

The Masque of the Red Death

Short Story by Edgar Allan Poe

from **Danse Macabre**

Essay by Stephen King

Wait Until Dark

Movie Poster

COMMON CORE

RL 3 Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story. RL 4 Determine the meanings of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone. RI 4 Determine

the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative and technical meanings. RI 7 Evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats as well as in words to address a question. L 2b Spell correctly. L 4c Consult reference materials to find the pronunciation of a word.

Meet the Authors

Edgar Allan Poe c. 1809–1849



Edgar Allan Poe was a master of the psychological thriller. His tales of the ghastly and the grotesque are peopled with distraught narrators, deranged heroes, and doomed heroines. They move beyond the sunlit, rational world to explore the dark, irrational depths of the human mind. (For more about Poe, see page 410.)

A Gothic Allegory “The Masque of the Red Death,” first published in 1842, is timeless in its appeal. We can enjoy it for its thrills or as an **allegory**. In an allegory, characters and objects stand for abstract ideas such as good and evil. Often meant to teach moral lessons, allegories typically feature simple characters and unnamed settings, somewhat like fairy tales.

Poe's Enduring Legacy Generations of mystery and suspense writers have been influenced by the brooding atmosphere and eerie tension of Poe's stories. In fact, two of the most highly regarded American short stories written since Poe's death owe a debt to the Gothic master. “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” (page 604) has the ghostly mood of Poe's fiction. The creepy tension that pervades “A Rose for Emily” (page 1066) can be traced to Poe's haunted settings. In the twentieth century, with the advent of movies, Poe found a wider audience in films adapted from his stories. In 1964, for example, “The Masque of the Red Death” was made into a movie starring Vincent Price, a well-known horror-movie actor of the time.

Stephen King

born 1947



Stephen King's phenomenal success began in 1974, with the publication of *Carrie*. Discouraged, King had thrown an unfinished manuscript of the novel in the trash. His wife retrieved it and urged him to finish it; the rest is history. King went on to become one of the bestselling writers of all time. His novels have contributed to a revival of horror fiction and horror movies. In fact, he's been called a “one-man entertainment industry.”

Terror and Suspense No living American author has achieved the success we

associate with King's Gothic page-turners and the movies that have been adapted from them. *Carrie* was a huge commercial success. Turned into a classic horror movie, also titled *Carrie*, it has inspired a movie sequel, a Broadway musical, a made-for-television movie, and a non-musical stage parody. His novels have sold in the millions, and the movies made from them have found a worldwide audience. They testify to the enduring appeal of the elements in fiction that both excite and frighten us.

Author Online

Go to thinkcentral.com. KEYWORD: HMD11-444



● TEXT ANALYSIS: SUSPENSE

One of the most important elements of a Gothic story is **suspense**—the combination of excitement and anxiety that readers feel about coming events in a plot. In “The Masque of the Red Death,” readers feel excited about an extravagant masquerade party, but they begin to feel anxious when Poe describes a clock that makes the guests nervous each time it strikes the hour. As you read the story, notice the elements in the party that make you eager for more or that make you feel a sense of dread about the outcome. Then, when you read Stephen King’s essay, notice how he explains the element of fear and terror in suspense. How does this nonfiction excerpt add to your appreciation of writers such as Poe?

■ READING STRATEGY: CLARIFY MEANING

Poe’s unusual, archaic vocabulary reinforces this story’s feeling of antiquity. To help you clarify the meaning of difficult words and phrases, consult the side notes for helpful information. In addition, use **context clues** in surrounding phrases to figure out unfamiliar words. Finally, **paraphrase** difficult passages, using simpler language. By contrast with the Poe story, Stephen King’s nonfiction excerpt is written in contemporary, accessible language. As you read King, pay special attention to his comments about a closed door and the role it plays in suspense. Remember that the best way to understand any suspense story is to become engaged in the author’s mixture of excitement and dread.

▲ VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT

Poe used the following words in his eerie tale. Complete each phrase with an appropriate word from the list.

WORD LIST	blasphemous	disapprobation	propriety
	cessation	impede	reverie

1. wandered the halls lost in a _____
2. a peace treaty following the _____ of hostilities
3. her friends’ _____ after her unwise decision
4. tried not to _____ the flow of traffic
5. deeply offended by his _____ arguments
6. acted with decorum and _____



Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.

Is SAFETY an illusion?

We like to feel that there are steps we can take to keep ourselves safe. To protect ourselves from theft, we can install an alarm or add high-security locks. To protect our health, we can exercise and eat healthy food. But do our precautions really keep danger away, or do they just give us an illusion of safety?

What’s the Connection?

As you study these texts, think about the elements that make a story, a movie, or even a movie poster suspenseful. With Edgar Allan Poe’s story “The Masque of the Red Death,” you will experience actual suspense in the hands of a master. Afterwards, as you read Stephen King’s explanation of suspense, think about how it applies to your experience as a reader. Finally, when you examine the poster for *Wait Until Dark*, think about how images create suspense.

THE *Masque* OF THE RED DEATH

Edgar Allan Poe

BACKGROUND Around 1350, Europe was struck by an epidemic of bubonic plague (Black Death) that killed more than a quarter of its population. The plague killed its victims quickly—within three to five days—and there was no cure. Artwork from that time is full of haunting symbols like the Dance of Death, where Death, personified as a skeleton, whirls anonymous figures to their graves. These grisly allegorical images spoke to the deepest fears of their audience, for whom death was a nearby presence. Note how Poe borrows from this history in his own tale of death.

The “Red Death” had long devastated the country. No pestilence had ever been so fatal, or so hideous. Blood was its 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 men. And the whole seizure, progress, and termination of the disease were the incidents of half an hour. **A**

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 from among the knights and dames of his court,

2 Avatar (äv'ə-tär'): the physical form of an unseen force.

5 pest ban: announcement of infection with the plague.

A CLARIFY MEANING

Use the **side notes** to help you restate lines 1–8. What can you **infer** about the mood of the country from this description?



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 girdled it in. This wall had gates of iron. The courtiers, having 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 care of itself. In the meantime
20 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."

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 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
30 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 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 looked out upon a closed corridor which pursued the windings of the suite. These windows were of stained glass whose color varied in accordance with the prevailing hue of the decorations of the chamber into which it opened. That at the eastern extremity was
40 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
50 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

12 castellated abbeys (kās'tə-lā'tīd əb'ēz): castle-like buildings once used as monasteries ("abbeys").

16–17 ingress (ɪn'grēs') or **egress** (ē'grēs'): entry or exit.

18 provisioned: stocked with supplies.

21 improvisatori (ɪm-prōv'ɪ-zə-tōr'ē): poets who compose verses aloud.

impede (ɪm-pēd') v. to interfere with or slow the progress of

 **COMMON CORE** RL.3

B SUSPENSE

Reread Poe's description of the seventh room used by guests of the masquerade party (lines 44–60). Notice that the details establish an eerie **mood**—an important part of Gothic **suspense**. Nothing frightening happens in these lines, but the **setting** itself gives the reader an unsettling sense that terror awaits. How does the narrator's description of the windows (lines 46–48) contribute to the story's suspenseful atmosphere? What effect does firelight in the room have on Prince Prospero's guests? Finally, how does their reaction add to the suspense?

53 brazier (brā'zher): metal pan for holding a fire.



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
 60 set foot within its precincts at all. **B**

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;
 70 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

58 countenances (koun'tə-nəns-əz):
 faces.

62 ebony (ĕb'ə-nē): a hard, very
 dark wood.

64 brazen: brass.

69 evolutions: intricate patterns
 of movement; **disconcert**: state of
 confusion.

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 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. **C**

80 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 lustre. 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.

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
90 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—writhed 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-
100 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
110 any which reaches *their* ears who indulge in the more remote gaieties of the other apartments. **D**

But these other apartments were densely crowded, and in them beat feverishly the heart of life. And the revel went whirlingly on, until at length there commenced the sounding of midnight upon the clock. And then the music ceased, as I have told; and the evolutions of the waltzes were quieted; and there was an uneasy **cessation** of all things as before. But now there were twelve strokes to be sounded by the bell of the clock; and thus

reverie (rĕv'ĕ-rĕ) *n.* daydream

C SUSPENSE

How does the clock described in lines 71-79 contribute to the story's developing suspense?

82 *decora*: fine things.

90 *Hernani* (ĕr'nĕ-nĕ): a play by French writer Victor Hugo, first staged in 1830 and notable for its use of color and spectacle; **arabesque** (ĕr'ĕ-bĕsk'): intricately designed.

D CLARIFY MEANING

Paraphrase lines 104–111. Why do none of the guests venture into the seventh room?

cessation (sĕ-sĕ'shĕn) *n.* a coming to an end; a stopping

it happened, perhaps, that more of thought crept, with more of time, into the meditations of the thoughtful among those who reveled. And thus, too, it happened, perhaps, that before the last echoes of the last chime had utterly sunk into silence, there were many individuals in the crowd who had found leisure to become aware of the presence of a masked figure which had arrested the attention of no single individual before. And the rumor of this new presence having spread itself whisperingly 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 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 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 indefinite decorum. There are chords in the hearts of the most reckless which cannot be touched without emotion. Even with the utterly lost, to whom life and death are equally jests, there are matters of 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. 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. 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 broad brow, with all the features of the face, was besprinkled with the scarlet horror. **E**

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 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** 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 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 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

disapprobation

(dĭs-ăp' rə-bā'shən)

n. disapproval

130 out-Heroded Herod: been more extreme than the biblical King Herod, who ordered the deaths of all male babies in order to kill the infant Jesus. This expression is also used in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

propriety (prə-prī' ī-tē) *n.*

the quality of being proper; appropriateness

137 habiliments (hə-bīl' ə-mənts): clothing.

E CLARIFY MEANING

Reread lines 127–143. Use **context clues** to determine the meaning of the words *decorum*, *visage*, and *vesture*. What details help explain why the figure's appearance is so shocking?

blasphemous (blăs' fə-məs) *adj.* disrespectful or offensive

162 mummer: a person dressed for a masquerade.

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 uninterrupted, 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 revellers 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-cerements and corpselike mask, which they handled with so violent a rudeness, untenanted by any tangible form. **F**

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 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. 

COMMON CORE L 2b, L 4c

Language Coach

English Spelling Usually you write *ie* when the sound is long *e*, except after *c*. *Seize* (line 163), which has a long *e* sound, is an exception. Pronounce the following words aloud: *either*, *neighbor*, *protein*, *height*. Check your pronunciations in a dictionary.

183–184 **finding the . . . form:** ripping off the figure's burial garments and mask to find nothing underneath.

F SUSPENSE

How does the quickening pace of the plot's closing moments contribute to this story's suspense?

190 **illimitable dominion**
(i-līm'ī-tə-bəl də-mīn'yən):
unlimited power.

Comprehension

1. **Recall** Why does Prince Prospero seal himself and his guests in the abbey?
2. **Recall** What effect does the striking of the clock have on the revellers?
3. **Summarize** What happens after the mysterious figure is unmasked?

Text Analysis

4. **Make Inferences** What does each of the following reveal about Prince Prospero?
 - his response to the crisis in his country (lines 1–12)
 - his plans for the masquerade (lines 86–94)
 - his response to the masked figure (lines 144–152)
5. **Clarify Meaning** Explain how context clues and the author’s use of suspense help you to understand the narrator’s description of firelight (lines 51–60).
6. **Analyze Descriptive Details** For each of the following examples, identify the contrast drawn between the seventh room and the rest of Prince Prospero’s suite. Based on these contrasts, what might the seventh room represent?
 - its decorations (lines 44–48)
 - its location (lines 104–105)
 - its atmosphere (lines 56–60)
 - what occurs there (lines 174–179)
7. **Evaluate Suspense** For you as a reader, what is the most suspenseful moment in Poe’s story and how does the narrator create suspense at this point? Support your answer with evidence from the story.
8. **Analyze Mood** As you learned reading “The Fall of the House of Usher” (page 412), the mood or atmosphere of Poe’s stories contributes to an overall unity of effect. What kind of mood does Poe establish in “The Masque of the Red Death”? How does the mood of the story contribute to the suspense? Support your response with evidence from the selection.

Text Criticism

9. **Critical Interpretations** Some critics have argued that “The Masque of the Red Death” takes place in Prospero’s mind. Cite details from the story that support this interpretation. How does this view change the story’s meaning?

Is SAFETY an illusion?

Consider the desperate measures the characters take to achieve safety. In what ways, if any, do their behaviors reflect real-world responses to a deadly threat?

COMMON CORE

RL 1 Cite evidence to support analysis of inferences drawn from the text. **RL 3** Analyze the impact of the author’s choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story. **RL 4** Determine the meanings of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone. **L 4a** Use context as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase.

Vocabulary in Context

▲ VOCABULARY PRACTICE

Show you understand the vocabulary words by answering these questions.

1. Will an attempt to **impede** the passage of a law speed up the process or slow it down?
2. Would a **blasphemous** comment be considered controversial or appealing?
3. Which would more likely result in a parent's **disapprobation**—a detention or a school award?
4. Would someone's **reverie** make them attentive or distracted?
5. If I act with **propriety**, am I being polite or asking uncomfortable questions?
6. Which would cause the **cessation** of a conversation—one participant nodding in agreement or one participant walking away?

WORD LIST

blasphemous
cessation
disapprobation
impede
propriety
reverie

ACADEMIC VOCABULARY IN SPEAKING

• construct • expand • indicate • reinforce • role

Poe, who was a master of horror stories, sometimes **constructed** his stories around true accounts. In a small group, discuss what inspires you to write creatively. Then, **expand** this idea by brainstorming where professional writers get their inspiration. Use at least three of the Academic Vocabulary words in your discussion.

VOCABULARY STRATEGY: AFFIXES AND SPELLING CHANGES

Some base words are hard to recognize because they are spelled differently when affixes are added. For example, the vocabulary word *cessation* includes the base word *cease* and the suffix *-ation*. Note how the spelling of the base word changes in the new word. These spelling changes may reflect the word's etymology (its history and origins), or they may simply reflect new pronunciation that made the word easier to say. To decipher words of this type, look for related base words and use context clues to unlock meaning.

PRACTICE Identify the appropriate base word for each of the following numbered words. Then write a sentence that demonstrates the meaning of each numbered word. Finally, use a dictionary to research the word's origins. Did the spelling change as a result of the word's history?

- | | |
|----------------|------------------|
| 1. derisive | 6. irrevocable |
| 2. contentious | 7. despicable |
| 3. impermeable | 8. incessant |
| 4. pomposity | 9. sobriety |
| 5. acclamation | 10. commensurate |

COMMON CORE

L 2b Spell correctly.
L 4b–c Identify and use patterns of word changes that indicate different meanings or parts of speech; consult reference materials. **L 6** Acquire and use academic words and phrases.

Interactive Vocabulary **THINK** central

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Essay

In “The Masque of the Red Death,” you experienced suspense. Now, in an excerpt from Stephen King’s *Danse Macabre*, you’ll read about what creates suspense in a work of art.

from *Danse Macabre*

Essay by Stephen King

BACKGROUND Stephen King may well be the best-known writer of horror fiction since Edgar Allan Poe. In 1981, after writing a number of best-selling novels, King wrote *Stephen King’s Danse Macabre*, a nonfiction work in which he discussed horror in literature and film and examined the psychology of terror. The book’s title is a reference to the “Dance of Death,” a symbolic representation of death, in the form of a skeleton, leading people to their graves. This dance was commonly depicted on cemetery walls and in the European art of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

I want to say something about imagination purely as a tool in the art and science of scaring people. The idea isn’t original with me; I heard it expressed by William F. Nolan at the 1979 World Fantasy Convention. Nothing is so frightening as what’s behind the closed door, Nolan said. You approach the door in the old, deserted house, and you hear something scratching at it. The audience holds its breath along with the protagonist as she or he (more often she) approaches that door. The protagonist throws it open, and there is a ten-foot-tall bug. The audience screams, but this particular scream has an oddly relieved sound to it. “A bug ten feet tall is pretty horrible,” the audience thinks, “but I can deal with
10 a ten-foot-tall bug. I was afraid it might be a *hundred* feet tall.” . . . **A**

Bill Nolan was speaking as a screenwriter when he offered the example of the big bug behind the door, but the point applies to all media. What’s behind the door or lurking at the top of the stairs is never as frightening as the door or the staircase itself. And because of this, comes the paradox: the artistic work of horror is almost always a disappointment. It is the classic no-win situation. You can scare people with the unknown for a long, long time (the classic example, as Bill Nolan also pointed out, is the Jacques Tourneur film with Dana Andrews, *Curse of the Demon*), but sooner or later, as in poker, you have to turn your down cards up. You have to open the door and show the audience what’s behind it. And if what happens to be behind it is a bug,
20 not ten but a hundred feet tall, the audience heaves a sigh of relief (or utters a scream

A SUSPENSE

In lines 4–10, how does the image of a door, with a giant bug behind it, contribute to your understanding of suspense? Explain.



THEME

The most famous of all vampires, Dracula originated in Bram Stoker's novel of the same name. The mythic figure of the vampire inspired many literary, dramatic, and film versions. Some adaptations stay close to the spirit of Stoker's novel, in which Dracula was a disturbing, even repulsive character. But many portray vampires as desirable, mysterious, even romantic figures. Stephenie Meyer's series of vampire novels, beginning with *Twilight*, features a contemporary romance between two teenagers, one of whom is a vampire. Why do vampires continue to fascinate us?

of relief) and thinks, "A bug a hundred feet tall is pretty horrible, but I can deal with that. I was afraid it might be a *thousand* feet tall." . . . **B**

The danse macabre is a waltz with death. This is a truth we cannot afford to shy away from.

Like the rides in the amusement park which mimic violent death, the tale of horror is a chance to examine what's going on behind doors which we usually keep double-locked. Yet the human imagination is not content with locked doors. Somewhere there is another dancing partner, the imagination whispers in the night—a partner in a rotting ball gown, a partner with empty eyesockets, green mold growing on her elbow-length gloves, maggots squirming in the thin remains of her hair. To hold such a creature in our arms? Who, you ask me, would be so mad? Well . . . ?

"You will not want to open this door," Bluebeard tells his wife in that most horrible of all horror stories, "because your husband has forbidden it." But this, of course, only makes her all the more curious . . . and at last, her curiosity is satisfied. **C**

"You may go anywhere you wish in the castle," Count Dracula tells Jonathan Harker, "except where the doors are locked, where of course you will not wish to go." But Harker goes soon enough.

And so do we all. Perhaps we go to the forbidden door or window willingly because we understand that a time comes when we must go whether we want to or not . . . and not just to look, but to be pushed through. Forever. 

B CLARIFY MEANING

Explain the meaning of *danse macabre*, and identify the context clues that help you understand what the phrase means.

C SUSPENSE

Reread lines 33–35. What does Bluebeard's wife reveal about the human response to suspense? Explain your answer, citing ideas from King's essay.

Movie Poster

The movie poster shown on this page advertised *Wait Until Dark*, a very successful movie from 1967. Based on a stage play, the film tells the story of a recently blind woman threatened by thugs in her basement apartment. The poster's split image shows a match flame in the dark and the dimly lit face of a woman opening her mouth to scream. Think about how the image works with the words in the poster to create suspense. Respond to the questions below, citing evidence from the poster to support your answers.

COMMON CORE

RI.7 Evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats as well as in words to address a question.



1. ANALYZE

Study the split image in the poster. Examine the woman's facial expression and the contrast between darkness and the match flame. What kind of atmosphere do these elements create? If you had only the images to analyze, what kind of story would you expect them to represent?

2. INTERPRET

Examine the language to the right of the split image. How do the words themselves and the diminishing type size contribute to the impact of the poster? What purpose do they help the poster to achieve?

Comprehension

1. **Summarize** According to Stephen King, what makes a closed door so frightening?
2. **Clarify** In this discussion of suspense, what do some amusement park rides have in common with tales of horror?

Text Analysis

3. **Analyze Suspense** Why, according to King, is a closed door more frightening than what is actually behind the door (lines 12-13)? Explain.
4. **Clarify Meaning** What does the author mean, in lines 17-18, when he compares creating suspense to playing poker? Explain.
5. **Interpret Metaphor** What does King mean when he compares the experience of suspense to a waltz with death (line 23)?
6. **Clarify Meaning** In the concluding paragraph, why does King think we willingly open the forbidden door of suspense? Support your answer with evidence from the text.
7. **Make Inferences** How does King's essay help to explain the success of suspenseful books and movies of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries? Support your response with examples from your own reading or film viewing.

Comparing Themes Across Genres

8. What elements in "The Masque of the Red Death" (page 446) illustrate what King means with his metaphor of a closed, forbidden door? Explain your answer, citing evidence from Poe's story.

COMMON CORE

RI 1 Cite evidence to support analysis of inferences draw from the text. **RI 4** Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative and technical meanings.

Is SAFETY an illusion?

A locked door can make us feel safe from threats. But is a locked door merely an illusion of safety? Using evidence from Stephen King's essay, explain how he would answer this question. How would you answer the question? Explain your answer.

Assessment Practice: Short Constructed Response

LITERARY TEXT: “THE MASQUE OF THE RED DEATH”

On assessments you are expected to read carefully and answer questions that focus on particular passages from a text. To strengthen your close-reading skills, read the **short constructed response question** at left below and practice the strategies suggested at right.

Examine Poe’s description of the effect a masked figure has on guests at the masked ball. How does this description contribute to the story’s developing suspense?

◀ STRATEGIES IN ACTION

1. List words or phrases that have a foreboding tone.
2. Identify elements of the action that cause anxiety for the guests and the reader.
3. Use evidence you circled or underlined to support your answer.

NONFICTION TEXT: from DANSE MACABRE

On assessments you are expected to identify key ideas in a piece of text. Practice this skill as you respond to the **short constructed response question** below. Be sure to follow the steps outlined to the right of the question.

In the opening paragraph, King introduces a metaphor that expresses the central idea of the text. What is the metaphor and what idea does it express about suspense?

◀ STRATEGIES IN ACTION

1. Reread the opening paragraph and identify a metaphor/idea that plays a key role in the rest of the essay.
2. Briefly explain the idea conveyed by the metaphor and identify why it is so important to King.

COMPARING LITERARY AND NONFICTION TEXTS

To succeed on assessments, you will need to identify thematic connections between literary and nonfiction texts. Practice this valuable skill by responding to the following **short constructed response question** about “The Masque of the Red Death” and the excerpt from *Danse Macabre*.

As a nonfiction text, *Danse Macabre* has an explicit main idea. Poe’s short story, by contrast, has an implied theme. What is King’s explicit main idea and how is it reflected in “The Masque of the Red Death”?

◀ STRATEGIES IN ACTION

1. Reread King’s opening paragraph and identify the essay’s main idea.
2. From Poe’s story, select two or three details or scenes that illustrate King’s main idea.