

## EDGAR ALLAN POE'S "THE MASQUE OF THE RED DEATH"

SHU-TING KAO

Adjunct Assistant Professor, Department of English, Tamkang University, Taiwan

### ABSTRACT

The Red Death, shuttling freely among the seven rooms, is the plague who brings death to Prince Prospero's masquerade. His presence is omnipresent and omnipotent. Poe makes the Gothic abbey in the story a metaphor, an uncanny space where an omnipresent and omniscient power enters and brings termination to all those who are enthralled in their mundane "paradise," and have an illusion of escaping from death. In other words, Poe's Gothic abbey executes the will of the Red Death, which kills all. What is less known about the Red Death is its expression of divinity in a corruptive world, and this is what the paper seeks to present. The Red Death "is not a random source of evil in a chaotic universe, spreading death without rhyme or reason, but rather is an expression of the will of God" (Haspel 62). The paper thus aims to prove that both the Red Death and all the objects in the Gothic abbey express divinity in the mundane, corruptive world.

**KEYWORDS:** The Plague, Omnipresent and Omniscient, Apocalypse, Gothic Abbey

### INTRODUCTION

Many critics have tried to decode the mysterious intrusion of the Red Death and the death of Prince Prospero in Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death." In "Bells of Freedom and Foreboding," Paul Haspel studies the story in terms of its historical context, and the seemingly apocalyptic force that brought down slavery in the South. Haspel draws parallels between the conflict of Prince Prospero and the Red Death and that of the slaveholders and abolitionists. He perceives the collapse and death of the Prince and his revelers in the masquerade as the end of slavery. Kenneth Silverman, in *Edgar A. Poe: Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance*, associates the tale with Poe's wife (and cousin), Virginia, suffering an outbreak of bleeding, an ominous manifestation of the fatal illness, tuberculosis (180-181).<sup>1</sup> The seventh room of the prince's abbey is a place where Poe creates both emotions and fear with regard to his wife's approaching death. In terms of allegory, the tale is linked to eschatology in the Bible. Brett Zimmerman, in "Allegoria and Clock Architecture in Poe's 'The Masque of the Red Death'," analyzes time and clock imagery in Poe's tale: when the clock opposite the seventh room (the black room) chimes at midnight, death triumphs over men and delivers destruction to them. The Red Death thus symbolizes the end of a system, illness, or cessation of time.

If the mysterious Red Death is symbolic of the end, Prospero's abbey is personalized as a "character" that adopts the same role of murderer, propelling all to death. Perhaps it is also the most attractive "character" in the tale, and the interior objects within the house—a space where the Red Death moves energetically, have the power of destruction or influence over its inhabitants. The architecture stirs the emotions of those who reside there, and, as Kim Drain observes, it "often comes alive to destroy the living" (170). Poe's house itself has a negative force, and it has prompted many critics to

---

<sup>1</sup>Poe's mother and elder brother William also died of tuberculosis. Alternatively, the Red Death may refer to an epidemic of cholera that Poe witnessed in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1831. For a discussion of the Red Death's relation to this, see Meyers 133.

analyze it in terms of psychology. Critics like Wilbur and Darrel compare the house to the dark psyche of its dwellers, and the collapse of the house to the destruction of the physical or mundane identities of those who live there.

In this chapter, I extend the theme of a sentient house in Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death" to Poe's thoughts concerning the cosmic forces of creation and destruction, something that can be seen in this allegorical tale. Poe provides his mysterious house with the unconscious—a dream—where his revelers are enthralled in their mundane "paradise," having an illusion of escaping from death. To them, the Red Death that haunts the abbey "is not a random source of evil in a chaotic universe, spreading death without rhyme or reason, but rather is an expression of the will of God" (Haspel 62) that they are afraid to confront. This paper aims to show that both the Red Death and all the objects in the Gothic abbey express divinity in the mundane, corrupted world.

### **Symbol of the Seven Rooms**

Poe describes the seven rooms of Prince Prospero's abbey as a strange or irregularly disposed circle.

There were seven—an imperial suite....The apartments were so irregularly disposed that the vision embraced but little more than one at a time. There was a sharp turn at every twenty or thirty yards, and at each turn a novel effect. To the right and left, in the middle of each wall, a tall and narrow Gothic window looked out upon a closed corridor which pursued the windings of the suite. (Poe 604-605)

Why is the abbey composed of seven rooms, rather than some other number? In the Pythagorean model, the seven spheres with the three spheres—fire, water and air—signify a "music of the spheres." For Robert Fludd, the cosmic spheres are composed of the planetary levels in men and the sphere of angels beyond them (Mann 43).<sup>2</sup> In the Qur'an, "the spheres are given a specifically architectural quality, the heavens being seen as storeys of a cosmic temple created from pearls, jacinth, gold and silver. Paradise is the seventh heaven. Each heaven is separated from those adjacent by veils and thrones symbolize the powers of each level" (Mann 44).

Brett Zimmerman, in "Allegoria and Clock Architecture in Poe's 'The Masque of the Red Death'," translates Poe's seven rooms into the movement of time towards the upper realm beyond materiality. According to Zimmerman, the abbey in this story is shaped like a clock. Within the clock, the Red Death, which symbolizes the hour hand, catches its victim Prince Prospero, the minute hand, when the clock strikes midnight. The clock that starts from six to twelve o'clock stands for the mundane time from birth to death. As it chimes midnight it signifies the end of the mundane world—the termination of the masquerade as well as the complete dissolution of all objects. Zimmerman thus identifies the interior space in Poe's Gothic abbey as a destructive power in time. In other words, the activities in the circumscribed space of Prospero's masquerade are controlled by time.

Gothic architecture is not the only sphere that links architecture to space and time. The Temple of Sobek in Egypt presents the power of space and time incarnated in the carvings of a snake (Mann 57). Hindu cosmic temples in India contain a quaternary mandala symbolic of Shiva as the power of time. The Temple of Quetzalcoatl in Mexico has the carving of "the crucified sun god" that "resembles both the serpent and the dragon, two symbols of time and solar energy" (Mann 71). Viewed from this perspective, Gothic architecture shares with ancient sacred temples the idea of the power of

---

<sup>2</sup> Robert Fludd is significant for the connection of Poe's story with symbols in the seven rooms. He is the author of the book that Roderick Usher keeps in his study room.

time in a limited space.

In "The Masque of the Red Death," the movement of time from birth to death is implied in the color of each room, indicating a certain period of life (Poe 605). The colors of the seven rooms reflect Poe's polychromatic parable about the movement of one's life on earth—from the fall from pre-existence of divinity, through corruption on earth, and to the return to the pre-birth state. Based on the *Penguin Dictionary of Symbols*, Zimmerman in "The Puzzle of the Color Symbolism in 'The Masque Of The Red Death': Solved At Last?" points out that blue evokes the association with "the infinite and the immortal" (63). The color of the first room is blue. Blue symbolizes that one has "initially come into this world not from nonexistence but from the metaphysical repertoire of souls where 'God' dwells" (64). The following three colors—purple, green, and orange—indicate one's prospects in the mundane. Purple is the color of "a regal, magisterial, and pompous" state (65). Green is the color of "madness" and "vigour" in one's awakening life (65). Orange is associated with "lust and infidelity" (65-66). The last three colors—white, violet, and black—shining through the windows of the last three rooms, symbolize "mortuary" and "death" (67). Zimmerman believes that the last room—black—is probably the "reentrance into the ethereal repertoire of extra-carnal spirits" (69). Zimmerman's speculation may be true: Poe never separates the theme of eschatology—the motif of death and dissolution in Gothic space—from that of immortality of the soul in relation to Neo-Platonism.

Poe uses the Gothic house to imply the desire to return to the pre-birth state. The seven rooms in the Gothic house, like the carvings, paintings, and sculptures of the ancient temples, embody the unconsciousness accessible to beings before being born. The limited space in the abbey is symbolic of the psyche of Prince Prospero—a desire for decay and dissolution. As Sigmund Freud states in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, every organism follows its own path towards death (45-46). The death wish grows in the unconscious and drives the organism to go through various circuits on the path towards death. Prince Prospero, among the revelers of the masquerade, behaves as if he is ignoring the existence of the plague, yet ironically, he steps on the path of death, haunted by the mysterious Red Death.

The Red Death moves rhythmically in the abbey "with the same solemn and measured step" (Poe 608-609). Zimmerman compares the movement of the Red Death in Prospero's suite to the hour hand on the clock.<sup>3</sup> As a part of the clock, he moves precisely, and in a timely manner. His movement represents the mundane time of Prospero. In the seven rooms, Prince Prospero is unaware of the path of destiny while he is chasing after the Red Death in rage.

It was then, however, that the Prince Prospero, maddening with rage and the shame of his own momentary cowardice, rushed hurriedly through the six chambers....There was a sharp cry—and the dagger dropped gleaming upon the sable carpet, upon which, instantly afterward, fell prostrate in death the Prince Prospero. (Poe 609)

Prospero's falling down before the Red Death symbolizes the cosmic destiny described in architecture. His chase after death stands for his unconscious following the path of death. The idea of falling prostrate in death is often repeated in Poe's tales. The ancient house in "The Fall of the House of Usher" is animate, and it kills its dwellers. The sentient houses

---

<sup>3</sup> Zimmerman's comparison comes from Weber. In "Edgar Poe or the Theme of the Clock," Weber suggests that Prospero's chase after the Red Death is the movement of the two hands of the clock. "In this case Prospero must represent the *minute hand*, and a conjunction must take place between the two....At the end of the tale 'the tall figure' stands 'erect and motionless, within the shadow of the ebony clock': the hour hand (the phantom) is indeed standing erect...at about twelve o'clock. As for Prospero, he falls 'prostrate in death' a few feet from the specter..." (Weber 86).

in “The Black Cat” and “The Tell-Tale Heart” also murder their inhabitants. Critics have thus observed the power of animism in Poe’s houses. Kim Drain states that “the houses in Poe’s stories murder...the walls sob...the curtains terrorize...they are literally alive” (175). Prince Prospero is unable to escape his destiny—death. The clock in the prince’s abbey moves with a cosmic rhythm and indicates the time of death, as the Red Death appears in the seventh room.

### **The Chimes of the Ebony Clock**

The imagery of clocks often occurs in Poe’s tales, such as “The Devil in the Belfry” (1839), “A Predicament” (1838), “The Angel of the Odd” (1844), and “The Masque of the Red Death” (1842). The imagery of a clock in the latter appears in the seven rooms symbolic of the time from six to midnight (from birth to death), as well as the ebony clock that stands on the western wall of the seventh chamber. The chimes of the clock keep interrupting the revelers, reminding them of the existence of time—the time of death.

Dennis. W. Eddings, in “Poe’s Tell-Tale Clocks,” points out that the ebony clock in the black room functions to echo the power of time in the seven chambers:

The clock brackets the story, appearing early and at the end, and the effect of its chiming on the assembly is evoked five times. The clock is thus given palpable form seven times within the tale, subtly tying it in with the seven rooms that also symbolize the idea of time as progression as they move from blue (birth) westward to black (death).(12)

The revelers in the abbey are not mindful of the clock-like shape of the seven rooms, but are profoundly affected by the chimes of the ebony clock. Although they follow the Prince and lock themselves in the abbey, away from the exterior world of the plague, they sense the disease’s approach as the clock chimes, which produces in them certain emotions (Poe 606). Time dominates the abbey, and reminds all the masquerade revelers of its existence, leading them to madness, sadness, and despondency. “There are chords in the hearts of the most reckless which cannot be touched without emotion” (Poe 607-608). The ebony clock is the messenger of death that sends news of its approach. Poe thus uses the clock to create a sense of horror in the revelers and makes it ring repeatedly and rhythmically. The ebony clock is a devil that aims to tear out the hearts of the revelers, whom it mocks for their ignorance of the plague.

Characteristic of evil, the ebony clock symbolizes the destruction of mundane decorum, and brings to the masquerade the end of Prince Prospero’s principles and propriety. Paul Haspel identifies the power of destruction in the clock’s chimes with the power of the anti-slavery movement. However, at the level of allegory and symbolism, the clock goes beyond political significance. It signifies the apocalyptic moment, and as it chimes at midnight it destroys Prospero’s principles.

Like all the key objects in Poe’s tales, the ebony clock is characteristic of animism. As David Halliburton, in *Edgar Allan Poe: A Phenomenological View*, suggests, “the clock comes closer to an active state” (314-315). It comes alive as the tarn in “The Fall of the House of Usher” mirrors the mysterious power bringing down destruction on the house. Just as the zigzag ominously shows itself on the wall of the old House of Usher and projects on the surface in the tarn, so the chimes of the ebony clock stop the revelers dancing and bring back the unconscious and uncanny power of destruction. Poe is an expert in creating the effects of horror through images of a clock.

Poe’s clocks, combined with the power of destruction in Gothic architecture, parallel the power of time in

Egyptian and other ancient temples. In ancient sacred architecture, the image of a clock stands for the earth's polar axis, whose rotation indicates the time on earth and the cosmic movements above. It appears in the Mayan Codices, the Egyptian stone carvings that depict Horus and Set, and the Wheel of Karma (Mann 32-33). Since Gothic architecture partially embodies the features of Masonic stonework, it has some elements of the sacred architecture. The clock that produces tremendous emotions in Poe's "Masque" progresses as "the scythe of time" that separates the soul from the thrall of the material world. It chops off the head of Zenobia Psyche in "A Predicament." It stays in the corner of William Wilson's classroom, watching. It makes the muffled sound that stirs a sense of guilt in the murderer in "The Tell-Tale Heart." Whatever Poe's characters or narrators confront, time controls and pulls in all organisms towards death.

Aside from omniscient power, a clock signifies the material that exists in the mundane world. The ebony clock rings on the wall of the black room, the room of death. After the moment of death comes, it ceases to ring and stops its disturbance. The seven chambers form the shape of a half-clock, with the implication that the missing half does not exist in the everyday world. Decorated with a clock that indicates the end of time, Poe's Gothic architecture reveals the astrological meaning of time—creation and dissolution in the Universe.

### **Gothic Windows and Light**

The windows in Prospero's abbey are in Gothic style. Light goes through them from a tripod that stands opposite the windows and bears a brazier of fire (Poe 605). I assume that Poe's stained glass windows emphasize the limited time in Prospero's abbey, echoing both the clock-shaped seven chambers and the ebony clock.

Gothic windows in Catholic cathedrals are designed to signify the wheel of fortune. The predecessors of Gothic windows, Romanesque windows, have comparably simple decorations. Whereas Gothic windows are made of crystal glass in various colors, Romanesque windows are simply circular holes decorated with carved stone figures of saints or evangelists (Radding 11-55). They are in the shape of a wheel and resemble a mandala (Mann 139). Gothic windows have more decorations that are complex, and emphasize the movement of time with their clock-like shape. Geometrically, Gothic windows have a rose shape surrounded by circles, squares, and a cross. This geometrical composition also resembles a mandala or the wheel of fortune. The basic geometry of Gothic windows is twelve-fold. Such windows, also called rose windows, look like roses spiraling with twelve-fold circular or square units when the light shines through them (Mann 139-143). "The preoccupation with colored light in Gothic Cathedral's was inspired by the belief that natural light was a symbol of the divine light of God" (Spielvogel 191).

Both the light of Gothic architecture and the light of ancient sacred architecture, or the related stone monuments, represent the Light of the Lord. For example, the solstice sunrise can be seen through the Heel Stone of Stonehenge. While Stonehenge demonstrates the wisdom of the Megalithic era, the Gothic architecture presents the wisdom of medieval times. There is in fact strong evidence that indicates Gothic cathedrals have many of the features of ancient stone temples or monuments. For example, A. T. Mann points out that St. Mary's Chapel at Glastonbury is "inscribed within a hexagon and circle with a diameter of 79.20 feet, a reference to the 7,920 miles diameter of the earth. This diameter is also the same as that of the bluestone ring at Stonehenge" (152). The light of the stone temple refers to the light of the sun and moon that the Megalithic people worshipped as gods. The light that goes through the rose windows of the Cathedral is equal to the light of God.

The window light of Gothic cathedrals that evokes admiration, ecstasy, hope, and a sense of revivification, becomes dim as it enters a ruined Gothic building. The shift from bright light cast through the Cathedral windows to dim light that evokes horror does not deprive the light of its divine origin. In *Eureka*, Poe points out that it is “the squares of the distance” that decide the brightness of the light.

From a *luminous* centre, *Light* issues by irradiation; and the quantities of light received upon any given plane, supposed to be shifting its position so as to be now nearer the centre and now farther from it, will be diminished in the same proportion as the squares of the distances of the plane from the luminous body, are increased; and will be increased in the same proportion as these squares are diminished. (Harrison 225)<sup>4</sup>

A Gothic dungeon or abbey in ruins receiving dim light stands for its distance from the luminous center, God, being farther out than that of a prosperous Gothic cathedral. From the luminous center, light irradiates in proportion to “the squares of the distance.” All atoms are thus in the process of diffusion. There is, Poe emphasizes in *Eureka*, a finite diffusion of atoms in the Universe, and what follows their diffusion is the return to Unity. Light does not continually dim towards infinite space (Poe thought that the Universe was finite), but instead it returns to its center.

The light that goes through the seventh chamber in “The Masque of the Red Death” represents the decay of idealism, beauty, reason, and sanity. It enters the seventh room—the black room that is sentient to the intrusion of evil and the evocation of emotions.

In the western or black chamber the effect of the fire-light that streamed upon the dark hangings 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. (Poe 605)

The western window produces the effect of horror. It has the same impact as that of the sculptures or paintings in Gothic architecture, such as “dragons, lions, devil-slayers with drawn swords, resentful dwarfs, winged bulls” (Campbell 91-92). The light, as it reaches the interior Gothic space (a space symbolic of the fallen state), is so dim that mortal eyesight fails to distinguish its divinity from God’s luminous center. In a decayed space, the light in the dark chamber is that of infernal luminosity.

The light in the seventh room is symbolic of the mortuary or approach to death. As the fire light flows “through the blood-colored panes” (Poe 607), the muffled chime of the ebony clock overwhelms the boisterous revelers and indicates the end of time, which consumes all in the rays of the fire light. The last scene represents the apocalypse, and at this moment Prince Prospero and his guests surrender to the plague as the clock chimes at midnight, indicating that all must return to nothingness.

### **Poe’s Dark Unconscious—Union with God**

That Poe’s Gothic house kills its inhabitants demonstrates a microcosm of the Universe in a state of collapse. The

---

<sup>4</sup> Poe’s “Eureka” is collected in James A. Harrison’s *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe, Volume XVI*. It also appears on the internet: Edgar Allan Poe’s “Eureka: An Essay on The Material and Spiritual Universe.” <<http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks06/0603391h.html>>

house can feel and execute the Will of the Universe. All objects—the tarn, clock, tree, and so on—contribute to the execution of death.

In *Eureka*, Poe proposes that in the Universe there exists the reaction of the Divine Act of God—gravity—that dominates the collapse of all matter. Gravity is a phenomenon of “all things returning into their original unity” after God’s creation of the Universe. All matter must disappear, and all returns to nothingness, the beginning of the Universe. All matter, on the path of “returning to its original unity,” depends on attraction and repulsion. Poe describes the two properties in his letters sent to George W. Eveleth:

...Mind is cognizant of Matter *only* through its two properties, attraction and repulsion: therefore Matter is only attraction & repulsion: a finally consolidated globe of globes, being but *one* particle, would be without attraction—i.e., gravitation; the existence of such a globe presupposes the expulsion of the separative ether which we know to exist between the particles as at present diffused:—thus the final globe would be matter without attraction & repulsion:—but these *are* matter:—then the final globe would be matter without matter—i.e., no matter at all: —it must disappear. Thus Unity is *Nothingness*.<sup>5</sup>

Attraction and repulsion—through natural phenomena (electricity, heat, magnetism, gravitation, attraction, and repulsion) —influence all objects until the destruction of all matter. Attraction is the Body while repulsion is the Soul: the two principles, “*Attraction and Repulsion—the Material and the Spiritual—*accompany each other, in the strictest fellowship, forever. Thus *The Body and The Soul walk hand in hand.*”<sup>6</sup>

So rigorously is this the case—so thoroughly demonstrable is it that attraction and repulsion are the *sole* properties through which we perceive the Universe—in other words, by which Matter is manifested to Mind—that, for all merely argumentative purposes, we are fully justified in assuming that matter *exists* only as attraction and repulsion.... (Harrison 214)

Poe’s theory of the destruction of all matter supports two points. One, as all things return to Unity, they return to the spiritual ether. All matter collapses and disappears. “God would remain all in all.” Second, the action and reaction of the Divine Will do not cease after the termination of this material Universe. God resumes “a novel Universe swelling into existence,” and then it “subsides into nothingness” through the two properties—Attraction and Repulsion. God’s “university of Gravitation” is a “perfect totality or absolute unity.” His Universe is defined (limited). God expands all matter and absorbs all matter into *Nothingness*.

Arthur Hobson Quinn, in *Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography*, identifies Poe’s theory with modern scientific knowledge. The biographer links Poe’s finite Universe to Sir Arthur Eddington’s view of “spherical space.”<sup>7</sup>

Poe’s grotesque Gothic house conforms to his psychological desire for destruction in *Eureka*. The building is characteristic of decomposition, and that means the collapse of the body and transcendence towards the spiritual sphere. The process of collapse in Poe’s house demonstrates the divine force of gravity, through which all things return to the

<sup>5</sup>“Edgar Allan Poe to George W. Eveleth— February 29, 1848” <<http://www.eapoe.org/works/letters/p4802290.htm>>

<sup>6</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “Eureka: An Essay on The Material and Spiritual Universe.” <<http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks06/0603391h.html>> James A. Harrison, *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe, Volume XVI*, p. 244

<sup>7</sup>Sir Arthur Eddington describes his idea of the spherical space in *The Expanding Universe*. The spherical space is “ ‘finite but unbounded’; we never come to a boundary, but...we can never be more than a limited distance away from our starting point. In the theory I am going to describe the galaxies are supposed to be distributed throughout a closed space of this kind” (Eddington 50).

original Unity. To achieve the purpose of collapse, Poe makes his building a murderer, and projects his desire for destruction onto the house. His grotesque tales concerning a mixture of a grotesque house with the Egyptian style demonstrate his desire for cosmological unity in *Eureka*. As John T. Irwin observes, Poe's cosmological theories in this poem "mapping the total forms of universal desire" are identical with Poe's desire for spiritual deliverance (the dissolution of the ego):

In *Eureka*, then, Poe presents us with the paradox of a "unified" macrocosmic body that is without a totalizing image—an alogical, intuitive belief whose "truth" rests upon Poe's sense that cosmologies and myths of origin are forms of internal geography that, under the guise of mapping the physical universe, map the universe of desire. (Bloom 2)<sup>8</sup>

Harold Bloom, in *The Tales of Poe: Modern Critical Interpretations*, perceives Poe's murderer-house as the Freudian drive or instinct towards death called "bodily ego."

A considerable part of Poe's mythological power emanates from his own difficult sense that the ego is always a bodily ego. The characters of Poe's tales live out nearly every conceivable fantasy of introjection and identification, seeking to assuage their melancholia by psychically devouring the lost objects of their affections. (7)

While Freud locates the bodily ego in the "cortical homunculus" of the brain, Poe extends it from man's head to Gothic space. Indeed, Poe intends to let the desire for self-destruction—an escape from the real world and into the valley of death—be swallowed by a fantastical space, and he has found this in his Gothic building that functions to heal melancholia through absolute termination of all matter.

The chimes of the clock in "The Masque of the Red Death" correspond to the chimes in Poe's poem "The Bells." Just as the chimes in the latter ring in the time of youth, marriage, and death, so those in "Masque" ring at the time of birth, the prime of life, the decline of life, and the moment of death. For the revelers who have an illusion of escaping from death, the chimes provoke horror, the fear of death. For Prospero, they wake up the "bodily ego" for a death wish.

### **Prospero's Chase after Death**

Prince Prospero's chasing after the Red Death in a limited space signifies the movement of matter towards collapse and Unity. An invisible force of destruction draws the Prince towards the center of the house. The Red Death guides the Prince on the path of collapse.

Poe describes the movement of Prospero and the Red Death as the return to the Universe. The Red Death is the plague who brings death to Prince Prospero's masquerade. He is "tall and gaunt, and shrouded from head to foot in the habiliments of the grave." The mask he wears is "so nearly to resemble the countenance of a stiffened corpse that the closest scrutiny must have had difficulty in detecting the cheat" (Poe 608). However, he is characteristic of another identity. As he slips into the western chamber, there is a resemblance between the Red Death and the Lord (Haspel 62). "He had come like a thief in the night" (Poe 609). 1 Thessalonians 5:2 in the Bible describes the day of the Lord as when He comes like a thief: "For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night." The Red Death can

<sup>8</sup>From John T. Irwin's *American Hieroglyphics*. Quoted by Harold Bloom. *Edgar Allan Poe: Bloom's Modern Critical Views*, p. 2



shuttle freely among the seven rooms, and he is omnipresent and omnipotent. He "is not a random source of evil in a chaotic universe, spreading death without rhyme or reason, but rather is an expression of the will of God" (Haspel 62).

...he made his way uninterruptedly, but with the same solemn and measured step which had distinguished him from the first, through the blue chamber to the purple—through the purple to the green—through the green to the orange—through this again to the white—and even thence to the violet, ere a decided movement had been made to arrest him.(Poe 608-609)

Zimmerman claims that the Red Death replaces Christ in the eschatological moment.

Poe...seems to have intuited the possibility of a godless universe where the eschatological promises of the Christian Bible are empty, meaningless...we are left with nothing but our biological and mental selves at the mercy of indifferent and overwhelming forces over which we have no control—eternally victims of Time. (11)

The Red Death, the agent of death, offers no Christian salvation, but for Poe does bring eternal rest. His presence reminds us of the omnipresence of the second William Wilson in Poe's "William Wilson." He holds "illimitable dominion over all." Poe uses the image of a clock to demonstrate the power of the Red Death when all revelers fall prostrate before him. I think it is thus possible to compare the Red Death to the god Shiva holding fire and a drum, symbols of the power of time.

## CONCLUSIONS

The Red Death stirs the emotions and pride of Prince Prospero, and this leads him to destruction. The black room is the center of the house where the power of destruction gathers and consumes all into Nothingness. Again, Poe makes the black room a metaphor, demonstrating the phenomenon of light dimming towards the circumscribed space (symbolic of the finite Universe) and the phenomenon of gravity as a force that draws all atoms into the center. Prince Prospero and his revelers are thus metaphorically equal to the atoms being drawn back to the center. Prospero's chase after Death is symbolic of awful, triumphant Death dominating men in their passage to the abyss. Poe sees the return to darkness as the process of the Universe when men grow weaker, glimpse "an identity with the Divine Being," and "recognize his existence as that of Jehovah."

## REFERENCES

1. Bloom, Harold. *Edgar Allan Poe: Bloom's Modern Critical Views*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 2006.
2. \_\_\_\_\_. *The Tales of Poe: Modern Critical Interpretations*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987.
3. Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973.
4. Drain, Kim. "Poe's Death-watches and the Architecture of Doubt." *New England Review* 27.2 (2006): 169-178.
5. Eddings, Dennis. W. "Poe's Tell-Tale Clocks." *The Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore*. Baltimore, 1994. Web. 10 Oct. 2010. <<http://www.eapoe.org/papers/psblctr/p119921.htm>>
6. Eddington, Sir Arthur. *The Expanding Universe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933.

7. Freud, Sigmund. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Trans. James Strachey. Ed. James Strachey. New York · London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1961.
8. Halliburton, David. *Edgar Allan Poe: A Phenomenological View*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973.
9. Harrison, James A. "Eureka." *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe. volume XVI*. New York: AMS Press, 1979. 179-315.
10. \_\_\_\_\_. *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe. volume I. Biography*. New York: AMS Press, 1979.
11. Haspel, Paul. "Bells of Freedom and Foreboding." *The Edgar Allan Poe Review* 13.1 (Spring 2012): 46-70.
12. Irwin, John T. *American Hieroglyphics: the symbol of the Egyptian hieroglyphics in the American Renaissance*. London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983.
13. Mann, A. T. *Sacred Architecture*. Shaftesbury, Dorset [England] ; Rockport, Mass. : Element, 1993.
14. Meyers, Jeffrey. *Edgar Allan Poe: His Life and Legacy*. New York: Cooper Square Press, 1992.
15. Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Masque of the Red Death." *The Complete Stories*. Everyman's Library, 1992.604-609.
16. Quinn, Arthur Hobson. *Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography*. New York: Appleton-Century-Company, 1941.
17. Radding, Charles M. and William W. Clark. *Medieval Architecture, Medieval Learning: Builders and Masters in the Age of Romanesque and Gothic*. New Haven and London: Yale U. Press, 1992.
18. Silverman, Kenneth. *Edgar A. Poe: Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance*. New York: HarperCollins, 1991.
19. Spielvogel, Jackson J. *Western Civilization: A Brief History*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 2013
20. Weber, Jean-Paul. "Edgar Poe or the Theme of the Clock." *Poe: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Robert Regan. Englewood Cliffs (NJ): Prentice-Hall, 1967.
21. Zimmerman, Brett. "The Puzzle Of The Color Symbolism In 'The Masque Of The Red Death': Solved At Last?" *Edgar Allan Poe Review* 10.3 (2009): 60-73.
22. \_\_\_\_\_. "Allegoria and Clock Architecture in Poe's 'The Masque of the Red Death.'" *Essays in Arts and Sciences* 29 (2000): 1-16.
23. "Edgar Allan Poe to George W. Eveleth— February 29, 1848"  
<<http://www.eapoe.org/works/letters/p4802290.htm>>