



The Masque of the Red Death

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Prospero takes extraordinary precautions against the plague's appearance. He fortifies his abbey with a lofty wall and iron gates. He also provides elaborate comforts for his favored subjects within. These include entertainments such as a masquerade ball.

The ball suite contains seven rooms, each a different color ranging from blue to ebony. Their number can represent the threescore and ten years of life, their colors life's stages. The black room has scarlet windows and a gigantic ebony clock against its west wall. It combines the color of death and mourning with that of blood and also time imagery with the location of the classical underworld. Only the boldest guests dare enter this last room, and its clock's chime silences the musicians and makes the ball guests grow pale.

Though he directs every detail of life within the walls, Prospero cannot control the Red Death's appearance as "guest" at the masquerade. The plague claims Prospero within the black western chamber, then one by one destroys the revelers.

Death's inevitable triumph fascinated Poe and recurs often in his work. That death appears in the splendor and comfort of Prospero's abbey makes its victory more ironic, and Prospero's name adds to the irony. Nevertheless, Poe's symbols are suggestive rather than rigid.

Poe's comparison of Prospero's ball to that in *HERNANI*, an 1830 play by Victor Hugo, is a clue to Death's arrival. Hugo's protagonist kills himself upon the arrival of a black-robed figure. The ball guests of Poe's play in like manner fear the sinister stranger.

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