

Masque of the red death

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While most are familiar with the gruesome nature of Poe's classic short story horror yarn "Masque of the Red Death," most have a tendency to fixate on the action of the story and the grim proceedings that occur and do not carefully examine the role that nature plays in the short story and how the short story presents a cautionary morality tale warning people that no matter how they try, they can never escape the wrath of the natural world when it decides to wreck havoc.

Poe and his contemporary authors of the 19th century presented a recurring theme in their work. This theme centers on the notion that society is inherently corrupt and that finding oneness with nature is a preferred choice. Of course, this does not mean that it was suggested that people abandon their homes in urban areas and head out to live in the forest, but it was a call to look skeptically towards the structure that society provides to them as it is not as flawless as they assume. This is seen in symbolic terms in the "Masque of the Red Death" and the environment in which the masque actually occurs.

In the short story, Prince Prospero and his cronies lock themselves up in Prospero's mansion so as to hide from the ravages of the Red Death that has destroyed much of the population. In order to entertain themselves and hide their paranoia of death, they turn the event into a grand masque. In a way, this is a strange attempt at distract and distance themselves from the ravages of the world outside.

Eventually, Prince Prospero notices a hooded individual who has snuck into Prospero's home. (He is noticeable in the manner that his masque guise

stands greatly out) When confronted, the stranger reveals himself to be the human embodiment of the Red Death and Prospero and his minions are doomed to succumb to the same fate as the common people they had mocked.

There is great symbolism in this tale as Prospero represents the privileged upper class and the masque that he promotes within a sequestered location represents the great cities that have seemingly insulated themselves from the ravages of nature. The use of the masques can even hint that the people are hiding their true nature of paranoia and fear of what lies beyond the wall of the castle. The insolence of Prospero and his minions is seen in the following excerpt:

But the Prince Prospero was happy and dauntless and sagacious. When his dominions were half depopulated, he summoned to his presence a thousand hale and light-hearted friends from among the knights and dames of his court, and with these retired to the deep seclusion of one of his castellated abbeys. This was an extensive and magnificent structure, the creation of the prince's own eccentric yet august taste. A strong and lofty wall girdled it in. This wall had gates of iron. The courtiers, having entered, brought furnaces and massy hammers and welded the bolts.

In this situation, it appears that Prospero holds a bizarre arrogance that if he re-enforces his castle, then he can keep out the brutality of the Red Death. This is a small scale version of the use of society and urbanized areas to control, curb and detain the natural world. Of course, there are limits to

society's value in this regard as nature wields force that can easily overwhelm any city.

The Red Death, while a disease, is a being of natural selection. Pestilence has one primary purpose: to thin the herd when the population of the herd grows to a dangerous extreme. When nature has decided on its course of action, often, it is unidirectional in its approach and next to impossible to deter.

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

In other words, nature, taking the form of pestilence, will not be stopped nor will it be denied its primary purpose. To this end, Prospero is doomed as will anyone who believes they can curb or dominate or escape nature.