

The Masque of the Red Death

Explain the meaning of the ending.

Match these parts of the analysis:

Tone	Horror or Gothic Fiction, Fantasy, Literary Fiction
Genre	Third Person (Omniscient)
Narrator	Dark, Grave, and Ominous; at moments Delirious

Put the name of the correct Theme above the explanation.

MORTALITY

VERSIONS OF REALITY

FEAR

FOOLISHNESS AND FOLLY

In the "The Masque of the Red Death," Edgar Allan Poe immerses us in an atmosphere that feels more dreamlike than real. This is in no small part because, as the story progresses, we get drawn ever more completely into a world imagined by Prince Prospero, the designer of the castle where the story takes place. Prospero is an eccentric artist figure – he may actually be mad – and everything in the masquerade ball he throws bears the mark of his weird but ingenious artistry. From the seven elaborately coloured rooms in which the ball is held, to the whirling, writhing, costumed masqueraders, everything feels fantastic and imagined, like a dream or a work of art spun out of control. Just like in a dream or an artwork too, here, everything seems to mean something. In this world, it's almost impossible to draw the line between what's real and what's a product of Prospero's half-mad mind. And there's a curious overlap between the imagination of Prospero and the imagination of Poe himself.

Prince Prospero, the main character in "The Masque of the Red Death," lives mainly for pleasure, as do his friends. Better not to think, and not to grieve, they believe – just enjoy life and keep on laughing. They refuse to give death the time of day, and so when a plague strikes the kingdom, they retreat to a pleasure palace to keep on partying, with buffoons and alcohol galore. Poe structures his frightening tale around a contrast between the looming presence of death and the happy-go-lucky folly of Prospero's court, who foolishly believe they can ignore it.

Poe's main aim in "The Masque of the Red Death" is to create a growing sense of fear and dread in his reader, starting in the opening sentence and building straight through to the story's dark climax. There's nothing in the world Poe creates which lets the reader feel at home, no source of comfort or stability. The reader's fear is also mirrored in the fear felt by the masqueraders in the story towards their own death and anything that reminds them of it. Over the course of the story, their fear builds in a clearly traceable manner, from a nervous unease to an "unutterable horror" at the climax.

Death is everywhere in this story, from the opening description of the "Red Death" plague to the closing line about death's "dominion." Images and symbols of death practically drip from its pages, reminding the characters, and the reader, of death's inevitability. The characters in the story all try to ignore and escape death, preferring to stay focused on living life to its fullest. But mortality can't be avoided, as they are reminded when Death literally crashes their party.