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A Pandemic of Greed and a Disease of Poverty in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Masque of
the Red Death"


by
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A Pandemic of Greed and a Disease of Poverty in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death"

The breakers tripped. Again. The breakers, a mandatory halt to trading on the floor of the stock exchange in response to the S&P falling more than 7% from the previous close. This was instituted after the Crash of 1987 to calm the markets before trading is allowed to resume. They are supposed to mitigate a drastic crash. They have only ever triggered once before, in 1997. Not for the tech bubble. Not even in the crash of 2008. All trading stops for fifteen minutes when the Level One breaker trips. If it drops further in the same day, the Level Two breaker trips. Fortunately, a Level Two breaker has never tripped. However, this was the fourth time the Level One breakers tripped since the beginning of March alone. Clients panic was palpable. What little money some of them had was quickly evaporating.

The drive home felt almost apocalyptic; the streets barren. State and local governments mandated shutdowns, so aside from police cars aggressively patrolling the streets, the drive was more reminiscent of a drive home at 3AM after a night shift than a bright and sunny afternoon. What would normally be a quick stop to the grocery store to pick up a few staples became an excursion that lasted several hours with no guarantee you would come home with what you needed. The shelves in many stores were bare. Stores were rationing what was left. Panic induced buying led to toilet paper, paper towels, and spray cleaners being snatched up in bulk, and some being resold online. One man bought, and attempted to sell, 17,700 bottles of hand sanitizer for up to \$70 a bottle when he purchased them for only \$1 a piece. A novel virus emerged. No one knew how it was transmitted. No one knew what the symptoms were, only that it was moving swiftly, debilitating those infected, and killing scores of people. News outlets

reported mass graves where coroners were interring bodies wearing hazmat suits. Only select industries were considered essential: retail, energy, emergency services, to name a few, and mine: finance.

Over 40 million non-essential workers lost their jobs. Many essential works, particularly in the emergency and retail sectors were deemed essential enough to keep working, but not necessarily essential enough to make sure they have sufficient protection or pay. Hospitals so overrun they are running out of beds for patients, and their caretakers are both physically and emotionally exhausted. The finance sector was different. Deemed essential, they kept their jobs as the stock market continued to plummet while other people lost their jobs. They were deemed essential, but often did not have to work directly with the public as banks were closed down to the public and operations for investors moved online. As the pandemic raged on, it did not take long for people to notice these disparities. Minorities in large cities were adversely affected. Many had jobs that could not be done remotely and they were given the option of not working, forcing them to lose their businesses or livelihood, or risk potentially fatal infections. As it became increasingly difficult to find necessary items on the store shelves, many turned to online shopping, particularly turning to the retail giant Amazon. While warehouse workers were faced with a similar possibility of losing their job or their lives for \$15 an hour, the founder and CEO of the company increased his net worth by almost \$70 billion by the end of 2020. According to the BBC, it is estimated that the world's some 2000 billionaires saw their fortunes increase to a combined total of \$10.2 trillion dollars, while it is expected that more than 115 million people will be pushed into extreme poverty, living on less than \$1.90 a day; an increase for the first time in more than two decades(“Wealth of world's 10 richest men doubled in pandemic”). Even more

striking is that \$3.7 trillion dollars has been transferred away from the poor and working class since the beginning of the pandemic to the end of 2020 (Kaplan, “Workers lost \$3.7 trillion”).

Finances were a major struggle for many people during the pandemic, a similar plight which has faced many people throughout history, especially under the weight of Capitalism. Owners of capital – that is, the owners of goods and resources – leverage those goods and resources for profit. Often to operate a scale large enough to take in a substantial enough profit for themselves, workers are leveraged as a resource by paying wages, and any excess is profit. In this system however, workers are only paid the barest of minimums to extract a maximum profit, and the value of workers’ labor is effectively stolen from them. Edgar Allan Poe, despite being known as the first writer in history to support himself with writing, was no exception. Poe was born into poverty and plague, and they followed Poe like a raven cawing “nevermore.” His birth parents were actors. His father abandoned his mother while she was pregnant with Edgar, and then she died from tuberculosis when he was around the age of two. The written word that later would condemn Poe to poverty was also the same vehicle by which he would be delivered from it in his youth. A newspaper printed a letter with a plea from Edgar’s mother on behalf of her son found its way to a wealthy merchant named John Allan who took him in shortly after. But despite being the ward of a wealthy capitalist, managing money was always an issue for Poe. His fiscal irresponsibility established itself in college where he often spent his money on drinking and gambling, taking loans from fellow students as well as from his adopted father. Poe’s injudicious borrowing and spending eventually eroded his relationship with John Allan, and on more than one occasion he requested to borrow money from John, and many letters between the two highlight the rift this caused in their relationship. This laid the foundation for Poe being almost perpetually destitute for almost the whole of his adult life, which then coupled with

external financial panics seemed to conspire against him to keep him under the thumb of those with power and wealth in perpetuity.

As previously mentioned, Poe is known as the first writer to sustain himself by his writing, but that was still fraught with struggles. Often, writers would struggle to be paid for their efforts and when they were paid, the compensation was not sufficient to live on. This is why Poe often spent time as an editor for several magazines throughout his life to supplement the income he brought in from being an author. This led to Poe's aspirations to be both a publisher and a political influencer. As both an author and editor, Poe saw how the wealthy used their power and influence to further consolidate their position, particularly during his time as editor of *Graham's Magazine*. In early 1841, Poe became editor of *Graham's* which is the publication within which his short story "Mask of the Red Death" originally appears. Given the context of what was going on in his life around the time "Masque of the Red Death" was published in *Graham's Magazine* in 1842, this provides a new lens by which to see the text. In "Mask," changed to "Masque" in later publications, a widespread plague is responsible for the death of over half the population in an unnamed country. Instead of protecting his citizens, the ruler of the country, Prince Prospero, invites all the rich and powerful within his domain to a castellated abbey to keep anyone from getting in or out. However, the disease ultimately finds its way in and is responsible for killing everyone within. Much of the discourse around "Masque" centers around the abbey, its apartments, and often, speculation regarding what kind of disease the Red Death actually was. The Red Death is not a disease like cholera, or tuberculosis, but rather representative of the disease of poverty in the time of Poe. Moreover, examining the actions and interactions of the Prince and the Pestilence, it becomes clear why the disease represents poverty and the parallels between Poe's economic climate and today.

-The Pestilence-

Disease intrigued Poe – evidenced by the fact that diseases function as textual backdrops in a number of his stories, often as a way to convey a feeling of terror and fear. However, modern readers are often more familiar with tales like “The Raven,” or “The Cask of Amontillado,” or “The Tell-Tale Heart,” all which primarily feature some type of mental disease. In fact, Poe is so well-known for his use of disease and epidemics as a literary device, it has captured the interest of the scientific community as well. Even within the PubMed repository which contains over 33 million articles that specifically relate to biomedical research, there are papers which investigate possible origins for the diseases in Poe’s writings. In his article “Poe’s Pandemics,” Alan Brown dives deeply into the ways in which physical disease figures into Poe’s writing. One of the more thought-provoking points Brown brings up is the fact that when the disease is responsible for a death like that in “Ligeia,” the singular death is the result of an unnamed malady, which also lacks defining characteristics making it impossible to speculate about which real life disease is responsible for the demise. However, when a disease is responsible for a pandemic, there is a specific name and defining symptomatology. In “The Sphinx,” it is plainly stated: “During the dread reign of the Cholera in New York” (Poe, *The Essential Tales* 421). In this way it frames the mind of the reader in a specific time and place as well as the specifics around the disease itself. Additionally, in these pandemics, the disease informs the action of the text, but is not explicit in driving the action of the story. In Poe’s “King Pest,” the black death is responsible for depopulating London:

At the epoch of this eventful tale, and periodically, for many years before and after, all England, but more especially the metropolis, resounded with the fearful cry of "Plague!" The city was in a great measure depopulated --and in those horrible regions, in the

vicinity of the Thames, where amid the dark, narrow, and filthy lanes and alleys, the Demon of Disease was supposed to have had his nativity, Awe, Terror, and Superstition were alone to be found stalking abroad. (114)

Unlike in “The Sphinx” and “King Pest,” “Masque” is substantially different in its presentation of disease when compared to the named diseases in his other texts. Where in those texts, Poe outright states the disease for the backdrop of his text, the Red Death is enigmatic. “The red death had long devastated the country” (261). A reader, particularly in a time period where “70-90% of the urban populations in Europe and North America were infected with tuberculosis” (“Tuberculosis in Europe and North America”) would acknowledge the dread of a disease that was seemingly indefatigable. Tuberculosis was fatal in 80 percent of the individuals who contracted it, and the thought of a disease more virulent and deadly is going to be terrifying. Some critics, of which Brown is one, have speculated about a connection between the Red Death and tuberculosis. Aside from having a similar moniker to tuberculosis – colloquially referred to as the white death – Brown also points out that “Like tuberculosis, ‘The Red Death’ has a connection with blood and night sweats” (31). But while Brown is right that there is a blood connection between Tuberculosis and the Red Death, the connection does not go much deeper. With tuberculosis, the termination of the disease takes years. Symptoms include coughing, sometimes with blood, weight loss, fever, chills. Unlike tuberculosis, the Red Death is a disease that is fast acting: “There were sharp pains, and sudden dizziness, and then profuse bleeding at the pores, with dissolution. The scarlet stains upon the body and especially upon the face of the victim, were the pest-ban which shut him out from the aid and from the sympathy of his fellow-men. And the whole seizure, progress and termination of the disease were the incidents of half an hour” (Poe, *The Essential Tales* 261).

However, Brown's strictly literary interpretation of the disease is not entirely without merit, and it raises the question of other possibilities for potential diseases that the Red Death may represent? Dr. Setu Vora, and Dr. Sundaram Ramanan in their article "Ebola-Poe: A Modern Day Parallel of the Red Death" seek to examine the underpinnings of Poe's mystery disease because "to our knowledge a detailed medical analysis of *The Masque of Red Death* has not been conducted" (Vora and Ramanan 1521) Throughout their work, Vora and Ramanan highlight that the pathology of the Red Death also fits the pathology of filovirus hemorrhagic fevers: fever, capillary damage which ultimately leads to bleeding from the mouth and nose, as well as gastric bleeding. Despite these symptoms of modern-day Ebola having some parallels to the Red Death, Vora and Ramanan ultimately concludes that despite the fact the symptoms and pathology fit these types of diseases, "writing in 1840, Poe could not have known about Ebola or Marburg... Whether inspired by tuberculosis or yellow fever, the red death is clearly a concoction of Poe's imagination" (1522). This admission even helps further buttress Poe's use of an unknown malady to evoke dread.

Rather than borrowing from an existing disease, Poe creates the symptomology with an intense focus on the blood that makes the Red Death so menacing. Historically, blood is viewed as a source of life and vitality. In Levitical law, it was forbidden to consume the blood of an animal "For the life of the flesh is in the blood" (*New American Standard Bible*, Lev. 17:11). In later Antiquity, blood was seen as a medicine, and consumption was common in Greco-Roman cultures, and even the rite of the Last Supper hearkens to the Dionysian practice of the consumption of the body and blood of a God (Groopman, "Pumped"). In Poe's era, steeped in Christendom, blood should be the source of life, strength, and vitality. Instead, the Red Death is a perversion that produces an unease both within the text as well as the reader. While

tuberculosis is not nearly as quick to dispatch its victims, at its peak it was just as widespread, where in densely populated areas “it is believed that TB killed one-third of all those who died in Britain between 1800 and 1850” (Trueman, “Diseases in Industrial Cities”).

Another point worth noting regarding the blood is Poe’s description of how the exterior symptoms of the disease strip humanity from its victims as well. Blood as an avatar – Avatar -- a herald of the disease, then becomes a metonymic stand-in for the victim itself. The plague marks the body, and the face in particular, in blood which effectively becomes the cause for their banishment from the rest of society. The blood becomes a mask on the face of the person who is affected, an allusion Poe made in the title of the original text: *Mask of the Red Death*, indicating a mask to wear, rather than the masquerade that takes place within the abbey. When those who are unaffected by the Red Death see an affected person, they are no longer viewed with human sympathies, but are cast away and it “shut him out from the aid and from the sympathy of his fellow-man” (Poe, *The Essential Tales* 261). When it comes to poverty, long lasting poverty is rarely unseen, and the Red Death as poverty strikes fear into the heart of his readers, both in how poverty is closely tied to death and disease, but wealth, particularly in Poe’s time can be fleeting, and a loss of wealth and status can be just as detrimental to the psyche. Critic Kurt Riezler underscores this point by underscoring how everyone has a fear of something regardless of status:

Man's fear is fear of something or for something: of illness, loss of money, dishonor; for his health, family, social status....In the concrete case fear is never alone. We always hope, if only that the thing we are afraid of will not happen.

Man faces great danger without fear if a strong desire, emotion, passion sways his heart” (Riezler 489).

The habiliments of the Red Death underscore how the concept of disease is framed as a disease of poverty in Poe's time. The disease of poverty is outwardly visible and often puts you out of the sympathies of your fellow man because of the fear it produces. It is a fear of loss: loss of status, honor, health, and this is a fear that is just as prevalent now as it was in Poe's era. However, in Poe's era, there was a deeper fear tied to poverty beyond the loss of money and status, it was fear of a loss of health, and ultimately, a fear of death itself.

There are several layers to understanding how poverty and disease are tied together and how that impacted Poe's life and work. First, the economic landscape during the pre-Civil War period was vastly different than it is today, and this disparity must be addressed first as a foundation for the framework of the Red Death as a disease of poverty. In his book, "Principles for Dealing with the Changing World Order: Why Nations Succeed and Fail" Ray Dalio discusses the rise of the US economy tracing a line from the colonies all the way through key economic markers in 2020. Dalio underscores how tumultuous the first one hundred years of the US financial system was:

"Its financial system was completely underdeveloped...hard money was put into banks that together lent out much more than they had. That Ponzi Scheme unraveled, so banks failed to meet their commitments and devalued the money. The US had no central bank to control financial markets or act as a lender of last resort. The US went through many boom/bust cycles in which, classically, many debt financed investments into land, railroads, etc, became over extended and resulted in credit losses and a credit crunch. As a result, banking panics were extremely common. (Dalio 335)

During Poe's time, the monetary system was complex, based on an ill-defined system which revolved around two types of payment methods: soft money – paper money – was used for

regional lending and transactions, and hard money, sometimes called specie – gold and silver – often used for reserves or repayment for government debts. There was political tension building between hard money and soft money proponents. Much of this tension was born out of the arguments regarding federal powers versus state powers. Hard money proponents wanted the currency of the United States to be entirely based off of hard money as to provide stability as well as a federal standard upon which the economy could be based. Soft money proponents also felt this was a vast overreach of the federal government. Soft money was often used speculatively, borrowing money which is paid out in paper money, that is then only worth a fraction of what was held in reserve. During this time, there were attempts to institute a gold standard by which the value of paper money was directly linked to the value of gold, however, this standard did not become internationally recognized until the late 1800's. So, throughout Poe's life, paper money functioned in a very similar fashion to paper money today, but had far less federal regulation which caused its instability, both on a local as well as state level.

These soft money proponents were also becoming wealthy off of this speculative monetary system because of a concentration of power between the wealthy and the commercial banks of Poe's era. Oftentimes the charters were limited to those who had power and influence or were friends of state officials and were not open to the public. In his *Marginalia* in 1844, he states that "knowledge breeds knowledge, as gold gold" (Poe, "Marginalia"). He wasn't saying this to say that gold produces more gold necessarily but that you need to have the means by which to produce more money, something he was acutely aware of given the situation regarding his debts. But because soft money was not directly linked to hard money, meaning banks could lend out more soft money than hard money they had in reserve, it became a mode by which commercial banks lent money as their standard, and, as previously mentioned, often used to

debt-finance various investment projects which would then go bust, bankrupting wealthy speculators, causing financial panics. Adding an additional layer of complexity, many banks were regional meaning the farther away you got from the bank that issued the currency it became more difficult to determine its true value, and this also allowed for counterfeiters to print their own money because the farther away you were from a regional bank, the harder it became to determine if a note was authentic. Ultimately, it was President Jackson's attempts to regulate the industry by only accepting payments of debts to the US government in his 1836 specie circular, which kicked off a 7-year cascade of financial panics which lasted through the time period that "Masque" was produced.

In the first chapter of their book, "The Monetary Imagination of Edgar Allan Poe: Banking, Currency, and Politics in the Writings" by Heinz Tschaller, Tschaller highlights just how this system had a direct effect on Poe's life during this time: "As a result of the contradictory interests of 'hard' money as opposed to 'soft' money, the suspension of specie payment also marked the beginning of the panic of 1837" (Tschaller Location 528). This initial panic which started in May of 1837 had widespread consequences, but even by the end of 1837 many people were devastated:

By May, there had been about a hundred bank failures, in New York alone, causing a loss of about \$15 million. By the end of the year, across the nation, over six hundred banks had closed their doors forever. With no credit available, new businesses could not be created, bankruptcies were recorded by the tens of thousands, and business losses -compounded by Britain's stoppage to cotton imports- were registered at \$741 million. Almost ninety percent of factories in the east shut down, resulting in mass unemployment. (Location 821)

Unfortunately, as dire as this picture is, however, the panic did not end there but rather carried on from 1837 through 1843, however, it was also during this time in which the word millionaire was first used to “describe those five percent of white males who then owned some seventy percent of the real and personal property” (Location 741). These contemporary businessmen, much like Prospero, insulated from the devastation that was affecting predominantly poor populations.

It was this financial system and subsequent panic that was responsible for widespread poverty in the time period within which “Masque” was produced, which obviously would have severely impacted workers in large urban settings. Poverty in Poe’s era is in a lot of ways not dissimilar to poverty in the modern era, even down to the distrust people feel regarding those who live in large urban settings. Interestingly enough, many of our modern concepts regarding poverty and urban settings can be drawn back to such time periods as these. In their article, Steven Schlossman provides a key link between our modern concepts of poverty and how they directly relate to the Antebellum south. “Systematic historical investigation of the "culture of poverty" model is essential for evaluation of ongoing social scientific debates. My thesis, briefly, is that the "culture of poverty" idea first emerged in a form recognizable to us today in antebellum urban America” (152). In other words, not only is the idea of a culture of poverty not new, what we think of today as a culture of poverty got its start in the urban centers of Poe’s time; the same urban centers from which Poe was writing. The idea regarding a culture of poverty centered around the problem of immigration, as Schlossman also notes “Thomas Jefferson's famous indictment of cities as scourges of the body politic to recognize that the seamy side of urban life has been a constant in American social thought” (154). The city, and

those that live there, regardless of immigration status are always viewed with a level of fear for being different and contempt for their lack of wealth, sentiments that still echo today.

This is a key factor in the fear of disease in Poe's era, which is why Prospero is so keen to lock out the populous. In the same way the Red Death was responsible for widespread depopulation, large urban settings with high concentrations of poor people were hotbeds of declining life expectancy rates also closely tied to these poor, cloistered urban populations. The average life expectancy at the beginning of the industrial revolution peaked out at just over 55 years old, but by the 1850's the average life span dropped to just 48 years old in men. In her article, "Health and the Economy in the United States from 1750 to the Present," Dora Costa examines the intersection of health outcomes and the economy, and her examination of what she calls microdata makes a compelling argument: "Together, the trend and micro- data imply that unhealthy conditions can outweigh the positive effects of income [...], healthy conditions can outweigh the negative effects of income declines (e.g., during the Great Depression), and rising incomes may have little effect on health (e.g., the recent slowdown in the heights at a time of rising incomes)" (505-506). Further on in her paper, Costa outlines four distinct periods in which there were dramatic differences in health outcomes that could be identified: the first period, spanning from 1750 through the 1820s; and the second period which spanned from 1830-1880. The second period, from the 1830s to the 1880s, was one of a worsening of the disease environment and of nutritional availability with no new technologies to improve health. The worsening of the disease environment was starkest in urban areas where again, urban areas were often seen as hotbeds of poverty and disease. In Costa's analysis, she notes that on the eve of the Civil War, New York City was the "natural home of every variety of contagious disease, and the favorite resort of foreign pestilences" (Smith 1911, p. 19)" (513). What is fascinating is that

despite an increasing GDP health outcomes were decreasing due to poor environmental conditions (514). Similarly, as was seen during the pandemic in 2020, an increase in GDP and stock market indexes hitting new highs does not correlate to a healthy economy for the lower classes, and we see this play out in the text through the actions of the Prince.

-The Prince-

Prospero is a character shrouded in mystery to start, and much of what is revealed about him is through how the narrator speaks about him and his castellated abbey. One of the first things that Poe reveals about him is that The Prince, and everything associated with him, highlights a stark class divide between the rich and poor. The introduction clearly indicates that it is the affected that are shut out from the sympathies of their fellow man. With his introduction the plight of the lower class is barely more than a footnote: “When his [Prospero’s] domain was half depopulated...” (Poe, *The Essential Tales* 261). There is no mention of one single citizen, but a large, likely urban population whose status can only be inferred by the completion of that sentence: “he summoned to his presence a thousand hale and lighthearted friends from among the knights and dames of his court”(261). Prospero’s actions make it clear that he intends to solely take care of those with high status. He does not welcome any poor who are unaffected, only those friends from his court. As one would expect given the beliefs regarding poverty and disease at the time, the disease is disproportionately affecting the lower classes, and the only ones that appear to be safe are the ones that Prospero invites into his abbey. They are hale, strong and vivacious, so they would be less likely to be diseased. Poe also describes them as lighthearted, indicating their lack of concern regarding the pest as most people would be if they are of means.

Much like the vaccines and antibiotics used to treat and prevent diseases, and what appears to be a completely unironic display of social distancing, Prince Prospero and his cohorts had their own method of preventing the disease from reaching them, by locking themselves in. Despite the fact that almost half his population had died, Prospero's intent was to focus solely on himself, and to insulate himself against the Red Death. The text states that Prospero was "dauntless and sagacious" – cunning in the manner in which he cloistered himself from the Red Death. Through his actions, it is clear that Prospero had no intention of helping the population at large which was already dealing with the spread of this disease. And while it is possible to read the text in a way to indicate that Prospero intended to keep the Red Death out, the narrator pays special attention to the egress which is paired with sudden impulses of despair or of frenzy from within. One thing the text makes clear is that the courtiers within the abbey intend to fully insulate themselves from the ravages of the disease: "The abbey was amply provisioned. With such precautions the courtiers might bid defiance to contagion" (261)

On the surface, their actions can be looked at as simply that, a prophylactic, locking out the disease to forestall death. Lauren Delli Santi in her article "Prince Prospero: The Antithesis of 'The Beautiful Death,'" examines Prospero's actions as a response to 19th-century beliefs about death. She points out that in the 18th century, death was viewed as an event that one was expected to face alone. In the 19th century, however, it became fashionable to display "an outward hysteria toward loss" (98). From there she extrapolates a reading of the Prince based on his complacency. His lax attitude after several months in lockdown led him to a belief that he "locked the disease, and therefore death, out of his life" (98). One interesting point she does bring up is the fact that "Poe exaggerates the hardship of accepting death by banishing his characters to an abbey where they do not have to face death at all. Death is not beautiful to the

prince or his courtiers: it is nonexistent (100). While Della Santi highlights some intriguing changes in attitudes toward death, the Prince seems to fly in the face of such a reading. The masquerade he puts on is flamboyant, and does not display an outward hysteria, rather he portrays an outright defiance to the thought that he may die: “it was towards the close of the fifth or sixth month of his seclusion, and while the pestilence raged most furiously abroad, that the Prince Prospero entertained his thousand friends at a masked ball of the most unusual magnificence. It was a voluptuous scene that masquerade” (Poe, *The Essential Tales* 262). Similarly, the rich and wealthy have many methods at their disposal to avoid the disease of poverty, and the death that it can bring with it.

It is unsurprising that the Prince and the Courtiers lock themselves within the abbey. It is a form of self-preservation, one that any rational person would pursue. What has fascinated scholars the most is not the act, but rather what the abbey itself represents and how the internal arrangement of the abbey reflect the inner workings of the Prince and with good cause, this is where the action of the story takes place. Eric du Plessis, H.H. Bell Jr., Walter Blair, and Brett Zimmerman have all dedicated a portion of their scholarly writings to the apartments within the abbey, and in particular, the color and decor of the castellated abbey. As critic H.H. Bell Jr. argues, “Poe has so much to say about the colors found in the seven rooms that it is difficult, if indeed not impossible, to think that he meant nothing by them” (103). Similarly, in his essay, “The Puzzle of the Color Symbolism in ‘Masque of the Red Death’” Zimmerman opens with this quip: “G.R. Thompson reminds us that ‘one of the favorite pastimes of critics is trying to identify the symbolic meaning of the colors of the seven rooms.’” (60). These rooms are around much of what the critical discourse regarding “Masque” revolves. Zimmerman highlights an important aspect of the criticism around “Masque”: “‘The Masque of the Red Death’ is, as so many other

commentators believe, a tale about the stages of human life” (69). Editor Benjamin Fisher in his notes from *The Essential tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* supports this idea that critics focus on the decor, and more importantly, their takeaway is that Poe intended the color scheme to represent a journey from life to death (Poe *The Essential Tales* 612). The shortcomings of both of these readings are that they each neglect the other viewpoint. Poe spends so much time on the interior of the abbey that it would be a disservice to neglect the fact that the color meant something as Delli Santi did. Likewise, Zimmerman and others focus so hard on the abbey decor and the life stages that those colors may represent that they neglect what the narrator says about Prospero and his love of the bizarre, as well as the actual actions of the Prince himself. HH Bell argues for madness: “Enhancing the possibility of considering Prospero insane, Poe indicates that the rooms were filled with dreams such as those a man with a tortured mind might have” (104). The narrator points out just the opposite. Prospero *seems* mad, but “his followers felt that he was not” (Poe, *The Essential Tales* 263) And it is this interaction between Prospero and the Masked Figure which underpins the whole of the story Admittedly, that could indicate a move from life to death, but there is nothing within the text to suggest that, nor in Poe’s other works to indicate possible color symbolism.

With that said, the color scheme is indeed important, but not in the way commonly thought. Zimmerman has probably the most erudite examination of the abbey itself in his text “The Puzzle of the color symbolism in “Masque of the Red Death.” He argues against other prominent critics like Ruddick and du Plessis, framing his reading in a historical context. His primary criticism of their readings is that they apply modern contexts to their interpretations of the text: “Consequently, an important question arises: Would Poe have known about the various meanings assigned to the colors by these twentieth-century scholars?” (Zimmerman 62). Agreed,

it would be impossible for Poe to foresee the way in which modern scholars interpret his work. Instead, Zimmerman uses a historicist approach to interpret the colors in the way that Poe would likely have interpreted them. However, one of the biggest issues with the idea of these color schemes is that they all overlook a far more explicit connection to the Red Death in that other diseases that were commonly connected to colors as well: Tuberculosis was known as the white death, porphyria was the blue death, bubonic plague is the black death. Some of these as they are commonly known would have also been known to Poe, particularly the plague, which shared a common symptomology with the Red Death, the bloodying of the face. In this way, in a response to the puzzle of color symbolism, a far more compelling reading into the coloration of the rooms as a whole would be when the embodiment of the Red Death moves through the abbey, it is to show how much more deadly the Red Death is than all others. However, this is not a turn that Poe is making either. Poe said it himself, in his *Philosophy of Furniture*, “In the internal decoration, if not in the external architecture, of their residences, the English are supreme. The Italians have but little sentiment beyond marbles and colors” (Poe, “The Philosophy of Furniture”). Insinuating that Prospero is Italian due to his name, the decor of his abbey contains but little sentiment beyond marble and colors, except where the narration lands on the black room which is the focal point of both the narration and the action. In the text, Poe describes the first six rooms thusly: “That at the eastern extremity was hung, for example, in blue — and vividly blue were its windows. The second chamber was purple in its ornaments and tapestries, and here the panes were purple. The third was green throughout, and so were the casements. The fourth was furnished and litten with orange — the fifth with white — the sixth with violet” (Poe, *The Essential Tales* 262). In this way, the argument for the color scheme falls apart, save for one room where Poe spends four of the next five paragraphs describing in great, painstaking detail,

the final room of black and scarlet. The narrator of “Masque” makes this clear as well that the decor is not simply due to the wild tastes of the Prince, but it is a reflection of the Prince himself. It was necessary to take part in the revel to know the Prince, to be sure of who he was: “His plans were so bold and fiery, and his conceptions glowed with barbaric luster. There are some who would have thought him mad. His followers felt he was not. It was necessary to hear and see and touch him to be *sure* that he was not (263).

-The Black Room-

The color scheme of the Black Room is ominous and foreboding. A clash of black velvet and scarlet window panes; a garish red “fire-light that streamed upon the dark hangings through the blood-tinted panes” (262); and a black clock whose brazen lungs let out a note upon the hour that is so peculiar and unsettling that the musicians stop playing, dancers stop dancing, and the giddiest among the revel grew pale and aged. This mixture of red and black and everything about the apartment itself unsettles everyone partaking in the party with the obvious exception of the Prince. This clash of red on black is also a central idea behind the idea of the Red Death as a disease of poverty, and not that the poor were infected more than not, but the idea that poverty is the disease itself; the idea of being in the red or in the black monetarily speaking. While it is difficult to find any reference in Poe’s own works, there are references to use of red ink indicating a negative balance in a ledger as far back as the ancient Babylonians and ancient Egyptians in their accounting practices. This practice, with his upbringing under the guidance of a successful capitalist, as well as the crushing debts he personally faced, would not be lost on Poe.

There is little doubt that Poe’s focus was on the Black Room. This space is the focal point of the tension felt throughout the story. It bears the tension of those within, those in the black,

who are prosperous, and those left outside the abbey, those in the red; those who bear the mark of the pest-ban of poverty on their face. The Black Room is a binary itself, a room of red and black where courtiers both fear to tread and yet are found, the most western apartment in the entire abbey, but attention is constantly being drawn to it by the brazen call of the black clock. The final scene, where the Red Death makes its way into the castellated abbey is where the action of the entire story points toward, and ultimately culminates with. Prospero upon seeing the Red Death within his walls gives into a fit of despair and frenzy and attempts to apprehend the then unknown visitor, but when he apprehends him within the black room but falls down and dies. Prospero's courtiers set upon the masked intruder, and when they remove the mask, they find no visage to behold – the intruder is both in human form and vestment, but also an empty specter. This bears the tension of both the pursuit of wealth, and the ultimate failure of that pursuit, as well as the possession, and subsequent loss of the same. In this way, Prospero becomes both Poe and the Prosperous. Poe as Prospero passes through the colored apartments in pursuit of an object that could only logically conclude within the Black room, where he is in constant pursuit of becoming a person of wealth and status. However, continued financial faults and failures plague him, ultimately leaving him in the red. A victim of life-long poverty. Likewise, this tension is also Poe's warning to the hale and lighthearted of his day, for the politicians and bankers – the princes and courtiers that Poe situated within the space of the Prince. The haves that use their money and resources to insulate themselves against falling into poverty that ultimately fell into ruin during a particularly volatile time in American economic history as we will see by examining Poe as Prospero and George Rex Graham as Prospero.

-Poe as Prospero-

Fortunately, there is already a fairly prevalent argument in literature surrounding the Red Death that indicates that Poe did intend to position Prospero as a foil to himself. In his article "Poe's Pandemics," Brown sees how Poe fits into this Poe/Prospero foil in that he believes Poe wrote himself into the text as the Prince as an allegory for his feelings regarding Virginia's tuberculosis. Because Poe described said that blood was its avatar, for both tuberculosis as well as the Red Death, and because Poe's wife fell ill to tuberculosis in January of 1842 before the production of "Masque," Brown also concludes that is where Poe writes himself into the text: "Poe may have been thinking of himself when he created the character of Prince Prospero, who also tried to downplay the seriousness of the disease" (32) because of how ill-prepared he was to take care of his wife. On the surface, it would be easy to think that the Red Death could be a response to Poe's feelings regarding Virginia's illness, and moreover, his almost neurotic response to the thought of losing her. This could certainly be the case, however, with such a short time span between the first symptoms of her disease on January 20th, and the original publication of the text a few short months later, it raises questions regarding this line of thinking. Additionally, during the early stages of her disease, Poe was hopeful that Virginia would actually make a full recovery, something not possible if he truly believed her disease to be consumption. Brown may have been on to something regarding Poe's aristocratic pretensions, just not in the way one would assume. Much of his life was an attempt to become part of the American aristocracy as it were. He was well known to famous authors like Charles Dickens, but often it seemed that any progress he made in apprehending his fortune was met by an equal and opposing force, furthering his depression and desperation. Poe carried himself with an air of aristocracy, which would certainly have clashed with his persistent financial struggles, especially given, as Brown highlights, that if Poe really believed that Virginia's disease was tuberculosis: "His

aristocratic pretensions were quite possibly irritated by the public's perception tuberculosis as a 'poor person's disease'" (32-33). In doing this, Brown contends that Poe viewed himself aristocratically, a view that is supported by numerous observations regarding Poe throughout his life, and it can easily be argued that it was more of an artifact of his upbringing than trying to portray an inflated sense of self, what is undeniable is that Poe was known for his refinement which becomes a critical piece in analyzing Poe as Prospero.

In his treatise, "The Philosophy of Furniture," Poe is very clear in his understanding of what makes an American Aristocrat: "How this happens it is not difficult to see. We have no aristocracy of blood, and having, therefore, as a natural and, indeed as an inevitable thing, fashioned for ourselves an aristocracy of dollars, the display of wealth has here to take the place, and perform the office, of the heraldic display in monarchical countries" (Poe, "The Philosophy of Furniture"). In Poe's mind, there is a very clear outward display of wealth tied to aristocratic airs in America, which Prospero himself was known for. Furthermore, Poe is clear that the decor informs the reader of Prospero himself, not just simply a timeline from birth to death. The narrator is sure to point out the "tastes of the duke were peculiar" (Poe, *The Essential Tales* 262) and that some "thought him mad" (262). However, it becomes clear to the reader that Prospero is not peculiar and eccentric, but instead, he is calculating, doing what he can to preserve his way of life, no matter the cost, and on this almost all the critics agree. As previously noted Delli Santi reads this end as a way to forestall death: "As a means of self-preservation, and, arguably, the preservation of mankind, the prince isolates himself and other courtiers in a venue where they are supposedly untouchable to the Red Death. This reaction, as exposed by the prince, reinforces the basic human instinct to elude death at all cost" (99). Likewise, Alan Brown argues in his piece, "Poe's Pandemics," that "Prospero and his fellow revelers fully intend to wait out the disease in

the luxury of their surroundings” (31). While the visage of poverty would be apparent on most, Poe went to great lengths to display an air of elegance and sophistication. In his biography on Poe, *Edgar Allan Poe: His Life and Legacy*, Jeffrey Meyers mentions several instances throughout his life where Poe was known for his refinement despite his social status both in his youth, as well as throughout adulthood: “He had finely marked features, and eyes dark, liquid and expressive. He dressed well and neatly. He was a very attractive companion” (22) “I was impressed favorably with the appearance and manner of the author. He was clad in a plain and rather worn suit of black which was carefully brushed, and his linen was especially notable for its cleanliness” (93).

His refinement was of clear importance to Poe, but he still wore the pest-ban of poverty. The economic crisis had a particularly devastating effect on writers of Poe’s time, but out of this difficult climate probably his most ambitious goals were birthed. In the immediate aftermath of the Panic of 1837, “writing was devalued to such an extent that books sold at a quarter of the price of 1820; poetry became, as Poe ruefully remarked in 1842, completely ‘unsaleable.’ To make matters worse, magazine publishers even discontinued paying for contributions” (Tshaller Location 841), but it was during this time where Poe birthed the idea for his own literary magazine, the *Penn*, officially announced in 1840. Such an announcement excited the literary world at the time, and one such review hints at why Poe would attempt such an undertaking:

We trust that he will soon come out with his Penn Magazine, a work which, if carried out as he designs it, will do away with the monopoly of puffing and break the fetters which a corps of petitioned blockheads have bound so long around the brows of young intellects who are too proud to pa a literary pimp for a favorable notice in a mammoth six penny or a good word with the fathers of the Row, who drink wine out of the skulls of authors and

grow fat upon the geese that feed upon the grass that waves over their early tomb stones.

(Thomas, "The Poe Log")

The idea of Poe starting his own magazine was a breath of fresh air for the literary world, and one that would elevate the art form and wrest power away from the elites of his day who have no literary sense, and use and abuse their contributors. While working at *Graham's Magazine*, Poe drummed up support from other authors, and even from George Graham himself, Poe's aspirations of a new magazine ended up coming against the difficult financial landscape of his time. Investors interested in backing him financially found it difficult to truly measure the worth of this endeavor because of the aforementioned commercial banking landscape. John Tomlinson, a potential backer for Poe's new magazine inquired if "Tennessee money is current in the ordinary business transactions of your city [of Philadelphia]" (Tschaller Location 679).

In 1841-1842, Poe was editor of a popular editorial: *Graham's Magazine*. *Graham's Magazine* was a fashion magazine that appealed to both men and women and contained poems, short stories, music, and engravings of people of status. As editor, he was uniquely positioned to dictate what was fashionable at a time when *Graham's* was read by tens of thousands of subscribers while he himself was not able to partake in higher society himself. The irony of this position is that he was more like the scarlet, blood-tinted windowpanes within the Black Room of someone else. Undaunted, Poe as Prospero faces off against the Red Death who dares to upend his revel. He is within the halls of the prosperous but is unable to attain it, and poverty as the Red Death strikes him down. In this way, poverty continues to haunt Poe as Prospero. This provides a framework for this important aspect of Poe's personality that could certainly lend to reading "Masque" as an allegory for poverty, and it reveals a tension between the way he viewed himself as a southern gentleman and his near constant financial woes. As Charles Stanford puts

it, “His psychology was simultaneously that of a disinherited aristocrat and a middle-class failure” (58).

-Graham as Prospero-

The irony in Poe attempting to become one of the American Aristocracy was the fact that he was viciously critical of them. In his *Philosophy of Furniture*, Poe excoriates the Yankees as he puts them: “We have no aristocracy of blood, and having, therefore, as a natural and, indeed as an inevitable thing, fashioned for ourselves an aristocracy of dollars, the *display of wealth* was here to take the place, and perform the office, of the heraldic display in monarchical countries” (Poe, “The Philosophy of Furniture”). Certainly in his treatise as a whole, he is being humorous, but his satirical bite is sinking its teeth into the powerful. It can definitely be argued that compared to Poe, George Graham was a representation of the powerful, and the embodiment of his ire: a younger man than Poe with wealth and prosperity, actively attaining a life that was continually just outside of Poe’s grasp. George Graham is a perfect example of the wanton excess that a man like Poe could only dream of, by being an owner of capital, the landlord in a neo-feudal framework.

Due to lax copyright laws in the early and mid-1800’s, Poe was very critical of the thought that many authors feel forced into writing for magazines for preservation of their pay: “the want of an International Copy-Right Law, by rendering it nearly impossible to obtain anything from the booksellers in the way of remuneration for literary labor, has had the effect of forcing many of our very best writers into the service of the Magazines and Reviews” (Poe, “Some Secrets of the Magazine Prison-house”). In the late 1700’s and early 1800’s there was an

understanding that the intellectual work of the author was owned by them was a matter of natural law, but there was obvious gaps between that understanding and the implementation of that:

At the same time that authorship came to dominate the theoretical and abstract discourse surrounding copyright law, the institutional-doctrinal details of copyright remained rooted in traditional pre-authorship patterns.

The rift between the new official ideology and actual institutional forms was staggering. Original authors were celebrated as the *raison d'être* of the regime, but copyright had no mechanism whatsoever to identify either authors or works of authorship (Bracha 199).

What this then meant for authors is that they were responsible for the ownership of the work itself, but because they did not own the medium by which the work was published, this allowed for exploitative practices by publishers. “In short, at the end of the eighteenth century, copyright remained the old economic privilege of the publisher (now conferred on authors) wearing an official rhetorical mask of authorial property rights” (200). Lax copyright laws allowed for entrepreneurs and publishers to take advantage of writers who were attempting to make a living off of their craft. This is why it was so difficult for many writers of Poe’s era to actually sustain themselves on a writer's salary, as well as why Poe is considered to be being first American author to support himself entirely by writing. Poe recognized this gap, and this is likely the impetus for wanting to establish his own literary magazine, to right the wrongs of the industry. This is also what forced Poe’s hand to become an editor, it would provide him consistent income that he would not see as an author. Such a position would provide Poe a unique view into the gap between the poor and the affluent, even more given his upbringing.

Given how writers were treated during Poe's era, this informs us why Poe would want to become a publisher, and it can be argued this is why Poe decided to work with George Graham to begin with because Graham was known for paying authors well. When Poe began his editorial position with Graham, he felt he was being compensated handsomely for his work as an editor. However, this relationship soured quickly because it was under his direction that Graham's subscriber base grew exponentially, and even though Poe was largely responsible for an increased readership of Graham's magazine, he did not see any increase in wages which ultimately led to a dispute between him and Graham regarding money.

George Graham started out his career as a lawyer, but after joining the bar, he abandoned his law pursuits to become an editor. In rather quick succession between 1839 and 1840, Graham leveraging his capital, overtook several publications, of which *Burton's* magazine was one, which he then turned into *Graham's Lady's and Gentleman's Magazine*, which "This periodical became in the next ten years perhaps the most popular magazine of its sort in America" (Hull, "Graham's Magazine"). Graham as owner of the magazine owned the building where the magazines were published, and was responsible for the distribution of the publications, but ultimately provided little else to the production of the magazine. The authors, artists, and editors were the ones who undertook the labor while Graham absorbed the profits. This produced a particular animus within Poe especially given the amount of profit that was produced when he was editor of Graham's Magazine. During this time as editor, Poe made only \$800 per year, while the publisher allegedly brought in over \$25,000 in profit. Those figures today would roughly equate to \$24,000 per year, and \$748,500 per year respectively. It is amid this backdrop that Poe wrote "Masque", and the story was in fact published in the edition that came out around the time he departed the magazine over a dispute in regards to his pay.

The meaning of the story moves even deeper beyond Graham, but on to the whole of the American aristocracy of Poe's era. Owning the magazine was not Graham's only source of income, nor was it as deep a passion as it was for Poe, but instead another defense in his castellated abbey designed to keep the disease of poverty at bay. Graham as Prospero then becomes a warning to Graham and the other elites of his day. When the Red Death appears, Prospero chases him through the abbey, to attack him, and buying out *Burton's Magazine* then becomes a vanity pursuit to save away poverty. The purpose of the Abbey was to prevent any ingress, to keep him in the black. It then becomes fitting to see how Poe ultimately describes the black room as a combination of black and scarlet:

But in the western or black chamber, the effect of the fire-light that streamed upon the dark hangings through the blood-tinted panes, was so ghastly in the extreme, and 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, *The Essential Tales* 262).

The fire casting blood-tinted light throughout the black room is an ever present reminder of the fact that poverty can be just around the corner despite your wealth and status. When Poe wrote "Masque," he certainly would not have had any idea how Graham's life would ultimately play out, nor did he live long enough to see it. But Poe recognized the patterns which he puts into the movement of Prospero through the abbey. Prospero's movements through the Abbey were reflective of what Poe was seeing in the financial institutions of his time. Use of soft money and speculation was effectively like buying on credit and eventually when the economy contracted the whole house of cards came down and not only taking the rich and prosperous, but the poor and middle class as well whose only crime was putting their faith and trust in institutions designed to fail to begin with. For Graham, he had a similar fate:

In August, 1848, Graham was forced to turn his proprietary rights over to Samuel D. Patterson and Company, although he continued as editor. He had become involved in financial difficulties which resulted in his neglecting the magazine and in his turning to heavy drinking. In March, 1850, he made a come-back, and repurchased the magazine; but his energies had abated, and the magazine did not flourish. He sold out for good in December, 1853. His career was over. The rest of his life was a wretched affair. Finally some friends took him out of the gutters, and on their charity he lived until July 13, 1894. (Hull, "Graham's Magazine")

Prospero's actions extend beyond Graham as well though. Prospero can be read as the bank owners, and the hail and light-hearted, were the ones who were investing in these Banks as well as putting their faith and money within these institutions which ultimately failed. Graham, and by extension the American Aristocracy, fulfill their dual purpose in the story. Despite having the means to insulate themselves against poverty and the woes and sicknesses of the poor, many still found themselves, and their fortunes, consumed through wild speculation and were likewise responsible for the downfall of many of those with means as well. The aforementioned financial panic ruined many who pursued wealth in their day, and often bankrupted those who deposited funds into their coffers. And while Poe was not alive to witness it, Graham who was financially hale and light-hearted, fell victim to Poe's prophecy. Graham, despite having a healthy salary from what was one of the most lucrative published journals of his time period, was still thirsty for larger profits, and attempted to increase his wealth even further by prospecting for precious metals and copper, which forced him to close up the magazine because of the financial stress it put on him, and ultimately required financial help from his friend during the final stages of his life.

This movement of the Red Death within Prospero's abbey is also a sobering reminder of the outcome of inaction on the part of the controlling class which is indicated by the failure on Prospero's part. Prospero instead of addressing the issue continues to ignore the presence of the Red Death outside of the abbey until it appears within. Prospero is ashamed of his cowardice, which is the only cause for his action. He moves because the artifice of his appearance is momentarily shattered in front of the revel, Then he attempts to attack the red death with his knife which is another example of failure on his part due to his ignoring, rather than attacking, the problem. By the time Prospero decides to be moved to action in attacking the Red with his knife, the Red Death has already entered the abbey and the time for action has already passed. Everything in the Abbey itself was intended to be a display of his wealth, power, and prosperity and the narrator makes it very clear that the Prince wants the reader to sure of the wealth and power that he had through the decorations of the Abbey.

While all of this shows that Poe was acutely aware of the issues of money in his time, we can look to other texts to highlight the fact that there were associations between money and greed and that owe himself was not supportive of the desire for limitless accumulation of wealth. Looking at his short story "The Gold Bug," the protagonist Legrand is in pursuit of a horde of gold which he is able to deduce that was the treasure of Captain Kidd, which becomes an all consuming pursuit for him, but upon finding the treasure, there are several skeletons leading Legrand to speculate that Kidd had help in burying the treasure, and then afterward killed those who was helping him to keep the treasure secret. Likewise, when the company within the abbey sets upon the Red Death, in a panicked effort to insulate themselves against the disease of poverty, they find that there is no form to behold behind the mask, "and now was acknowledged

the presents of the Red Death ... One by one dropped the revelers in the blood-bedewed halls of their revel, and died each in the despairing posture of his fall.”

The tale ends with a reference to a parable told by Jesus in Gospel of Matthew, where he says that he will return like a thief in the night. Poe adds this as a subtle jab to those in power. What Poe leaves out is the rest of the parable, where Jesus says that there will be two groups of people, one who is found worthy and are found so by doing what the master deems worthy, and the other group who will be found wanting, a man who beats his servants and eats and drinks with the drunkards; in this way Poe adds even another layer of meaning to his text by showing the fate of people like Graham and the elites. Gerardo del Guericco highlights how “Masque” is ultimately a revenge fantasy against the Prosperos of his day: “For Poe, art beauty, and the Red Death exact a certain revenge on the upper-class members of society who ignore the less fortunate and the diseased” (80).

-The Present-

The complexity and ambiguity of the interaction between the Masked Figure and Prospero coupled with the bifurcated reading of either Poe or Graham as Prospero uncovers the heart of the issue in the Capitalist society, and it reflects how little has changed in 190 years.” What happens to the wealthy when the poor and under-served no longer have any wealth that they can then strip away? As previously mentioned, the Coronavirus pandemic underscored the disparity between the haves and the have-nots of our modern age, much like the financial panics of Poe’s time shifted out the speculators out from the solid businesses like wheat from the chaff. While many people struggled to make ends meet while being deemed essential workers, billionaires had space races in overtly phallic rockets. The fundamental underpinnings of the

Blue Origin and SpaceX projects are to open space travel to “all.” Jeff Bezos upon his return to earth, and after capriciously announcing a gift of \$200 million dollars to two people unrelated to his launch and subsequent return, thanked the thousands of workers that he does not pay a living wage to, claiming that they paid for it. This completely underscored the difference between his incomprehensible wealth and the workers whose median income was \$29,000 in 2020, and were responsible for the continued success of Amazon, and the reason for Bezos’ wealth. Dauntless and sagacious, the billionaires are eyeing a space race, and looking to colonize other planets, locking the rest of us out and leaving us to our fates.

Even more concerning is how digital platforms have separated workers from their labor. Social media platforms of all kinds use the labor of their users as profit, whether its posting on a wall, or making a video, users create content which is all for likes, clicks, and engagement, but rarely, if ever, do these content creators get paid. Taking the Red Death to its ultimate conclusion, the upheaval of the monetary system and the systematic leaching of Capitalism to the dissolution of the working class and how that will eventually lead to the dissolution of the ruling class as there will no longer be any profit to extract. With the modern day proliferation of novel currencies like crypto and assets like NFTs, they are promoted as free, open, and democratic. Free from the encumbrances of a centralized currency that Poe so ardently supported, are inherently as devoid of value as the fiat currency system they are supposed to replace. These currencies and assets unfortunately still have the fundamental weaknesses that are present in regular markets, coupled a lizzie-faire approach to regulation, vulnerable lower and middle classes have been flocking to it as a way to join the 1% of the world, however, much like Poe, they will ultimately fall to the predation of the wealthy.

The tale of Prospero is a warning against both the acquisition of wealth and the maintenance of it at all costs. Reading Poe as Prospero, it was his attempt to subvert the societal norms of his time and become a successful author despite his inability to manage money. The ever consuming debt and interest that must be eliminated to acquire assets that produce income is overwhelming. And with his lack of ability to manage money, Poe was never able to produce income which paid off his debt. In this way, the pursuit of money eluded Poe, and he becomes as Prospero, laying dead at the feet of the disease of poverty. Reading Graham as Prospero, Poe underscores the fact that that in the attempt to insulate yourself from poverty at all costs will ultimately lead to the downfall both yourself as well as those within your sphere. There is a hubris that is associated with the wealthy that they can do no wrong. While Poe never lived to see Graham's downfall – he accurately predicted it just the same. Reading Graham as Prospero shows how the wealthy attempt to maintain their wealth to the detriment of others will ultimately lead to the destruction and subversion of the systems meant to protect. Ultimately, this is why the tale ends here, its meaning is bifurcated, and no matter which way you turn, the story is not about how you cannot take your money with you when you die, but a cautionary tale to both the haves and the have-nots that the pursuit of wealth is a destructive force, often leading to financial ruin, so like the Red Death, poverty holds an illimitable dominion over all.

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