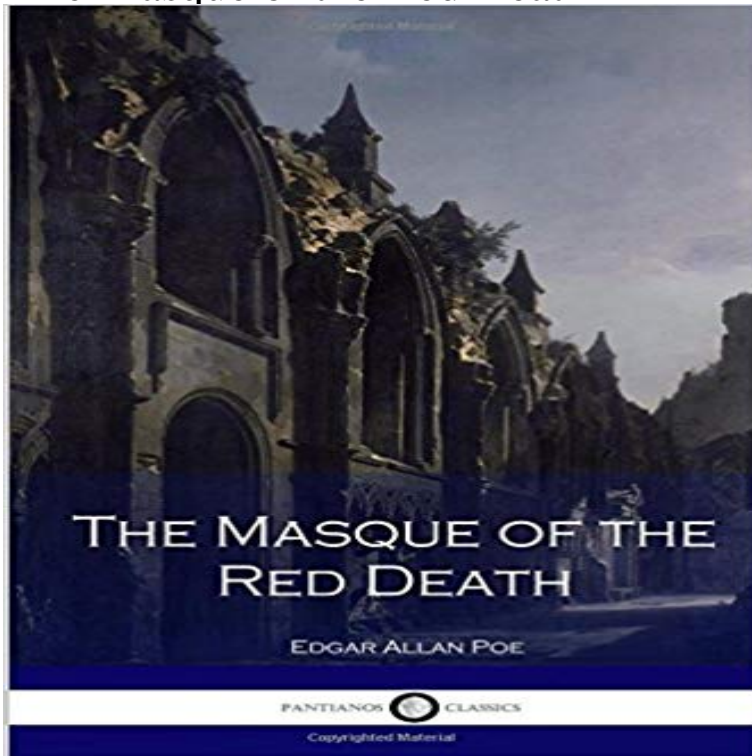


The Masque of the Red Death



The Masque of the Red Death is a classic short story of Gothic Fiction, first published in 1842. Featuring many of the tropes which define the genre, we witness in its pages a grim setting of a castle, and its multiple rooms which themselves resemble aspects of human personality. The story is not without its ironies: Prospero's castle, while mighty as an ideal guard against the disease ravaging the lands outside, ultimately serves as an oppressor to the Prince Prospero, his wealthy guests, and his retinue. As the tension ratchets and the great and majestic masquerade turns to one of horror, we witness Poe's evocative flair for grim and horrific prose. Given the description of its symptoms, it is possible that the titular Red Death was inspired by tuberculosis, which was rife among the European continent throughout the 19th century. The Red Death somewhat resembles a highly accelerated form of consumption, which was a terror in society. However given the speed of its spread and its sheer magnitude, it is also likely that Poe cast his mind further back in history to the time of the Black Plague, whose death toll as a proportion of Europe's population were far higher when compared to tuberculosis. In addition to the literal portrayal, scholars focused upon Poe have put forth a metaphorical theory that the castle and its wealth occupants are meant to mirror Poe's own life. Since he was looked after by rich foster parents, Prospero can be seen as Poe, seeking seclusion from the outside world and its many dangers. A more allegorical, or even moral, interpretation is that death is inevitable and should not be excessively shielded against. The nature of the guest, shrouded mysteriously, is evocative of the historical image of Death himself, and would seem to support such a reading. The story was first published in May of 1842, in *Graham's Ladies and Gentlemen's Magazine*, its distinct style and evocative

imagery gained Poe reasonable recognition which was only to grow later in his career as he gained enough confidence to author and release longer fiction. This short tale also saw Poe paid \$12, a modest but meaningful sum in his time. Famous today for its characteristically macabre silver screen adaptation featuring Vincent Price, the Masque of the Red Death continues to be popular and intensely discussed by scholars interested in Edgar Allan Poe, and the Gothic fiction of his era.

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