The Masque of the Red Death *

The “Red Death” had long been a curse on the country. No disease had ever been so fatal or so hideous. Blood was its sign and its seal—the redness and the horror of blood.

There were sharp pains and sudden dizziness. This was followed by heavy bleeding at the pores and, finally, death. The scarlet stains upon the body, and especially upon the face of the victim, caused terror in those watching the afflicted. Most sufferers had to die alone and unaided. And the entire progress of the disease, from start to end, was half an hour.

But the Prince Prospero was happy and fearless and wise. When half of his countrymen had died of the plague, he called to himself a thousand healthy and good-natured friends from among the knights and ladies of his court. With these he retired to the deep privacy of one of his castles.

This was a large and magnificent fortress that the prince had designed himself. A strong, high wall surrounded it and the wall had gates of iron. Once the company was inside, the bolts of the gates were welded shut. No one was to leave or enter for any reason.

The castle was well stocked with food and water. With much care, the prince and his knights prepared to defy the raging disease. The outside world could take care of itself. In the meantime it was foolish to feel sorrow—or to think.

So the prince had arranged for the pleasures of his company. There were clowns, there were dancers, there were musicians. There was beauty and there was wine. All these and safety were within. Without was the “Red Death.”

It was in the fifth or sixth month of dwelling within the fortress—while the disease raged at its worst throughout the country—that Prince Prospero decided to entertain his thousand friends at a masked ball.

Truly marvelous it was! But first let me tell of the rooms in which it was held. There were seven. In many palaces, such rooms for entertainment are connected so that when all the doors are open you can see the full length of the apartment. Here, the case was different. The rooms were so arranged that you could see little more than one at a time.

Every room was a different color. To the right and left in each wall was a tall, narrow window. These windows were of stained glass whose colors matched the decorations of the rooms. One room was blue, and so were its windows. The second room was purple, the third green, the fourth orange, the fifth white and the sixth violet. The seventh room was hung with black velvet curtains, while the floor was covered with a carpet of the same material. Only in this room the windows did not match the furnishings. Instead, the glass was scarlet—a deep, blood color.

Lighting the rooms was achieved in a strange way. A huge pot filled with flaming coals was placed just outside each window on

* A masque was a popular form of costume party or masquerade.
a balcony. The brightly burning cals provided plenty of light. However, when this light passed through the stained glass windows, it cast eerie designs on the walls, furniture and people within.

In the seventh room, the effect of scarlet light on black velvet was ghastly. It produced so wild a look upon the faces of those who entered that there were few of the guests bold enough to set foot within the room at all.

Another feature of this room was a huge ebony clock. Its pendulum swung to and fro with dull, heavy clang. And as the minute hand came upon the twelve and the hour was to be struck, there came from the brass lungs of the clock a sound that was clear and loud and musical. But it was such a strange note that at every hour even the musicians would stop and there was a short period of quiet in all the rooms.

While the chimes rang, young men were seen to grow pale. The older men seemed lost in secret and fearful thoughts. But when the echoes of the chime had faded away, a light laughter set in at once. The musicians looked at each other and smiled foolishly as if to say that at the next chiming they would not stop again. Then, when the next sixty minutes had passed, it would all happen again as before.

In spite of these things, it was a gay and magnificent ball. The prince had a fine eye for colors and effects. His plans were so bold and fiery that some thought him mad. But his followers did not. They very much enjoyed the different flavors he gave to his entertainments.

It was the prince's own guiding taste which had given character to the maskers. "Be sure your costumes and characters are grotesque," he had said.

So instead of the common characters you might expect to find at a masked ball, there seemed such creatures as one might find in nightmares. There was much that was beautiful, much of the bizarre, and some of the terrible. There, too, was not a little that might have caused disgust.

To and fro in the seven rooms walked a thousand dreams. They danced about taking on their colors from the rooms and the flickering colored lights of the blazing cals. And then strikes the ebony clock in the hall of black velvet. And then, for a moment, all is still and all is silent save the voice of the clock.

The dreams are stiff-frozen as they stand. But the echoes of the clock die away—they have lasted but a minute—and a light laughter floats after them as they leave. And now, and again, the music swells and the dreams live and twist to and fro more merrily than ever. All through the rooms beats the heart of life.

The gay time went on until the chimes of midnight were heard from the ebony clock in the black velvet room. Then the music stopped, as I have told, and the dancers were quiet. There was an uneasy stopping of all things as before.

But now there were twelve strokes to be sounded by the bell of the clock. Thus it happened, perhaps, that before the last echoes of the last chime had sunk into silence, many of the merrymakers had found time to notice the presence of a masked figure whom no one had seen before.
And the rumor of this new guest having been whispered around, there arose from the whole company a buzz of surprise—then small sounds of terror, horror and disgust.

You can imagine that in such a wild scene as I have described, no ordinary appearance could have excited such a sensation. In truth, there was no limit on the costumes that night. But the figure in question had outdone them all. He had gone far beyond the limits of even the prince’s uncertain standards.

There are strings in the hearts of the wildest among us which cannot be touched without stirring strong feelings. Even among lost souls to whom both life and death are jokes, there are matters about which no jokes can be made. And the whole company seemed to feel that the costume and bearing of the stranger did not belong among them.

The figure was tall and grim and draped from head to foot in a shroud. The mask which hid his face was made to look so much like the face of a stiffened corpse that it was difficult to detect the cheat. And even this might have been taken as the great joke of the evening except that the man had gone so far as to take the appearance of the Red Death.

His shroud was dabbed with blood. His broad forehead and all the features of his face were sprinkled with the scarlet horror. When the eyes of Prince Prospero fell upon this ghastly image, he was seen to shudder with terror and disgust.

“Who dares?” he demanded hoarsely of the knights who stood near him. “Who dares insult us with this damnable comedy? Seize him and unmask him, that we may know whom we have to hang at sunrise from the fortress walls.”

Prince Prospero was standing in the eastern or blue room as he spoke these words. They rang through the seven rooms loudly and clearly—for the prince was a bold man. The music had become hushed when he waved his hand. All the while, a group of pale knights was standing at his side.

At first, as the prince spoke, this group made a move to rush at the stranger, who at this time was also near at hand and coming closer to the prince with slow and stately strides. But because of an uncertain and nameless fear that everyone felt, no one put out a hand to stop the mysterious stranger.

He freely passed within a yard of the prince. Everyone in that great crowd shrank against the walls. Then, the masker made his way—with the same slow, stately strides—through the blue room to the purple—through the purple to the green—through the green to the orange—through this to the white—and then to the violet room before a move was made to stop him.

It was then, however, that Prince Prospero sprang into action. He was maddened with rage and the shame of his own momentary cowardice. Drawing his dagger, he rushed through the six rooms. Not one of his knights followed because of a deadly fear that had seized them all. Overtaking the somber figure at the end of the velvet apartment, the prince raised his knife to strike.
At this movement the stranger turned suddenly to confront his attacker. There was a sharp cry ... and the dagger dropped gleaming upon the black carpet. In the next instant Prince Prospero dropped beside the dagger in death.

Calling upon the wild courage of despair, twenty knights broke into the black apartment and seized the stranger. His tall figure stood erect and motionless in the shadow of the ebony clock. But the next second they gasped and fell back in horror. There was nothing inside the grave-clothes or behind the corpse-like mask.

And now was recognized the presence of the Red Death. He had come like a thief in the night. And one by one the members of that merry company dropped in the blood-spattered halls. Each died as he fell, and with the last went the life of the ebony clock. It struck no more. The flames died on the burning coals, and Darkness and Decay and the Red Death ruled over all.

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Glossary

The Masque of the Red Death
A Glossary of Words and Expressions

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Key Concepts

The Masque of the Red Death
Understanding Key Concepts—Examining Values

These are short passages taken from the story, followed by three questions. In every case, Question A can be answered without knowing the story and may be used for warm-up discussions.

Questions B and C should be kept in mind while reading or listening to the story so that they may be discussed later. Answers to the A questions may also be reviewed at this time.

1. The "Red Death," a fatal and hideous disease, had been stalking the country. Thousands were dying gruesome deaths (page 7):

   There were sharp pains and sudden dizziness. This was followed by heavy bleeding at the pores and, finally, death. The scarlet stains upon the body, and especially upon the face of the victim, caused terror in those watching the afflicted. Most sufferers had to die alone and unaided. And the entire progress of the disease, from start to end, was half an hour.

   A. What would you do if a fatal disease like the Red Death was spreading through your town? Would you try to escape or stay to help the victims?

   B. Is the "Red Death" a real or fantasy disease? Has there been, or could there be, a disease as widespread or with similar symptoms?

   C. Compare the above description of the Red Death with the Red Death masker who came to the ball. How do they differ? How are they the same? Is one more real?

2. When half of his countrymen had died of the disease, Prince Prospero took one thousand of his healthy and happy friends and locked them up with him in his castle (page 8):

   The castle was well stocked with food and water. With much care, the prince and his knights prepared to defy the raging disease. The outside world could take care of itself. In the meantime it was foolish to feel sorrow—or to think.

   A. "Let the outside world take care of itself" is a common attitude today. What does it mean? Give some examples of the excuses people make to avoid thinking of others.

   B. Do you think Prince Prospero was right to escape to his castle? What else could he have done?

   C. Do you think it was fair of Prince Prospero to choose only the healthiest and happiest of his friends to escape with him? What would you have done?

3. The castle has seven rooms, each a different color: blue, purple, green, orange, white and violet (page 9):

   In the seventh room, the effect of scarlet light on black velvet was ghastly. It produced so wild a look upon the faces of those who entered that there were few of the guests bold enough to set foot within the room at all.

   A. How many of the colors in the prince's castle were bright and cheery? How many were quiet and somber? Do colors affect your inner feelings?
B. Why were the guests afraid to enter the seventh room? What would the flickering shadows and the red colors remind them of?

C. The story ends grimly in the seventh room. List all the features of the seventh room and explain how you could tell something awful was going to happen there.

4. When the Red Death raged at its worst, the prince held a magnificent ball where everyone danced through the seven colorful rooms of his castle (page 10):

To and fro in the seven rooms walked a thousand dreams. They danced about taking on their colors from the rooms and the flickering colored lights of the blazing coals. And then strikes the ebony clock in the hall of black velvet. And then, for a moment, all is still and all is silent save the voice of the clock.

A. Why do you think the prince held a ball when the Red Death was killing thousands outside the castle walls?

B. The chimes of the clock caused all the merriment to stop. What other effects did the clock have?

C. Why do the dancers fear the striking of the clock? In what way are they all fighting against Time?

5. It is midnight and a mysterious stranger has appeared for the first time. He has set off a sensation of terror, horror, and disgust (page 11):

There are strings in the hearts of the wildest among us which cannot be touched without stirring strong feelings. Even among lost souls to whom both life and death are jokes, there are matters about which no jokes can be made. And the whole company seemed to feel that the costume and bearing of the stranger did not belong among them.

A. What are some things about which no jokes can be made—in the story and in real life?

B. Why was the stranger so shocking even among all the grotesque costumes of the dancers?

C. Why was the prince first struck with terror, then rage when he saw the stranger? Why was he insulted?
Comprehension Questions

The Masque of the Red Death

How Well Did You Understand the Story?

Choose the letter that best answers each question.

1. Those who watched the victims of the Red Death were terrified to see
   a. the victims' pains.
   b. heavy bleeding at the pores.
   c. the slow death.
   d. scarlet stains upon the face.

2. When half of his countrymen died of the disease, the first thing Prince Prospero did was to
   a. have a ball.
   b. gather a thousand friends.
   c. build a castle.
   d. stock his castle with food and water.

3. When the prince and his friends were safe within the castle,
   a. the doors were opened to all who needed help.
   b. the gates were welded shut.
   c. the Red Death disappeared.
   d. he sent help out to the victims.

4. The seventh room of the castle had
   a. black curtains and black windows.
   b. black rugs and scarlet curtains.
   c. red rugs and red windows.
   d. black rugs and scarlet windows.

5. The ebony clock chimed
   a. when the pendulum swung to and fro.
   b. every hour.
   c. only at twelve.
   d. every half hour.

6. When the clock chimed,
   a. the dancers danced.
   b. the music got louder.
   c. the dancers laughed.
   d. the music stopped.

7. The stranger was covered from head to foot in
   a. blood.
   b. a shroud.
   c. black.
   d. Red Death.

8. When the prince first saw the stranger, the prince was in the
   a. blue room.
   b. violet room.
   c. white room.
   d. purple room.

9. When the prince rushed after the stranger,
   a. the knights followed him.
   b. the knights seized the stranger.
   c. the stranger raised his dagger.
   d. not one of the knights followed.

10. After all had died,
    a. the clock stopped.
    b. the flames burned.
    c. the gates of the castle were opened.
    d. the Red Death departed.
The Masque of the Red Death

Discussion Starters

1. We are told that most victims of the Red Death had to die alone and unaided because it was such a frightful disease to see. Why are people frightened, repulsed or disgusted at the sight of disease or injury?

2. The Red Death is not a real disease, but some of its symptoms are more real or possible than others. Which symptoms seem real? Which are fantasy?

3. When the prince and his friends were safe inside the castle, the bolts of the gates were welded shut so that no one could enter or leave. Is it wise to "burn your bridges behind you," or shut yourself off from the world? What are some of the problems that could arise?

4. The decorations in the prince’s castle were extraordinary. Some thought he had a fine eye for colors and effects. Others thought he was mad. What do you think?

5. The clock plays a very important role in the story. How does it contrast with the gaiety of the ball? Why is a clock a good object for reminding people of their responsibilities?

6. This story is like a dream or a nightmare with some real-life aspects in it. What are some of the dream qualities? What are some of the real-life aspects?

7. Prince Prospero, ashamed of his cowardice, rushed after the stranger. Are wisdom and common sense often mistaken for cowardice? How are people sometimes bullied into doing foolish things because they don’t want to appear cowardly?

8. Poe's stories may be divided into three types: a) tales of terror, b) tales of beauty in color and rhythm, and c) detective tales. Which type (or types) fits "The Masque of the Red Death"?

9. What do you think would happen if the Red Death were to strike North America? Where would you go? Who would you take with you? What would you do to protect yourself?

10. The setting of the story, where the action takes place, is very important. How are the moods of the characters affected by the setting—the castle, the colors, the lighting, the castle walls, the twisting rooms, the costumes, the bolted doors and the clock? How does the setting inside the castle differ from the setting outside the castle?