

THE MASQUE OF THE RED DEATH

by Edgar Allan Poe – abridged and simplified version

devastate: verheeren
pestilence: Seuche
seal: Markenzeichen

dauntless: furchtlos
sagacious: weise

courtier: Höfling
weld: verschweißen

contagion:
Ansteckung

seclusion: Isolation

rage: wüten

vista: Ausblick, Sicht

[A] THE “Red Death” had long devastated the country. No pestilence had ever been so deadly, or so horrible. Blood was its seal —the redness and the horror of blood. There were sharp pains, and then bleeding at the pores. The red marks upon the body and upon the face of the infected person were the pest ban which shut him out from the help of the other men. And they died within half an hour.

[B] But the Prince Prospero was happy and dauntless and sagacious. When half of his people had died, he called a thousand friends together, and with them he went to one of his castles. This was a great place, the creation of the prince’s own eccentric taste. There was a strong and high wall around it. This wall had gates of iron. The courtiers welded the bolts. They left no way to enter or leave, and they had enough food in the abbey. That way the courtiers thought they could avoid contagion. The world outside could take care of itself. In the meantime it was madness to be sad, or to think. The prince had provided all kinds of amusements. There were clowns, there were ballet-dancers, there were musicians, there was beauty, there was wine. All these and security were inside. Outside was the “Red Death.”

EXERCISE 1 Explain in your own words:

The “Red Death” is ...

Prince Prospero’s plan is ...

[C] Towards the end of the fifth or sixth month of his seclusion, and while the Red Death raged most furiously outside, the Prince Prospero entertained his thousand friends at a masked ball.

It was a colorful scene, that masquerade. But first let me tell you of the rooms in which it was held. These were seven – an imperial suite. In many palaces, however, such suites form a long and straight vista. The doors

in accordance with:
passend zu

tripod: Dreifuß
brazier of fire:
Feuerschale

Ebony: Ebenholz

disconcert:
Verwirrung, Unruhe
giddy: albern

between the rooms slide back nearly to the walls on either side, so you can see the whole suite at once. This suite was very different. The apartments were so irregularly disposed that you could see little more than one room at a time. There was a sharp turn at every twenty or thirty yards. To the right and left, in the middle of each wall, a window looked out upon a corridor which followed the windings of the suite. These windows were made of colorful glass. The color of the glass varied in accordance with the decorations of the chamber into which it opened. That at the eastern end was hung, for example, in blue—and blue were its windows. The second chamber was purple in its decorations, and here the windows were purple. The third was completely green, and so was the glass. The fourth was lighted with orange—the fifth with white—the sixth with violet. But the seventh apartment was decorated with black velvet tapestries. They hung all over the ceiling and down the walls, falling upon a carpet of the same material. But in this chamber only, the color of the windows didn't correspond with the decorations. The glass here was scarlet—a deep blood color. Now in none of the seven apartments was there any lamp. There was no light coming from lamp or candle within the suite of chambers. But in the corridors that followed the suite, there stood, opposite to each window, a heavy tripod, bearing a brazier of fire that projected its light through the glass and so lit the room. And thus many fantastic effects were produced. But in the western or black chamber the effect of the firelight that fell upon the dark hangings through the blood-tinted windows was ghastly in the extreme. It produced such a wild look upon the faces of those who went inside, that there were few of the company bold enough go inside at all.

[D] In this apartment, there stood a gigantic clock of ebony. Its pendulum swung to and fro with a heavy clang; and when the hour was to be stricken, there came a sound from the lungs of the clock: clear and loud and deep and musical, but so strange that the musicians of the orchestra had to pause to listen to the sound; and the waltzers stood still for a moment; and there was a short disconcert of the whole happy company; and one could see that the giddiest turned pale, and the more aged passed their hands over their brows as if in dream or meditation. But when the echoes had ceased, a light laughter arose at once; the musicians looked at each other and smiled, and promised, each to the other, that the next chiming of the clock should produce in them no similar emotion; and then,

after another sixty minutes, there came another chiming of the clock, and there were the same disconcert and fear as before.

EXERCISE 2 Make a sketch of the seven rooms in which the masked ball takes place. Include the corridors, the windows, the tripods with the braziers of fire, and the clock.

[E] But, in spite of these things, it was a happy and magnificent party. The tastes of the duke were strange. He had a fine eye for colors and effects. He had directed the decorations of the seven chambers for of this great *fête* himself; and his own taste had given character to the masqueraders. Of course they were grotesque. There were much glitter and phantasm. There were strange figures with unsuited limbs. There were much of the beautiful, much of the wanton, much of the *bizarre*, something of the terrible, and nothing that was disgusting. Everywhere in the seven chambers there walked, in fact, a multitude of dreams. And these—the dreams—turned around and around, and the wild music of the orchestra seemed as the echo of their steps. And, now, there strikes the ebony clock in the hall of the velvet. And then, for a moment, all is still, and all is silent except for the voice of the clock. The dreams are stiff-frozen as they stand. But the echoes of the chime die away—and a light laughter follows. And now again the music plays, and the dreams live, and dance more happily than ever. But none of the maskers goes to the chamber which lies most westwardly of the seven; there flows a red light through the blood-colored

unsuited limbs:
untaugliche Glieder
wanton: üppig

windows; and the blackness of the room seems dreadful; and those who step inside hear a sound from the clock of ebony, more emphatic than any which reaches *their* ears who enjoy the amusements of the other apartments.

EXERCISE 3 Which of these costumes are likely to appear at Prospero's ball, and which aren't? Explain your choice.



(c) nuck , ia lick



(c) Dfoulk1, ia Wikimedia Commons



William o le , Wikimedia Commons



(c) li C is man, ia lick

[F] But these other apartments were full of people, and in them beat the heart of life. And the dance went on, until there started the sounding of midnight upon the clock. And then the music stopped, as I have told; and the waltzers stood still; and there was an uneasy halt of all things as before. But now there were twelve strokes to be sounded by the clock; and thus it happened that there were many in the crowd who had become aware of a masked figure which nobody had noticed before. And once the rumor of this had spread around, there arose from the whole company a murmur of disapprobation and surprise—then, finally, of terror, of horror, and of disgust.

[G] In an assembly of phantasms such as I have described, no ordinary appearance could have caused such sensation; but that figure had gone beyond the bounds of even the prince's eccentric taste. There are chords in the hearts of the most reckless which cannot be touched without emotion. Even with the utterly lost, to whom life and death are both jests, there are things of which no jest can be made. The whole company, indeed, seemed

rumor: Gerücht

*disapprobation:
Missbilligung*

jest: Scherz

wit: Einfallsreichtum
propriety: Anstand
shrouded: verhüllt
habiliments of the
grave:

Leichengewänder

mummer: Pantomime

mockery: Hohn
to seize: packen
battlements: Zinnen

intruder: Eindringling

cowardice: Feigheit

prostrate:
ausgestreckt

now to feel that in the costume of the stranger neither wit nor propriety existed. The figure was tall and gaunt, and shrouded from head to foot in the habiliments of the grave. The mask which hid the face looked like the face of a stiffened corpse. And yet all this might have been endured by the mad dancers around. But the mummer had gone so far as to choose the Red Death. His clothes were dabbled in *blood*—and his broad forehead was besprinkled with the scarlet horror.

[H] When the eyes of the Prince Prospero fell upon this image (which, with a slow movement, stalked to and fro among the waltzers) he shuddered, either with terror or distaste; but, in the next, his face turned red with rage.

“Who dares”—he asked the courtiers next to him—“who dares to insult us with this horrible mockery? Seize him and unmask him—so we know whom we have to hang, at sunrise, from the battlements!”

The Prince Prospero was standing in the blue chamber as he spoke these words. They rang throughout the seven rooms loudly and clearly – the prince was a strong man, and the music had stopped at the waving of his hand.

[I] It was in the blue room where the prince stood, with a group of pale courtiers by his side. At first, as he spoke, there was a slight movement of this group in the direction of the intruder, who was also near at hand. And now, with slow steps, he approached the prince. But there was nobody who tried to seize him; so he passed within a yard of the prince himself; and, while the courtiers shrank from the center of the room to the walls, he walked on: through the blue chamber to the purple—through the purple to the green—through the green to the orange—through this again to the white—and then to the violet, before a movement had been made to arrest him. Then, however, the Prince Prospero, mad with anger and the shame of his own momentary cowardice, rushed hurriedly through the six chambers. Nobody followed him – a deadly terror had seized upon all. He held his knife, and had approached to within three or four feet of the figure, when the figure, who had reached the velvet apartment, turned suddenly and confronted the prince. There was a sharp cry—and the knife dropped upon the carpet, and the Prince Prospero fell, prostrate in death. Then, with the wild courage of despair, a group of the courtiers threw themselves into

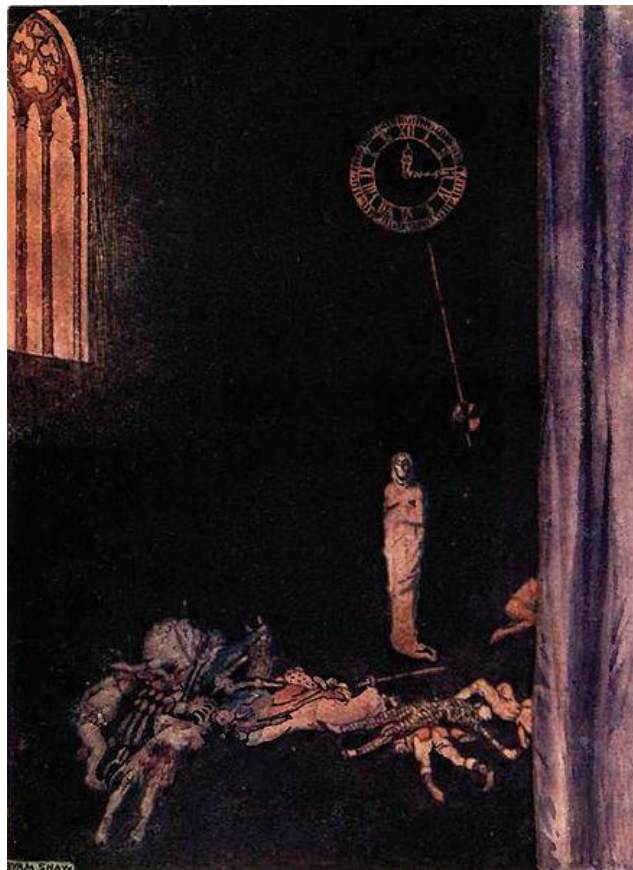
to gasp: keuchen
cerement:
Leichengewand

acknowledge: sich
eingestehen

Decay: Fäulnis
illimitable:
unbegrenzt

the black apartment, and, seizing the mummer, gasped in horror: The grave cerements and corpse-like mask were completely empty.

[J] And now they acknowledged the presence of the Red Death. He had come like a thief in the night. And one by one the revelers dropped in the blood-spilt halls of their revel, and died each in the position of his fall. And the life of the ebony clock went out with that of the last of them. And the flames of the tripods expired. And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all.



Byam Shaw's
illustration for Poe's
*The Masque of the Red
Death* in "Selected
Tales of Mystery"

EXERCISE 4 Which scene is depicted in the illustration above? Describe the elements from Poe's story that you can see in the picture.

EXERCISE 5 Write a short *summary* of Poe's story.

EXERCISE 6 What makes this story so scary? Take a look at:

- the description of the rooms ([E]), the party ([F]) and the shrouded stranger ([G]).
- symbols: the great clock in the black and red room

EXERCISE 7 What do you think of Prospero's decision to retreat into seclusion when his country is devastated by the Red Death? In the story it says that he is "happy and dauntless and sagacious". Would you agree? Why / why not?

EXERCISE 8 The fear of contagious diseases still haunts us in the 21st century – think of the recent Ebola outbreak in West Africa, the Swine Flu, or HIV. How do people react when they are confronted with it? Are there similarities with Prince Prospero's behavior?

i Bildnachweise (Bilder zugeschnitten):

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Venetianische Maske: [Venetian Carnival Mask - Maschera di Carnevale - Venice Italy - Creative Commons by gnuckx](#)

Pferdekostüm: "Inflatable costume" by Eli Christman -

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https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Inflatable_costume.jpg#/media/File:Inflatable_costume.jpg

W. J. Topley: Mrs. Ritchie in fancy dress. <https://de.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:ChessCostume.gif>

The Masque of the Red Death – Answer key

EXERCISE 1

The “Red Death” is a deadly infectious disease.

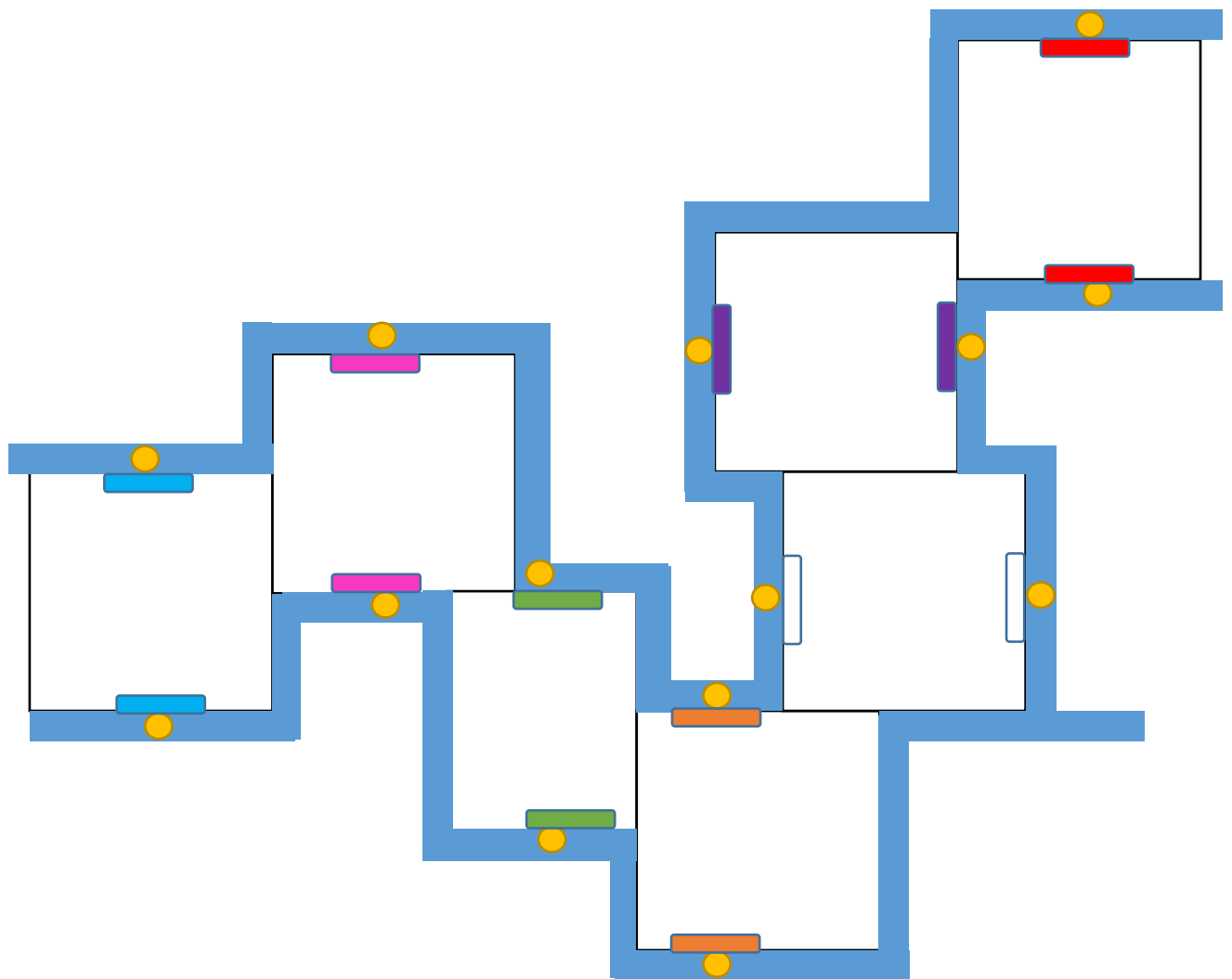
Prince Prospero’s plan is to hide with his friends, so they don’t get infected.

EXERCISE 2 The rooms might look something like this:

Blue line = corridor

yellow dots = tripods

colourful squares = windows



EXERCISE 3 The zombie costume doesn’t fit because it is disgusting. The elk costume is perhaps a little unlikely because it is a little silly – from the description in the text it sounds like the costumes are rather elegant.

EXERCISE 4 The picture shows the end of the story. You can see the Red Death, the clock, and the dead guests on the floor.

EXERCISE 5 Edgar Allan Poe's story "The Masque of the Red Death" is about a prince named Prospero who hides away in a castle along with his friends while a terrible disease (the "Red Death") is killing countless people in his country. One night, Prospero organizes a masked ball for his courtiers; the event takes place in a very odd suite with seven apartments. The last room is black and contains a large clock. The guests avoid this room, as it makes them feel uncomfortable, and whenever the clock strikes, everybody falls silent for a moment. When the clock strikes twelve, the guests notice a figure dressed up as the Red Death walking through the rooms of the suite. At this sight, Prospero gets very angry and commands his guards to arrest him; however, they are too afraid. Prospero then follows the figure himself to confront it, but when it turns around to look at him, the prince drops dead. When the courtiers try to grab the figure, they're horrified to discover that the costume is empty. Realizing that the Red Death has caught up with them, they all die.

EXERCISE 6

[E]

The scene is very odd (words such as "grotesque", "strange" and "bizarre" are used) and dreamlike; even the guests themselves are referred to as "dreams". Therefore, the reader knows that their happiness is just an illusion that can shatter at any moment. The guests themselves seem to realize this unconsciously, as they stop dancing every time the clock strikes. Clocks are often a symbol of time that is running out and thus, ultimately, of death. The chimes remind the guests that their life is drawing to a close even though they're still trying to suppress these thoughts.

In addition, there is a sharp contrast between the happiness within the six colourful rooms and the "dreadful" seventh room, which makes the latter seem even scarier. The red light "flows" through the "blood-colored" windows – this is strongly reminiscent of actual blood flowing, which is a symbol and a foreshadowing of the Red Death. The sound of the clock is "more emphatic" here – the message of the impending doom is even clearer, which is why the maskers physically avoid it, in the same way that they try to avoid thinking about the horrible disease.

[F]

The happy illusion breaks apart at the 12th stroke of the clock – this time is also known as "witching hour" and traditionally associated with all kinds of scary, supernatural creatures and events. Thus, the reader knows that something scary and unnatural is going to happen. The fact that nobody has seen the masked figure before also underlines its supernatural origin – it seems to appear out of nothing. Poe uses three related words (terror, horror and disgust) to show the creature's effect on the guests.

[G]

Again, Poe stresses that the creature is supernatural (literally "beyond the bounds"). He uses negatives ("no ordinary appearance", "no jest can be made", "neither wit nor propriety"); this creates the impression that the figure is so unworldly that it can only be described by saying what it is *not*. The superlatives "of the most reckless" and "the utterly lost" achieve a similar effect: You can only get close to what this creature is, but it is really too incomprehensible and terrible to describe.

EXERCISE 7 – Individual solution. Example:

I don't think that Prospero is happy or dauntless. He pretends to be happy, but the story shows that he and his friends are very uneasy. They try to ignore these scary thoughts, but ultimately, they can't shut them out (the same way they can't "shut out" the Red Death). And while it is true that the Prince is not a coward (after all, he brings up the courage to confront the masked figure), you can see that he is scared. The act of hiding away shows his fear from the beginning. I find it hard to decide whether he is sagacious. Of course, trying to avoid other people during an epidemic makes sense. However, on the other hand, you would expect a wise ruler to act more responsibly. Prospero leaves his subjects to die; he doesn't make any attempts to control the disease. For example, he could have imposed laws such as contact restrictions to stop the spread of the disease; or he might have sent messengers to other kingdoms to find out if anybody had a cure. Of course, this would have been difficult and maybe fruitless, but anything would have been better than just ignoring the problem. As long as there are people affected by the disease, Prospero and his courtiers will be in danger, as well.

EXERCISE 8 – Individual solution. Example:

I believe that there are many situations today where people act like Prospero. First of all, Prospero is selfish in the face of danger – a behaviour that you still see a lot these days. For example, whenever a storm is coming, some people stockpile items such as food and toilet paper. As a consequence, they have more than they need, while other people get nothing. Secondly, Prospero ignores the suffering of less fortunate people; he believes that his wealth and power will protect him. People often think that other people's problems do not concern them. For example, when they see homeless people, they'll say that they're just too lazy to get their lives together. Of course, they are too intelligent or disciplined to suffer the same fate themselves! And although they know that people in other countries lose their homes because of natural disasters or civil wars, they could never imagine going through this experience themselves. As a consequence, they don't feel obliged to help.