

## ANALYSIS

“The Masque of the Red Death” (1842)

Edgar Allan Poe

(1809-1849)

“The Masque of the Red Death” is [an obvious] example of architectural allegory. You will recall how Prince Prospero, when his dominions are being ravaged by the plague, withdraws with a thousand of his knights and ladies into a secluded, impregnable and windowless abbey, where after a time he entertains his friends with a costume ball. The weird décor of the seven ballrooms expresses the Prince’s own taste, and in strange costumes of the Prince’s own design the company dances far into the night, looking, as Poe says, like ‘a multitude of dreams.’

The festivities are interrupted only by the hourly striking of a gigantic ebony clock which stands in the westernmost room; and the striking of this clock has invariably a sobering effect on the revelers. Upon the last stroke of twelve, as you will remember, there appears amid the throng a figure attired in the blood-dabbled grave clothes of a plague-victim. The dancers shrink from him in terror. But the Prince, infuriated at what he takes to be an insolent practical joke, draws his dagger and pursues the figure through all of the seven rooms. In the last and westernmost room, the figure suddenly turns and confronts Prince Prospero, who gives a cry of despair and falls upon his own dagger. The Prince’s friends rush forward to seize the intruder, who stands now within the shadow of the ebony clock, but they find nothing there. And then, one after the other, the thousand revelers fall dead of the Red Death, and the lights flicker out, and Prince Prospero’s ball is at an end.

In spite of its cast of one thousand and two, ‘The Masque of the Red Death’ has only one character. Prince Prospero is one-half of that character, the visionary half; the nameless figure in grave clothes is the other... More than once, in his dialogues or critical writings, Poe describes the earth-bound, time-bound rationalism of his age as a *disease*. And that is what the Red Death signifies. Prince Prospero’s flight from the Red Death is the poetic imagination’s flight from temporal and worldly consciousness into dream. The thousand dancers of Prince Prospero’s costume ball are just what Poe says they are—‘dreams’ or ‘phantasms,’ veiled and vivid creatures of Prince Prospero’s rapt imagination. Whenever there is a feast, or carnival, or costume ball in Poe, we may be sure that a dream is in progress.

But what is the gigantic ebony clock? For the answer to that, one need only consult a dictionary of slang: we call the human heart a *ticker*, meaning that it is the clock of the body; and that is what Poe means here. In sleep, our minds may roam beyond the temporal world, but our hearts tick on, binding us to time and mortality. Whenever the ebony clock strikes, the dancers of Prince Prospero’s dream grow momentarily pale and still, in half-awareness that they and their revel must have an end; it is as if a sleeper should half-awaken, and know that he has been dreaming, and then sink back into dreams again.

The figure in blood-dabbled grave clothes, who stalks through the terrified company and vanishes in the shadow of the clock, is waking temporal consciousness, and his coming means the death of dreams. He breaks up Prince Prospero’s ball as the keepers in ‘Dr. Tarr and Prof. Fether’ break up the revels of the lunatics. The final confrontation between Prince Prospero and the shrouded figure is like the terrible final meeting between William Wilson and his double. Recognizing his adversary as his own worldly and mortal self, Prince Prospero gives a cry of despair which is also Poe’s cry of despair; despair at the realization that only by self-destruction could the poet full free his soul from the trammels of this world.

Poe’s aesthetic, Poe’s theory of the nature of art, seems to me insane. To say that art should repudiate everything human and earthly, and find its subject matter at the flickering end of dreams, is hopelessly to narrow the scope and function of art. Poe’s aesthetic points toward such impoverishments as *poesie pure* and the abstract Expressionist movement in painting. And yet, despite his aesthetic, Poe is a great artist, and I would rest my case for him on his prose allegories of psychic conflict. In them, Poe broke wholly new

ground, and they remain the best things of their kind in our literature. Poe's mind may have been a strange one; yet all minds are alike in their general structure; therefore we can understand him, and I think that he will have something to say to us as long as there is civil war in the palaces of men's minds."

Richard Wilbur  
"The House of Poe"  
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