

Name: _____

The Short Story

Find the Real Ending
“Masque of the Red Death”

Name: _____

Here are six possible endings for Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Masque of the Red Death.” Read them carefully, and decide which one fits best with the clues you observed in the short story. While analyzing them.

Ending 1

Those who stood in nearest proximity to the prince gazed with cautious uncertainty upon the masked figure. Two of the courtiers, fearing above all else the opprobrium of cowardice, lunged forth at the ebony-clad apparition; but he, with singular agility, evaded their grasp and proceeded with wild laughter to race through each of the imperial chambers. As he darted in and out of the apartments, the gaily-tinted windows cast their brilliantly-colored patterns upon his sable attire, transforming him into a thing of shifting hues and shadows. At length, when he had attained the chamber hung throughout in black velvet, he stopped—as though tempting those who pursued to reveal at last his identity. Before any could act upon this silent invitation, the bold interloper lifted the mask from his countenance.

At first, in the dim and uncertain light of that darkly-appointed chamber, little could be discerned. Slowly, however, the fair complexion of the man began to glow with an unearthly luminescence against the surrounding gloom. Prince Prospero arrived in the chamber in time to witness this spectral radiance. He commanded that additional torches be set aflame forthwith. This sudden burst of illumination revealed the features of Duke Joculo—the Prince’s own brother. Hesitantly, and with exceeding slowness, while gazing in silence upon one another, boyish grins of recognition appeared upon the countenances of both men. A choking laughter began to engulf the assembled throng.

Like Prospero himself, the Duke was renowned throughout the land for his love of the grotesque and the bizarre, and for his peculiar sense of jest. He explained that his refusal of the invitation to this night’s revelry had been but a stratagem—a timely opportunity to perpetrate an elaborate deception upon his brother and the assembled guests. It was he who had caused the great ebony clock to be placed within the halls; it was he who had ordered the orchestra to cease their performance when the clock tolled the hour. Moreover, he had commanded that the blood-tinted window be placed within the chamber hung with black velvet, knowing well that it would inspire a certain nameless dread.

After these revelations had been made known, the Duke summoned his confederates and mingled freely with the rest of those assembled. The orchestra played long into the night, and the Red Death was thought of no more.

Ending 2

The stillness that ensued was of that peculiar and profound character which sends a shudder into the hearts even of the most resolute. The masked figure, not wishing to be apprehended until the moment should prove most opportune, dashed with sudden swiftness into the apartment of black velvet. The blood-tinted light of the stained window produced upon his countenance a visage of ghastly and terrible aspect. The Prince, rushing madly through chamber after chamber—from the blue to the purple, from the purple to the green, from the green to the orange—at length confronted his pursuer in that final and most forbidding of rooms.

Prince Prospero drew forth a jeweled dagger from beneath his vestments, poised to strike at the mummer before him. Summoning his last reserve of courage against the nameless terror that had seized upon his soul, he struck with all the force of desperation. But the figure proved as nimble and elusive as he was grotesque in appearance. No sooner had Prospero lunged forward than the masked apparition lurched with practiced grace to the side, causing the Prince to plunge the blade deep into his own heart. A sharp cry escaped his lips as he fell.

The stunned spectators of this ghastly scene rushed as one into the chamber of black velvet. An atmosphere of unutterable horror filled the apartment. The ebony-clad, blood-red specter removed his mask with deliberate ceremony. The revelers recognized immediately the countenance thus revealed—it was that of Prospero’s own cousin, whose father the Prince had treacherously slain in order to ascend to the throne.

Thus it was that Revenge, and not the Red Death, held the kingdom in its inexorable grasp.

Ending 3

It was in the blue room where the prince stood, with a group of pale courtiers by his side. At first, as he spoke, there was a slight rushing movement of this group in the direction of the intruder, who at the moment was also near at hand, and now, with deliberate and stately step, made closer approach to the speaker. But from a certain nameless awe with which the mad assumptions of the mummer had inspired the whole party, there were found none who put forth hand to seize him; so that, unimpeded, he passed within a yard of the prince’s person; and, while the vast assembly, as if with one impulse, shrank from the centers of the rooms to the walls, he made his way uninterruptedly, but with the same solemn and measured step which had distinguished him from the first, through the blue chamber to the purple—through the purple to the green—through the green to the orange—through this again to the white—and even thence to the violet, ere a decided movement had been made to arrest him. It was then, however, that the Prince Prospero, maddening with rage and the shame of his own momentary cowardice, rushed hurriedly through the six chambers, while none followed him on account of a deadly terror that had seized upon all. 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. 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. Then, summoning the wild courage of despair, a throng of the revelers at once threw themselves into the black apartment, and, seizing the mummer, whose tall figure stood erect and motionless within the shadow of the ebony clock, gasped

in unutterable horror at finding the grave ceremonies and corpse-like mask which they handled with so violent a rudeness, untenanted by any tangible form.

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 revelers in the blood-bedewed 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.

Ending 4

A response came at length, though not in the fantastical form which the Prince had anticipated. While the greater number of guests had most scrupulously avoided even the faintest suggestion of the Red Death in their attire, one particular woman seemed to epitomize that dread pestilence with deliberate and provocative intent. She was arrayed in a gown of the most vivid scarlet hue, smooth as blood itself, and wore upon her features a mask of solid and unrelieved black. Her purposes, at first, were far from apparent to those assembled.

None among the guests had prior knowledge of her presence; yet she had conceived a plan to approach Prince Prospero with an offer of salvation—an elixir, she claimed, which possessed the power to ward off the Red Death. The cruel dilemma, however, lay in this: there existed but sufficient quantity of the precious potion for two souls only.

As the violins and harps commenced their melancholy strains, she made her way with measured grace across the great hall and curtsied before Prospero with studied elegance. He, bound by the customs of his station, had no choice but to request the honor of a dance. She leaned toward him until her lips nearly brushed his ear, and whispered that she intended nothing less than the preservation of his life. This singular gesture awakened within Prospero's breast both intrigue and desperate hope. What could this seductive creature offer beyond a moment's distraction from the death and desolation that raged without the castellated walls?

She revealed, from within the folds of her scarlet gown, a small crystalline vial, and the Prince immediately comprehended her meaning. He drew her gently but urgently toward the black chamber and commanded his servants that none should follow or interrupt them there.

The crimson glow emanating from the blood-tainted windows seemed to summon the very specter of the Red Death into that ominous apartment. The sole hope for continued existence was contained within the vial which she—this masked figure of mystery—clutched tightly in her small, trembling hand.

Of a sudden, an earth-shattering cacophony arose from the outer precincts of the castle. Somehow the great iron doors had been forced asunder by those wretched souls who had survived thus far within the Prince's depopulated dominion. As they stormed the abbey in their desperation, it became horrifyingly evident that they bore upon them the unmistakable marks of the pestilence—blood seeping from every orifice as they pitched forward lifeless upon the stone floors.

Within the black walls of that final chamber, both she and Prospero understood with terrible certainty that the Red Death had violated the sanctity of the stronghold. The contagion had infiltrated each of the imperial apartments in succession—save only for this chamber of black velvet, which remained as yet untouched. The Prince reached forth his hand toward the vial; but she entertained other intentions entirely.

With a sudden and violent motion, she whirled about, causing the scarlet dress to swirl in frantic circles. Swiftly she withdrew the stopper from the vessel and consumed its entire contents in a single draught. In that same moment, the door to the chamber opened slowly, as if of its own accord, admitting a wind—scarce more than a whisper of a breeze—which floated over them both like the breath of the grave itself.

Prince Prospero felt his life's blood begin its exodus from his body as he gazed with questioning horror into her eyes. She stood erect and triumphant, relishing the spectacle as the Prince's vitality ebbed away and he slid slowly to the ebon carpet beneath. Then, with terrible satisfaction in her voice, she pronounced: "And now, Prince Prospero, I alone shall reign as mistress of this forsaken castle—until such time as Death itself shall claim me too!"

Ending 5

It was in the chamber of green where the Prince at last took his stand, encompassed by a cluster of pale and nervous courtiers. As the intruder continued his inexorable approach, a ripple of visible unease spread throughout the assembly like a contagion of fear itself. The Prince, his countenance betraying a forced and hollow bravado, raised his hand in a gesture meant to signal the stranger's immediate apprehension. Yet not a soul stirred from their positions.

The figure, draped in robes of deepest blood-red, glided through the trembling throng with a grace that seemed scarcely of this earthly realm. From the green apartment to the blue, from the orange to the purple, from the white to the black—through each successive chamber the specter traversed, meeting no resistance whatsoever. The revelers pressed themselves against the walls in their extremity of terror, their festive masks proving wholly inadequate to conceal the mounting dread written upon every face.

Prince Prospero, his pride deeply wounded and his rage building to a pitch of madness, lunged suddenly forward. He seized a jeweled sword from its place beside a nearby statue and gave chase through the succession of colorful apartments. His followers, paralyzed utterly by an overwhelming and nameless terror, could do naught but watch as their sovereign pursued the red-clad intruder in solitude.

In that final chamber—bathed as it was in the somber and oppressive light cast by the great ebony clock—the Prince succeeded in cornering his quarry at last. With what he believed to be a triumphant cry, he thrust his blade forward with the full force of desperation—only to observe, with dawning horror, the weapon pass through the figure as through mere smoke or vapor. The sword clattered upon the sable carpet as Prospero stumbled backward, his eyes grown wide with the recognition of something beyond mortal comprehension.

The mummer turned with deliberate slowness, revealing not a mask of cloth or paper, but the very face of Death itself—hollow-eyed, grinning with therictus of the grave, a thing of nightmare made manifest. A skeletal hand emerged from the crimson robes and reached forth, its bony fingers barely grazing the Prince's chest. In that instant, Prospero crumpled to the floor, his life extinguished as swiftly as one might snuff a candle's flame.

A panic both wild and unreasoning erupted among those who witnessed this dreadful scene. The revelers rushed headlong into the black apartment, discovering there their fallen leader and the specter that waited in patience. As the great clock struck the hour of midnight—its chimes sounding like some funeral knell for all humanity—the figure appeared to dissolve into a mist of crimson that engulfed the chamber entire. One by one, with horrible inevitability, the assembled party-goers succumbed to an invisible doom, their elaborate costumes becoming nothing more than shrouds for the newly dead.

The Red Death moved among them, silent and inexorable as fate itself. As the final reveler fell lifeless to the ground, the great ebony clock shuddered once and ceased its mechanical beating. The flames of the tripods flickered and died, plunging the palace into an absolute and terrible darkness.

In the profound stillness that followed, only the Red Death remained—its unseen presence pervading every shadow, inhabiting every corner of those now-silent halls. The masquerade had reached its final curtain, and in its wake persisted only silence—a silence as complete and eternal as that which dwells within the sealed chambers of the tomb.

Ending 6

It was in the violet chamber—that apartment which stood between the white and the final room of black—where Prince Prospero at last made his stand against the interloper. The masked figure had progressed through each successive apartment with that same deliberate and measured step, and now paused as if in anticipation of the confrontation to come. The Prince, his features contorted with a rage born equally of fear and wounded pride, seized a heavy iron torch-stand and brandished it above his head like some primitive weapon of war.

"Remove thy mask!" commanded Prospero, his voice trembling with barely suppressed emotion. "I would look upon the face of him who dares mock me in mine own domain!"

The figure remained motionless for a long moment—so still, indeed, that he might have been mistaken for some grotesque statue placed there for the purposes of decoration. Then, with agonizing slowness, the mummer raised both hands to the ghastly mask and lifted it from his countenance.

A collective gasp arose from the assembled courtiers who had followed at a safe distance to witness this revelation. For beneath the mask there lay no face at all—or rather, the visage thus exposed was so perfectly ordinary, so wholly unremarkable, that it inspired a species of terror more profound than any monstrous countenance might have produced. The man was neither diseased nor deformed; his features bore no mark of the Red Death whatsoever. He was, in every observable aspect, merely a man—perhaps a court jester, perhaps a servant—none could say with certainty.

"There is no contagion upon me," spoke the stranger in calm and measured tones. "I am as hale and whole as any man present in these chambers."

Yet even as he spoke these words, a terrible transformation occurred—not in the stranger, but in those who gazed upon him. Prince Prospero, staring with eyes grown wide and wild, perceived upon the man's features the unmistakable stigmata of the pestilence: the scarlet stains spreading across the skin, the blood beginning its awful seepage. He cried out in horror and struck at the figure with his improvised weapon.

The assembled courtiers, their minds fevered with wine and weakened by months of excess, likewise began to see what was not there. One after another, they shrieked in terror, declaring that they beheld the Red Death standing before them in mortal form. A madness—swift and contagious as the plague itself—spread through their ranks. They fell upon one another in their panic, each seeing in his neighbor's face the marks of the disease. Some fled toward the outer chambers; others collapsed where they stood, overcome by the sheer force of their terror.

Prince Prospero struck the stranger a terrible blow, and the man fell lifeless to the violet carpet. Yet this act of violence brought no relief to the Prince's tortured mind. Looking down at his own hands, he perceived them stained with blood—though whether it was the stranger's blood or the first signs of his own infection, he could not determine. The distinction ceased to matter. Clutching at his chest, crying out against the pain he imagined consuming him from within, the Prince collapsed beside the body of the man he had slain.

Throughout the seven chambers, the revelers succumbed one by one—not to any tangible disease, but to the invisible contagion of their own overwhelming dread. They died as men die in the grip of nightmare, their hearts surrendering to a terror that existed nowhere save within the darkest recesses of their own minds. Some few, in their final moments of clarity, understood the horrible truth: that they had fled the Red Death only to bring with them a pestilence more deadly still—the pestilence of ungovernable fear, of reason overthrown, of minds that could no longer distinguish between reality and delusion.

As the last of the revelers breathed his final breath, the great ebony clock tolled once more, and then fell silent forever. The flames in their braziers guttered and died. And throughout those seven chambers there reigned at last an absolute and terrible silence—the silence of the grave, the silence of the tomb—while beyond the castellated walls, the Red Death continued its patient work, requiring no assistance from the fears and follies of mortal men.

Which ending did you select? Why?
Explain why the ending you chose is the ending. Remember to call upon the clues offered in the story to support your answer.