

ANTI-TRANSCENDENTALISM AND DARK ROMANTICISM IN POE'S "THE MASQUE OF THE RED DEATH"

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ABSTRACT

This review seeks to analyse the short story "The Masque of the Red Death", by Edgar Allan Poe, and to study its connection to the anti-transcendentalist and dark romantic movements. Through an examination of the literary aspects contained in the story, this work aims to inspect Poe's writing style, notably marked by a bold approach of the themes of death, mourning and decay, and to compare his aesthetic decisions - such as the strong symbolic streak, the reliance on colour and architecture and the artistic depiction of death - to the chief tenets that influenced anti-transcendentalist writers over the 19th century.

Keywords: Edgar Allan Poe; Death; Dark romanticism; Romanticism; Anti-transcendentalism.

The anti-transcendentalist movement

Anti-Transcendentalism was a literary movement that took place in the 19th century and emphasised the inherent darkness of human nature. The writers that adopted this style – such as Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville – usually rejected all transcendental romantic ideals. While Transcendentalism proposed an escape from the corruption of civilisation through the pursuit of the purity of nature, anti-transcendentalist writers explored the most sinful, pessimistic aspects of the human psyche. Their writing was laden with moral conundrums that served to highlight the human attraction to potentially destructive actions and ideas.

The movement is also remarkable for its strong symbolic streak. The anti-transcendentalists often referenced elements that stemmed from mythology, religion and classical literature, as well as themes and emotions that are generally shared by people, such as mourning, the fear of death and the sense of dread derived from the unknown. Anti-transcendentalist writers frequently created parallels with moral dilemmas and plots that are imbued in the minds of people in the form of myths, popular stories and culturally-shared sentiments; this made their stories all the more effective in evoking powerful emotions and conveying psychological complexity.

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Anti-transcendentalism in “The Masque of the Red Death”

While the plotline of “The Masque of the Red Death” might be plainly described as the attempt of a nobleman to “isolate himself from the plague-stricken world, permitting no one to enter his secluded castle, but finding his efforts futile against the power of the pestilence” (REECE, 1953, p. 114), Poe’s stories were hardly striking on account of their plots alone. In this particular narrative, some of the most remarkable elements are the meticulously constructed atmosphere of dread, the intensifying sense of psychological unease and the masterful use of poetic justice in the story’s dénouement.

In “The Masque of the Red Death”, Prince Prospero seeks to evade the plague that assails his country by escaping to a private retreat along with a coterie of nobles. However, even as Prospero attempts to entertain his courtiers with an uninterrupted masquerade, there is an atmosphere of constant dread that permeates the narrative.

At the beginning of the story, Poe’s extravagant descriptions of the prince’s domains suffice to evoke a sense of unease in the reader. The palace is often described as a bizarre, unusual place; the area where the masquerade takes place seems to be haphazardly disposed and devoid of any sources of light other than a set of braziers that glaringly illuminate the rooms. Among these rooms – which are rife with rich, strange colours and “a multitude of gaudy and fantastic appearances” (POE, p. 347) –, there stands out a particularly macabre chamber, where the only colours to be seen are black and blood-red. Within this chamber lies an enormous ebony clock, which chimes with every passing hour, producing a sound so loud and odd that every reveller feels compelled to gravely pause their merriment in order to hear it.

This room – as well as the clock it contains – are a constant reminder of the inevitability of death. The chamber’s colours, crimson and black, refer both to the terror of the red plague that decimates the prince’s country and to the darkness often associated with death and decay. The clock’s unsettling chiming reminds the courtiers that, with every passing hour, they become that much closer to death. This use of foreshadowing – the omen of death portended by the ebony clock, as well as the ever-hovering sense of decay derived from the plague – are finally brought to surface in the final scene. As death arrives in the shape of a mummer dressed as a plague-ridden corpse, Prince Prospero’s worst fear becomes real. After one final attempt to confront the imminence of his demise, the prince falls to his death, and, in turn, each of the

courtiers follows his fate. In the end, "Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all" (POE, p. 354).

"The Masque of the Red Death" is a narrative that exquisitely showcases the leading ideas of Anti-Transcendentalism. It portrays a theme of intense moral complexity, presenting the reader with a protagonist that, despite his wealth and his duty as a ruler, refuses to protect his people from the plague that threatened his country. As a typical dark romantic leading character, Prospero displays the sort of dark and ruthless mind that anti-transcendentalist writers proposed to depict. The frequent mentions of death, as well as the discovery of the inevitability of doom, are also elements that fit the anti-transcendentalist ideals and illustrate the general sense of darkness and hopelessness often approached by the movement's writers.

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