

# Edgar Allan Poe's View of Life and Death

— Structural Analysis of "The Masque of the Red Death" —

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This paper is a literary analysis of "The Masque of the Red Death," written by Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849). This is among the shortest of his many tales, but is complete as it is, filled with horror and tension from beginning to end. However, it is not simply a horror story. The tale is successful in creating beauty in an impressionistic way through tension between fear and merriment, between sadness and happiness, and between silence and noise. The entire drama seems to take place somewhere in medieval Europe, which produces a suprealistic mood to the progression of the story, but it is futile to talk about when and where. While the Black Death is a plague that actually spread in late medieval Europe, the Red Death is a fictional disease, probably meant to add a visually sensational effect to the story.

In the present paper, we will attempt to find out what kind of views Poe had concerning Life and Death. As a matter of procedure, we will apply the principle of the structuralist way of literary analysis. We will treat the entire work as a self-sustaining entity consisting of several portions. By surveying the words and expressions in each portion, we will find conflicting elements, or binary oppositions, and then try to see the relations between the binary oppositions. In this way, it is hoped that we will be able to reveal the transformation of conflicts and the final solution to the conflicts in a synchronical way. Our goal is to draw more abstracted and generalized conclusions as indicated above. With frequent descriptions of struggling forces and abundant symbolic expressions, this tale is an ideal material for structuralist analysis. As the first step, we will narrate each portion of the story in a simplified form and look into various binary oppositions that govern different stages of the tale. The italicized parts hereunder are portions of the tale simplified for the purpose of this analysis.

- 1 . *A dreadful disease called Red Death is rampant. Anybody who contracts the disease suffers from a severe pain and dies in half an hour with scarlet stains all over his body, especially on his face. Prince Prospero, who is "happy and dauntless and sagacious," goes into seclusion in a remote castellated abbey with one thousand "hail and light-hearted*

*friends." The abbey is surrounded by a strong and lofty wall, and Prince Prospero has all the iron gates welded so that nobody could go in or out.*

Here we find a sharp contrast between INSIDE and OUTSIDE the abbey in which Prince Prospero and his thousand followers have secluded themselves. Inside, there is SECURITY (=LIFE) and outside, there is RED DEATH (=DEATH). Inside, there are "all appliances of PLEASURE" and outside, there is "HORROR of blood." Inside, there is HAPPINESS and outside, there is GRIEF. These binary oppositions are going to be governing factors until near the end of the story, and the "strong and lofty wall" acts as the intermediary for the series of oppositions. Another symbolic feature we should note is that the abbey is by nature a holy place, the house of God. By converting the abbey to a fortress against the deadly disease, and by using it as a place of pleasure, Prince Prospero has brought down Religion and God into the relative plane from the absolute.

2. *In this way, life continues within the abbey for five or six months. Then Prince Prospero decides to have a masked ball. The ball is held in an imperial suite consisting of seven rooms. Contrary to such suites in most other palaces, Prince Prospero's suite has a sharp turn at every twenty or thirty yards so that one can hardly see more than one room at a time even if the folding doors between the rooms are opened wide. To the right and left, in the middle of each wall, a tall and narrow Gothic window looks out upon a closed corridor which pursues the winding of the suite. These windows are of stained glass whose color varies in accordance with the decorations of each chamber. The decorations of the easternmost chamber are blue and the color of the stained glass is also blue. The second chamber is purple throughout, the third green, the fourth orange, the fifth white, and the sixth violet. However, the seventh and westernmost chamber differs from the others. While the ceiling and the walls are covered with black velvet tapestries and the floor with a carpet of the same material and hue, the color of the windows is scarlet, the color of blood. Each room is lighted by the fire placed in the corridor opposite to each window. Its rays are colored by the tinted glass and illumine the room producing "a multitude of gory and fantastic appearances." But in the black chamber, "the effect of the firelight that streamed upon the dark hanging was through the blood-tinted panes, was ghastly in the extreme, and produced so wild a look upon the countenances of those who entered, that there were few of the company bold enough to set foot within its precincts at all."*

In this portion of the tale, we can see Prince Prospero enjoying this "voluptuous," "bizarre,"

"gory and fantastic" masquerade. We can visualize the effect of the unusual lighting and the variant coloring of the rooms in which people dance in equally gory and fantastic costumes. In terms of space, there is a sharp contrast between the first six rooms and the last, westernmost one. In the former, there is LIFE, as a line goes, "the rooms were densely crowded and in them beat feverishly the heart of life." In the latter, hardly any persons dare to step because of the GHASTLY effect of the firelight which comes through the scarlet-tinted glass and falls on the black decorations of the room. With regard to color and light, the first six are colors of LIFE, while black in the seventh room represents a lack of color and light, pointing to DEATH. That lightless and colorless room is lighted and colored by the scarlet tint of the glass. This means that the room is brought into a condition between light and lightlessness, color and colorlessness, and life and lifelessness, which is the condition of the fatal disease, the Red Death. Before the residents of the abbey become aware of it, the binary oppositions between the INSIDE and the OUTSIDE of the abbey, LIFE and DEATH, SECURITY and RED DEATH, and PLEASURE and HORROR, have penetrated into the abbey. These binary oppositions also suggest that EAST means LIFE, and WEST means DEATH.

3. *In the room at the western end of the suite, there is a gigantic clock of ebony (also black) against the western wall. Its pendulum makes a dull, heavy, monotonous clang every time it swings, and when the clock strikes the hour, it makes a sound that is clear, loud and deep, and exceedingly musical, but of a peculiar note. It is so disconcerting to everybody present that the musicians of the orchestra stop their music and the waltzers momentarily cease their "evolutions." But when the echoes have fully ceased, people are embarrassed at their reaction to the sound and soon regain the previous gaiety and magnificence. Prince Prospero has told masqueraders to be sure that they are grotesque. There is much "glare and glitter and piquancy and phantasm." There are "a multitude of dreams" that are writhing "in and about, taking the hue from the rooms."*

During the party, two conflicting events are going on simultaneously. One is the COLOR and GAIETY of the party, and the other is the SOUND OF THE CLOCK. The former creates DREAMS, and the latter SILENCE. In fact, while the clock is striking the hour, its sound is the loudest thing in this secluded universe and all other things becomes "still" and "silent" and "still-frozen." Here we see an inversion of the SOUND of the party and the SILENCE of the westernmost room into the SILENCE of the party and the SOUND of the clock. And TIME is the intermediary for the opposition of SOUND vs. SILENCE in both cases.

4. *Yet the party continues until the clock hits twelve midnight. Before the last chime has utterly sunk into silence, many people become aware of the presence of a masked figure. His figure quickly spreads the sensation of disapprobation, surprise, and then terror, horror and disgust. The mask of the stranger closely resembles the face of a corpse. What is worse, the figure has assumed all the features of the Red Death — with his vesture dabbled in blood and his broad brow sprinkled with the scarlet horror.*

We have been discussing binary oppositions such as SECURITY vs. RED DEATH, PLEASURE vs. HORROR, HAPPINESS vs. GRIEF, COLORS vs. BLACK (COLORLESSNESS), LIGHT vs. DARKNESS, and DREAMS (SOUND) vs. SILENCE, where the left side of each binary opposition represents LIFE and the other side DEATH. So far, however, the representations of LIFE have been explicit and placed in the foreground, while those of Death have been implicit and placed in the background. From the beginning of the tale, it has been a struggle between Prince Prospero, a name meaning the prosperous aspect of LIFE, and the Red Death, representing the force of DEATH. And he has secluded himself and his group from the sphere of DEATH and has secured LIFE in his little kingdom in the abbey. But, as briefly discussed in the preceding section, with the sound of the clock's striking the hour, this relationship of obverse and reverse, explicit and implicit is overturned. While the clock is ringing, the SOUND representing DEATH dominates over the SOUND of GAIETY, PLEASURE and HAPPINESS, which is LIFE. Also, the SILENCE, which is characteristic of DEATH, overwhelms the people who are present. Still, at the end of the last echo of the sound of the clock, the original binary opposition of the SOUND (LIFE) vs. SILENCE (DEATH) is reinstated when people do everything to restore the previous GAIETY and MAGNIFICENCE. But with the appearance of the strange figure, which physically brings DEATH before the eyes of the people, this precarious balance between LIFE and DEATH rapidly collapses in the latter's favor.

5. *Prince Prospero is enraged at the figure, stops the music and orders the people to seize him. But stricken by a sort of awe, none of them dare to seize the stranger. The stranger comes closer to the prince "with deliberate and stately step" and passes within a yard of the prince's person. Then passing through the center of the room, he goes out of the easternmost, blue chamber, and "with the same solemn and measured step which has distinguished him from the first," he walks into the purple chamber. In this way, he walks through all the first six rooms. Then Prince Prospero rushes through the six chambers with a drawn dagger and comes within three or four feet of the intruder. When the latter*

*reaches the western end of the seventh apartment, he suddenly turns and confronts the prince. With a sharp cry, the prince drops the dagger on the carpet and instantly afterwards falls upon it dead. Many of the prince's friends finally try to seize the stranger, only to find that there is no tangible form under the grave cerements and corpse-like mask. People realize the presence of the Red Death and fall to death one by one in those chambers. The ending of the story goes:*

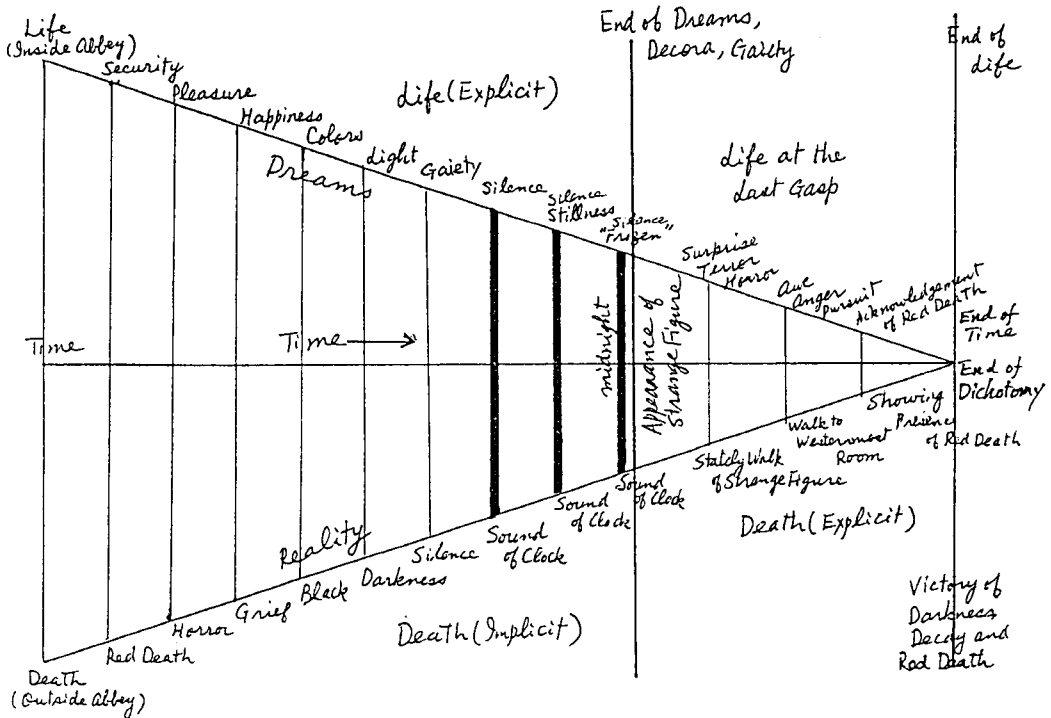
*And the life of the ebony clock went out with that of the last of the gay. And the flames of the tripods expired. And darkness and decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all.*

At this stage of the story, all the decora, all the dreams, lose meaning. Horror of DEATH and Gasping for LIFE are all that have remained. The strange figure is DEATH incarnate. TIME has been the mediator for the struggle between LIFE and DEATH. Now that stranger walks like the progression of time — with deliberate and stately step — leading the people to the final cessation of conflict. With the fall of Prince Prospero and his followers, the dichotomy between LIFE and DEATH comes to an end. LIFE succumbs to DEATH, LIGHT to DARKNESS, and DREAMS/GAIETY to SILENCE.

Now we are going to round up the discussion and try to find out what kind of message Edgar Allan Poe has left to us. For clarification of the following discussion, the reader may refer to the diagram attached to this paper. The very basic theme that underlies this tale from the beginning to the end is the struggle between LIFE and DEATH. This binary opposition is transformed into different forms of conflict with the passage of time. Physically, LIFE is within and DEATH is without the castellated abbey. However, this conflict is manifested even inside the abbey as an opposition between colored rooms in the east and the black room at the western end. The colored rooms represent LIGHT, SOUNDS, GAIETY and LIFE, while the black room DARKNESS, SILENCE and DEATH. The different colors in the former symbolize different phases of LIFE. The rooms are so irregularly arranged that one can hardly see the adjacent ones, which symbolizes the fact that we are not able to see the future and that we tend to forget the past in whatever phase of life we may be in. The light and colors coming from the fire outside the chambers through the colored glass symbolize the fact that we fail to see reality as it is, except for the surface of events in life, and that we end up making the entire life a series of "masquerades" and "jests."

When the masquerade begins, there is another binary opposition — the sound of the party vs. the sound of the clock. The former represents LIFE and the latter DEATH. Between

Diagram Showing Binary Oppositions



hours, the former is predominant and the latter is pushed behind. But when the clock strikes the hour, the latter overwhelms the former, indicating that LIFE is powerless when DEATH takes a concrete form.

DEATH becomes clearly predominant when the strange figure appears in the costume of a corpse who has died of the Red Death. Prince Prospero's run from the chamber in the eastern end through the other colored rooms into the black room appears as if he were chasing the embodiment of DEATH, but in reality, he is being taken hold of by DEATH. DEATH's final victory is thorough. No trace of LIFE remains after the fall of Prince Prospero and his thousand friends. The stopping of the clock indicates the cessation of the dichotomy, the final victory of DEATH. The fire's extinction symbolizes the defeat of LIFE.

In this connection, it should be pointed out that the whole drama takes places in an abbey, a symbol of Religion, God, and Life, which means that even Religion and God are denied as the ultimate reality. To Poe, Religion and God were no more than a temporary shelter, a part of the masquerade of Life, and were doomed to be defeated, however tightly castellated they might be, by the almighty Death.

To Edgar Allan Poe, death is the ultimate reality. There is nothing that surpasses it. Death is also the governing force of life. We may try to forget about death by resorting to all sorts of

decora, gaiety, pleasure and happiness, but they are like the light and colors coming through the tinted glass; they have no solid reality. Whatever we do is like a masked ball; we neither know our true selves nor show them to others. Thus, life is vain and absurd. Our substance, if there is any, is death itself. Life is empty and void, as shown by the strange figure. Time exists as long as life continues to take the journey toward death, always reminding us that our lifetime in terms of seconds is counted. Time is the intermediary between life and death and is the messenger of death. In the end, death triumphs. This seems to be the message Poe intended to convey through this short tale.

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