

# *Colors and Sounds in the Masque of the Red Death*

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**Abstract:** The Masque of the Red Death is one of Edgar Allen Poe's famous short stories. The whole story is permeated with horror and tension, and Poe uses a lot of color and sound elements for rendering. In the story, the discordant arrangement of the chamber colors and regular chimes are the focus of all horrors throughout the story, the space for the reader's imagination as well as the sign of Poe's unique and bold artistic treatment.

## 1. Introduction

Edgar Allen Poe is a famous horror novelist. He is good at creating the imaginative and horrible story plots to express the themes of the crisis of humanity and the inevitability of death, etc. *The Masque of the Red Death*, published in 1842, is one of his masterpieces. In this horror story, the disease, "Red Death", was spreading, but the Prince Prospero who was supposed to save his citizens fled to an abbey with one thousand people to avoid being infected. But as they indulged in the extravagant masked ball, the Red Death mixed in as a guest, and thus in the end everyone failed to escape from it. In the story, Poe devoted many words to describe the colors of the seven chambers and the chimes from the gigantic clock in the seventh chamber, which make the readers be exposed to a horrible, confusing and weird atmosphere from the beginning to the end. This thesis analyzes the color and sound elements in detail in order to better understand the artistic characteristics and themes of the story.

## 2. Sounds and Colors in the Masque of Red Death

### 2.1 Colors of the Seven Chambers

Blue, purple, green, orange, white, violet and the final combination of black and red in *The Masque of the Red Death*, these colors appear in the seven chambers of abbey. Since the story was published, the arrangement of those colors has inevitably ignited discussion and controversy. Because this sequence does not conform to the recognizable patterns or the standard spectrum in our daily life, it seems very chaotic and random, but at the same time it is described in lots of words in such a short story. There are two parts where the colors are depicted elaborately. The first is at the very beginning to tell the readers what the abbey looks like, and the second is near the end of the story where the Prince was chased by the mummer. In this regard, many formers held different analyses. For example, Walter Blair believes that these seven rooms represent the seven components of life; Joseph Roppolo thinks that these colors remind the readers of the life cycle and

the first room is the start of life and the last is the end; Vanderbilt holds that Poe is to imitate the seven stages of life in *As You Like it* to arrange colors for the seven chambers. [1] The above analyses seem to be reasonable but actually are not convincing enough to some extent, because their analyses combine certain psychological elements or personal experience, and are generally subjective. This thesis will explain Poe's unique artistic style from a more objective perspective, that is, pure color analysis.

Artistically, the three-primary colors are red, yellow, and blue, because these basic colors can also produce all other colors by mixing up in a certain proportion. The first chamber is blue, and the second is purple which is a mixture of the red and the blue, and it is the complementary color of the yellow. The third chamber is decorated with the green, a result of mixing blue and yellow color and the complementary of the red. The fourth is furnished in orange, a product of the red and yellow as well as the complementary of the blue. Until now, the first four chambers don't have any similarity or closeness with each other in color at all. Instead, only two colors of the three-primary are combined at a time to create an opposition to the rest color. Because of the opposition, the above together naturally gives readers a very strange feeling. The fifth is white, which is more obviously different from the colors of former chambers. The sixth is violet, and suddenly the arrangement changes from bright white to a dark one. The last chamber falls straight into the darkness, and the decoration of the entire apartment is all black, black tapestries, black carpet, a clock of ebony and so on. Furthermore, the apartments are irregularly disposed that the vision embraced but little more than one at a time. There is a sharp turn at every twenty and thirty yards, and people can't know the color of the next chamber. Each time people enter a room, it would be a shock without any psychological preparation.

It is worth mentioning that all chambers do not have any lamp or candle. The lighting of the rooms is provided by a brazier of fire on a heavy tripod outside the windows whose colors of the first six apartments are consistent with the colors of their respective decoration. The extremely unreasonable arrangement of colors coupled with the indirect lighting makes people feel unreal and insecure, and it seems that even it is hard for their inner fear to find a root. The color of the window in the last apartment is different from that of its decoration. The window is red. Red color has two symbolic meanings: life and death. At the very beginning, the author described the popular "Red Death" in the country, and then the red naturally symbolizes death. When light penetrates glass to cover the whole black-decorated chamber with red, consequently red and black in the same space, this chamber will undoubtedly become a horrible forbidden zone that challenges people's bottom line.

Poe's unusual color arrangement and optical effect create a weird atmosphere at the beginning and push the whole story to a climax at the end, thus showing Poe's flexible dealing of color and his superb skills in synesthesia.

## 2.2 Sounds from the Clock

In the story, the Prince summons a thousand friends from different walks of life to the abbey. They immersed in the extreme gaiety, ignoring others. Music is, of course, an essential component, but it seems to fail to get its importance in the story. The focus of all sounds is the chimes of the clock of ebony in the seventh apartment. This is the focus not just that the author intentionally sets but the fear of all the characters in the story. The description of the clock appears both at the beginning and the end. It has a dull, heavy, monotonous clang, and it can cause the disillusion of the Prince's dream. Whenever the clock rang, "the musicians of the orchestra were constrained to pause... and thus the waltzes perforce ceased their evolutions... it was observed the giddiest grew pale, and the more aged and sedate passed their hands over their brows..." [2] Although people

continue to laugh after the chiming, every hour the clock draws them into a panic, and the panic is actually a momentary sobriety.

Outside of abbey, the Red Death is spreading. Blood itself is the most vivid manifestation of life. But in this story, blood goes out of people's pores, which is the final symptom of the Red Death. Then there, blood has a dual meaning: it is a part of people's physical life, but at the same time, it is a company of death. [3] When people came to abbey, they have brought the life and the terrible death into the enclosed space as well. So the walking of the clock generates a sense of tension and depression, and it always reminds the people who participate in the ball of how long their life is left. Their life has been separated into minutes and seconds for the existence of the clock. This is why they fear the clock and try to forget it. Thus, every time the clock strikes, people clearly know: time is moving forward every second, and they can't live forever. Moreover, waiting for death is a terrible and unavoidable process. [4] Finally, there are twelve strokes from the clock. This is the end of the day and also the end of their lives. The Red Death appeared. The first thing it did is to kill the Prince who seems to be omnipotent, which tells everyone that no one can surpass life. In the end everyone died in despair one by one. With the death of the last person, the life of the clock ends, because there is no more life that needs to be measured and recorded, and there is no heart that is still beating.

The carnival before the chiming of the clock sounded a sharp contrast to the disappointment and despair after it. The author uses chimes to create an effect of suffocating horror. The stroke at the end of the story disappears forever, and Darkness, Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all, giving readers more space for thinking and imagination.

### 3. Conclusion

All the fugitives in the story are arranged in an enclosed space, which is the Gothic element of Poe's novel. [5] Then the author further narrows the space: the most important colors and sounds, all the horror elements, are basically concentrated in the seventh room. The colors are static, and the sounds appear regularly with the running of time and they are dynamic. The whole story does not devote too much on the description of the direct death force, but through the integration of static and dynamic elements, the air of death is slowly infiltrated into the character's destiny and readers' hearts, and the hidden death force has been revealed at the end. This is also the charm of Poe's story.

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