A Comparison of *The Masque of the Red Death*

In 1964, a Vincent Price film was made titled *The Masque of the Red Death*. It was adapted from Edgar Allan Poe’s short story of the same name. The film, like the story, focuses on Prince Prospero and the Red Death. It also takes place mostly in Prospero’s castle, but that is about as far as the similarities go. The film took the many liberties Hollywood is prone to make. This paper will explore some of the major differences in the film and will offer insight as to why these changes were made, and what they add to or take away from the original concept of the story, if there is any of the original concept left.

The movie itself is vastly different from the film, mostly because it intertwines two other subplots with the main plot. The first of the two is an adaptation of another one of Poe’s short stories, titled *Hop-Frog*. The other one involves a woman named Juliana, who desires to be inducted into Prospero’s Satanic cult. Aside from these, there are additional characters that bring something altogether new to the story.

The movie begins by changing Prince Prospero’s character. When the movie begins, he burns down a village on a whim and kidnaps a young woman named Francesca. Prospero is portrayed as a villain. Not only is he placed in the role of antagonist, but the film version of Prospero is as evil as can possibly be. He is an outspoken worshipper of Satan, and several times in the movie, he makes several claims that God is dead. This is a shocking characteristic, especially for a movie from the 1960’s. It is possible that this was done to shock the audience it
was intended to debut in front of. This shock and aversion would stir them to hate him even more. The villainous Prospero is also shown to be a manipulator when he demands his guests subject themselves to embarrassing behavior. In the first scene of the movie, he arrives with an entourage of guards to one of the villages under his control. He is fond of tormenting the people here. When two of the villagers confront him about how he is afflicting them and reveals a prophecy about how their deliverance is coming, he captures them and plans to put them to death, but before he can, he is informed that the Red Death has infected the village. He then decides to take care of the problem by burning the village to the ground and abducting Francesca, the daughter of one of the village protestors. This Prospero is completely different from the thoughtless and careless, though not openly evil, Prospero from the story.

In the story, Prospero is not the nicest of men. He does try to run away from the Red Death by welding shut his castle doors with himself and a thousand friends inside. He does abandon his people to the deadly plague, but Poe never paints him as a complete monster. He is more like a mere man with extraordinary resources. Anyone, when faced with the prospect of horrendous death, will naturally flee from it. He never burns a village or kidnaps an innocent girl with intentions of corrupting her, like his film counterpart. In fact, he is “happy and dauntless and sagacious” (Poe para 2). He is simply a hedonist who wishes to escape from the woes of the world. What about the new characters that the film brought in? Francesca is the most prominent of these new additions, and her point is fairly clear.

Francesca is the young girl from the village that Prospero burned down. She becomes captive to the evil prince, only to discover that he has her father and boyfriend imprisoned in the castle. After a failed attempt to rescue them from the prison, the prince forces her to watch her father and boyfriend play a game of death with poisoned daggers. Throughout the movie, she is
the personification of faith in righteousness. Prospero tries to corrupt her and seemingly succeeds as well. She also seems to grow somewhat fond of Prospero despite all the evil things he does. It is possible that the director included her to have a strange love triangle included in the movie. Perhaps she is simply inserted so that there could be an attractive female lead. The allegory of good versus evil is most credible, except, in a somewhat strange twist, it appears as if evil overcomes, even though Prospero still dies in the end and she survives. Perhaps good does win in the end, after all.

The castle in the movie is perhaps the truest to Poe’s story. Prince Prospero’s castle is a mountain stronghold that is refuge from the Red Death for the Prince and his friends. It is a spacious citadel with the same seven solid colored rooms as the ones in the story. The difference in the film castle is that the rooms were used as rooms of torture. When Prospero shows Francesca the rooms, he mentions an instance when he imprisoned a man in the yellow room for a very long time. He said that when he came out of the room, that he could not bear the sight of anything yellow, like the sun or a daffodil. Francesca remarks how horrible such an act is and Prospero shrugs it off as a simple experiment in how to control a person. This remark continues to develop the controlling nature of Prospero. Prospero leads her from room to room until they get to the final room. He bars her passage from this room as if he is hiding something inside it. He also mentions in another scene that he built the castle as a citadel to Satan, so it is like an extension of Prospero’s dark faith.

Francesca’s father and boyfriend are both an extension of her faith. In the beginning, Prospero tells Francesca to choose for one to die and the other to live, which she refuses to do. Throughout the story, they are trained in combat so that they can kill one another at one of Prospero’s feasts. They refuse to do this and are instead forced to cut themselves with daggers,
one of which is poisoned. Their unwillingness to kill one another is attributed to a law of righteousness that says to do no harm to a neighbor. They were likely included in the film to also be a test of Francesca’s faith.

Juliana is another character that was added into the film. She is Prospero’s jealous mistress. She is the focus of one of the movie’s subplots. This jealous mistress hates Francesca just for being there and wants to do whatever it takes to win Prospero’s favor. She decides that she wants to be inducted into Prospero’s Satanic Cult. There are several scenes involved in this subplot as she goes through the initiation rites. Francesca discovers Prospero and Juliana lying in a trance-like state in the black room in one scene. Later, near the end of her story, Juliana drinks from a chalice and is tormented by a dream-like vision where she is attacked by all sorts of strange creatures. She is eventually killed by a hawk and thus ends Juliana’s role in the film. This subplot truly feels as if it was tacked on to make the movie longer. It was never necessary to incorporate her. The director seemingly just needed more material.

Hop-toad and Esmeralda are the main characters in the other subplot of the film. This subplot involves a story of revenge. Esmeralda is a small dancer who is struck by Alfredo when she accidentally knocks over a goblet while dancing. Hop-Toad, enraged by the way Alfredo treated Esmeralda, plans to get his revenge for her sake. He convinces Alfredo to dress up as an ape for the masquerade. He dresses as the ape’s trainer. During the party, Hop-Toad embarrasses Alfredo by tying him up to a lowered chandelier. He then raises the chandelier with Alfredo still lashed to it. While Alfredo dangles there, Hop-Toad drenches him in alcohol and lights him on fire. Prince Prospero, who finds the fiery execution entertaining, wants to reward Hop-Toad, but he has already fled from the castle. This subplot also seems to be added in just to extend the movie, since the original story would not nearly be long enough. This story, unlike the other
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subplot, is at least more interesting and seems to have a little more relevance, since it is at least another Poe story.

The final character to be examined from the movie is the Red Death itself. Just like in the story, the Red Death is personified as a mysterious figure in a red cloak and hood, wearing a mask. He has more appearances and more lines in the movie than he does in the story. He appears in the beginning to an old woman and is the one who gives her the prophecy of deliverance from Prospero. Here, he is seen as a sort of angel of death, using his presence as a means of liberation for the villagers. Later in the film, he appears again to Gino to give him a tarot card that is supposed to represent mankind. Finally, he appears to Prospero at the end of the movie. Even this scene is not the same as it is in the story. In the story, the Red Death is a silent specter who leads a frenzied Prospero and all of his guests to their death in the black room. In the film, the Red Death leads him to the black room like he did in the story, but since the black room’s purpose in the movie is changed to a satanic shrine, Prospero mistakes the Red Death for an ambassador of Satan. Prospero tries to talk to him as such and the Red Death reveals that he (Death) has no master and that Prospero’s faith will not save him. In the end, he still kills Prospero and his entire entourage, but spares Francesca and Gino. His character was probably altered to give it a more prominent role in the film and to be a sort of dark reckoning for the film’s antagonist.

With all of these changes now in mind, the final verdict is that most of the additions are superfluous. They take away from the original plot in an attempt to make the film longer and also make it feel shoddy. The overall quality of the film is diminished by the extra subplots. The drastic change of Prospero’s character is also too much. It makes it impossible to relate to him, so that when he dies, the only thing the viewer feels is a sense of relief that the movie is finally
over. Now that the two works have been compared and contrasted, with emphasis on the latter, it is safe to say that the story itself is much better.