# Contemplating COVID-19 through Disease and Death in Three Short Stories by Edgar Allan Poe

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**Abstract**

*Wort-case scenarios depicted in literary works may function to mourn and warn people about the real situation, such as the spread of COVID-19 that has altered worldwide life drastically. This study offers a reflection on the current pandemic time through a close reading of selected American classic literary works. The imagination of fear, isolation, and mask-wearing in Edgar Allan Poe's short stories is resonant with the new expressions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Three short stories by Poe, i.e., 'The Masque of the Red Death', 'The Cask of Amontillado', and 'The Sphinx' are chosen for examination using the thematic analysis method. Repeated reading of the short stories shows that parallels can be drawn between these stories and today's phenomenon about anxiety, social restriction, and health protocols. What can be implied from the analysis are as follows: (1) Fear of the disease results in the characters' added distress, (2) The characters' aberrant behaviour as to overprotect themselves is exacerbated by the dreadful situation, and (3) Poe's obsession with dread and death to shock the readers can be historically traced through his own inner predicaments, ill-health, and the 1832 Cholera contagion. In conclusion, the findings resonate with the COVID-19 epidemic's upshots.*

**Keywords:** Aesthetic of fear, death, disease, distress, shocking effect, short stories, Edgar Allan Poe.

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## 1.    INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has inflicted havoc throughout the world with many victims and mortality rates steadily increasing since January 2020. All aspects of life in the medical, ethical, and political-economic sectors have all been shattered by the virus that spread more quickly than anyone predicted. Identified for the first time in the city of Wuhan, China by December 2019, the case of the disease has afflicted all nations across the globe with alarming death tolls every day. Deemed more severe than the 1918 Spanish Flu that lasted in one year, the COVID-19 pandemic may last even longer given that no specific and effective eradication of the disease is yet to be found (Chen et al., 2020; Roback & Guarner, 2020), to say nothing of its economic and socio-political impacts. Through December 2020, doubts about vaccination to combat the virus remain unsettled and negatively affect the treatment of the virus (Bertin et al., 2020; Harrison & Wu, 2020; Zhang & Liu, 2020).

Having said that, reading fiction can be one way to reflect on the worse-case circumstances portrayed in the literature that are resonant with the present-day situation such as the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath. As we know, when we read life-imagined-in-literature, we learn about values or moralities in addition to their linguistic and artistic wealth (style of language, symbolism, etc.) therein. Literature is the sedimentation of people's life contemplation as in success, failure, love, hate, peace, war, forgiveness, revenge, and many more, all of which are uncovered imaginatively and creatively. Literature is rich. Just as joy and triumph are subjects of literary works, so to have diseases and discomforts have become the core of such great works as Albert Camus' 'The Plague', Daniel Defoe's 'Journal of the Plague Year', and 'Love in the Time of Cholera' by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, to name a few.

This present study limits itself to discussing the works of Edgar Alan Poe, an American writer of the Romantic Period who is known for his tales of terror, insanity, deterioration, and death. Many speculate that Poe's own life is as neurotic as his characters due to his illness, alcoholism, and unhappy relationships, hence worthy of medical and psychopathological investigation (Arranz, 2014; Vora & Ramanan, 2002). According to Christopher Semtner, the curator of the Edgar Allan Poe Museum in Richmond, USA, many of Poe's gruesome stories are based on real people, real events, and set-in real places including the stories chosen for discussion, i.e., 'The Masque of the Red Death', 'The Cask of Amontillado', and 'The Sphinx'. The plague in 'The Masque of the Red Death' resembles the 1832 Cholera Epidemic that hit the city of Baltimore where Poe was living and yet he survived. In the same way, the presence of corpses and death in 'The Cask of Amontillado' is reportedly inspired by an anecdote about a soldier buried alive inside the wall of the granite bastion of Fort Independence in Castle Island, Boston, Massachusetts whereby Poe was once a private (Semtner, n.d, 2015, 2017). The last story 'The Sphinx' is a lesser-known work published in a magazine. Such as in 'The Masque of the Red Death', this third story is set against rampant cholera that swept through New York City that Poe once witnessed. Given the parallels, readers of Poe's short stories can mull over the current period of crisis and high uncertainty concerning the conniving COVID-19 spread. While several studies have examined Poe and a variety of ailments like tuberculosis (Wilsey, 2012), maritime illness (Gowen, 2019), and neurological diseases (Battle, 2011; Teive et al., 2014), Poe's connection with COVID-19 is hardly discussed. This current research provides answers to this missing link. The research question raised is:

- How do 'The Masque of the Red Death', 'The Cask of Amontillado', and 'The Sphinx' respectively examine the parallels between each story and the circumstances surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic?

By choosing three short stories by Poe that particularly deal with mysterious illness and death, it aims to shed light on the author's observation of human nature in the face of catastrophe and loss of life.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section provides the study's conceptual framework in reading Poe's short stories by presenting his literary technique and consistency in dealing with the subject matter as thus far discussed in some scholarly writings. A brief discussion on possible modern-day corresponding contexts regarding the COVID-19 pandemic is also presented herein.

### 2.1 Poe's Literary Technique

If the early twentieth century's scholars mostly discussed the influence of European writers on Poe's tales, the wealth of scholarships more than a century later has continued to acknowledge who influenced Poe and the influence of Poe on other writers to date. Besides, Poe's enduring reputation as a popular culture icon is also proven in the entertainment industry from movies to video games that credit his horror and detective stories (Buday, 2015; Ehrlich, 2014; Frank, 2014). Why Poe? What follows is a further elaboration on the main virtue in Poe's writing, i.e., shocking his readers.

#### 2.1.1 The aesthetics of fear

Unlike other American Romantic and regional writers whose works refer to a particular region of their own Old South, Edgar Allan Poe is considered an international writer for he hardly takes any place as the setting of his works. Interestingly, he deals with his imagination region as in unknown places, miraculous lands, mythical landscapes, etc. (Battle, 2011; Gelfert, 2014; Schöberlein, 2017). Different from writers of his generation like Emerson, Hawthorne, Melville, or Longfellow who are imbued by William Wordsworth's poems, for instance, Samuel Taylor Coleridge is Poe's chief inspirational poet. Coleridge's 1798 poem 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' inspires Poe to write his short story 'Ms. Found in a Bottle' and his novel 'The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket' (Møllegaard & Belcher, 2013). Next, while other Romanticists use symbolism as one literary device that links them together as Romantic writers when conveying moral teachings, Poe's use of symbolism is to create aesthetic effects in his works. He wants to bring about such emotions as frightening, scary, creepy, etc. into his works. In so doing, Poe refutes didacticism believing as he does in the importance of creating beauty and intensity of emotion in literature. Greatly inspiring later writers, Poe and his aesthetic ideas have left profound effects on foreign (non-American) authors from France such as Charles Baudelaire and Stephane Mallarme (Faber, 1989; Filippakopoulou, 2015; Stroparo,

2017; Szabo & Crişan, 2018) to Latin America like Borges (Esplin, 2016), to mention a few.

Aesthetic of fear is also evident in the way Poe's work is set. The conventional setting in Gothic literature includes old houses with pointed arches and vaults, flying buttresses, narrow spires, stained glass windows, intricate traceries, and varied ornamental details. This upward movement of the Gothic architecture shown in the old, richly decorated buildings here is meant to suggest heavenward (Crow, 2009). Although Poe sometimes uses such similar eerie settings, the purpose is to suggest the underworld and the dark side of the human soul frequently portrayed in his fictional characters (Clarke, 2016; Møllegaard & Belcher, 2013). The gloomier the setting, the more distressing the characters are.

### 2.1.2 The art of shocking the reader

Poe believes in designing and composing a short story in a way that every single word and every detail may contribute toward one powerful impression. He borrows Aristotle's idea of unity as shown in the classic writer's 'Oedipus Rex'. The unity of time, action, and place is seen in Poe's works. He begins with information. Detailed facts appear first with a piece of explanation about the setting, character, and situation.

The effect in Poe's story usually has a connection with what is presented before. Poe begins, for instance, by discussing idiosyncrasy to draw people's attention. The Ushers and their estate are detached from the neighbourhood, and only one family member has survived for generations. Poe thus describes something grotesque. He deals with unreal happening, that is, something that is always out of scale. Most writers begin with reality by making use of fantasy to describe it. They comment on the real thing introduced by the fantastic world in the like of Hawthorne's dark forest to describe humans' evil. Poe is different as he goes through fantastic worlds and never returns. Poe was mostly influenced by Shelley and Byron who believe in indefinite landscape or the so-called supernatural beauty (Beyers, 2009).

Poe is therefore unique in that he is only interested in the effect, i.e., to shock the readers. To achieve this effect, he firstly escapes from the ordinary by presenting a lonely, dark, and strange place. Such a setting is usually claustrophobic and isolated from society. Secondly, he astonishes the reader with a death-related situation such as temporary burial place underneath the house, incurable disease, bad omen as in his famous poem 'The Raven', etc. Poe intentionally chooses a raven not any other birds to symbolize death and despair as it sits and stares at the slowly going mad speaker of the poem. The carrion, a black-plumaged bird, is often seen at the battleground pecking at corpses (Freedman, 1996). Thirdly, the narrative is that of a sensitive person who usually comes from the upper class like Roderick Usher. As such, the story is exaggerated, unreal, and fantastic, hence giving a shocking effect.

### 2.1.3 Psychosomatic character

Often considered as the leading figure and inventor of detective stories (Esplin, 2016; Kopley, 2008; Rachman, 2010; Yang, 2010), Poe, together with Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville are prominent authors of American Dark Romanticism whose works influence the development of Gothic literature in America and England (Kaplan, 2018; Kopley, 2010). Poe's tales, specifically, show evidence

of creepy symbols, dreadful themes, and psychological effects of guilt and sin characteristic of grotesque literature (Møllegaard & Belcher, 2013; Sommerfeld, 2018).

The characters in Poe's tales/poems are usually of two types. The first type is a hypersensitive person. This person is mostly bothered by sound or any objects that hardly disturb other people. The second type is characters, which fill Poe's tales are beautiful women of femme fatale variety. Poe creates a situation that greatly raises the readers' sympathy by way of the death of the women.

Poe's peculiar themes and the development of psychoanalysis at that time have continually provoked debates as to whether Poe's works represent his mental conditions (Semtner, 2017; Shulman, 1997; Stephanou, 2013). Nonetheless, the self-destruction-prone characters in Poe's stories remain an interesting phenomenon that invites not only speculations but also scientific, interdisciplinary research pursuits (Battle, 2011; Gelfert, 2014; Schöberlein, 2017).

## 2.2    Possible Parallel to COVID-19 Phenomenon

The outbreak of the deadly virus, COVID-19, has taken people from all walks of life around the world by a storm leading to dramatic changes to people's daily lives. COVID-19 has seized control and influenced the behaviour of the policymakers, medical and health front liners, researchers from different disciplines, and, more importantly, the victims and their family members, to say nothing of its economic, psychological, and socio-political setbacks.

This section is to discuss three common terms associated with the COVID-19 pandemic that have caused social and psychological impacts on people: fear, isolation, and mask-wearing. To begin with fear, several recent studies show that the unseen virus has led to anxieties, fears, and vulnerabilities along with its psychosocial consequences, in addition to the far-reaching global economic significances, to cite only three studies sampled in Indonesia (Abdullah, 2020), Brazil (Ornell et al., 2020), and the United States (Perz et al., 2020). These studies concur that this pandemic has impacted and transformed every aspect of people's lives from professionals, college students, to low-income people who are badly beaten by the spread of the disease.

Next, mindful of these interchangeable terms, namely social distancing, self-quarantine, and self-isolation (Suppawittaya et al., 2020u), this present study's use of social distancing is of two types. The first is isolation as a civil obligation following the call for avoidance of public gatherings. The second is that of mental health disorders as a result of traumatic experience in coping with COVID-19. One of the most effective ways to slow down the spread of the deadly virus is by implementing health protocols such as social distancing. Cancellations of all kinds of public assembly to avoid the human-to-human spread of the virus have taken place around the world with differing success and repercussions. On the one hand, social distancing inevitably results in socio-economic upshots that vary from individual or institutional financial instability (Martin et al., 2020; Nicola et al., 2020) to the uncertainty of the global economy (Ozili & Arun, 2020). On the other hand, reducing interactions between individuals has helped improved healthier lifestyles and increase public knowledge about health (Di Renzo et al., 2020; Suppawittaya et al., 2020), hence the positive side of social distancing. Meanwhile, the wealth of studies claim that isolation, despite its effectiveness to mitigate virus spread, can lead to psychological after-effects

such as grief, loneliness, corona phobia, and other anti-social behaviours (Luchetti et al., 2020; Wallace et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020). It is against the isolation of the second type that Poe's short stories will be read.

Finally, the last resemblance is mask-wearing. This practical tip is most popular during the pandemic time given its usefulness (Esposito & Principi, 2020; Martin, 2020; Qian & Jiang, 2020). Wearing a mask is a mandatory lifestyle along with hand-washing and social distancing (Goh et al., 2020; Purnamasari & Raharyani, 2020). The mask does not avert the plague, but today it is a must because nobody wants to transmit the disease to others. The three short stories under discussion will thereby be interpreted within this context.

## 3. METHODS

This research was designed using qualitative-interpretative methods commonly used in the study of literary texts. The research data were taken through a library study (George, 2008) in the form of primary data, namely three short stories by Poe procured from *The Project Gutenberg EBook*; and secondary data that include journal articles, newspapers, magazines, and books of related topics. No research participants/ respondents were involved here because the researcher is the one to locate, identify, and interpret the data (George, 2008). The steps are as follows. Each story was thoroughly and repeatedly read. Next, thematic analysis was applied to examine the occurrence of fear, isolation, and mask-wearing in the three short stories. The analysis emphasizes setting and characterization as these two elements fit in most clearly with Poe's technique previously outlined, i.e., horror as an aesthetic and self-inflicted character. The last step is contextualization with three main issues surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. To report the results of the study, a summary of each story is important, to begin with.

In 'The Masque of the Red Death', a bloody disease wrecks one certain kingdom in Europe, killing people every day by attacking the victims to bleed from the pores. The Prince named Prospero isolates himself for fear of contagion. He invites his close friends to a mask-wearing party in his decorative castle that has seven rooms with seven different colours. The last room, black with red windows looks quite frightening that nobody dares to enter the room. A ghost-like figure dressed up like a plague victim appears at midnight from the very room. Prospero approaches the figure and he is killed instantly. Some invitees try to attack the costumed figure and find nobody inside the red death clothing. These attackers all died on the spot.

'The Cask of Amontillado' is a story of vengeance. Montresor the narrator vows to take revenge on Fortunato an Italian who loves wine tasting. During an Italian carnival season, Montresor lures half-drunk Fortunato to test a dry sherry from Spain called 'Amontillado' for him. Despite his cough problem, Fortunato insists on checking over the wine kept in the catacomb beneath Montresor's family home. Dressed in a striped jester clothing fitted with a cone-shaped hat with bells and a black mask, Fortunato begins coughing as he breathes the nitre-filled air in the underground vault, but he continues walking down the winding staircase to get the wine cask. Montresor offers some drink again and again to the already drunk Italian. Montresor's hatred for Fortunato heightens when the drunken man says that Montresor is just a con man who does not belong to the noble family. Having quarrelled along the way, they

finally reach the smallest cellar when the cask is kept. Exclaiming 'Amontillado', Fortunato hardly realizes that Montresor has step by step built a wall of bricks to enclose Fortunato inside and leave him there to die.

'The Sphinx' tells of the narrator's self-inflicted phobia of seeing a hideous monster. As a cholera disease spread in New York City in 1832, he resolves to stay with his cousin who lives near the Hudson River. The cousin tries to cheer him up, but the narrator spends days sitting by the window overlooking the river while constantly worrying about the disease. His distress reaches its peak when on that day he reads a book about insects and suddenly sees a gigantic creature from the river approaching him through the window. His cousin calms him down, chasing away a spider crawling along the window-sash.

## 4.    RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

What follows is an analysis of 'The Masque of the Red Death', 'The Cask of Amontillado', and 'The Sphinx'. It examines how each story runs parallel, if variably, with the circumstances surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic.

### 4.1    Disease

The presence of disease in the selected three stories is both factual and imaginary. In 'The Masque of the Red Death', a scarlet-coloured disease kills people rapidly in the kingdom of Prince Prospero that makes him isolate himself to avoid contamination. Fortunato the wine expert in 'The Cask of Amontillado' is not in his best health as he is continuously coughing. The narrator in 'The Sphinx' decides to live temporarily in his cousin's house for fear of the Cholera outbreak. The characters here are also mentally un-ease. Each has to cope with his nervousness that worsens the situation.

To start with Prince Prospero, he throws a mask-wearing party after a few months when the Red Death plague is at its pinnacle. When the plague starts to hit his kingdom, the Prince is unaffected; He comes across as 'happy and dauntless and sagacious' (Poe, 2005a). The darkness of his soul makes him unaware of his people, mostly poor peasants, who get killed every single day for months. Prospero thinks only of his rich friends, knights, and dames who keep him company in the superfluous masquerade party. Poe writes (E refers to excerpts from Poe's work as displayed in this paper):

E1   It was towards the close of the fifth or sixth month of his seclusion, and while the pestilence raged most furiously abroad, that Prince Prospero entertained his thousand friends at a masked ball of the most unusual magnificence. (Poe, 2005a)

All party attendees wear masks. The uninvited guest who arrives at midnight, however, wears a mask of unusual appearance:

E2   "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". (Poe, 2005a)

His mask is a Red Deathmask. We are told earlier that the Red Death disease leaves unsightly marks on the victims that wearing a mask is important to conceal it. Poe describes the disease as such:

E3    "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 the sympathy of his fellow-men". (Poe, 2005a)

The plague that shatters Prince Prospero territory, like the COVID-19 pandemic, is contagious and exterminates the population swiftly. The resemblance between COVID-19 and the Red Death, however, ends in terms of the function of the mask-wearing. The real one is part of the health protocols; the imaginary other is worn by victims of the disease for evasion and cosmetic reasons.

Nobody feels sorry for Prince Prospero whose life ends tragically. He is but a selfish authority who cares only for himself, not his folks. Nonetheless, we now have the understanding that in times of crisis, there might be a Prospero within ourselves. Here, 'The Masque of the Red Death' explains to us that in difficult times, the supposedly influential people think only of their interests. It is easy to contextualize the situation depicted in fiction with the actual graft case involving the distribution of COVID-19 social aid, panic buying of food supplies and masks, unnecessary crowd settings amid the pandemic, and many other insensitive social behaviours we see these days.

Next, no perceptible disease is present in 'The Cask of Amontillado', except for the symptoms of chronic cough suffered by Fortunato. The Italian wine connoisseur is allergic to the smell of the grey salt deposit in the catacomb. But the plague of the heart is most obvious in Montresor the narrator of the story since he holds a grudge against Fortunato. As an unreliable narrator, Montresor says that he has endured "a thousand injuries" for the justice of his revenge (Poe, 2005a). No explanation is available concerning what kind of injuries that Fortunato has afflicted him. One critic argues that the motive of murder in this short story is attributed to Montresor's self-consciousness of his class and social status (Baraban, 2004). A disease of this kind is thus hard to cure.

A sizable body of research has discussed the authorial background of this story and its characterization. Symptoms of drunkenness in Fortunato seem to reverberate Poe's drinking habit (Bazil, 1999; Korostyshevsky, 2016; Yunhadi, 2016). Fortunato's persistent cough is similar to Poe's long illness – tuberculosis. Fortunato's love for drinking gets the better of him. Despite Montresor's warning about the severe cold that may be bad for Fortunato's cough and the "insufferably damp" nitre-filled vaults, the Italian ignores his illness, insisting ongoing after the wine, saying thus:

E4    "Let us go nevertheless. The cold is merely nothing. Amontillado!" (Poe, 2005a)

As for 'The Sphinx', fear of disease is the reason why the narrator decides to leave New York City where he lives to his cousin's home when the Cholera epidemic hard hit his area. Poe opens the story by introducing this psychosomatic character whose fear of the disease devours him. Poe describes the narrator's anxiety toward the disease as follows.

E5    Not a day elapsed which did not bring us news of the decease of some acquaintance. Then as the fatality increased, we learned to expect daily the loss of some friend. At length, we trembled at the

approach of every messenger. The very air from the South seemed to us redolent with death. That palsying thought, indeed, took entire possession of my soul. I could neither speak, think, nor dream of anything else. (Poe, 2005b)

The disease affects him terribly. Here, Poe uses his customary accounts of distressed character by way of self-confession. The disturbed narrator says this about his state of mind:

E6    "As this creature first came in sight, I doubted my sanity or at least the evidence of my own eyes; and many minutes passed before I succeeded in convincing myself that I was neither mad nor in a dream". (Poe, 2005b)

Detailed earlier on, Poe throws hypersensitive characters into his stories to achieve the unity of effects. Like vividly seen in the characters of 'The Black Cat' and 'The Tall-Tale Heart' who hear and see something other people do not, the narrator in 'The Sphinx' suffers neurosis to mistake a spider for a spooky giant. The narrator is also of the same type as the neurotic Roderick Usher elaborated at the beginning of this study.

It is worth noting here that both "The Cask of Amontillado" and "The Sphinx" use first-person narrators. It is clear here that Poe proves his literary aesthetics to shock the readers by revealing horror from the soul via the mouth of the doers. As Sun (2015) claims, horror originates from people's souls, in this case, the disintegration of personality. Just as Montresor is consumed by his desire to revenge, so is the sphinx narrator absorbed by his anxiety about the Cholera disease and monstrous creatures. As for Prince Prospero, fear of the disease and self-importance destroy him.

To reflect on the current pandemic, characters in Poe's short stories resemble, in one way or another, people across the globe today whose morale has been diminished by virus fear, grief, uncertainty about the future, bad news, unemployment, and many other negative upshots resulted from the COVID-19 outbreak. Many studies show that COVID-19 has tremendous psychological and social impacts and stress-related manifestations that go beyond the fear of the virus itself (e.g., Dubey et al., 2020; Sher, 2020; Taylor et al., 2020). Sher (2020) contends that people who reside in COVID-19 pandemic areas and those who have pre-existing poor health are vulnerable, and some are even prone to suicide. Meanwhile, Taylor et al. (2020) claim that some others are xenophobic as to believe that certain races spread COVID-19 and thus hate them for no reason. Other stress syndromes are self-centredness and self-induced terror. Interestingly enough, Poe has perfect examples for such people with unstable mental conditions: Prospero isolates himself in the grand castle and Montresor becomes cold-blooded because of his consuming vengeance. Fortunato's lingering lung disease and alcoholism make him lose sight of the danger leading to his death. Cholera fear turns the narrator into hallucinating about sphinx, giant, and monster. Poe, therefore, helps us see the darkness of human nature that is frequently exposed in difficult times.

## 4.2    Death

Edgar Allan Poe's obsession with death is inextricably linked with his literary technique and parallel encounters of death combined with incessant miseries in his life. As a motherless child aged three, he was sent to live with his adoptive parents, the Allans. When Mrs. Allan died, his adoptive father disowned and refused to pay Poe's

debts. Poe's wife and cousin Virginia Clemm whom he married when she was thirteen died; and Poe subsequently battled with his illness and poverty that desperately led to his demise. Forty-year-old Poe died in Baltimore, Maryland, USA, under strange circumstances speculated variously from alcohol, cholera, heart disease, tuberculosis to suicide. While the biographical approach to reading Poe's works have abounded (e.g. Beyers, 2009; Møllegaard & Belcher, 2013; Shulman, 1997; Yang, 2010), a closer look at his selected writings may reveal that death has a pattern as will be shown here.

Death in 'The Masque of the Red Death' is mass destruction by a plague named Red Death that takes everyone's life both outside and inside the castle of Prince Prospero. Death knows no gender nor class. In the beginning, the safest place is the castle described as follows.

E7   There were buffoons, there were improvisatory, there were ballet-dancers, there were musicians, there was Beauty, there was wine.  All these and the security were within.  Without was the 'Red Death' (Poe, 2005a).

Near the end of the story, death spares nobody when the Red Death figure eventually arrives in the middle of the night. Here the accounts reveal the features of Gothic literature with a haunted building, mysterious sickness, inexplicable personality, dead body – all highlight the night of the soul that Poe is famous for when composing tales of strange and shaking effects (Sun, 2015). Following Vora and Ramanan (2020) in drawing a parallel between Ebola and the Red Death, this current study affirms that the seizure of many lives in this short story resembles the COVID-19 attacks. While Fortunato's death is man-made (i.e., Montresor's act of murder and Fortunato's credulity worsened by his drinking habit), natural propagation is the cause of casualties in both Prince Prospero's realm and the hometown of the narrator in 'The Sphinx'. Situated within the current pandemic, all stories under discussion nonetheless give us some warnings about the seemingly uncontrollable forces of nature, the importance of a healthy living style, and, to say the least, empathy in a time of upheaval.

If authorial similitude is worthy of any clue, the characterization of Fortunato in 'The Cask of Amontillado' is easy to explain. The jester-clothed Italian is keen on drinking alcohol that he risks his life by entering the catacomb with his vengeful companion in search of the wine cask only to meet his death. Likewise, the medical investigation has proved that the death of Poe is attributed to his severe drinking bouts (Francis, 2010; Hernández & Estañol, 2009; Møllegaard, 2016). Unlike that of its author, however, Fortunato's death follows the modified pattern usually shown in Poe's writing, i.e., the bizarre buried-alive method as used in 'The Black Cat' and 'The Fall of the House of Usher' with the death of, respectively, the narrator's wife and Madeline. Although it is argued that Poe's universal theme becomes the most poetic with the presence of a beautiful woman in the death configuration (da Silva, 2015), 'The Cask of Amontillado' is slightly different. It is but an all-men story featuring brotherhood rivalry and wine-tasting competition. Besides, the victim is a man vis-à-vis fame Fatales in Poe's short stories and poems. The gender difference here is interesting. The death of Fortunato is therefore a variant to Poe's conventional plots. The male victims here complement Poe's dead women pattern. When read against COVID-19 casualties, death is indeed gender blind.

Death in 'The Sphinx' also bears some resemblance to COVID-19 casualties. The narrative makes no mention of the victims of the Cholera pandemic against which the short story is set. The narrator evades the disease but he is consumed by his fear of it. While trying to hide his heightened fear from the cousin and host, the narrator fails to do so upon seeing a creature resurrecting from the river. He acknowledges his horror as the following:

E8   "I was now immeasurably alarmed, for I considered the vision either as an omen of my death or, worse, as the fore-runner of an attack of mania". (Poe, 2005b)

It is worth noting here that Poe's technique is to alarm the reader by using accounts of the resurrection of the death often appears in his writings. The narrator comes across as lifeless and dispirited. To conclude, although 'The Sphinx' does not involve the death of the (main) character, the shadow of death is here to stay.

## 5.    CONCLUSION

This study has shown that Poe's living experience and the society of his time shape the background of 'The Mask of the Red Death', 'The Cask of Amontillado', and 'The Sphinx'. Death of loved ones, loss of job, rejection, chronic illness, extreme anxiety are all sources of distress in Poe's writing. Coupled with his own bitter life, Poe uses his literary technique to shock the reader through his aesthetic of fear and mentally disturbed characters. In the three short stories, distress is evident in a different character, to different degrees, for different reasons – all depicted to correspond to the uncanny settings and narratives about diseases and death of the characters.

This study has also shown that Poe, as an American writer of the Romantic Period, elevates dull realities to a realm of higher truth through exotic, supernatural, and old-time settings, while making statements about the dark side of humans and nature through his aberrant characters. Albeit the old setting, old characters, and old narratives, the three works discussed portray similar occurrences to todays' turmoil whereby the outbreak of COVID-19 across the globe has instilled fear, anxiety, and other devastating impacts especially to the weak. Prospero's discontinuity of self-isolation on account of the masquerade party results in more fatalities, just like the lack of community compliance to social distancing during the current pandemic. Illness of various kinds in Poe's short stories are worsened in time of plague, hence the resemblance to the ferocity of COVID-19.

Some aspects however pale in comparison to the COVID-19 situation. The mask-wearing as part of sudden lifestyle changes during the current pandemic is non-existent in Poe's stories in terms of its purpose. The masks worn by the characters in fiction have such symbolical meanings as evasiveness and identity concealment, unlike health protection in the real situation. In this context, further research on Poe's other short stories or works belonging to Dark Romanticism by other writers would provide valuable insight on how to cope with difficult times through reflective reading of literature. Reading Poe is thus doing real-world observations. If we believe that literature provides help, the contemplative reading of Poe may help endure and maintain hope while waiting prayerfully for the COVID-19 pandemic to discontinue spreading.

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