



The Significance of Religious Symbols in “The Masque of the Red Death”

A Response to Leonard Cassuto

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Building on literary scholar Leonard Cassuto’s analysis of the narrator in Edgar Allan Poe’s renowned “Masque of the Red Death,” Anastasia Dulle deftly argues that the Poe’s use religious symbolism augments the moral significance of Cassuto’s reading, transforming Death into a figure of divine judgement. This essay was composed for Writing about Literature with Dr. Ben Wetherbee.

IN HIS ESSAY “The Coy Reaper: Unmasque-ing the Red Death,” Leonard Cassuto explores the identity of the narrator in Edgar Allan Poe’s short story “The Masque of the Red Death.” In Poe’s story, the prince Prospero and “a thousand hale and lighthearted friends” of his hide away in a lavish abbey while the rest of Prospero’s kingdom suffers, ravaged by the plague known as the Red Death (169). In the midst of a masquerade Prospero throws a few months into their seclusion, the personified figure of the Red Death appears and massacres everyone in the abbey. While this story presents a variety of interesting elements one could analyze, Cassuto focuses on the ambiguity of the story’s narrator. Though Poe’s story is narrated in first person, the narrator never introduces themself,

and there are few clues as to their identity. Cassuto contends that, because the narrator survives to tell the story of how the Red Death killed everyone in the abbey, the only rational possibility is that the narrator is Death himself. It is worth stressing, too, that the religious symbols woven throughout Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death" augment Cassuto's argument of narrative perspective by revealing a deeper moral significance to the story that the narrator may be a part of.

First, there is a profound irony in Prospero's actions that emphasizes his own hypocritical moral state and those of all who live with him. Though the structure the rich nobility hole up in during the Red Death is often misinterpreted by readers as a castle, Poe states that it is actually "one of [Prospero's] castellated abbeys" (169). According to Prospero's desires, the abbey was an "amply provisioned" place that "provided all the appliances of pleasure," and it is there that he and his friends take refuge, going so far as to weld the gates shut to keep themselves safe from the plague that is destroying the rest of the kingdom. Unlike traditional monks or nuns, who choose to live in abbeys out of devotion to God, Prospero and his friends move into the abbey out of a desire for security, pleasure, and distraction in the midst of the Red Death, leaving "the external world [to] take care of itself." Such selfish intentions contrast drastically with the humble, self-sacrificing motivations of those who traditionally choose to live in an abbey. This irony both highlights the hypocrisy of Prospero's actions and criticizes those actions as immoral.

Secondly, while much of the religious symbolism is bound up in the irony created by the characters' actions, a device outside of the narrator's control, the narrator does not appear to be wholly silent or uncaring about the immorality of Prospero's behavior. Cassuto notes in his essay that the narrator has a storytelling style marked by "smooth, deliberate, almost deadpan calm" (319). However, this does not mean the narrator is unaware of the moral plight of the people throwing a masquerade ball in an abbey. When describing

the personification of the Red Death at the ball and the partygoers' subsequent horror, the narrator states that "the figure in question had out-Heroded Herod, and gone beyond the bounds of even the prince's indefinite decorum" (Poe 172). This reference to the historical person of Herod, who in biblical literature is always portrayed as an evil and corrupt ruler, reveals not only that the narrator is well-versed in religious and historical literature and events, but also that the narrator views Prospero's behavior as immoral, as he implies that Prospero's actions and tolerance for indecency surpass even the evil of Herod. Furthermore, the narrator reveals even more directly his own awareness of good and evil just after this, describing those "to whom life and death are equally jests" as "utterly lost." Such statements demonstrate that the narrator undeniably has a strong sense of morality.

Because of the religious undertones present throughout the story, the personified figure of the Red Death appearing at the end of the plot to kill all the people at the masquerade can be interpreted as a kind of divine reckoning against the nobility's callous actions. Though Prospero, enraged upon seeing what he believes is someone dressed up as a corpse killed by the Red Death, demands, "who dares insult us with this blasphemous mockery?" (173), the irony is that it is Prospero himself, by throwing a lavish and indecent party in an abbey as his people outside die from the plague, whose actions are blasphemous. Blinded by his own pride, Prospero fails to see his sins and is killed by the Red Death at the end of the story as a result. This sense of divine judgment raises further implications regarding the identity of the narrator. Because the narrator is telling the story, one can assume that the narrator believes the story is worth telling. This suggests that the narrator may be unobtrusively seeking to offer readers a moral lesson, or perhaps simply that the narrator finds a sense of satisfaction in the justice of the story's conclusion. Either possibility is compatible with Cassuto's conclusion that the narrator is Death. ►►

►► WORKS CITED

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