ALLUSIONS FROM “THE MASQUE OF RED DEATH”

There are two major allusions in this short story by Edgar Allen Poe:

1. Reference to “Red Death” is suggestive of the Black Death. Below is a description of this disease:

The Black Death was caused by fleas carried by rats that were very common in [towns](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/medieval_towns.htm) and cities. The fleas bit into their victims literally injecting them with the disease. Death could be very quick for the weaker victims. It symptoms were described in 1348 by a man called Boccaccio who lived in Florence, Italy: **"The first signs of the plague were lumps in the groin or armpits. After this, livid black spots appeared on the arms and thighs and other parts of the body. Few recovered. Almost all died within three days, usually without any fever."**

Written evidence from the time indicates that nearly all the victims died within three days though a small number did last for four days.

1. The main character’s name is Prospero. Poe’s audiences would have been familiar with Shakespeare’s The Tempest and his main character Prospero. Below is a description of this character:

Prospero from [The Tempest](http://shakespeare.about.com/od/thetempest/tp/The_Tempest_Play_Guide.htm) is the rightful Duke of Milan and father to Miranda who he loves. In the [plot](http://shakespeare.about.com/od/thetempest/a/tempest_Summary.htm), he was usurped by his brother and sent on a boat to his death but survived by landing on the island.

**Prospero's Power**

Prospero possesses magical powers and is able to conjure spirits and nymphs to perform tasks. With [Ariel's](http://shakespeare.about.com/od/thetempest/a/Ariel-tempest.htm) help, he conjures the tempest at the start of the play. Prospero is quite a foreboding character dealing out punishments and treating his servants with contempt, raising questions about his [morality and fairness](http://shakespeare.about.com/od/thetempest/a/The_Tempest_Analysis.htm). Both Ariel and [Caliban](http://shakespeare.about.com/od/thetempest/a/Caliban-tempest.htm) want to be free of their master which suggests he is not easy to work for. Ariel and Caliban represent the two sides of Prospero's personality – he can be kind and generous but there is also a darker side to him. Prospero is accused by Caliban of stealing his island and thus usurping power like his brother. Prospero's [power in *The Tempest*](http://shakespeare.about.com/od/thetempest/a/The_Tempest_Power.htm) is knowledge and his beloved books demonstrate this – these inform his magic.

**Prospero's Forgiveness**

Having been wronged by many of the characters, he graciously forgives them. Prospero's desire to rule the island reflects his brother Antonio's desire to rule Milan – they go about realizing their desire in similar ways but Prospero absolves himself at the end of the play by setting Ariel free and forgiving his persecutors.

[**http://shakespeare.about.com/od/thetempest/a/Prospero.htm**](http://shakespeare.about.com/od/thetempest/a/Prospero.htm)

**GOTHIC FICTION**

**As a genre, Gothic fiction involves several elements including these listed in Robert Harris’ Elements of a Gothic Novel**

1. **Setting in a castle.** The action takes place in and around an old castle, sometimes seemingly abandoned, sometimes occupied. The castle often contains secret passages, trap doors, secret rooms, trick panels with hidden levers, dark or hidden staircases, and possibly ruined sections.

**2. An atmosphere of mystery and suspense.** The work is pervaded by a threatening feeling, a fear enhanced by the unknown. This atmosphere is sometimes advanced when characters see only a glimpse of something--was that a person rushing out the window or only the wind blowing a curtain?

**3. An ancient prophecy** is connected with the castle or its inhabitants (either former or present). The prophecy is usually obscure, partial, or confusing.

**4. Omens, portents, visions.** A character may have a disturbing dream vision, or some phenomenon may be seen as a portent of coming events.

**5. Supernatural or otherwise inexplicable events.** Dramatic, amazing events occur, such as ghosts or giants walking, or inanimate objects (such as a suit of armor or painting) coming to life. In some works, the events are ultimately given a natural explanation, while in others the events are truly supernatural.

**6. High, even overwrought emotion.** The narration may be highly sentimental, and the characters are often overcome by anger, sorrow, surprise, and especially, terror. Characters suffer from raw nerves and a feeling of impending doom.

**7. Women in distress.** As an appeal to the pathos and sympathy of the reader, the female characters often face events that leave them fainting, terrified, screaming, and/or sobbing.

**8. Women threatened by a powerful, impulsive, tyrannical male.** One or more male characters has the power, as king, lord of the manor, father, or guardian, to demand that one or more of the female characters do something intolerable.

**9. The metonymy of gloom and horror.** Metonymy is a subtype of metaphor, in which something (like rain) is used to stand for something else (like sorrow)..

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| wind, especially howling | rain, especially blowing |
| doors grating on rusty hinges | sighs, moans, howls, eerie sounds |
| footsteps approaching | clanking chains |
| lights in abandoned rooms | gusts of wind blowing out lights |
| characters trapped in a room | doors suddenly slamming shut |
| ruins of buildings | baying of distant dogs (or wolves?) |
| thunder and lightning | crazed laughter |

**10. The vocabulary of the gothic.** The constant use of the appropriate vocabulary set creates the atmosphere of the gothic.

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| **Mystery** | diabolical, enchantment, ghost, goblins, haunted, infernal, magic, magician, miracle, necromancer, omens, ominous, portent, preternatural, prodigy, prophecy, secret, sorcerer, spectre, spirits, strangeness, talisman, vision |
| **Fear, Terror, or Sorrow** | afflicted, affliction, agony, anguish, apprehensions, apprehensive, commiseration, concern, despair, dismal, dismay, dread, dreaded, dreading, fearing, frantic, fright, frightened, grief, hopeless, horrid, horror, lamentable, melancholy, miserable, mournfully, panic, sadly, scared, shrieks, sorrow, sympathy, tears, terrible, terrified, terror, unhappy, wretched |
| **Surprise** | alarm, amazement, astonished, astonishment, shocking, staring, surprise, surprised, thunderstruck, wonder |
| **Haste** | anxious, breathless, flight, frantic, hastened, hastily, impatience, impatient, impatiently, impetuosity, precipitately, running, sudden, suddenly |
| **Anger** | anger, angrily, choler, enraged, furious, fury, incense, incensed, provoked, rage, raving, resentment, temper, wrath, wrathful, wrathfully |
| **Largeness** | enormous, gigantic, giant, large, tremendous, vast |
| **Darkness** | dark, darkness, dismal, shaded, black, night |

[**http://www.virtualsalt.com/gothic.htm**](http://www.virtualsalt.com/gothic.htm)

**Assignment :**

**Using one of the topics below construct a Venn diagram complete with quotations from both texts to construct a synthesis response.**

**TOPIC ONE: Discuss whether the allusion to Prospero from The Tempest is consistent with the character Poe creates in his short story.**

**TOPIC TWO: Poe is a noted American writer famed for his Gothic style. According to Harris’s article above, is this title of Gothic writer warranted if we use Poe’s “Masque of Red Death” as a point of assessment.**