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The Pandemic Separates, but the Mark of Death Equalizes

It is a recurring theme in pandemic literature that the sickness is the equalizer of humanity, having no mercy on demographics once the proximity of death’s unmistakable mark is near enough. However, in another sense, the pandemic event itself exemplifies the underlying and otherwise silent pre-existing systemic inequalities. We can see it in the different pieces we have read so far, as well as in the current pandemic the world is tiredly battling.

In Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Masque of the Red Death,” death and the plague seem to be defeated by barriers set forth by the aristocracy. The ultimate, and inhumane, goal of the ruler Prince Prospero is to protect only his friends from the plague, turning a blind eye to his people who were “half depopulated” (Poe). Living in a seemingly closed-off and eerie world, the prince and his friends choose to dance and live life ignorant of the reality of the rest of society, save the hourly wake-up calls with the chiming of the clock, which symbolizes the knocking of death on their walls of iron. The enforced inequalities, however, could only save those it was meant to save for a short period of time. The mask of the red death had caught up to and equalized all the people in society.

Death in Poe’s short story is portrayed as a few different things. In the first paragraph, Poe describes the Red Death as the disease: “Blood was its Avatar and its seal -- the redness and the horror of blood” (Poe). He also describes it as a person, which is ironically true in most cases, such as in today’s Coronavirus. Most people who are infected by the disease is most definitely death itself, as the virus wants more hosts, so people are both the vehicle and harbinger of death. Poe describes the figure of death as “tall and gaunt,” outfitted with decorum of the grave and blood, wearing a mask resembling “the countenance of a stiffened corpse” that covered his face, which in turn was coated with “scarlet” blood (Poe). Clearly, the outfit of the Red Death contrasts with the elegant costumes of the rest of the ensemble of the aristocracy, however it can be argued that the outfit sufficed enough so that the Red Death managed to penetrate the walls of the abbey.

This may represent the “equalizing” characteristic of death, and how it can catch up to whoever runs from it, rather than fixing the problem. Due to the position of power that is packaged with holding a title as high as prince, the responsibility lied upon Prince Prospero, yet he did not contribute to the containment or betterment of his dominion. Instead, he neglected the problem until the Red Death came like a “thief in the night” (Poe), a Biblical term, which produces an extra meaning of “surprise” or “stealth.”

Poe’s characteristics of death are comparable to the Coronavirus and how the United States government dealt with it. Donald Trump decided to downplay the severity of the virus and, multiple times, called it a “hoax,” which sowed seeds of ignorance among the American people. In a way, the way Trump is handling the situation is not dissimilar to Prospero’s, as he builds a fortification of madness that figuratively “protects” himself and his people. Of course, it is only an imaginary barrier, but for the reality of those who believe in Trump’s lies, that barrier is very much real, as it negates the effects of the virus. However, it was only a matter of time until the Coronavirus made its way past his barrier and attacked Trump and his family and all those in the White House.

Poe’s representation of the inequalities of a pandemic and the equalizing characteristic of death is truly remarkably insightful and realistic. It serves as a picture for what a bad example of how a ruler should handle a pandemic looks like, and an indicator for how the rulers of today are handling COVID-19.

Works Cited:

Poe, Edgar Allan. *The Masque of the Red Death*. Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation., 2010. PDF.