

Asceticism versus Hedonism in Poe's Story "The Masque of the Red Death"

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Abstract

Schopenhauer considers the concept of death to be an central concept. It's the only certainty for him. To face it, he proposes asceticism and the will to face desires. He sees life as a never-ending cycle of death. The triumph of death is inevitable, and this makes existence an absurd tragedy. Being influenced by Buddhist thinkers, he sees death as the origin of philosophy because it forces us to think and look for a way to counteract the futility of existence. The Red Death, Poe's short story, discusses this inevitable outcome. The paper examines the notion of death in the tale and the futile human struggle to avoid it. Life is hard because of our wants and desires, which he called the *Will to Live*. Schopenhauer proposed asceticism as a solution to counter our insatiableness. There are profound symbols in Poe's short story that replicate Schopenhauer's philosophy and man's futile attempts to escape death. The only deviation from Schopenhauer's concept is the failure of the protagonist to adhere to the suggested solution, and the protagonist is ultimately caught in the inevitable fate of death.

Key words: Schopenhauer's concept of death, red death, Poe's, Prospero, The Masque

Death is one of the most important concepts in the German philosopher Schopenhauer's book *The World as Will and Representation*. He regards Death as the purpose of life. Living for him means a continual struggle and suffering. Existence is a never ending process of dying which seeks to affirm the inherently hedonistic nature of man, the will to never stop the constant rejuvenation of the power to continue. Our will to life (Will zum Leben) pushes us constantly towards fulfilling our desires and needs only to discover to our expected disappointment that we need to fulfill them again and again until death. Seeking Pleasure breeds more pleasure and greater pleasure seeks even more, a process which will never be satiated till death. Death therefore stands as a force of annihilation awaiting our final loss of breath. The constant struggle to seek pleasure and pursue happiness is just an illusion. Julian young believes that:

One might venture a summary of the four-booked World as Will and Representation by means of four "noble truths" the world is my representation; its essence is will, that is to say suffering; temporary release from suffering is

possible through art; permanent release is possible through ‘denial of the will’, that is to say death. (Masny 494)

Schopenhauer says that “it is the chief task of philosophy and religion to provide consolation in the face of death”. For him life is a dream and we are dreamers and death ends the dream but fails to end the dreamer if the dreamer transcends existence. Schopenhauer cultivates the transcendent self. “The present is the only real form of the phenomenon of the will therefore no endless past or future in which [man] will not exist can frighten him” (Payne. 1969). To overcome this vicious circle of dying the solution would be to override our selfishness, sex drives, vanity and all other natural desires that form our will to life by seclusion, for example, or suppress our desires to reduce our existence to the basic needs and stop the vain search to be famous or rich. In simple term to live like monks or ascetics. The road to salvation is by negating the “will to life”

“Affirmation and negation of the will”. He argues, with a fervor that borders on the religious, that “negation of the will” is a condition of unique value, the only state that enables “true salvation, redemption from life and from suffering”. Some commentators have asserted without qualification that this condition is his “highest good.” The final goal of ‘salvation’... which Schopenhauer describes as the ‘summum bonum,’ ‘the highest good’... consists in something he calls ‘denial of the will.’ (Janaway 649)

Schopenhauer lived under constant influence of Buddhism. His thoughts in this are similar to the Buddhist theory which regards death as a release from pain while life by contrast is represented as an illusion and a “nothing” (Dagan 76). The other way of Schopenhauer’s proposed therapy to the final doom, however, is to spend as much time as possible with art and philosophy. Philosophy and art help us look at life without illusions. “Life is pain and every satisfaction is negative because it is just freedom from pain” (Saunders, 76)

Pleasure is therefore equated with misery in Schopenhauer’s sense. We pursue pleasure and in fact when we fail to attain it we feel miserable but ironically we feel sad because we failed to attain misery because the illusion of happiness is nothing more than our constant pursuit of misery. The most famous people who live in luxurious palaces and eat the best food are often unhappy and suffer so much that they sometimes get addicted to drugs and sometimes end their lives with suicide. They provided themselves with necessary provisions but failed to find the right consolation, in other words they preferred the Epicurean consolation rather than the summum bonum consolation (denial of the will to life) that Schopenhauer proposes.

Epicurus (341–270 BC) was an ancient Greek philosopher and sage who founded Epicureanism, and was one of the earlier philosophers who tried to adopt a perspective on death, opposed to that of Schopenhauer, believed that the summum bonum or the ultimate good is in pursuing happiness as a goal and moderate indulgence in pleasure and in all that that makes man happy:

It is true that the Epicureans believed one should indulge in moderation and enjoy life with friends, but they did not believe in self-destructive immediate

gratification. For example, just as Epicurus opened his school to women and slaves, believing this to be the best for social well-being. (Gerlach 5)

Death in the Epicurean philosophy does not have any effect on man because it exists only when man does not exist and therefore has no effect on man. Life is short and should be lived to the full and death does not exist as it shows up only when man has no senses to feel it: Epicurus says:

Accustom yourself to believe that death is nothing to us, for good and evil imply awareness, and death is the privation of all awareness [...] Foolish, therefore, is the person who says that he fears death, not because it will pain when it comes, but because it pains in the prospect. Whatever causes no annoyance when it is present, causes only a groundless pain in the expectation. Death, therefore, the most awful of evils, is nothing to us, seeing that, when we are, death is not come, and, when death is come, we are not. (Zagzebski, 8)

Edgar Allen in Poe who is known for his gothic tradition stories and through his protagonist Prospero in his short story *The Masque of the Red Death*, he is as much obsessed by death as Schopenhauer. He tries to incarnate Schopenhauer's philosophy and emulate his obsession with death in search of a possible consolation. In his gothic stories his characters are always made to face death in one way or another. But the protagonist in this story in particular seeks to escape death but fails to live up to one theory in favor of another. In other words he relinquished the concept of the denial of the will to favour Epicureanism, the illusion consolation that Schopenhauer deadly opposed. According to Schopenhauer indulging in pleasure will cause more pain and our will to life needs to be reined in in order to reduce the pain of existence. Life as a dream is clearly manifested in the details and ample and colorful description of the setting particularly the palace where the dance ball is held. "The things in the short story suggesting that the masquerade ball is a dream are because it gives a sense of unreality and hyper-meaningfulness. There is exaggerated imagery and colors, which also suggests that masquerade is the production of pure imagination" (Litpriest). A dream that Schopenhauer proposed to transcend through negation of the will rather than indulging in fleeting pleasures according to Epicurus.

Both philosophical concepts. However, seek to offer a possible escape from death but from a different perspective. The allegory *the Masque of the Red Death* tells of a contagious disease that struck the city. No one can escape the contagion. Prospero the protagonist is a prince who decides to protect himself from death by secluding himself in a castellated abbey that will gather all of his entourage and friends. A big iron wall surrounding the Castle is supposed to protect it from intruders. The courtiers who came with the prince left no place for infiltration. He provided the castle with all necessary means of pleasure. "Life with all its beauty was inside the castle and outside there was the red death". Prospero does not care about his people and he is far from trying to negate the will to life in order to transcend pain. He makes a selfish and immoral choice.

The main character of the story, Prince Prospero, lives his life mainly for pleasure, and so as his friends. They only believe in enjoying life and not to think and grieve about the poor lives of people dying from the plague. They do not give time to ponder on death. And when the plague hits the country, they lock themselves in their palaces and start partying with alcohol and buffoons. Poe creates his horrifying story by contrasting the happy-go-lucky court of the Prospero, who believes that they can easily avoid death and the looming presence of death. (Litpriest,)

The prince then decides to gather his friends for a big masquerade. The masquerade is to be held in seven colorful rooms with significant symbolic connotations.

The protagonist whose name is a tag one that refers to his prosperity and wealth is described as being sagacious. He does not lack wisdom. The author deliberately endows the protagonist with this quality as conquering death requires him to be a match to his opponent in wealth, power and wisdom. His attempt of protection is yet another attempt to attain immortality and no doubt a new challenge requires wisdom to be qualified to face up to the challenge. But wisdom is not enough therefore the castle which is supposed to protect the prince with his entourage is an abbey. An abbey is a religious place. Symbolically Religion provides some kind of protection and has often been a shelter against death. The castle was so protected by walls that no creature can ever infiltrate into the place “a strong and lofty wall girdled it in”. It is clear that Poe and the protagonist resolved their fear of death by choosing the Epicurean way of facing death. The castle had to be a powerful protection. The wall had gates of iron, the courtiers, having entered, brought furnaces and massy hammers and wielded the bolts” Poe decided to change the title from mask to masque in order to emphasize the fact that the real focus is not the masked man that stealthily infiltrates into the castle but on the dance ball itself. It is the people who during their life time wear different masks and behave in different ways espousing different religions and doctrine to shield themselves again the imminent and inevitable fate that count more than death itself.

The prince together with the courtiers made sure the contagion and hence death has no chance of entering the protected abbey. The prince was so epicurean in nature that he believed that “it was folly to grieve, or to think”. There is no time to spend in anything other than pure pleasure. Therefore the prince decides to fill his castle with all available pleasures of life. “There was Beauty and there was wine”, the word “beauty” is capitalized to stand for all that life as opposed to death might offer. He decided to gather all of his friends and they are a thousand in number for a masked dance ball. The number “thousand” is often mentioned in the scripture to refer to perfect or numerous quantities and the atmosphere is meant to be perfect Epicurean life where death is not allowed to enter:

The number one thousand (1,000) symbolizes “immensity,” “fullness of quantity” or “multitude.” The number evokes a very long time according to most Bible passages. It is often used in scripture to specify an indefinite quantity. Many early Church fathers saw in the number 1,000, “the totality of the generations and the perfection of the life.” The number sometimes is used in a reference to paradise and everlasting happiness. (Ron)

Prospero or so he thought managed to create a perfect place of happiness immune from perdition and death. The seven coloured rooms in which the party was held symbolise the different stages of life of an individual. Those luxurious rooms extend from the east to the west. East where the sun shines and life begins and west is the sunset or death. The first room which has the colour blue represent the birth, second purple room stands for the youth while the green is adolescence while adulthood is represented by the next room which is orange. The white room is old age and imminent death is violet while the black represents death. The black one, however, is the most important:

The seventh apartment 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. But in this chamber only, the colour of the windows failed to correspond with the decorations. The panes here were scarlet – a deep blood colour.

In the last black room there was a gigantic clock of ebony which strikes every hour during which period the musician and dancers stop in awe and meditation and the old put their hands on their brows “it was observed that the giddiest grew pale, and the more aged and sedate passed their hands over their brows as if in confused reverie or meditation.” (Poe) once the echoes of clock are gone they return to their normal laughing. The clock symbolizes the passing of time which with every strike brings people closer to their final destination. Poe gives a detailed description of the magnificent decorations and embellishments of the place. Everything was meant to excite and shock and keep his friend from entertained and away from ugliness and disgust. All the rooms are crowded with revellers except the black one. Suddenly the presence of a masked man disturbs the atmosphere. What attracted their attention is his appearance and strange bearing. The mask looked like the face of a corpse which truly resembled a dead body. His garment was soaked in blood and the brow was scarlet which clearly indicates that the masked man must have been a victim of the red death. Indeed it is death himself. Prospero followed with a dagger in his hand the masked man from one room to the other from the blue in the east to the black in the west trying to seize him and unmask him. The final battle ended in the black room where Prospero fell dead on the ground. Then a crowd of the revellers rushed to help Prospero only to find that there was no tangible form under the mask and they all fell dead one by one. Poe borrows again from the bible the phrase that “death comes like a thief in the night”. The story ends on a sad note where Epicurean salvation is nothing more than annihilation:

The lines can be explained in a deeper way by exploring the means through which the masquerade can be taken as the symbol for the world. The term “the world” has a negative connotation in the apocalyptic literature. It usually refers to the evil, base, and profane life that we live on earth, as compared to the spiritual and high life with God. Before the judgment, the world will become chaotic, frenzied, topsy-turvy, violent, grotesque, and absorbed in sin, just like the masquerade ball. (Litpriest)

Prospero and his companions died sooner than they thought and faster than his poor miserable subjects outside the castle. Indeed his selfishness precipitated their downfall. The climax of the story shows the failure of the Epicurean tradition and the triumph of the Schopenhauerian doctrine of the ultimate good in the denial of the will to life. Despite Prospero's wisdom, wealth and power he made an immoral choice that took him and his companions down the path of perdition. In Contrast to Epicurus' philosophy which is hedonistic, Schopenhauer's doctrine much approaches Christianity. He affirms this in his book *On the Suffering of the World*:

The spirit of the New Testament is undoubtedly asceticism, however your Protestants and rationalists may twist it to suit their purpose. Asceticism is the denial of the will to live; and the transition from the Old Testament to the New, from the dominion of Law to that of Faith, from justification by works to redemption through the Mediator, from the domain of sin and death to eternal life in Christ, means, when taken in its real sense, the transition from the merely moral virtues to the denial of the will to live. My philosophy shows the metaphysical foundation of justice and the love of mankind, and points to the goal to which these virtues necessarily lead, if they are practised in perfection. (Schopenhauer)

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