

Middle (1) - Literature

The Pit and the Pendulum

Summary

An unnamed narrator opens the story by revealing that he has been sentenced to death during the time of the Inquisition—an institution of the Catholic government in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Spain that persecuted all Protestants, Jews, non-Catholics, and atheists. Upon receiving his death sentence, the narrator loses consciousness. When he wakes, he faces complete darkness. He is confused because he knows that the usual fate of Inquisition victims is a public “auto-da-fé”, or “act of faith”—an execution normally taking the form of a hanging. He is afraid that he has been locked in a tomb, but he gets up and walks a few paces. He then realizes he is not in a tomb, but perhaps in one of the dungeons at Toledo, an infamous Inquisition prison. He decides to explore. Ripping off a piece of his clothes, he places it against the wall so that he can count the number of steps required to walk around the cell. However, he soon stumbles and collapses to the ground, where he falls asleep.

Upon waking, the narrator finds offerings of water and bread, which he eagerly consumes. He then resumes his exploration of the prison, determining it to be roughly one hundred paces around. He decides to walk across the room. As he crosses, though, the piece of cloth that he ripped earlier tangles around his feet and trips him. Hitting the floor, he realizes that he has fallen at the edge of a circular pit. To estimate its depth, the narrator throws a stone in it, timing its descent. The pit, he believes, is quite deep, with water at the bottom. Reflecting upon the pit, the narrator explains its function as a punishment of surprise, infamously popular with the Inquisitors.

The narrator falls asleep again and wakes up to more water and bread. After drinking, he immediately falls asleep again and imagines that the water must have been drugged. When he wakes up the next time, he finds the prison dimly lit. He remarks that he has overestimated its size, most likely having duplicated his steps during his explorations.

The narrator discovers that he is now bound to a wooden board by a long strap wrapped around his body. His captors offer him some flavorful meat in a dish, but no more water. When he looks up, he notices that the image of Time has been painted on the ceiling. He is holding a pendulum, which appears to be swinging back and forth.

The narrator looks away from the ceiling, though, when he notices rats coming out of the pit and circling around his food. When he looks back at the ceiling, he discovers that the pendulum is like a razor-sharp crescent in its descent toward him. Its progress, however, is slow in an extremely annoying way and near his chest. Even though he recognizes how serious the situation is, the narrator remains hopeful.



When the pendulum gets very close to him, he has a flash of insight. He rubs the food from his plate all over the strap that is tying him down. Drawn by the food, the rats climb on top of the narrator and chew through the strap. As the pendulum nears his heart, the narrator breaks through the strap and escapes from the pendulum's swing. When he gets up, the pendulum retracts to the ceiling, and he concludes that people must be watching his every move.

The walls of the prison then heat up and begin moving in toward the pit. The narrator realizes that the enclosing walls will force him into the pit, an escape that will also mean his death. When there remains not even an inch foothold for the narrator, the walls suddenly retract and cool down. In his fear, however, the narrator has begun to faint into the pit. To his great surprise, though, a mysterious person latches onto him and prevents his fall. The French general Lasalle and his army have successfully taken over the prison in their effort to terminate the Inquisition.

Analysis

“The Pit and the Pendulum” is distinct among Poe’s first-person narrations. The narrator claims to almost lose his mind during the opening scene of the story. He thus highlights his own unreliability in ways that other narrators of Poe’s resist or deny (Like the mad narrator of The Tell-tale Heart). The story is unusual among Poe’s tales because it is hopeful. Hope is manifested in the story not only in the rescue that resolves the tale, but also in the tale’s narrative strategy. The narrator maintains the capacity to recount faithfully and rationally his surroundings while also describing his own emotional turmoil. The tale suggests a political agenda only implicitly. Poe does not criticize the ideological basis of the tale’s historical context. The narrative examines the physical and emotional shifts of the pure present, leaving historical and moral judgments to us. “The Pit and the Pendulum” is a traditional Poe story that breaks from Poe’s conventions: violent yet ultimately hopeful, graphic yet politically allusive (containing suggestion rather than explicit mention).

Setting & Characters

1. Setting

'The Pit and the Pendulum' is set in a prison cell in Toledo, Spain, during the Spanish Inquisition. The Inquisition was the systemic effort of the Vatican and the governments of Portugal and Spain to uncover and eradicate Judaism, Protestant Christianity, and other non-Catholic faiths by punishing real or suspected heretics.

The setting featured most prominently in the narrative is, of course, the prison cell in which the narrator spends the entire plot. There's a deep circular pit in the center of the stone floor, and the entire cell is extremely dark, but not quite pitch-black.

The cell walls are also engineered to close inward. This forces the narrator toward the pit, which he discovers near the end of the narrative.

On the ceiling of the cell is a painted figure of Time that holds a real, heavy pendulum ending in a sharp, steel crescent. As the terrified narrator watches, it not only swings back and forth, but slowly descends closer and closer to his body, which at one point is strapped to a low wooden frame. He is positioned at right angles to the pendulum and realizes it will eventually cut him in two.

2. Characters

The narrator is the only three-dimensional character in the story, and---like so many Poe characters---is an unreliable narrator, or one whose perspective is highly subjective or compromised. This man is a prisoner of the Spanish courts enduring psychological and physical torture. He's exhausted and terrified, and he faints frequently. He also suspects that the water he's given in the first part of the narrative is drugged, causing him to lose consciousness. Despite being unreliable (through no fault of his own), however, the narrator is a practical problem-solver. To find out how big his prison cell is, he decides to feel his way around the cell, counting his steps. And to find out how deep the pit is, he drops a small piece of stone in it and counts the seconds it takes to hit water at the bottom. When rats begin eating his food, he cleverly lies still so they won't be afraid to jump on him to chew on his restraints, allowing him to escape the pendulum blade in the nick of time.

Other agents, if not real characters, in the story include the rats in the narrator's cell and the Inquisition judges who sentence him to prison.

'The Pit and the Pendulum'

Themes and Symbols

As if knowing you were about to die was not enough, imagine knowing that others are being entertained by your suffering. In "The Pit and the Pendulum" by Edgar Allan Poe, the narrator not only has reason to suspect that people are watching, but he has no idea where he is or how death will come - only that he will likely be tortured prior to his execution. The author explores themes related to death, time, and fear by using the symbols of the pit, pendulum, and Time in this short story.

Themes

The **themes** of a story are the main ideas that an author explores. In "The Pit and the Pendulum," some of the themes include death, time and fear.

1. Death

The narrator opens the story by telling the reader about his sentencing. Have you ever heard news that was so stunning that it seemed like everything faded to the background? The narrator describes a near loss of consciousness as he attempts to process what is about to happen to him. At times, he wishes it would just go ahead and happen so that he wouldn't have to worry about the inevitable, yet the will to live keeps him fighting until the very end.

2. Time

With an image of Time on the ceiling and a "huge pendulum, such as we see on antique clocks" descending from above, the narrator's experience reminds us that we are all fighting against the clock to an inevitable end.

3. Fear

The narrator is placed in several fearful situations prior to death. His torture comes from his exposure to fear of the dark, the unknown, rats, claustrophobia, pain, and death. Somehow, he is able to overcome each of these struggles, until in the end, "This time there was no escape. I let out one last final scream of despair, I closed my eyes -"

Symbols

Symbols are things that represent bigger ideas in a story. Some of the symbols used in this story include the cell, the pendulum, and the pit. They all can be seen as frightening aspects of human life. On a literal level, these are humankind's threatening environment, the inevitability of death, and death itself. On a psychological level, they represent fear of the loss of self-determination, fear of death, and fear of the unknown.

1. Cell

The first source of terror the narrator is introduced to is the cell itself, which symbolizes the incomprehensible and at times threatening world into which humankind is placed. Unable to see, the narrator cannot make sure of where he is, and as he fears he has been buried alive, the cell comes to symbolize a tomb. His exploration of the cell reveals treacherous, slimy surfaces comprising an irregular, incomprehensible shape. At the end of the story, the cell once again becomes the ultimate source of terror when its walls change shape, become glowing hot, and literally close in on him, relentlessly driving him toward an unknowable fate in the pit. Despite the narrator's meticulous attempts to ascertain the reality in which he has found himself, he is unsuccessful because the world is unknowable through the tools of consciousness.

2. Pendulum

The most obvious symbol is that of the pendulum. It descends from an image of Time. In this context, Time brings to mind his ghoulish doppelgänger, the Grim Reaper, who wields his scythe to harvest human life. In "The Pit and the Pendulum" it is a literal scythe that slowly descends toward the body of the narrator, bringing his death closer and closer with every swing of the pendulum.

3. Pit

The pit is a symbol of suffering and, even more clearly, of death. Before he entered this cell, the narrator had heard rumors of the pit as the ultimate, most horrifying torture inflicted on victims of the Inquisition. At one point he actually calls it a symbol of hell. This is not only because it threatens destruction, but also because its true nature and what might happen once one falls into it is unknowable. Even after he accidentally saves himself from it by stumbling before he reaches it, the pit becomes an enduring source of terror, at times beckoning him toward a self-destruction he cannot commit. Even at his most hopeless and desperate, the narrator refuses to throw himself into the pit, knowing that such a death would not be instant but slow and agonizing. At the end it is when he is tottering on the edge of the pit that he screams his final scream of despair and defeat.

But the pit also symbolizes the unknowable nature of the unconscious mind. Throughout the story, just as the narrator struggles to understand the location and nature of the pit, he also struggles to know what is real and what is imagined and even to know the difference between waking and dreaming.

CHARACTERS

- **The narrator:** he is an indirect character because the author doesn't describe him. We don't even know his name.
- **The judges:** they are the only direct character in the story because the author describe them as pale-face and he describes their clothes too. The judges were inquisitors.
- **General Lasalle:** He is part of the French army and the hero of the story because he saves the narrator when he was about to die. He is an indirect character.

SETTING

- The story was set in the past because we read the events that have already happened to the narrator.
- The whole story takes place in a cell that is designed to kill its prisoners and terrible ways.

POINT OF VIEW

The point of view is in first person because the author is the one tells his own story.

PLOT

- **Internal conflict:** the conflict here is mostly mental because the narrator is trying to figure out where he is and how he can escape from that place.
- **External conflict:** the external conflict in this story was the situations that his judges made him face. During the Inquisition, people were very bad and the ways of killing were very painful.
- **Exposition:** in the beginning the man was listening to his sentence to death for a crime that he has committed, then he falls asleep. We never get to know what the crime was.

- **Rising action:** the man wakes up in a place completely dark, and doesn't remember anything about his sentence. He starts to remember rumors that people in the town spread about a cell where people suffer a lot. He decides to measure the size of the cell by touching the walls and walking around. He finds a giant pit and is almost going to fall inside but he continues walking. Later, he finds some food on the floor and takes it. He says that maybe the food contained some drugs because he immediately falls asleep.
- **Climax:** he wakes up again but now the cell is lighted; however, the man realizes that he is tied to something. He looks to the roof and a big picture of Father Time is there and a giant pendulum that was there to cut him into two. He was scared and he knew it would be the end of his life. The man has the idea to take some food that is next to him and some rats approach him and cut what tied him. In that moment he felt free.