

## Study Guide

### Edgar Allan Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death"

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The works of nineteenth century poet, short story writer, novelist and critic Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) have exerted enormous influence on literature in America and in Europe. Today his literary reputation rests primarily on twenty short stories which exemplify his theory of short fiction accepted as the norm that subsequent short story writers have followed. Four of Poe's most notable stories provide a springboard for modern detective fiction, while sixteen others present terrifying experiences and personal agonies in fictional terms. The following discussion of "The Masque of the Red Death" is based on Julian Symons contention that this story should be taken literally, as "a macabre, jocular account of a madhouse, and a picture of universal doom" (*The Tell-Tale Heart: The Life and Work of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978: 233)).

#### Relevance to contemporary culture

Poe's early dysfunctional family life, his struggles with poverty, alcoholism and drug abuse, and the tragic loss of his wife represent problems often faced by young people today. Poe confronts his readers with shocking and horrifying situations which paradoxically may exorcise internal demons by suggesting they are universal, thus sharable, human terrors.

#### Context

As part of a high school American literature survey course, "The Masque of the Red Death" could be taught in one class period during a unit on Poe's work as a whole, which might also include examples of his poetry and an introduction to his critical theory. "The Masque of the Red Death" displays his mastery of the short story form, exhibits his ability to convey mood through concrete detail, and expresses his psychological deterioration during the final years of his life, observing the historical and personal tragedies he was experiencing at that time.

#### Possible preliminary activities

Assign the reading of this very short story. Ask students to check the entry on Poe in a standard print or online encyclopedia and list historical and biographical details relating to life-threatening diseases. Ask students to find newspaper or magazine examples of "plagues" in the world today, in both "underdeveloped" countries and in the United States. Ask students to find articles about diseases that may affect North Dakota (plague; hanta virus; AIDS; flu). How might people in our area today react if these illnesses became widespread? Might there be differences between how we should react

and how we do react? Did Poe's experience of his wife's death from tuberculosis possibly affect the writing of this story?

A vocabulary exercise could include the following words:

pestilence	avatar	profuse	dissolution	pest ban
dauntless	sagacious	dominions	hale	castellated
abbey	august	eccentric	despair	ingress/egress
folly	buffoon	voluptuous	bizarre	tripod
brazier	constrained	hearken	evolutions	disconcert
tremulous	<i>decora</i>	fête	grotesque	piquancy
phantasm	arabesque	wanton	ruddier	sable
decorum	propriety	habiliments	mummer	disapprobation
prostrate	illimitable	masque		

Class activities

At the beginning of class, arrange to have a small group of students pretend they are kindergartners playing "Ring Around the Rosy." After the class has seen the nursery rhyme enacted, ask students what they think the origin of this game might have been. Explain if necessary that it reflects the spread of the pneumonic form of plague in the Middle Ages: those near enough to be contacted by an afflicted person sneezing or coughing, even though they are carrying "posies," little bouquets of flowers to try to ward off the odors of sickness and death, soon are going to be fatally ill themselves ("ashes, ashes") and will soon "all fall down."

While briefly explaining the concepts of "plague" and its historical impact on Europe in the Middle Ages, show slides of medieval responses to plague in history and art, such as processions of penitents and flagellants, common burial pits in villages, etc.

Ask for student contributions: Did Poe write other works dealing with plagues? ("Shadow" is a prose poem about Pestilence, drawn from cholera outbreaks in the Mid-Atlantic states, especially in Baltimore in 1831 and 1842. "King Pest" is a supposedly comic short story in *Tales of the Folio Club*, set in London during a plague year. Two drunken sailors find a wine cellar where a group of decayed freaks drink and carouse on coffin trestles.) Where had Poe seen a graphic description of plague in England? (Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year*)

Describe the plagues in the world today. How would persons in our country react today to an outbreak of cholera? How would this reaction resemble or differ from reactions in underdeveloped countries and during Poe's time in the United States?

Discuss literary devices Poe uses to achieve his effect.

Present the literary concept of *irony* as involving some kind of incongruity or discrepancy. Present the concepts of three types of irony and ask students to supply examples of each, first from their experience, and then from "The Masque of the Red Death":

Verbal irony is a figure of speech in which what is said is the opposite of what is meant.

Dramatic irony is an incongruity or discrepancy between what a character does, says, or thinks, and what the reader knows to be true.

Situational irony is a situation in a literary work where incongruity exists between appearance and reality, or between expectation and fulfillment, or between the actual situation and what would seem appropriate. (Source: Lawrence Perrine, *Story and Structure* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1993: 519). How does Poe use irony to intensify the horror of “The Masque of the Red Death?”

Another literary technique Poe uses is *allusion*, a reference to another body of work which acts like a kind of shorthand, bringing additional meaning and emotional impact to a story, like the use of the terms “Achilles’ heel” or “the Good Samaritan.” Explain Poe’s use of the name “Prospero” (an ironic reference to Shakespeare’s magician hero of *The Tempest*); the ambiguous term “masque,” suggesting both an identity-concealing face covering and an elaborate dramatic entertainment; the name “Herod” from the baby-killing king of Biblical times; the phrase “a thief in the night,” also from the Bible, Job 24:14. Ask students how each of these allusions intensifies the mood which Poe is creating in this story.

Ask students what the colors of the various rooms might signify (the last room, with black décor, might suggest death, etc.) Bring a prism to show the spectrum into which white light is broken down. Do the colors of the successive rooms follow that pattern? Why or why not? Would the story be stronger or weaker if it were titled “Masque of the Black Death”? Why or why not?

Finally, discuss: What main idea is Poe conveying through this story?

Possible writing assignments based on this approach to “The Masque of the Red Death”:

Relate each answer to your statement of the main idea of this story in a three to five paragraph theme, with a thesis statement and supporting concrete details drawn from the story (use page references).

1. What happens to the country in this story? How do Prince Prospero’s reactions to these events reveal his character?
2. Does Poe approve of Prince Prospero? Why or why not?
3. How do the details of colors, numbers, and lighting effects help create the mood of this story?
4. Which room disturbs the revelers the most? Why?
5. What is the significance of the ebony clock, and how does it reflect the main idea of the story?
6. Why is the “masked figure” masked? How does Prospero react to him? Why?

Useful sources:

J.R. Hammond, *An Edgar Allan Poe Companion* (1981).

*Homage to Edgar Allan Poe* (video recording) (1993).

Charles E. May, *Edgar Allan Poe: A Study of the Short Fiction* (1991).

Jeffrey Meyers, *Edgar Allan Poe: His Life and Legacy* (1992).

Vincent Price and Chandler Brossard, *18 Best Stories by Edgar Allan Poe* (1965);  
(contains introduction by Price, who starred in several film adaptation of  
Poe's stories).

Kenneth Silverman, ed. *New Essays on Poe's Major Tales* (1993).

George E. Woodberry, *Edgar Allan Poe* (1885, rpt. 1980 with introduction and  
evaluation by R.W. B. Lewis).