

PREPARING to Read



The Masque of the Red Death

Short Story by EDGAR ALLAN POE

Connect to Your Life

Facing an Epidemic Imagine that your city or town has been struck by an epidemic of a deadly disease that seems to be incurable. The disease spreads rapidly but has not yet reached your neighborhood. How do you think you, other members of your family, and your neighbors would react? With a small group of classmates, discuss some actions that you could take in the crisis, both to protect yourself and to help other people.

Build Background

Plague A deadly disease seems just the thing to inspire Poe's haunted imagination. Before the advances of 20th-century medicine, when people had no antibiotics and little knowledge about how diseases spread, an outbreak of disease could be a source of great terror. Poe's story may have been inspired by an outbreak of bubonic plague that killed about 25 million people in Europe (more than a quarter of the continent's population) in the mid-14th century. Victims experienced high fever, vomiting, pain, and swellings that oozed blood, and they were usually dead within three to five days. In "The Masque of the Red Death," Poe's characters try to find a place of refuge from a similar disease.



A depiction of the Great Plague of London. The Granger Collection, New York.

WORDS TO KNOW Vocabulary Preview

contagion dauntless impetuosity pervade tangible
courtier grotesque license sagacious untenanted

Focus Your Reading

LITERARY ANALYSIS ALLEGORY This story can be read as an **allegory**, a work with two layers of meaning. In an allegorical tale, most of the persons, objects, and events stand for abstract ideas or qualities. For example, a bird might represent freedom. As you read the story, take note of the characters, objects, and events that Poe describes. Think about what each might represent.

ACTIVE READING CLARIFYING MEANING

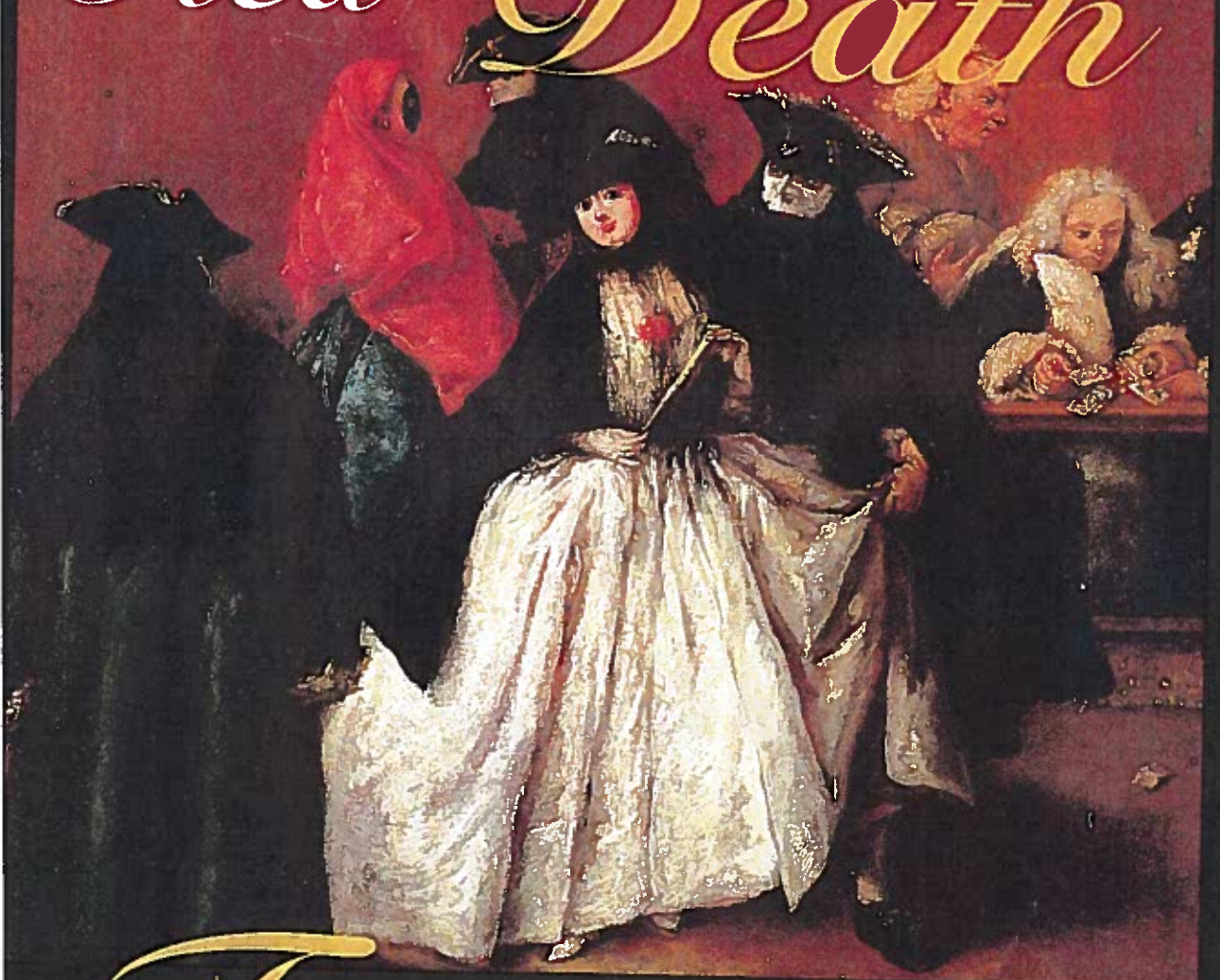
In "The Masque of the Red Death," Poe uses unusual, archaic vocabulary, partly to reinforce the story's setting in the past. The following strategies can help you **clarify** the meanings of particular words and passages:

- Use the Guide for Reading notes, which explain difficult words and passages.
- Reread difficult sentences or passages slowly and carefully. Try to **paraphrase** them—that is, to restate them in your own words.
- **Summarize** difficult passages.
- Use **context clues**—clues in the surrounding phrases—to help you figure out the meaning of unfamiliar words.

READER'S NOTEBOOK Record any questions you have about words or passages you read the story.

EDGAR ALLAN POE

The Masque of the
Red Death



Il ridotto [The tower] (about 1757–1760), Pietro Longhi. Oil on canvas, 62.3 cm x 51 cm. Fondazione Scientifica Querini Stampiglia, Venice, Italy; Erich Lessing/Art Resource, New York.

THE “RED DEATH” HAD LONG DEVASTATED THE COUNTRY. NO PESTILENCE HAD EVER BEEN SO FATAL, OR SO HIDEOUS. BLOOD WAS ITS

GUIDE FOR READING

2 devastated (dĕv’ə-stā’tīd): laid waste to.

3 pestilence (pĕs’tē-ləns): a very destructive infectious disease.

5 Avatar and its seal—the redness and 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
10 men. And the whole seizure, progress, and termination of the disease were the incidents of half an hour.

But the Prince Prospero was happy and dauntless and sagacious. When his dominions were half depopulated, he summoned to his presence a thousand hale and lighthearted friends
15 from among the knights and dames of his court, and with these retired to the deep seclusion of one of his castellated abbeys. This was an extensive and magnificent structure, the creation of the prince's own eccentric yet august taste. A strong and lofty wall girded it in. This wall had gates of iron. The courtiers, having
20 entered, brought furnaces and massy hammers and welded the bolts. They resolved to leave means neither of ingress or egress to the sudden impulses of despair or of frenzy from within. The abbey was amply provisioned. With such precautions the courtiers might bid defiance to contagion. The external world could take
25 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. All these and security were within. Without was the "Red Death."

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

It was a voluptuous scene, that masquerade. But first let me tell
35 of the rooms in which it was held. There were seven—an imperial suite. In many palaces, however, such suites form a long and straight vista, while the folding doors slide back nearly to the walls on either hand, so that the view of the whole extent is scarcely impeded. Here the case was very different; as might have
40 been expected from the duke's love of the *bizarre*. The apartments were so irregularly disposed that the vision embraced but little more than one at a time. There was a sharp turn at every twenty or thirty yards, and at each turn a novel effect. To the right and left, in the middle of each wall, a tall and narrow Gothic window
45 looked out upon a closed corridor which pursued the windings of the suite. These windows were of stained glass whose color

5 Avatar (ä'v'e-tär'): an appearance in physical form of an unseen force

7 dissolution: death.

8 pest ban: a proclamation announcing that a person is afflicted with the plague.

1-29 How is life outside the abbey different from life inside?

16 castellated abbey (käs'te-lä'tyc äb'ë): a fortified building formerly used as, or built to resemble, a monastery.

21 ingress (ÿn'grës') or egress (ë'grës'): entry or exit.

23 provisioned: provided with supplies.

27 improvisatori (ÿm-pröv'ÿ-zë-tör'ë): poets who recite verses that they make up as they go along.

34-72 If you are having trouble visualizing the setting, try drawing a floor plan of the abbey's suite of seven rooms and labeling their colors. The arrangement of the rooms will be important later on

WORDS
TO
KNOW

dauntless (dönt'lits) *adj.* fearless
sagacious (sə-gä'shəs) *adj.* wise
courtier (kôr'të-ər) *n.* a member of a royal court
contagion (kən-tä'jən) *n.* the spreading of disease



varied in accordance with the prevailing hue of the decorations of the chamber into which it opened. That at the eastern extremity was hung, for example, in blue—and vividly blue were its windows. The second chamber was purple in its ornaments and tapestries, and here the panes were purple. The third was green throughout, and so were the casements. The fourth was furnished and lighted with orange—the fifth with white—the sixth with violet. The seventh apartment was closely shrouded in black velvet tapestries that hung all over the ceiling and down the walls, falling in heavy folds upon a carpet of the same material and hue. But in this chamber only, the color of the windows failed to correspond with the decorations. The panes here were scarlet—a deep blood color. Now in no one of the seven apartments were there any lamp or candelabrum amid the profusion of golden ornaments that lay scattered to and fro or depended from the roof. There was no light of any kind emanating from lamp or candle within the suite of chambers. But in the corridors that followed the suite, there stood, opposite to each window, a heavy tripod, bearing a brazier of fire that projected its rays through the tinted glass and so glaringly illumined the room. And thus were produced a multitude of gaudy and fantastic appearances. But in the western or black chamber the effect of the firelight that streamed upon the dark hangings through the blood-tinted panes, was ghastly in the extreme, and produced so wild a look upon the countenances of those who entered, that there were few of the company bold enough to set foot within its precincts at all.

It was in this apartment, also, that there stood against the western wall a gigantic clock of ebony. Its pendulum swung to and fro with a dull, heavy, monotonous clang; and when the minute hand made the circuit of the face, and the hour was to be stricken, there came from the brazen lungs of the clock a sound which was clear and loud and deep and exceedingly musical, but of so peculiar a note and emphasis that, at each lapse of an hour, the musicians of the orchestra were constrained to pause, momentarily, in their performance, to hearken to the sound; and thus the waltzers perforce ceased their evolutions; and there was a brief disconcert of the whole gay company; and, while the chimes of the clock yet rang, it was observed that the giddiest turned pale, and the more aged and sedate passed their hands over their brows as if in confused reverie or meditation. But when the echoes had fully ceased, a light laughter at once pervaded the assembly; the musicians looked at each other and smiled as if at their own nervousness and folly, and made whispering vows, each to the other, that the

65 **brazier** (brā'zhər): metal pan for holding a fire.

71 **countenances** (koun'te-nən-səz): faces.

74 **ebony** (ēb'ə-nē): a hard, very dark wood.

77 **brazen**: brass.

79-94 **How do you explain the effect of the ebony clock's chimes on the assembled guests?**

82 **evolutions**: intricate patterns of movement.

WORDS
TO
KNOW

pervade (per-vād') *v.* to spread throughout



90 next chiming of the clock should produce in them no similar emotion; and then, after the lapse of sixty minutes (which embrace three thousand and six hundred seconds of the Time that flies), there came yet another chiming of the clock, and then were the same disconcert and tremulousness and meditation as before.

94 **disconcert:** confusion.

95 But in spite of these things, it was a gay and magnificent revel. The tastes of the duke were peculiar. He had a fine eye for colors and effects. He disregarded the *decora* of mere fashion. His plans were bold and fiery, and his conceptions glowed with barbaric luster. There are some who would have thought him mad. His followers felt that he was not. It was necessary to hear and see and touch him to be *sure* that he was not.

97 **decora:** fine things.

100 He had directed, in great part, the movable embellishments of the seven chambers, upon occasion of this great *fête*; and it was his own guiding taste which had given character to the masqueraders. Be sure they were grotesque. There were much glare and glitter and piquancy and phantasm—much of what has been seen since in *Hernani*. There were arabesque figures with unsuited limbs and appointments. There were delirious fancies such as the madman fashions. There was much of the beautiful, much of the wanton, much of the *bizarre*, something of the terrible, and not a little of that which might have excited disgust. To and fro in the seven chambers there stalked, in fact, a multitude of dreams. And these—the dreams—writhe in and about, taking hue from the rooms, and causing the wild music of the orchestra to seem as the echo of their steps. And, anon, there strikes the ebony clock which stands in the hall of velvet. And then, for a moment, all is still, and all is silent save the voice of the clock. The dreams are stiff-frozen as they stand. But the echoes of the chime die away—they have endured but an instant—and a light, half-subdued laughter floats after them as they depart. And now again the music swells, and the dreams live, and writhe to and fro more merrily than ever, taking hue from the many-tinted windows through which stream the rays of the tripods. But to the chamber which lies most westwardly of the seven, there are now none of the maskers who venture; for the night is waning away; and there flows a ruddier light through the blood-colored panes; and the blackness of the sable drapery appalls; and to him whose foot falls upon the sable carpet, there comes from the near clock of ebony a muffled peal more solemnly emphatic than any which reaches *their* ears who indulge in the more remote gaieties of the other apartments.

102–123 Notice the comparison of the masqueraders to dreams, phantasms, and a madman's fancies. **How do such comparisons help you imagine the scene?**

107 *Hernani* (ĕr'nā-nā): a play by Victor Hugo, first staged in 1830, notable for its use of color and spectacle; arabesque (ĕr'ə-bĕsk'): characterized by complicated decorations.

124–131 **Why do you think none of the revellers venture into the seventh room?**

But these other apartments were densely crowded, and in them

WORDS
TO
KNOW

grotesque (grō-tĕsk') *adj.* having a bizarre, fantastic appearance

beat feverishly the heart of life. And the revel went whirlingly on,
until at length there commenced the sounding of midnight upon
135 the clock. And then the music ceased, as I have told; and the evolu-
tions of the waltzes were quieted; and there
was an uneasy cessation of all things as
before. But now there were twelve strokes
140 to be sounded by the bell of the clock;
and thus it happened, perhaps, that
more of thought crept, with more of
time, into the meditations of the
thoughtful among those
who reveled. And thus,
145 too, it happened, per-
haps, that before the
last echoes of the last
chime had utterly
sunk into silence,
150 there were many indi-
viduals in the crowd
who had found leisure to
become aware of the
presence of a masked fig-
155 ure which had arrested the
attention of no single indi-
vidual before. And the
rumor of this new presence
having spread itself whisper-
160 ingly around, there arose at
length from the whole company
a buzz, or murmur, expressive of
disapprobation and surprise—then,
finally of terror, of horror, and of
65 disgust.

In an assembly of phantasms such as I
have painted, it may well be supposed that no
ordinary appearance could have excited such
sensation. In truth the masquerade license
70 of the night was nearly unlimited; but the
figure in question had out-Heroded
Herod, and gone beyond the bounds of even the prince's indefi-
nite decorum. There are chords in the hearts of the most reckless
which cannot be touched without emotion. Even with the utterly
'5 lost, to whom life and death are equally jests, there are matters of



144–165 What effect does the strange figure who appears at the stroke of midnight have on the revellers?

Detail of *Adoration of the Magi*: Lorenzo il Magnifico as Youngest of Magi (1459), Benozzo Gozzoli, Palazzo Medici Riccardi, Florence, Italy, Erich Lessing/Art Resource, New York.

171–172 out-Heroded Herod: been more extreme than the biblical king Herod, who ordered the deaths of all male babies up to two years old in an effort to kill the infant Jesus. This expression is used in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

WORDS
TO KNOW
license (lɪ'səns) *n.* a lack of restrictions on behavior, freedom

which no jest can be made. The whole company, indeed, seemed now deeply to feel that in the costume and bearing of the stranger neither wit nor propriety existed. The figure was tall and gaunt, and shrouded from head to foot in the habiliments of the grave. 180 The mask which concealed the visage was made so nearly to resemble the countenance of a stiffened corpse that the closest scrutiny must have difficulty in detecting the cheat. And yet all this might have been endured, if not approved, by the mad revellers around. But the mummer had gone so far as to assume the type of the Red Death. His vesture was dabbled in *blood*—and his 185 broad brow, with all the features of the face, was besprinkled with the scarlet horror.

When the eyes of Prince Prospero fell upon this spectral image (which with a slow and solemn movement, as if more fully to sustain its *role*, stalked to and fro among the waltzers), he was seen to 190 be convulsed, in the first moment with a strong shudder either of terror or distaste; but, in the next, his brow reddened with rage.

“Who dares?” he demanded hoarsely of the courtiers who stood near him—“who dares insult us with this blasphemous 195 mockery? Seize him and unmask him—that we may know whom we have to hang at sunrise, from the battlements!”

It was in the eastern or blue chamber in which stood the Prince Prospero as he uttered these words. They rang throughout the seven rooms loudly and clearly—for the prince was a bold and 200 robust man, and the music had become hushed at the waving of his hand.

It was in the blue room where stood the prince, 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 205 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 a hand to seize him; so that, unimpeded, he passed within a yard of the prince’s person; and, 210 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 215 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 220

179 *habiliments* (he-bĭl'e-ments): clothing.

180 *visage* (vĭz'Yj): face.

184 *mummer*: a person dressed for a masquerade.

188–196 Why does Prince Prospero get so mad?

207–217 Why do you think the masked figure is allowed to walk the length of the rooms uninterrupted?

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 apart-
 225 ment, 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
 230 Prince Prospero. Then, summoning the wild courage of despair, a throng of the revellers at once threw themselves into the black apartment, and seizing the mum-
 235 mer, whose tall figure stood erect and motionless within the shadow of the ebony clock, gasped in unutterable horror at finding the grave-cerements and corpselike
 240 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.
 245 And one by one dropped the revellers 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
 250 gay. And the flames of the tripods expired. And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all. ❖



Skull (19th or 20th century), artist unknown. Carved and painted wood, 8 1/2" x 5 1/4" x 6 1/2", National Museum of American Art, gift of Herbert Waide Hemphill, Jr., and museum purchase made possible by Ralph Cross Johnson, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C./Art Resource, New York.

230–242 Poe's language is hard to understand here. Essentially, he says that when a group of revellers rip off the figure's costume, there is nothing underneath.

239 cerements (sēr'ə-ments): cloth wrappings for the dead.

253 illimitable dominion (Ī-lĪm'Y-tə-bəl də-mĪn'yən): unlimited power.

WORDS TO KNOW **impetuosity** (ĭm-pĕch'ōō-ōs'ĭ-tĕ) *n.* unthinking action
untenanted (ūn-tĕn'ən-tĭd) *adj.* not occupied
tangible (tǎn'jə-bəl) *adj.* able to be touched or felt

Connect to the Literature

1. What Do You Think?

How did you react to the masked figure's first appearance?

Comprehension Check

- Why does Prince Prospero close himself and his courtiers off in the abbey?
- Why does the masked figure's presence cause such a sensation?
- What happens to the prince and the revellers?

Think Critically

2. What feeling do you think Poe wanted readers to have at the end of the story? Give reasons for your opinion.
3. **ACTIVE READING** **CLARIFYING MEANING** Refer to questions you may have recorded in your **READER'S NOTEBOOK** about words or passages. Look again at lines 21–29, and recall the techniques you used to clarify your understanding of this passage. How does the passage set up the basic plot of the story?
4. The ebony clock, when it chimes, has the ability to silence the revellers. What might their thoughts be during these still moments?
5. What are your impressions of Prince Prospero?
 - his plan to escape the Red Death
 - the decorated rooms of the party suite
 - why he becomes angry
6. What message or messages do you see in this story?
 - what literally happens to the revellers
 - what the Red Death might stand for

THINK ABOUT

THINK ABOUT

Extend Interpretations

7. **Comparing Texts** Compare this story with "The Devil and Tom Walker" (page 349). Which story did you find more horrifying? Cite evidence to support your choice.
8. **Connect to Life** Recall your earlier discussion about what you might do when faced with an epidemic, and think about how people today react to epidemic diseases. Bearing these things in mind, give your opinion of Prospero's reactions.

Literary Analysis

ALLEGORY "The Masque of the Red Death" can be read as an **allegory**, a literary work in which most of the people, objects, and events stand for abstract qualities. Here are some important things to know about allegories:

- An allegory usually has a second level of meaning in addition to its literal meaning.
- Some allegories are intended to teach moral lessons. In the fable of the tortoise and the hare, for example, the actions of the tortoise—the slow, focused, character—are shown as more admirable than those of the cunning but easily distracted hare.
- Stories that are not formal allegories may nevertheless contain some allegorical elements—some objects, people, or events that stand for abstract ideas or qualities.

Paired Activity Review the story to find elements that might have allegorical meanings. Explain what you think is the meaning of each element, as well as how Poe used the elements to convey a moral lesson. You might use a chart like this one to record your interpretations. Compare charts with a partner, and defend your interpretations.

Person, Object, Event	Possible Meaning	Possible Lesson of Story
The prince		
The abbey		
The series of seven rooms		
The clock		
The stranger		

Choice & CHALLENGES

Writing Options

1. Newspaper Editorial Prospero and his friends escape to the abbey after half the people in his lands have died. Pretend that you are a newspaper editor in the prince's domain, and write an editorial giving your opinion of this action.

2. Poetic Retelling In a ballad or another type of narrative poem, retell the story of the prince and his friends. Make sure that you include all the key events.

3. Archaeological Report In the role of an archaeologist who has excavated the remains of Prospero's abbey, write a descriptive report about the remains you have found and the conclusions you have drawn from them.



Activities & Explorations

1. A Fantastic Set Design the set for a television version of "The Masque of the Red Death." You can either make drawings or make a model of the set representing the suite of rooms.

- ART

2. Radio Drama Work with a group of classmates to create a radio dramatization of

the story. Figure out how you might turn some of the narration into dialogue. You might also include sound effects (chimes, the laughter of revellers) and music to make your dramatization more effective.

- PERFORMING

Inquiry & Research

Medical Detective Find out more about the great outbreak of plague in Europe during the mid-1300s. What caused it? What parts of Europe were affected? How did people try to contain it? Present your findings to the class in an oral report.



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What caused the plague in the 1300s?

What parts of Europe were affected?

How did people deal with the plague?

Vocabulary in Action

EXERCISE A: WORD KNOWLEDGE In the chart shown here, the Words to Know are grouped under headings that refer to elements in the story. Use each group of words to write two or more sentences about the person or thing named by its heading. You may also want to include in your sentences words that you looked up on your own.

Building Vocabulary

Many of the Words to Know in this lesson are from French or Latin. For an in-depth lesson on word origins, see page 550.

Red Death	Masked Ball	Prince Prospero
contagion	courtier	dauntless
pervade	grotesque	sagacious
untenanted	license	impetuosity
tangible		

EXERCISE B Work with classmates to act out some of the sentences you created for Exercise A.

WORDS TO KNOW
 contagion grotesque pervade tangible
 courtier impetuosity sagacious untenanted
 dauntless license