

ENGLISH STUDIES DEGREE

FINAL UNDERGRADUATE DISSERTATION



FEAR OF DEATH:

**POE'S "THE MASQUE OF THE RED DEATH" AND THE
COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

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ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic represents one of the most difficult situations humanity has faced in modern times, although it is not the only pandemic human beings have experienced. In order to confront this medical and social crisis, citizens act guided by their fear of death, and these attitudes are similar to the ones caused many years ago during the tuberculosis epidemic in the 19th century, or even to attitudes seen in by fictional characters set in this period. This research paper aims to examine the similarities and differences between the current Covid-19 pandemic and Edgar Allan Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death", focusing on the attitudes caused by the fear of death. Consequently, situations encountered in the short story and the current reality such as the confinement, the use of masks or the distortion of time will be analysed, as well as the attitudes towards these critical situations. Selfishness, foolishness, carelessness and anger conclude to be present in circumstances where the human being is threatened by death and has to survive the unknown, whether these circumstances are real or fictional.

Keywords: Covid-19, fear of death, attitudes, "The Masque of the Red Death", pandemic

1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout history humans have suffered several epidemics and pandemics such as the black death, the Spanish flu, the plague of Justinian or cholera. The most feared of them has probably been tuberculosis, an illness which affected important areas of the world and caused a great deal of deaths.

The tuberculosis epidemic in the 18th and 19th centuries affected mainly throughout the area of Europe and North America. 80% of those who developed active tuberculosis died because of it (Harvard University Library, n.d.). This disease was also called “the robber of youth”, as it seemed to possess a higher death rate among young people. Another name for this disease was the “White Plague”, and this name was because of the anaemic aspect who those infected presented (Frith, n.d.). With regard to the clinical features and symptoms of this illness, tuberculosis is defined as an airborne disease which affects the lungs resulting in severe coughing, fever and chest pain (Fogel, 2015), as well as fatigue and night sweats. The persistent coughing also presents white phlegm and sometimes blood. It was a remarkably feared disease and the leading cause of death during the 19th century in the United States. The University of Virginia (2007), estimates that, “at the turn of the century, 450 Americans died of tuberculosis every day, most between ages 15 and 44,” and that “[t]he disease was so common and so terrible that it was often equated with death itself.”

As a result, it is not strange to conclude that Poe represents tuberculosis as death itself, using the character the “Red Death” in the short story “The Masque of the Red Death” (1842). In this work, Edgar Allan Poe seems to be referencing this 19th-century epidemic, which he witnessed and experienced first-hand. Born in Boston in 1809, his mother died of tuberculosis and he became an orphan soon, later being adopted by a rich businessman named John Allan who lived in Richmond, Virginia (National Park Service, n.d.). Years later, in 1847, his own wife Virginia would also die of this disease (National Park Service, n.d.), which seems to have affected him greatly and caused him depression. Therefore, there are clues, as we will see throughout this paper, that Poe was referring to this disease in his short story.

The bond of Poe with terror atmospheres came when he was involved in the folklore of his nursemaids and black servants which were engaged with the supernatural and death. Poe listened to stories about black magic, conjuring and zombies. He also read horror stories in English magazines. All of this influenced Poe to write fictional works where horror and death were prominent (Gavaldà, 2019).

Poe studied in the University of Virginia, in which he excelled in his studies of Latin and French. However, as a consequence of his addiction to gambling, he had to leave the university because of his debts. Later, he moved to Boston and published *Tamerlane and Other Poems*, but, because of his poor economic situation, he joined the army. Poe did not respond to the duties and presented disobedience, so he was expelled in 1831 (National Park Service, n.d.).

The American writer decided then to move to Richmond and work as an editor in the journal *Southern Literary Messenger*, where his economic situation improved notably and where he married his cousin Virginia in 1845 (National Park Service, n.d.). With regard to his literature, his works were defined as macabre and mysterious. He published some works which became really popular, for instance, the work *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* which was the pioneer of the crime novel genre, and in 1845 he published *The Raven* which is considered one of the best poems in American and world literature. (Gavaldà, 2019).

After working in the *Southern Literary Messenger*, Poe started to work at *Graham's Magazine*, where he published the short story "The Masque of the Red Death." Finally, two years after the death of his wife, in October of 1849, Edgar Allan Poe died of "acute congestion of the brain" in a Baltimore hospital (National Park Service, n.d.).

"The Masque of the Red Death" was originally published with the title "The Masque of the Red Death: A Fantasy". The context of this short story is, as we have mentioned earlier, a real plague: tuberculosis in the 19th century. An important trait of tuberculosis, as previously mentioned, is the coughing of blood, and in this short story, the Red Death is described as a profuse bleeding illness. Therefore, the Red Death is inspired by tuberculosis.

The short story was written in a period in which the United States experienced some significant changes economically, politically and socially. At the beginning of the 19th

century, the United States economy experienced an improvement thanks to Industrialization, which was key for the United States in order to recover economically from the losses caused by the War of Independence, which took place between 1775 and 1783 (Obregon, 2019).

As regards the social aspects of that time, it must be taken into account that although the tuberculosis epidemic caused the death of many citizens, there was a demographic growth. This increase of the population was influenced mainly by the expansion of territories. In 1846, the United States entered into war with Mexico, as a consequence of the conquest of territories. This war ended in 1848, when the United States offered a peace deal, and Mexico agreed to it, losing the territories of New Mexico, High California and Texas (Obregon, 2019). The citizens of the United States were likely used to witnessing death: the epidemic and war could have influenced artists such as Edgar Allan Poe to reflect the issue of death in his stories.

Another important trait of the period and which influenced Poe's writing "The Masque of the Red Death" was the rise of masquerade balls. These festivities originated in Europe and were celebrated by people from the nobility or high social class. According to Beryl (2012), "masked balls were one of the most popular forms of entertainment in eighteenth-century Europe, and appear frequently as a motif in the period's literature and arts" (p: iv). In these balls, people dressed with typical costumes of that period and wore masks, the most important item at these events.

Because of our current worldwide pandemic, Covid-19, it shall be interesting to compare the attitudes of the protagonists of Poe's story with our own reactions nowadays. The Covid-19 pandemic started in December 2019 in Wuhan, a city in China, and is still ongoing. Covid-19 is caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, and the disease affects the respiratory system with symptoms as fever, cough, fatigue, muscle aches, headache, loss of smell and taste, sore throat, congestion, nausea and diarrhea (CDC, 2021). The spread of this disease was declared a global pandemic on the 11th of March, 2020. Prime ministers all around the world declared an emergency state in their countries, forcing their citizens to stay at home, and imposing quarantines which lasted for about three months to avoid the spread of the virus. The pandemic is still showing its social and economic consequences, but evidence shows that we will enter a worse global economic crisis, as well as political in the near future. Currently,

freedom of movement is restricted in many areas of the world, with citizens unable to travel out of their regions or countries.

As of 21 of April of 2021 the total amount of deaths by Covid-19 is 3,013,217, and there have been 141,754,944 (Google News, 2021) infections since the pandemic started. Although the numbers are breathtaking, the professionals who work in the medical sector increased their work intensely in order to reduce deaths and contagion, and accelerated the vaccine programme so that we could develop immunity to the disease as quickly as possible. Some of the preventive measures that have been taken are the use of masks, keeping social distance and the use of hydroalcoholic gel and other disinfectants.

Although it is still too soon, I believe it is interesting to compare our attitudes to this pandemic with the attitudes of those affected by tuberculosis in the 19th century as reflected in fiction works. For this reason, the aim of this dissertation is, in broad terms, to analyse the relationship between fiction and reality, and specifically, to examine the similarities and differences in terms of the fear of death caused by Covid-19 and tuberculosis in “The Masque of the Red Death” by Edgar Allan Poe.

2. EPIDEMIC FICTION VS. PANDEMIC REALITY

To examine how Poe reflects death in the short story and how this can be related with the actual pandemic situation, the short story “The Masque of the Red Death” has been analysed bearing in mind literary details such as the place, the plot, the characters’ actions and the main themes of the story. Furthermore, these details have been explained through Poe’s perspective, focusing on death and the feelings and actions that this produces. Lastly, the analysis has been divided into two sections: fear of death and how characters confront death.

2.1 Fear of death

The fear of death is present all over Poe’s short story and during the whole Covid-19 pandemic till now. In this section of the dissertation, this feeling will be analysed and

explained through some relevant issues such as the illnesses, the confinement, the use of masks, and lastly the distortion of time.

The virus which appears in the fictional work is the Red Death. This illness could represent tuberculosis in Poe's story and is introduced at the beginning of the story:

No pestilence had ever been so fatal, or so hideous. Blood was its Avatar and its steal - the redness and the horror of blood. 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. (1842: 37)

There is also a character who appears in the castellated abbey presenting itself with a Red Death costume and a mask, "the presence of a masked figure which had arrested the attention of no single individual before. And the rumour of this new presence having spread itself whisperingly around" (1842: 40).

This character, having filled the scenario with a huge tension, is described later by Poe in order to put the reader in context:

The figure was tall and gaunt, and shrouded from head to foot in the habiliments of the grave. The mask which concealed the visage was made so nearly to resemble the countenance of a stiffened corpse that the closest scrutiny must have had difficulty in detecting the cheat. (1842: 41)

The physical appearance of the figure seems to be very similar to the image of death personified (i.e., face of a corpse, black and red clothes and being tall). Therefore, the masked figure represents illness, conveying an allegory of death itself. Additionally, this character is also a personification of the disease which has affected the village, the Red Death, and since the very first moment it enters the ball, the ebony clock chimes midnight and the guests stare at it with suspicion. The figure just walks around the rooms, making the guests feel scared.

Knowing this information, the fear of death arouses with the simple presence of the figure, reaching the climax of the story.

At this point of the story we can observe some differences and similarities with the Covid pandemic. On the one hand, the Red Death has been seen physically, and this is used by the writer to transmit fear. However, the Covid-19 disease has not been seen nor touched. Nevertheless, almost every individual who has experienced the Covid pandemic, knows a person that has died of this illness, a fact which could help to personify the disease and to arouse fear. On the other hand, the Red Death spread fear and anguish when first appearing in the story till the end, and Covid-19 has also spread these same feelings to the worldwide population since the first news of it. Then, it can be stated that both are feared illnesses.

In addition, another similarity among the diseases is that both have a high mortality rate. However, tuberculosis was more dangerous, as in the period in which the short story develops, the medicine field was not as advanced as nowadays, they did not have the same hygiene measures or preventive measures as the population possesses now in the Covid pandemic. Furthermore, professionals of that period did not own the huge amount of information about viruses and diseases that nowadays professionals hold. Because of this mortality rate, people felt anguish and anxiety over being touched or coming in contact with a stranger. This happened during the tuberculosis epidemic and also during the Covid pandemic (especially at the beginning). In the case of the Covid pandemic, individuals have been required to preserve social distance at all times, even among people who live together or are family members.

Lastly, both illnesses kill without justification nor reasons. This is another fact which evokes insecurity and fear among human beings. The Red Death is an unfair being, so is the Covid disease. Both are illnesses produced by viruses, which do not discriminate. In addition, the Red Death clearly states by its actions that death might arrive unexpectedly, again, as Covid does.

Every person who has experienced the Covid-19 pandemic during the year 2020 is aware of the worldwide lockdown that began in March of that year. In “The Masque of the Red Death” characters also confine themselves for several months to avoid the spread of the virus. In the story, we meet Prince Prospero, who is the prince of the kingdom. He is the one who decides

to confine himself with his friends in his castellated abbey. At this point of the story, Poe has already presented to the reader the lethal disease which has urged people to decide to stay indoors: “He summoned to his presence a thousand hale and light-hearted friends from among the knights and dames of his court, and with these retired to the deep seclusion of one of his castellated abbeys” (1842: 37).

This fact has a huge importance, because it conveys a strong similarity with our reality which, as previously mentioned, during the year 2020 people of many countries were forced to undergo a quarantine, staying at their homes. Quarantine occurs when an unknown enemy threatens a town or even the entire planet. In the case of the story, there is a village which is threatened by a virus, but in our reality, it is the whole planet which is threatened by Covid-19. The fear of death appears just at the beginning of the story, when the Red Death is presented, and the very first consequence is confinement. However, there is a difference between the fictional story and our reality: in Poe’s story Prospero confines himself with thousands of people in the same place, but during Covid lockdown each family stayed at their homes, in small groups of people. This may point out that we have experienced more fear than Prospero and his guests at this point of the story.

The lockdown has also provoked a panic situation among people living the Covid pandemic. Citizens of every country did not know how long the quarantine would be and how long the resources would last (e.g., food and hygiene products such as toilet paper and bleach were the most demanded items). Therefore, people crowded in the supermarkets and bought in massive amounts, leaving the supermarkets and other families without resources. Prince Prospero and his guests had many more resources, as Poe indicates in the story: “the abbey was amply provisioned” (1842: 37). This differs from our initial Covid situation, although the Prince and the people in the abbey were also uncertain about how long they would have to stay there.

Another preventive measure besides confinement is the use of masks. Prince Prospero organises a masquerade ball in his castellated abbey, and every person in the ball must wear a mask. This also conveys a strong similarity with the actual social situation; as being exposed to the virus provokes its spread, the use of masks is essential and a requirement. However, in Poe’s story we find that these masks are useless for protection from the virus; instead they are used as a fashion object popular in that period. In the short story the masquerade ball is a

remarkable allegory: Prince Prospero and all his guests try to mask themselves, as if they were hiding something. We know that they are scared of the plague, so they hide themselves behind the mask trying to avoid death. Fear is the essence of their attitude, and it is again aroused by death. Nobody in Prospero's party desires to die, so they put a mask on to hide from the virus. In our society, the necessity of wearing a mask is induced by the fear of contagion which can later lead to death.

During this masquerade ball, the tension increases, influenced by the atmosphere and most importantly, time. The distortion of time is also an important theme in this story, and there is a strong representation of it in the abbey: the big ebony clock. This clock is a literary symbol used by Poe and which appears in the story by chiming every hour. Every time the clock chimes, the guests in the masquerade ball feel more tense, as if it was a reminder of death's arrival: "There came another chiming of the clock, and then were the same disconcert and tremulousness and meditation as before" (1842: 39).

Moreover, the figure of the Red Death appears when this clock marks midnight, as if it was time for everybody to die, the end of the day. Lastly, the clock breaks down when the last person in the party dies, so this concludes with the idea that the clock was definitely a reminder of death's arrival. The clock is located in the seventh room of the suite, which possesses a ghastly decoration, representing also the last stage in life: death. Following this idea, Pruette (1920) states:

We read in "The Masque of the Red Death": "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.' It was not merely the thought of death which obsessed the poet, but death in all its details and in its visible symbol, the casket of the dead." (1920: 388)

The first months of today's Covid pandemic were confusing for every person. Specialists did not know how long the pandemic was going to last, and it all depended on the spread of the virus, and most importantly, the development of a vaccine. Time is a factor which can evoke anxious feelings in the individuals who are waiting for something. In the case of "The Masque of the Red Death," the characters feel uncertainty and stress as time passes, and they feel death closer to them, and in the case of our society, which is currently fighting the virus,

time provokes the same feelings as in the characters of the story. Lastly, the passing of time during a pandemic brings consequences such as suffering and death, so citizens experiencing this situation could feel more afraid as time passes and the problem remains unsolved. This happens in the literary work by Poe, especially during the ball, and also in our current situation.

Time has also led to the growth of mental illnesses during the Covid pandemic, especially depression and anxiety. According to a study about the growth of mental disorders in the Covid pandemic, Almar et al (2021) state that, “people without depressive, anxiety, or obsessive-compulsive disorders showed a greater increase in symptoms during the COVID-19 pandemic, whereas individuals with the greatest burden on their mental health tended to show a slight symptom decrease”, that is, people who did not present any of the mental disorders mentioned before the pandemic, developed symptoms when the Covid situation began.

2.2 Confronting death

Among the attitudes towards the pandemic we can find a great variety; selfishness, foolishness, carelessness and anger are the most significant. Ideas such as classism and the inevitability of death are inherent to both the short story and the 2020 pandemic. These attitudes and ideas seem again to be raised by the feeling of fear.

When confronting death, Prospero, moved by fear, orders the guests to arrest the masked figure, but nobody will. When the prince decides to run towards the figure, again nobody follows him. The prince's guests seem to be so scared that they would rather avoid helping him and let him die. This selfishness is caused by their extreme fear of death, as people thought that if they stayed away from the illness they would escape death.

Selfishness has also been observed in our Covid society. Thanks to medical advancement, professionals have created the vaccine to beat Covid. The vaccine is the key for improving the current situation, by avoiding more deaths. People from the higher classes or those with

power, such as politicians, have taken advantage of the situation, and some of them have not respected their vaccine turns (which depend on age, work situation and medical conditions) so that they could skip the line and get the vaccine earlier. Other influential people, especially in social media, have organised private events exceeding the maximum number of people in these meetings and without following any preventive measures, and most importantly, without thinking about the people at risk. Both cases represent the selfishness which Poe describes in the story and personifies with the character of Prospero and also his guests: rich people with the power to decide and preoccupied only about themselves.

Prince Prospero embodies this selfishness and Poe shows this during the course of the story. According to Bell (1973),

Prospero is a feelingless ruling prince. To the discerning reader there is also implicit within the text a strong suspicion that this man is probably insane, for we are told that “Prince Prospero was happy, and dauntless and sagacious” even though half the people in his kingdom had been killed by the Red Death. This would hardly be the reaction of a ruler who is in contact with his environment.
(1973: 101)

Another idea which is much rooted in society and especially while experiencing an extremely difficult situation such as a pandemic is carelessness. Carelessness appears as a shield against fear in order to manage a problematic situation which cannot be solved instantly. In Poe’s story, Prince Prospero is shown as a mad man and awful ruler. He is the prince of a kingdom and he lets his people die while he and his friends go and lock themselves in a castellated abbey with all sorts of commodities. The prince acts in a hedonistic way to evade himself from the people’s suffering, a fact which bears many similarities with the illegal events previously mentioned:

The external world could take care of itself. In the meantime it was folly to grieve, or to think. The Prince had provided all the appliances of pleasure. There were buffoons, there were improvisatori, there were ballet-dancers, there were musicians, there was Beauty, there was wine. (1842: 37)

Therefore, Prospero's actions may be fueled by his irrational fear. In order to avoid his fear and guilt he organises a masquerade ball. Additionally, he is also considered a fool, as he thinks he can escape death by isolating himself in a castellated abbey. Everybody in the story seems to be unconcerned about the disease, believing they are not going to die. But the truth is that they all fear the Red Death, and we know this because when the Red Death figure appears in the masquerade ball, everyone stares at it and stays quiet, feeling the tension, experiencing the uncertainty of the figure's intentions. Poe describes this situation through the musicians' reactions: "The musicians looked at each other and smiled as if at their own nervousness and folly, and made whispering vows, each to the other (Poe 1842: 39).

Prince Prospero shows an evolution in his behaviour during the story. At first, this character could be considered a representation of carelessness and foolishness against the clearly fatal situation, because he organises a masquerade ball in the middle of an epidemic caused by a lethal virus. Prospero and his guests only desire to have fun to avoid thinking about the plague which is killing the poor people. During the Covid-19 pandemic, news have surfaced about events in which huge groups of people spent time together without respecting the measures nor wearing any masks. Both situations, fictional and real, seem to be very similar, as they show people who disregard the severity of the situation.

Moreover, the use of masks is an action which also represents foolishness as Prospero and his guests try to hide themselves from death behind the mask, as if they could avoid it by just wearing this object. In the case of the Covid-19 pandemic, wearing masks represents the opposite, they are an effective measure to stop the spread of the virus. Therefore, in nowadays' situation, wearing masks is an indication of solidarity and responsibility.

Over the course of the story we see Prospero's evolution, after the Red Death first appears in the ball, Prospero stares at the figure and starts convulsing, but quickly reacts. In order to preserve his bold image, he becomes filled with rage and challenges the masked figure:

"Who dares,"—he demanded hoarsely of the courtiers who stood near him—"who dares insult us with this blasphemous mockery? Seize him and unmask him—that we may know who we have to hang, at sunrise, from the battlements!"
(1842: 41)

The prince then decides to approach the threatening figure himself. He picks up a dagger and runs through the rooms, till he arrives at the black-velvet room and positions himself in front of the Red Death:

He bore aloft a drawn dagger, and had approached, in rapid impetuosity, to within three or four feet of the retreating figure, when the latter having attained the extremity of the velvet apartment, turned suddenly and confronted his pursuer. (1842: 42)

Anger fills Prospero with power and, confronting the unknown, he approaches the virus and tries to kill it with a dagger, which obviously turns out to be useless and the encounter ends with Prospero's death. Prospero's anger, which eventually causes his own death, is mirrored by part of the population facing Covid-19 who prefer to express their anger against politicians and health workers. For these people it is easier to lash out than to accept reality.

After the first news of the 2020 pandemic, there emerged groups of people popularly known as Covid "deniers" who state that the virus does not exist, and this could be a consequence of their feelings of anger, as they can not accept there is a global pandemic. However, Prospero seems to believe that the Red Death exists, and that is why he confines himself in the abbey. The deniers seem to be angry with governors and professionals as they feel that they are lying whereas Prospero uses his rage to face the virus, not to deny it.

As previously stated, classism is another concept which is shown in a critical manner by Poe. Social status differences are also rooted in our society and have also influenced our lives during the 2020 pandemic. Prince Prospero represents a high class individual and his guests belong to nobility also. In the story, Prospero decides to invite only aristocrats to his castellated abbey, leaving the rest of the people from his village alone dealing with the lethal virus.

While reading the story, we can see that Poe includes this classist image of Prospero and his guests, as if they believed they are superior to the rest of the people from the village. The idea that high social class people are the ones who must survive represents the thoughts of the period, and Poe wanted to criticise this in the short story: "he summoned to his presence a

thousand hale and light-hearted friends from among the knights and dames of his court (...) the external world could take care of itself” (1842: 37).

Prince Prospero, only admitted people from the court who were very rich to his abbey. Rich people then had a higher chance to survive than the poor people of the village. Nevertheless, at the end of the story, Poe seems to conclude that the Red Death eventually catches up with everyone, rich or poor.

The fact that death will have its day for every person is an idea which may provoke anguish and fear of death. The guests and the prince in the short story, as explained before, show through their actions these feelings that death evokes them. Additionally, during the 2020 pandemic, people have also witnessed the inevitability of death. Covid-19 has brought around 3,013,217 deaths worldwide, and these people were from many different backgrounds: poor and rich. However, vaccines and preventive measures arrived earlier to the developed countries, which may be a similarity to the short story: the arrival of death is delayed for the ones who are more privileged while the poor have to deal with the illness without preventions, resulting in more deaths in poor environments.

High social status people have also experienced the 2020 pandemic in a more privileged manner. During the confinement, wealthy people stayed in their homes also but, usually these are houses with outdoor areas like yards or big terraces, where people can have more freedom and enjoy themselves. Moreover, it is probable that wealthy families possessed more entertainment items such as videogame consoles, visual platforms such as *Netflix* and better resources at the time to exercise. Average and poor families did not have the advantage of outdoor areas in their homes, as these are usually flats with windows and sometimes a tiny balcony. Therefore, this is consistent with Poe’s story: the prince and his people had the pleasure to stay in a huge abbey, similar to a castle, while the working people were in the village, in their precarious houses with only the basic resources to live.

Furthermore, during the current pandemic, less educated people and with less opportunities in the professional field also experienced an important loss of jobs, which had a bigger impact because of their inability to search for another place to work: they could not even leave their city, and the companies were not interested in hiring people because of the economic crisis.

However, rich people usually preserved their jobs or even had economic resources from their previous earnings.

Therefore, the population has feared contagion and death, especially because of the inevitability of death, a main preoccupation in the short story as well as in the current pandemic. Prospero's death is one of the key moments in the story: "There was a sharp cry—and the dagger dropped gleaming upon the sable carpet, upon which, instantly afterwards, fell prostrate in death the Prince Prospero" (Poe 1842: 42).

As exemplified by Prospero, foolishness and anger are not useful attitudes to confront the Red Death. Actually, the Red Death ends up killing Prospero; no matter which attitude he adopted, death would have arrived at the end. Nevertheless, according to Adel et al (2018), Poe represented the different attitudes derived from the fear of death, in order to demonstrate the deepest instinctive feeling human beings possess to survive: "The story's fantastical embodiment of man's deeply haunted fears of death, frantic condition of wipe-out and his attitude towards the end of life challenge readers to delve deeply inside their consciousnesses and unravel their dark and realistic deep fears of the inevitability of death." (2018: 1).

Other attitudes such as selfishness are also proved to be useless when confronting death, as its inevitability makes it impossible to avoid it. In the end, death catches up with everybody, and this idea is clearly portrayed in Poe's story:

And now was acknowledged the presence of the Red Death. He had come like a thief in the night. And one by one dropped the revellers in the bloodbedewed halls of their revel, and died each in the despairing posture of his fall. And the life of the ebony clock went out with that of the last of the gay. And the flames of the tripods expired. And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all (1842:6).

The ending of the story, therefore, clearly depicts the topic of death's inevitability as well as Poe's idea of death.

3. CONCLUSION

The main goal of the current study was to determine whether the short story “The Masque of the Red Death” and the current Covid pandemic bear any similarities in terms of how the fear of death is represented in both.

After comparing the literary work and the Covid-19 pandemic, the findings suggest that in general terms, there are many similarities between them. Firstly, when examining what produces the fear of death in both situations, we can state that this clearly arises from the feared illnesses of tuberculosis and Covid-19, due to their high mortality rate. As a consequence of this mortality rate, characters in the short story as well as citizens in the current pandemic experience a lockdown, in order to avoid contact with other people. Another remarkable issue is the use of masks, which in the short story, as well as serving as a fashion item, are used by the characters to hide from death, while in the current pandemic masks are used also to prevent death. The uncertainty evoked by death’s imminence produces a distortion of time which causes feelings of stress for the witnesses of a pandemic, both in Poe’s story and during the Covid-19 pandemic. This distortion of time leads to a rise of tension and also, in the case of the current pandemic, to mental illnesses such as depression or anxiety.

As a result of fear, citizens also tend to act similarly even if the situation or the illness is different. In both the fictional piece and our reality, attitudes such as selfishness, foolishness, carelessness and anger are present. Beginning with selfishness, we have seen similarities such as high-risk events without preventive measures held by people from the higher classes, the masquerade being the most representative. Foolishness and carelessness are also related to these situations, as people organising huge events contribute to the spread of the virus, showing their irresponsibility. Lastly, anger is presented through the figure of Prospero in the story and is visible also nowadays in those citizens who take out their anger on politicians or by denying the existence of Covid. Neither can accept the reality of their situation. What is more, all the previously mentioned attitudes are caused, again, by the fear of death.

Finally, however, death's inevitability shows how, acting in a certain manner or taking preventive measures is not a guarantee against death. Both the short story and our current pandemic have demonstrated that these diseases, as well as death, are unpredictable.

Further research might investigate whether these same similarities will be present in future literary works set during the Covid pandemic, and examine if they could be compared as well with "The Masque of the Red Death" concerning tuberculosis.

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