“Mask (Masque) of the Red Death” Symbolism Notes

One interpretation is that the **seven rooms** represent Shakespeare's "**Seven** Ages of Man" from As You Like It: (bolding is from me).

"All the world's a stage, / And all the men and women merely players: / They have their exits and their entrances; / And one man in his time plays many parts, / **His acts being seven ages**. **At first the infant**, / Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms. / **And then the whining school-boy, with his satchel** / And shining morning face, creeping like snail / Unwillingly to school. **And then the lover**, / Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad / Made to his mistress' eyebrow. **Then a soldier**, / Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard, / Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel, / Seeking the bubble reputation / Even in the cannon's mouth. **And then the justice**, / In fair round belly with good capon lined, / With eyes severe and beard of formal cut, / Full of wise saws and modern instances; / And so he plays his part. The **sixth age shifts** / Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon, / With spectacles on nose and pouch on side, / His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide / For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice, / Turning again toward childish treble, pipes / And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all, / That ends this strange eventful history, /**Is second childishness** and mere oblivion, / Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything." (II, vii, 139-66).

Many consider "The Masque of the Red Death" an allegory.

The **seven rooms**, therefore, represent the life of all humans. It differs in respect to Shakespeare's monologue insomuch that death (symbolized by the sounding of the ebony clock) oft intervenes in the six rooms preceding death. The physical arrangement of the seven rooms also lends itself to this allegorical interpretation:

(1) the first room lies furthest East, or where the sun rises;

(2) the last room lies furthest West, or where the sun sets;

(3) the rooms are arranged in such a manner "that vision embraced but little more than one at a time" in the same way life only provides short glimpse into the future.

**Another interpretation would involve the seven deadly sins.**

**Seven Deadly Sins**

1. **Pride/Vanity** - Pride is the excessive belief in one's own abilities, similar to vanity, which is setting one's heart on things of little value. Prospero's belief that he is more powerful than death is a vivid demonstration of pride.
2. **Envy**- It is unclear who the Prince might envy, but he sure is trying hard to impress someone.
3. **Gluttony**- Gluttony is the act of consuming more than one is required. Instead of using his means to protect more people, something he is obligated to do as prince, he lavishes his guests with "ample provisions" and "the appliances of pleasure."
4. **Lust**- Lust is an excessive craving for the pleasures of the body. The era in which Poe wrote prohibited the explicit or implicit description of sex.
5. **Anger**- The Prince becomes angry with the uninvited guest and attacks it.
6. **Greed**- Although it is apparent Prince Prospero shares his wealth with a thousand guests, he helps those who need it least and withholds his substance from those in need.
7. **Sloth**- Sloth is the absence of work. The prince seems like a hard worker; his work, however, is on the physical realm not the spiritual realm.