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The license may not give you all of the permissions necessary for your intended use. For example, other rights such as publicity, privacy, or moral rights may limit how you use the material. In the realm of literature, there are many rhetorical devices that shape the way a reader interprets a story. One of them is allegory. It is a device in which characters, settings, and events in a story or image represent ideas or concepts. The ideas revealed are often of a political or moral nature (Allegory). Symbolism and metaphor, devices that both compare objects with ideas, are often employed in allegory. A few examples of allegorical works include Platos famous Metaphor of the Cave and George Orwells Animal Farm, andEdgar Allan Poes The Masque of the Red Death.What is the purpose of using allegoryinstead of directly saying what is inferred by symbols and metaphors? Why not leave the reader to his or her own interpretations? Perhaps by using allegory to construct a narrative, the potential to reach a broader audience increases. The Masque of the Red Death,Poe creates a fictional world not unlike our own in which people vainly attempt to escape death. It has the features of a Poe horror story but is didactic in function.Allegories can also help readers understand concepts that might be too difficult to comprehend otherwise, or, in the case ofThe Masque of the Red Death, force readers to examine something that is unpleasant, such as death. Poes wife Virginia, as well as his mother, brother, and foster mother, contracted and died from tuberculosis (Poes Life: Who is Edgar Allan Poe?), which may have inspired him to write about the follies of pretending death is avoidable.Cover to Animal FarmBut does allegory ensure that every reader always reaches the same conclusion(s)? In The Masque of the Red Death, are we to assume that the moral of the story is that we cannot escape death no matter how hard we try, or is there something else? Poe never stated that this story was meant to be an allegory, but today it is commonly read as such. It seems that some symbols seem to have less room for interpretation than others, and others inspire a vast array of meanings due to the readers understanding of contextual clues. For instance, the colors black and red, especially when paired together, can be interpreted as symbolizing death and blood. However, black could also symbolize night, whereas red could symbolize passion, lust, and romance. An analysis of Poes story might shed some light on how allegory works and what kind of interpretations are possible in allegory-heavy stories.Allegory inThe Masque of the Red DeathThe Masque of the Red Death contains imagery that upholds the storys allegorical interpretation, as well as imagery that is open to other interpretations. The allegorical symbolism is apparent from the beginning of the story. First, in an attempt to escape the Red Death, a fictional plague-like disease, Prince Prospero gathers his friends and retreats to one of his castellated abbeys (Poe 438). The abbey has strong and lofty walls and gates of iron (Poe 438). Upon entering the abbey, the Prince and his guests lock themselves inside: They resolved to leave means neither of ingress or egress to the sudden impulses of despair or of frenzy from within (Poe 438). The Prince and his guests believe that they can hide from the Red Death by locking themselves away from the suffering of the rest of the world.Half a year later, Prospero throws a masquerade ball to be held in the seven rooms of the abbey. Each room has a set of windows that look out into the hallway. In the hallway, there are tripods holding braziers of fire that send light through the windows and into the room (Poe 438-439). There are no windows that look outside the abbeys walls, and therefore, there is no light from the sun or moon coming inside. These features of the abbey reinforce the notion that the lack of exposure to the outside world means that Prospero and his courtiers will be safe from the Red Death.The author of The Masque of the Red DeathAdditionally, each room is a different color. Its decorations are of the same color, as are the windows that peer into the chamber. For example, the eastern most room is blue, and it has windows of blue-stained glass. Five of the other rooms are decorated in this manner with their respective colors: purple, green, orange, white, and violet (Poe 439). However, the seventh and most westward room of the abbey is furnished with black velvet and red windows. This room has an eerie effect on the masqueraders:the effect of the fire-light that streamed upon the dark hangings through the blood-tinted panes [] 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 439)The Velvet Hall reminds the guests that fear is still present among them, even though the masquerade is supposed to be a lively affair. The dark and bloody imagery of the seventh room also seems to foreshadow that something bad will happen to Prospero and his friends in this chamber. The symbolism of time is also prevalent throughout the story. First, a gigantic clock of ebony (Poe 439) stands in the Velvet Hall. Every hour,there came from the brazen lungs of the clock a sound which was clear and loud and deep and exceedingly musical, but of so peculiar a note and emphasis that [] there was a brief disconcert of the whole gay company [] the giddiest grew pale, and the more aged and sedate passed their hands over their brows as if in confused reverie or meditation. (Poe 439)The clock interrupts the masquerade every time it chimes. The clock does not only mark what time it is; as a foreshadowing device, it suggests that time is running out for Prospero and his guests, though they seem oblivious to this.The allegory continues with other time imagery, including the layout of the abbeys rooms. They are arranged east to west, reminiscent of the movement of the sun across the sky, and the number of rooms, seven, is equal to the number of days in the week. Additionally, the Red Death makes its appearance at midnight. Midnight marks the transition from one day to the next, as well as from night to morning. Its significance as the time when the Red Death appears is yet again another instance of foreshadowing. Midnight is also known as the witching hour, when demons, ghouls, and witches are said to be most active. The prevalence of representations of time suggest that though the masqueraders attempt to escape disease and death, it is not possible to do so. Time is not a friendly force in this case. The witching hour, when so many things can happenMoreover, the Red Death arrives at the masquerade dressed as its own victim: His vesture was dabbled in bloodand his broad brow, with all the features of the face, was besprinkled with the scarlet horror (Poe 441). It is a literal representation of death walking among the living. The Red Death is able to move around the abbey unimpeded, as its disguise unsettles the masqueraders. An enraged Prospero seeks to lay the masquerader who dares to dress like a corpse and pursues the Red Death from the easternmost room to the Velvet Hall. As soon as he raises his dagger against the corpse-figure, Prospero falls dead (Poe 442). When the guests tear away the disguise, they find no form beneath the clothes. Shortly after, the masqueraders die of the Red Death. The lack of a tangible body beneath the disguise suggests that death does not need a physical form, and it cannot be stopped by any means.Allegory has a strong hold on this Poe tale. Almost everything in the story tells us that there is no escaping death, no matter what we do. The reader is nearly beaten over the head with allegory and symbolism: the title itself is a play on words. It is no coincidence that masque and the similar sounding mask are both relevant to the story. Both words imply that disguises and hidden abbeys cannot shield a person from the inevitable which, in this case, is death.Other InterpretationsAt the same time, it is possible to interpret some of the images and symbols in the story in a manner that moves away from the no escape from death analysis. Yet, it does not seem possible to completely ignore this reading. However, we can read The Masque of the Red Death as a critique of socioeconomic inequality. The disguises of the masqueraders and the door of the party are meant to mask the reality of death and suffering. The masqueraders are attempting to escape death, and they attempt to do so by escaping into a dream world, where the fancies of the mind run wild, and the Red Death is not among them. To and fro in the seven chambers there stalked, in fact, a multitude of dreams. And thesethe dreamswritten in and about taking hue from the rooms, and causing the wild music of the orchestra to seem as the echo of their steps (Poe 440). The masqueraders delve into a dream-like trance where reality has little bearing.Additionally, there is a brief passage in the story that breaks into present tense:And, anon, there strikes the ebony clock which stands in the hall of the velvet. And then, for a moment, all is still, and all is silent save the voice of the clock. The dreams are stiff-frozen as they stand. But the echoes of the chime die awaythey have endured but an instantand a light, half-subdued laughter floats after them as they depart. And now again the music swells, and the dreams live, and writhe to and fro more merrily than ever, taking hue from the many tinted windows through which stream the rays from the tripods. (Poe 440)The break into present tense comes as the dream-state of the masqueraders is being described. The guests themselves are equated with the dreams. It is the dreams who are stopped by the chimes of the clock, and it is the dreams that pass from room to room. The use of present tense instead of past tense attests to the escapism of the masquerade.Also, the layout of the abbey upholds the dream-like atmosphere of the masquerade. In addition to the rooms having different colors, the manner in which of the rooms are arranged is bizarre: 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 (Poe 438). No room has a clear view into another, and the guests find themselves wending through a maze of chambers. Coupled with the lack of windows looking to the external world and the artificial lighting, the abbey and the masquerade represent the enclosed dream-world of Prospero and his friends.Let your dreams become reality.However, as with many dreams, glimmers of reality soon creep in. For instance, the Velvet Hall continues to unnerve the masqueraders: But to the chamber which lies most westwardly of the seven there are none of the maskers who venture; for the night is waning away, and there flows a ruddier light through the blood-colored panes; and the blackness of the sable drapery appalls (Poe 440). This quote is also a part of the section written in present tense, which signifies that the masqueraders think they are still in a dream-state. Though the other chambers are filled with people, laughter, and dancing, the Velvet Hall brings elements of death and violence into an otherwise happy, though bizarre, dream-world. It isnt long before the dream crumbles around them, and reality is made known to Prospero and his friends.ConclusionsSo what difference does it make if a story is considered an allegory? The Masque of the Red Death is labeledan allegory because the symbolism and imagery seems to point the reader to one conclusion: death is coming, whether you want it or not. While allegory gives us an interpretation of the world, we can agree or disagree with it, and of course we are free to draw our own conclusions from the story. Some stories are written with the intention of being allegorical, and other are not, but once a story is released for popular consumption, the reader will make his or her own interpretation of the story. Additionally, there is no way to be sure if Poe meantThe Masque of the Red Deathto be read as allegory or as having an overarching moral.At the same time, some stories are perhaps designated allegoriesbecause theaudeance gainsa more complete understanding of the world by having read them. Allegories seem to explore ideas that we might hold as common truths. Maybe the colors red and black usually symbolism blood and death because those things exist in our world and affect the way we live. Even if we ignore the allegorical interpretation of a story, we can reach our own conclusions that might affect our

lives or at least the way we think. Literature often serves the purpose to teach us about the way we live, and allegory and symbolism are but merely a tool for the author and reader can rely in order tocomprehendthe way a little better.Works CitedAllegory. Merriam-Webster. Web. 8 Jul. 2014. < .Poe, Edgar Allan. The Masque of the Red Death. Edgar Allan Poe: Complete Tales and Poems. New York: Fall River Press, 2012.438-442. Print.Poes Life: Who is Edgar Allan Poe? Poe Museum.Web. 15 Jul. 2014. < .What do you think? Leave a comment.Edgar Allan Poes The Masque of the Red Death should be studied at many levels: (1) the literal level - the literal level is a study of the events that actually take place in the story; (2) an allegorical level - an allegory is a story in which the objects, characters, and events are symbolic of something grander in scale. In order to understand the story allegorically, one needs a firm understanding of The Masque of the Red Death symbolism. You can find the full text of the short story here.Symbols & Analysis[caption id="" align=aligncenter width=600]The Red Death symbolizes the inevitability of death. Although there is no specific disease with the exact symptoms described in the story, critics believe the diseases description has elements of tuberculosis, a disease which killed many of those close to Poe. It also brings forth memories of the Black Death which depopulated much of Europe during the Middle Ages. The Castle represents mans efforts to prevent death. Regardless of wealth, social position, or popularity, death arrives as an uninvited guest. Prince Prospero symbolizes the end of feudalism. Prosperos inviting only wealthy knights and ladies to his castle at the expense of peasants and commoners represents the socioeconomic divide between landowners and peasants that existed during the feudalistic period. It is not coincidental that the Black Death, which reduced the number of workers, led to a demand for labor and played an important role in ending feudalism in Europe. The Ebony Clock is a constant reminder of death and symbolizes the inevitability of it. The revelers could neither stop its pendulum from swinging nor could they prevent its ominous tones from dampening their enthusiasm. The Seven Rooms represent the stages of life. More on this later. The Masqueraders symbolize all humans and gives credence to the interpretation that the seven rooms represent the seven ages of man (covered further in the next section).Color SymbolismColors play an important role in The Masque of the Red Death symbolism. Red - The most obvious color symbolism in The Masque of the Red Death is in its title. Red symbolizes death and blood. The gruesome description of the Red Death gives the color a ghastly connotation, especially in light of the red window panes contained in the death room at the far western end of the imperial suite. Black/Ebony - The seventh room 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 (146). This seventh room contains no light of any kind and represents the darkness of death. In this room stands the ebony clock. Upon hearing its chimes the guests were reminded of death: the giddiest grew pale, and the more aged and sedate passed their hands over their brows as if in confused reverie or meditation (147). Blue/Purple/Green/Orange/White/Violet - These are the colors of the first six rooms in the imperial suite. I will address them together insofar as they represent a prism and therefore reflect a progression, lending credence to the interpretation that the story is an allegory for life. This interpretation, however, is complicated by the fact that the color of Prosperos room does not occur in the same sequence as they do in a prism, possibly reflective of Prosperos twisted sense of fairness or an attempt by the author to associate particular colors with a specific period in life.Why Seven Rooms in The Masque of the Red Death?One interpretation is that the seven rooms represent Shakespeares Seven Ages of Man from As You Like It: (bolding is from me). All the worlds a stage, / And all the men and women merely players: / They have their exits and their entrances; / And one man in his time plays many parts, / His acts being seven ages. At first the infant, / Mewling and puking in the nurses arms. / And then the whining school-boy, with his satchel / And shining morning face, creeping like snail / Unwillingly to school. And then the lover, / Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad / Made to his mistress eyebrow. Then a soldier, / Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard, / Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel, / Seeking the bubble reputation / Even in the cannons mouth. And then the justice, / In fair round belly with good capon lined, / With eyes severe and beard of formal cut, / Full of wise saws and modern instances; / And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts / Into the lean and slipperd pantaloon, / With spectacles on nose and pouch on side, / His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide / For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice, / Turning again toward childish treble, pipes / And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all, / That ends this strange eventful history, / Is second childishness and mere oblivion, / Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything. (II, vii, 139-66). Many consider The Masque of the Red Death an allegory. The seven rooms, therefore, represent the life of all humans. It differs in respect to Shakespeares monologue insofar as death (symbolized by the sounding of the ebony clock) oft intervenes in the six rooms preceding death. The physical arrangement of the seven rooms also lends itself to this allegorical interpretation:(1) the first room lies furthest East, or where the sun rises;(2) the last room lies furthest West, or where the sun sets;(3) the rooms are arranged in such a manner that vision embraced but little more than one at a time in the same way life only provides short glimpse into the future.Another InterpretationOthers interpret the 7 rooms in The Masque of the Red Death as a symbol of Prosperos indulgence in the seven deadly sins:Pride/Vanity - Pride is the excessive belief in ones own abilities, similar to vanity, which is setting ones heart on things of little value. Prosperos belief that he is more powerful than death is a vivid demonstration of pride.Envy - It is unclear who the Prince might envy, but he sure is trying hard to impress someone.Gluttony - Gluttony is the act of consuming more than one is required. Instead of using his means to protect more people, something he is obligated to do as prince, he lavishes his guests with ample provisions and the appliances of pleasure.Lust - Lust is an excessive craving for the pleasures of the body, usually associated with sex. The era in which Poe wrote prohibited the explicit or implicit description of sex, but what do you think was going on at an anything goes party?Anger - The Prince becomes angry with the uninvited guest and attacks it.Greed - Although it is apparent Prince Prospero shares his wealth with a thousand guests, he helps those who need it least and withholds his substance from those in need.Sloth - Sloth is the absence of work. The prince seems like a hard worker; his work, however, is on the physical realm not the spiritual realm.What do you think they mean? If you have an alternate interpretation, let me know in the comments.ReferencesPoe, Edgar Allan. The Masque of the Red Death. The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Tales. New York: Penguin, 1998. 145-51.This post is part of the series: Masque of the Red Death Study GuideAvoid becoming a bloody mess on your next short story test. Use this study guide and keep the Red F away!

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