



Is “The Masque of the Red Death” the Most Criticized of Edgar Allan Poe?

Student’s Name

Institution Affiliation

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Blood, terror, horror, and mystery... These are the words with which many readers, including myself, identify a world-famous American writer and poet Edgar Allan Poe. Robinson (2015) in her article titled “On Edgar Allan Poe” states that the word that is applied the most to the Poe’s works is “horror”. This ever-present feeling of mystery, like a key to a concealed secret, constantly eluding from a reader, is a mundane feature of almost all of his works, along with the one of his most puzzled stories titled "The Masque of the Red Death". Even given that the story is rather short, it still raises many discussions and argues in regard to its true meaning and purpose. The word "masque" by itself is very peculiar choice to the story's title, as it is not a mask worn by guests at a costume ball, but rather "a form of dramatic entertainment that was popular among the aristocrats and nobility of the 16th-17th century in England, which consists of dancing and acting performed by masked players" (Oxforddictionaries.com, 2016). So, the title itself prompts the suggestion that this is not the story about Prince Prospero’s ball, but rather a costume party that was thrown for the Red Death. But why is this story related to the most criticized works of Edgar Allan Poe? In this essay, I will try to find an answer to this provocative question.

To answer this question, it is necessary to know Poe’s background and the culture of the 19th century Baltimore, keeping in mind that some rituals of that time may turn out to be extremely odd for the modern people. Death seemed always to surround Poe, as many of his relatives and loved ones died at the early age, and Poe himself witnessed the death. As a boy, he was introduced to the popular at that time mourning culture, the culture of grief and mourning practices that affected many people of the 19th century America. Bradford (2014) retells that death was a constant guest of the nineteen-century America, as every second family had a relative who died because of a certain disease or a fatal circumstance; the nineteen-century Americans needed these mourning practices to counteract their grief and desiderium. Bradford (2014) also mentions that this culture had its own rituals and beliefs that influenced many emerging poets and writers, and Poe himself produced some Gothic poems in which death, as well as its credo, was one of the central figures. It is evident by the story that is being evaluated at the moment, and all this knowledge altogether gives a protagonist a feeling of his or her supposed immortality and glorious existence that awaited for such a person after death. Maybe, that is why a reader gets this feeling that people mentioned in the story cannot put up with their fate, and they go on partying despite everything. It is like dancing on the razor-edge and knowing that you will fall after all. The whole abbey was full with guests dressed in diverse, colorful costumes that denied the presence of Red Death.

“All these and security were within. Without was the Red Death” (Hutchisson, 2012). The masquerade goes on while the Red Death keeps taking people’s lives outside the abbey.

There are many things to evaluate and argue about in the story, and that is why it is one of the most mysterious and criticized works of the author. It is everything in the story that makes it so scary and mysterious at the same time. Amper et al. (2008) evidence that it is not a mere thread of the mortal disease,

but terrible and oddly-colored rooms, costumes and huge ebony clock that create the atmosphere of full immersion into the scene. You may read the story twice or thrice and every single time you may reveal something new, a minute detail waiting to be unpuzzled. The story's mystery keeps you wondering about the meaning of each item in the scene, as much as about the interpretation of colors of the sealed abbey's apartments. Each reader tries to find his or her own symbolism of these colors, despite the fact that Poe disliked allegory and symbolism (The Poe Decoder, 2016). There are many controversial issues of the Masque of the Red Death that capture the attention of readers, as the opposition of Prince Prospero's character to the Red Death, or opposition of the apartments' colors to the gloomy atmosphere of the outside world created by the author. Almost every detail of this story evokes bright images of the main scenes: façade of the Prospero's abbey, colored apartments with joyous dancing figures, and the black room with the massive ebony clock. The clock is both the symbol of the assumed immortality of costumed dwellers for whom the hands of time are stopped forever and the symbol of the inevitability of death. As much as costumed figures want to despise the Red Death and its deeds in general, they stand still every time the massive ebony clock strikes another hour as if they realize that something or someone dreadful was about to arrive. With each strike of the clock, readers are brought closer to the understanding that they are about to see the Red Death in flesh, to say so.

Indeed, the figure of the Red Death appears almost at the end of the story, culminating the ball and bewildering the abbey's dwellers all at once. The figure of the Red Death is much criticized and evaluated since readers ponder about its identity and real appearance without the mask. The Red Death is one of the leading characters of the Poe's story, opposing Prince Prospero's character. Poe (2012) described it as a tall and gaunt figure folded in the cloth shroud from head to toe. The figure wore the mask concealing its face, and the mask itself resembled a stiffened corpse; the figure's appearance was the exact Red Death, and its garments were covered with blood. The mystery of this unwelcomed figure is revealed at the moment when one of the revelers unmasks the Red Death and the subsequent horrifying discovery that the figure has no tangible form, as death itself. Poe left enough space for guessing about the role of the Red Death in the plot. Nevertheless, one thing is certain: the shrouded guest came to take lives of all the guests and the prince's life as well.

The identity of a narrator is another controversial issue of the Poe's story alongside with the Red Death. Dudley (1993) argues that there are several theories of a teller's identity. First of all, the narrator is one of the costumed guests who survived the dreadful masquerade. This figure is even more mystique than the Red Death, as it is safe to presume that this person should be dead by the moment this tale was told, but he or she wasn't. The other theory, which is also argued in the Dudley's article (1993), suggests that the teller is death itself, but this theory is slightly polemic and sarcastic at the same time. It is next-to-impossible to presume that Poe was humorous enough to fold the Grim Ripper in such garments to visit a poor Prospero. Whoever the narrator really is, he or she gives us a unique possibility to observe the plot unfolding from the inside of the abbey and watch the Red Death leaving this place.

Irrespective of any evidence-based judgment, it is fair to say that Poe's Masque of the Red Death will always be one of the most enigmatic and criticized works due to its choice of colors, its plot, and abrupt ending that create this mysterious atmosphere of horror individual for each reader.