

A terrible plague, called the Red Death, spreads in an unknown country and kills half of the population. The reigning prince, Prospero, decides to lock himself in an abbey, together with a thousand members of his court to escape the danger. They live in total seclusion but have all the food and entertainment they need. After a few months, the prince decides to organize a sumptuous masked ball. The prince and his guests will learn the truth about the Red Death.

The “Red Death” had long devastated the country. No pestilence had ever been so fatal, or so hideous¹. Blood was its Avatar² and its seal – the madness and the horror of blood. There were sharp pains, and sudden dizziness³, and then profuse bleeding at the pores, with dissolution. The scarlet stains⁴ upon the body and especially upon the face of the victim, were the pest ban which shut him out from the aid and from the sympathy of his fellow-men. And the whole seizure, progress, and termination of the disease, were incidents of half an hour.

But Prince Prospero was happy and dauntless⁵ and sagacious. When his dominions were half depopulated, he summoned to his presence a thousand hale⁶ 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 crenellated abbeys⁷. This was an extensive and magnificent structure, the creation of the prince’s own eccentric yet august taste. A strong and lofty wall girdled⁸ it in. This wall had gates of iron. The courtiers, having entered, brought furnaces and massy hammers⁹ and welded the bolts¹⁰.

They resolved to leave means neither of ingress nor egress¹¹ to the sudden impulses of despair or of frenzy from within. The abbey was amply provisioned. With such precautions the courtiers might bid defiance¹² to contagion. The external world could take care of itself. In the meantime it was folly to grieve or to think. The prince had provided all the appliances of pleasure. There were buffoons, there were improvisatori, there were ballet-dancers, there were musicians, there was Beauty, there was wine. All these and security were within. Without was the “Red Death.”

It was toward the close of the fifth or sixth month of his seclusion that the Prince Prospero entertained his thousand friends at a masked ball of the most unusual magnificence.

It was a voluptuous scene, that masquerade. But first let me tell of the rooms in which it was held. There were seven -an imperial suite. [...] The apartments were so irregularly disposed that the vision embraced but little more than one at a time¹³. There was a sharp turn at the right and left, in the middle of each wall, a tall and narrow Gothic window looked out upon a closed corridor of which pursued the windings of the suite¹⁴. These windows were of stained glass whose color varied in accordance with the prevailing hue¹⁵ of the decorations of the chamber into which it opened. That at the eastern extremity was hung, for example, in blue - and vividly blue were its windows. The second chamber was purple in its ornaments and tapestries, and here the panes were purple. The third was green throughout, and so were the casements¹⁶. The fourth was furnished and lighted with orange - the fifth with white - the sixth with violet. The seventh apartment was closely shrouded in black velvet tapestries that hung all over the ceiling and down the walls, falling in heavy folds upon a carpet of the same material and hue. But in this chamber only, the color of the windows failed to correspond with the decorations. The panes were scarlet - a deep blood color. [...]

It was within this apartment, also, that there stood against the western wall, a gigantic clock of ebony. Its pendulum swung to and fro with a dull, heavy, monotonous clang; and when the minute-hand¹⁷ made the circuit of the face, and the hour was to be stricken, there came from the brazen lungs¹⁸ of the clock a sound which was clear and loud and deep and exceedingly musical, but of so peculiar a note and emphasis that,

1. **hideous:** ugly, cruel, evil.

2. **Avatar:** personification.

3. **dizziness:** physical sensation of losing one's balance.

4. **stain:** mark left on the skin by something.

5. **dauntless:** brave.

6. **hale:** in good health.

7. **crenellated abbeys:** abbeys with indentations in their structure (typical of gothic architecture).

8. **girdle:** surround, encircle.

9. **massy hammers:** big hammers.

10. **welded the bolts:** fastened the bolts, so the door could remain closed.

11. **egress:** exit.

12. **bid defiance:** (here) confront, challenge.

13. **the vision ... time:** it was impossible to see more than one

room at a time.

14. **pursued the windings of the suite:** followed the curving corridor of the house.

15. **hue:** colour.

16. **casement:** the window frame.

17. **minute-hand:** minute needle in the clock.

18. **brazen lungs:** (fig.) lungs made of bronze.

at each lapse of an hour, the musicians of the orchestra were constrained to pause, momentarily, in their performance, to hearken¹⁹ to the sound; and thus the waltzers perforce ceased their evolutions; and there was a brief disconcert of the whole gay company [...]. But when the echoes had fully ceased, a light laughter at once pervaded the assembly; the musicians looked at each other and smiled as if at their own nervousness and folly, and made whispering vows, each to the other, that the next chiming of the clock should produce in them no similar emotion; and then, after the lapse of sixty minutes (which embrace three thousand and six hundred seconds of Time that flies), there came yet another chiming of the clock, and then were the same disconcert and tremulousness and meditation as before. [...]

But now there were twelve strokes to be sounded by the bell of the clock; and thus it happened, perhaps that more of thought crept²⁰, with more of time into the meditations of the thoughtful among those who revelled²¹. And thus too, it happened, that before the last echoes of the last chime had utterly sunk into silence, there were many individuals in the crowd who had found leisure to become aware of the presence of a masked figure which had arrested the attention of no single individual before. And the rumor of this new presence having spread itself whisperingly around, there arose at length from the whole company a buzz, or murmur, of horror, and of disgust.

In an assembly of phantasms such as I have painted, it may well be supposed that no ordinary appearance could have excited such sensation. In truth the masquerade license²² of the night was nearly unlimited; but the figure in question had out-Heroded Herod, and gone beyond the bounds of even the prince's indefinite decorum²³. 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 equally jests, there are matters of which no jest can be made²⁴. The whole company, indeed, seemed now deeply to feel that in the costume and bearing of the stranger neither wit nor propriety²⁵ existed. The figure was tall and gaunt²⁶, and shrouded from head to foot in the habiliments of the grave. The mask which concealed the visage was made so nearly to resemble the countenance of a stiffened corpse that the closest scrutiny must have difficulty in detecting the cheat. And yet all this might have been endured²⁷, if not approved, by the mad revellers around. But the mummer²⁸ had gone so far as to assume the type of the Red Death. His vesture was dabbled in blood - and his broad brow, with all the features of his face, was besprinkled²⁹ with the scarlet horror.

When the eyes of Prince Prospero fell on this spectral image (which, with a slow and solemn movement, as if more fully to sustain its role, stalked to and fro among the waltzers) he was seen to be convulsed, in the first moment with a strong shudder either of terror or distaste; but in the next, his brow reddened with rage.

"Who dares" - he demanded hoarsely³⁰ of the courtiers who stood near him - "who dares insult us with this blasphemous mockery? Seize him and unmask him - that we may know whom we have to hang, at sunrise, from the battlements!" [...]

He bore aloft a drawn dagger, and had approached, in rapid impetuosity, to within three or four feet of the retreating figure, when the latter, having attained the extremity of the velvet apartment, turned suddenly and confronted his pursuer. There was a sharp cry - and the dagger dropped gleaming upon the sable carpet, upon which most instantly afterward, fell prostrate in death the Prince Prospero. Then summoning the wild courage of despair, a throng³¹ of the revellers at once threw themselves into the black apartment, and seizing the mummer whose tall figure stood erect and motionless within the shadow of the ebony clock, gasped in unutterable horror at finding the grave ceremonies and corpse-like mask, which they handled with so violent a rudeness, untenanted by any tangible form³².

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 revellers 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.

19. **hearken:** listen to.

20. **crept:** (here) thoughts were slowly growing in people's minds.

21. **revel:** attend a party.

22. **masquerade license:** during that party everyone could choose his/her preferred masquerade.

23. **out... decorum:** the person had exceeded all the limits.

24. **Even ... made:** even if everything is lost and life and death seem only a joke, there are matters that cannot be considered a joke anyway.

25. **propriety:** moral decency.

26. **gaunt:** very thin.

27. **endured:** tolerated, approved.

28. **mummer:** (here) masqueraded person.

29. **besprinkled:** his face and costume

was sprinkled with blood.

30. **hoarsely:** with a low and rasping voice.

31. **throng:** crowd, large group.

32. **grave... form:** the crowd grabbed the figure and discovered that there wasn't any human shape behind the costume.

Other suggestions:

- The beginning of a pandemic: Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (1985), Chapter 9
- Feelings during a pandemic: Caroline Collingridge, *Staying In* (2020)
- Anxieties during a pandemic: Simon Armitage, *Lockdown* (2020)
- The arrival of death: Christina Rossetti, *The Plague* (1865)
- The consequences of a pandemic: Mary Shelley, *The Last Man* (1826)
- The memory of a pandemic: Jack London, *The Scarlet Plague* (1915), Chapter 2
- The beginning of a new life: Margaret Atwood, *The Year of the Flood*, Chapter 1, Toby (2009)