18 provisioned: stocked with supplies.

21 improvisatori (ĭm-prōv'ĭ-zə-tōr'ē): poets who compose verses aloud.

B ALLEGORY

Reread lines 9–23. Which details suggest a mythical or fairy-tale **setting**?

impede (ĭm-pēd') v. to interfere with or slow the progress of

53 brazier (brā'zhər): metal pan for holding a fire.



ghastly in the extreme, and produced so wild a look upon the countenances
of those who entered, that there were few of the company bold enough to
60 set foot within its precincts at all.

It was in this apartment, also, that there stood against the western wall a
gigantic clock of ebony. Its pendulum swung to and fro with a dull, heavy,
monotonous clang; and when the minute hand made the circuit of the face,
and the hour was to be stricken, there came from the brazen lungs of the
clock a sound which was clear and loud and deep and exceedingly musical,
but of so peculiar a note and emphasis that, at each lapse of an hour, the
musicians of the orchestra were constrained to pause, momentarily, in their
performance, to hearken to the sound; and thus the waltzers perforce ceased
their evolutions; and there was a brief disconcert of the whole gay company;
70 and, while the chimes of the clock yet rang, it was observed that the giddiest
turned pale, and the more aged and sedate passed their hands over their

58 countenances (koun'tə-nəns-əz): faces.

62 ebony (ĕb'ə-nē): a hard, very dark wood.

64 brazen: brass.

69 evolutions: intricate patterns of movement; **disconcert**: state of confusion.

brows as if in confused **reverie** or meditation. But when the echoes had fully ceased, a light laughter at once pervaded the assembly; the musicians looked at each other and smiled as if at their own nervousness and folly, and made whispering vows, each to the other, that the next chiming of the clock should produce in them no similar emotion; and then, after the lapse of sixty minutes (which embrace three thousand and six hundred seconds of the Time that flies), there came yet another chiming of the clock, and then were the same disconcert and tremulousness and meditation as before. **C**

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

He had directed, in great part, the movable embellishments of the seven chambers, upon occasion of this great *fête*; and it was his own guiding taste which had given character to the masqueraders. Be sure they were grotesque. There were much glare and glitter and piquancy and phantasm—much of
90 what has been seen since in *Hernani*. There were arabesque figures with unsuited limbs and appointments. There were delirious fancies such as the madman fashions. 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. To and fro in the seven chambers there stalked, in fact, a multitude of dreams. And these—the dreams—writhed in and about, taking hue from the rooms, and causing the wild music of the orchestra to seem as the echo of their steps. And, anon, there strikes the ebony clock which stands in the hall of velvet. And then, for a moment, all is still, and all is silent save the voice of the clock. The dreams are stiff-
100 frozen as they stand. But the echoes of the chime die away—they have endured but an instant—and a light, half-subdued laughter floats after them as they depart. And now again the music swells, and the dreams live, and writhe to and fro more merrily than ever, taking hue from the many-tinted windows through which stream the rays of the tripods. But to the chamber which lies most westwardly of the seven, there are now none of the maskers who venture; for the night is waning away; and there flows a ruddier light through the blood-colored panes; and the blackness of the sable drapery appalls; and to him whose foot falls upon the sable carpet, there comes from the near clock of ebony a muffled peal more solemnly emphatic than
110 any which reaches *their* ears who indulge in the more remote gaieties of the other apartments. **D**

But these other apartments were densely crowded, and in them beat feverishly the heart of life. And the revel went whirlingly on, until at length there commenced the sounding of midnight upon the clock. And then the music ceased, as I have told; and the evolutions of the waltzes were quieted; and there was an uneasy **cessation** of all things as before. But now there were twelve strokes to be sounded by the bell of the clock; and thus

reverie (rĕv'ĕ-rĕ) *n.* daydream

C ALLEGORY

Identify the idea that is **personified** in lines 61–79. What object does Poe use to represent this concept?

82 *decora*: fine things.

90 *Hernani* (ĕr'nā-nĕ): a play by French writer Victor Hugo, first staged in 1830 and notable for its use of color and spectacle; **arabesque** (ă'rĕ-bĕsk'): intricately designed.

D CLARIFY MEANING

Paraphrase lines 104–111. Why do none of the guests venture into the seventh room?

cessation (sĕ-sā'shən) *n.* a coming to an end; a stopping

it happened, perhaps, that more of thought crept, with more of time, into the meditations of the thoughtful among those who reveled. And thus, 120 too, it happened, perhaps, that before the last echoes of the last chime had utterly sunk into silence, there were many individuals in the crowd who had found leisure to become aware of the presence of a masked figure which had arrested the attention of no single individual before. And the rumor of this new presence having spread itself whisperingly around, there arose at length from the whole company a buzz, or murmur, expressive of **disapprobation** and surprise—then, finally of terror, of horror, and of disgust.

In an assembly of phantasms such as I have painted, it may well be supposed that no ordinary appearance could have excited such sensation. In truth the masquerade license of the night was nearly unlimited; but the 130 figure in question had out-Heroded Herod, and gone beyond the bounds of even the prince's indefinite decorum. There are chords in the hearts of the most reckless which cannot be touched without emotion. Even with the utterly lost, to whom life and death are equally jests, there are matters of which no jest can be made. The whole company, indeed, seemed now deeply to feel that in the costume and bearing of the stranger neither wit nor **propriety** existed. The figure was tall and 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 140 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. **E**

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

“Who dares?” he demanded hoarsely of the courtiers who stood near 150 him—“who dares insult us with this **blasphemous** mockery? Seize him and unmask him—that we may know whom we have to hang at sunrise, from the battlements!”

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

It was in the blue room where stood the prince, with a group of pale courtiers by his side. At first, as he spoke, there was a slight rushing movement of this group in the direction of the intruder, who at the moment 160 was also near at hand, and now, with deliberate and stately step, made closer approach to the speaker. But from a certain nameless awe with which the mad assumptions of the mummer had inspired the whole party, there

disapprobation

(dĭs-ăp' rə-bă'shən)

n. disapproval

130 out-Heroded Herod: been more extreme than the biblical King Herod, who ordered the deaths of all male babies in order to kill the infant Jesus. This expression is also used in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

propriety (prə-prī'ĭ-tē) *n.*

the quality of being proper; appropriateness

137 habiliments (hə-bĭl'ə-mənts): clothing.

E CLARIFY MEANING

Reread lines 127–143. Use **context clues** to determine the meaning of the words *decorum*, *visage*, and *vesture*. What details help explain why the figure's appearance is so shocking?

blasphemous (blăs'fə-məs) *adj.* disrespectful or offensive

162 mummer: a person dressed for a masquerade.

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

And now was acknowledged the presence of the Red Death. He had come like a thief in the night. And one by one dropped the 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
190 Death held illimitable dominion over all. 

183–184 finding the . . . form: ripping off the figure's burial garments and mask to find nothing underneath.

F ALLEGORY

The prince's name suggests prosperity, or good fortune. Given this suggestion, what is **ironic**, or unexpected, about his fate?

190 illimitable dominion
(ĩ-ĩm'ĩ-tə-bəl də-m'ĩn'yən): unlimited power.

Comprehension

- Recall** Why does Prince Prospero seal himself and his guests in the abbey?
- Recall** What effect does the striking of the clock have on the revellers?
- Summarize** What happens after the mysterious figure is unmasked?

Literary Analysis

- Make Inferences** What does each of the following reveal about Prince Prospero?
 - his response to the crisis in his country (lines 1–12)
 - his solution to the threat of disease (lines 15–23)
 - his plans for the masquerade (lines 86–94)
 - his response to the masked figure (lines 144–152)
- Clarify Meaning** Recall the summaries you wrote to help clarify each paragraph of the story. Which proved more difficult to understand, the events in the story or the descriptions that set the scene? Explain your answer.
- Analyze Descriptive Details** For each of the following examples, identify the contrast drawn between the seventh room and the rest of Prince Prospero’s suite. Based on these contrasts, what might the seventh room represent?
 - its decorations (lines 44–48)
 - its location (lines 104–105)
 - its atmosphere (lines 56–60)
 - what occurs there (lines 174–179)
- Interpret Allegory** Using a chart like the one shown, identify a possible meaning for each character or object and list details from the text that support your interpretation. Based on your answers, what lesson is Poe’s allegory intended to teach?

Main Story Elements	Possible Meaning	Supporting Details
Prince Prospero		
the abbey		
the series of seven rooms		
the clock		
the masked stranger		

- Evaluate Characters’ Actions** Consider the desperate measures the characters take to achieve **safety**. In what ways, if any, do their behaviors reflect real-world responses to a deadly threat? Support your answer with details.

Literary Criticism

- Critical Interpretations** Some critics have argued that “The Masque of the Red Death” takes place in Prospero’s mind. Cite details from the story that support this interpretation. How does this view change the story’s meaning?

Vocabulary in Context

VOCABULARY PRACTICE

Show you understand the vocabulary words by answering these questions.

1. Will an attempt to **impede** the passage of a law speed up the process or slow it down?
2. Would a **blasphemous** comment be considered controversial or appealing?
3. Which would more likely result in a parent's **disapprobation**—a detention or a school award?
4. Would someone's **reverie** make them attentive or distracted?
5. If I act with **propriety**, am I being polite or asking uncomfortable questions?
6. Which would cause the **cessation** of a conversation—one participant nodding in agreement or one participant walking away?

WORD LIST

blasphemous
cessation
disapprobation
impede
propriety
reverie

VOCABULARY IN WRITING

Poe's formal language echoes his story's setting in a royal court. Using at least two vocabulary words, write a royal declaration for your subjects to obey. You might start like this.

EXAMPLE SENTENCE

*I order the immediate **cessation** of this unlicensed and unauthorized behavior.*

VOCABULARY STRATEGY: AFFIXES AND SPELLING CHANGES

Some base words are hard to recognize because they are spelled differently when affixes are added. For example, the vocabulary word *cessation* includes the base word *cease* and the suffix *-ation*. Note how the spelling of the base word changes in the new word. These spelling changes may reflect the word's etymology (its history and origins), or they may simply reflect new pronunciation that made the word easier to say. To decipher words of this type, look for related base words and use context clues to unlock meaning.

PRACTICE Identify the appropriate base word for each of the following examples. Then write a sentence that demonstrates the meaning of each numbered word. Finally, use a dictionary to research the word's origins. Did the spelling change as a result of the word's history?

1. derisive
2. contentious
3. impermeable
4. pomposity
5. acclamation
6. irrevocable
7. despicable
8. incessant
9. sobriety
10. commensurate



VOCABULARY PRACTICE

For more practice, go to the **Vocabulary Center** at ClassZone.com.