

The Mask of the Red Death

Summary

The Red Death, a bloody disease that kills a man rapidly with a seizure and bleeding from the pores, is terrorizing the country. But **Prince Prospero** is unaffected. Though his people are dying by the hour, he gathers his friends and his knights and shuts himself away in an ornate abbey, which he designed himself. He has it fitted with everything they need to avoid the disease and the Prince is determined not to think about it – he fills the abbey with entertainments. After a few months, the Red Death is at its height. But the Prince holds a fabulous masked ball, throughout the imperial suite, whose seven rooms are unusually laid out (fitting the Prince's unusual taste) in sharp turns, so that you can't see further than one room at a time. Each apartment has windows matching the color of the décor, one decorated in orange, another in violet and so on. The seventh apartment is black with scarlet window panes. In the whole suite, there are no lights of any kind, but in the corridors that lay behind the windows of the suite, fires blaze. Shapes dance around the walls from the patterns of the flames. The black seventh room becomes so fearsome with the illuminations from the fire that none of the guests venture into it. Also in this room is a giant clock, which, every hour, strikes with a deep, clear note of very strange pitch. This sound sends the masked company into a kind of reverie. But besides these things, the ball is a magnificent event. It is all designed with the **Prince's** eccentric taste, combining the disgusting and the beautiful, which is so bold that it is almost grotesque. Some think he is mad. Through the suite, "dreams" pass through, writhing and following the colors and sounds of the room, freezing with each chime of the clock, and moving again as the chime ends. But to the last chamber with the black drapes, none of these masked dreamers go. Here, the chime of the clock sounds solemn and loud, whereas in the other, brighter rooms it has a merry sound. The colorful apartments are full to bursting, and the party goes on feverishly until the strike of midnight, when the music and dancing uneasily comes to a stop and the dancers fall into their strange reverie. Then there are twelve further chimes. Before the chimes die away, the crowd becomes aware somehow of a new presence in the suite. The rumor of this presence travels through the rooms and the company becomes collectively fearful. What kind of figure must this be to cause alarm even in such a strange party? Even in the most reckless person, there is always something that will touch his sensible side, and for **Prince Prospero**, this figure does that. The figure is completely masked, from head to foot, as if dressed for the grave. Within the crowd, the rumor grows and they become sure that the figure, stained with scarlet, is the Red Death

itself. The figure moves slowly among the waltzers and starts to shake with rage as he sees **Prince Prospero**. The Prince, also enraged, orders the man to be uncovered and hung from the battlements. His words ring through the seven chambers. The group around him begin to approach the figure, but no one wants to seize him, and so he is able to stalk right up to the Prince, and past him, through each room, to the violet room. Then the Prince, angry at his own cowardice, quickly follows the figure and draws a dagger from behind. Now at the black apartment, the masked figure suddenly turns and the **Prince** drops to the floor. The revelers rush into the room and the figure in the shadows is now intangible, save for the mask and grave-like robes. **The Red Death** captures each dancer, one by one, the clock stops and the lights go out, and the Red Death finally rules over the whole realm.

Analysis

Death and life come up against each other in this story. The figure of Prince Prospero is healthy, wealthy and lives beyond threat and vulnerability, and the Red Death is challenging him for the throne. But though the plague kills the masses easily, Prince Prospero's prosperity (pun intended) is unaffected. If Prince Prospero's lively abbey retreat did not show his willful disregard of the plague that has swept his realm and killed his people, then this extravagant display certainly does. The masked ball is both a kind of celebration but also a place of darkness and disguise, providing a setting perfect for mystery. The numbering and thematic colors of the suite's rooms adds a sense of strangeness, and of being trapped, to the party. The fated seventh room is the odd one out and the story implies, though only vaguely, that something otherworldly is occurring as the time passes. The passing of time, marked by the eerie chimes of the clock, symbolizes the threat of death that the guests and the Prince are trying to ignore. The disgusting and beautiful images are brought together in the Prince's curation of his Imperial Suite. Like other Poe characters, the prince pulses with life, but with a kind of grotesque self-aggrandizing life. The architecture of the scene represents the Prince's character and the final seventh room foretells a dark fate. The strange behavior of the masked dancers show how in tune they are to the rhythm of the apartment's music and the uneasy passing of time. Midnight is a well-used hour in Gothic literature – its position between night and day and the magic associated with it makes these twelve chimes a superstitious significance. The revelers are drunk with this mystic atmosphere and the rhythm of the clock keeps them moving in

this elaborate show of denial. But when this dream is broken, the sensation that they have been avoiding attacks them all at once. The Prince has formed an image of himself as an unbeatable, superior creature, above even death. So the deathly figure that now approaches is immediately associated with death itself. The mask is now a sinister object, reminiscent of grave shrouds and bandages. Prince Prospero's authority and personality are threatened for the first time here and a battle of wills ensues. The unknown masked character is bent on the Prince and the Prince on him, and the Prince's exuberant party-throwing skills are nothing to the threat of death. Now the layout of the suite comes into play and captures the Prince in a trap of his own design. The masked figure is blood-stained and, after stalking ominously, kills the Prince in seconds – the figure is the personification of the plague. His effortless overthrowing of the Prince, who had seemed too big and wild to be vulnerable like an ordinary citizen, shows the power of death over the living.