The Pit and the Pendulum Study Guide

The Pit and the Pendulum by Edgar Allan Poe

BOOKRAGS

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Overview

Edgar Allan Poe is best known as the author of numerous spine-tingling stories of horror and suspense. "The Pit and the Pendulum" is a classic example of Poe's ability to keep readers on the edge of their seats with almost nightmarish terror. However, Poe should also be remembered as the American author who helped to establish and develop America's major formal contribution to the world of literature—the short story.

Poe was the first writer to recognize that the short story was a different kind of fiction than the novel and the first to insist that for a story to have a powerful effect on the reader every single detail in the story should contribute to that effect. "The Pit and the Pendulum" is a striking example of Poe's ability to follow his own advice about the artistic unity of a short story.

Finally, Poe should be remembered as an artist who had the uncanny psychological understanding of the most powerful, deep-seated fears and anxieties of human beings, as well as the technical skill to write stories which unerringly focused on those fears. "The Pit and the Pendulum," with its emphasis on the terror of absolute darkness, on the fear of falling into a bottomless pit, and on the panic of helplessness, is a singular example of Poe's expertise at creating stories which capture universal human anxieties.

About the Author

Edgar Poe was born on January 19, 1809, in Boston, Massachusetts, the son of indigent actors. At age three, when his parents died, Poe was taken in by John Allan, a merchant from Richmond, Virginia. He attended a private school in England where he lived with the Allans between 1815 and 1820. After returning to America, he continued private schooling until 1826, when he entered the University of Virginia. However, he was forced to leave after less than a year because of gambling debts which John Allan refused to pay.

After quarreling with his guardian, Poe went to Boston where, under an assumed name, he joined the army. A few months later, at the age of eighteen, his first collection of poems, privately financed, was published. In 1829, after the death of John Allan's wife, Poe was discharged from the army. He reconciled with his guardian and received an appointment to West Point. However, because Allan would not support him adequately (and because he did not like military life) he purposely neglected his duties to get himself dismissed from the academy.

Poe then went to Baltimore, where he took up residence with his impoverished aunt and her young daughter Virginia.

In 1832 he began his career as a writer of bizarre and romantic short stories by publishing "Metzengerstein," a tale about feuding families and supernatural revenge. However, his first real success came the following year when his "MS.

Found in a Bottle," an eerie tale about a shipwreck and ghostly seamen, won a fifty dollar prize given by a Baltimore newspaper. More importantly, it won him recognition and led to a position as an editor on a monthly magazine published in Richmond.

In 1836, Poe married his cousin Virginia, who was not quite fourteen years old at the time, and in 1837, after the end of his editorship, he and his child bride and her mother moved to Philadelphia. Poe soon published the only novellength fiction he ever wrote, The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym, a rambling adventure yarn filled with mutiny at sea, shipwreck, cannibalism, fierce South Sea natives, and a voyage to the South Pole.

Between 1838 and 1849, the year he died, Poe was at the center of magazine publishing in America, serving as the editor of several different journals and writing reviews, critical articles, stories, and miscellaneous pieces which won him admiration for his critical genius and courage. His most famous works— including gothic horror stories such as "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "Ligeia," detective stories (a genre he invented) such as "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and "The Purloined Letter," and tales of obsession such as "The Black Cat" and "The Tell-Tale Heart"— were all published during this period. He also earned great fame and wide acclaim with poems such as "The Raven" (1845).

However, for all this renown, Poe waged a constant struggle for money. To add to his distress, in 1847 his young wife developed tuberculosis and died, leaving Poe almost mad with grief. In early October 1849, while on a trip from Richmond to New York, Poe stopped in Baltimore and began drinking, a habit for which he had absolutely no tolerance. On October 3, election day, he was discovered near a polling place in a coma. He died three days later of delirium tremens and was buried in a Baltimore cemetery where, on Halloween, a mysterious, unidentified person places flowers on his grave.

The Pit and the Pendulum

The Pit and the Pendulum Summary

The narrator begins with a disjointed account of what appears to be his sentence at the hands of the Inquisition. He drifts in and out of consciousness, pondering how restful death would be. He then describes parts of his trial, remembers a period of feeling and thinking nothing, then of forgetting.

When he is seemingly in his right mind, he begins by saying that now that he is in his place of punishment, he has not yet opened his eyes. He is not tied up, and he is lying on his back. When he does open his eyes, his worst fears are realized - he can see *nothing*. He is lying in complete and utter darkness. He does not know or cannot remember his sentence, but he knows that those condemned to death are usually killed soon after they are convicted.

His next fear soon engulfs his mind - what if he has been buried alive? He crawls around a bit, and having established that he does seem to be in a room and not a tomb, he feels some sense of relief. He knows that the end result of his punishment will be death, just not what manner of death.

He tries to ascertain information about his surroundings, outstretching his hands to touch the walls around him. He tears a piece of material from his garment and places it at a right angle to the wall, planning to use its position to help him calculate the approximate size of his cell. He underestimates his own weakness, as well as the slipperiness of the floor, and falls down. He is very tired so he stays on the floor, and falls asleep. When he awakens, he finds he has been given some bread and water. He then resumes his walk around the cell, finally encountering the torn material he had left as a marker and estimating the room is about 50 yards around. He realizes there is no real object to his curiosity, he just needs to occupy his mind with something.

Feeling a burst of courage, the narrator leaves the safety of the walls and tries walking across directly; he promptly trips over his robe and falls. Dazed at first, he soon realizes he has fAllan at the brink of a circular pit. He is able to dislodge a small piece of masonry, and he drops it into the pit in order to determine the depth of the pit. His action draws the attention of his captors, who open an overhead door slightly. A small shaft of light comes in, revealing the details of the room.

Knowing how close he had come to a horrible death leaves the narrator shaking and trembling. He is very agitated but is eventually able to fall asleep. When he wakes up, he again finds bread and water, but immediately after he drinks the water he feels drugged and falls into a deep sleep.

He awakens again, and there is a little more light in the room. He had greatly overestimated its size, and its shape is much more square than he had thought. He is

now tied down on his back. There are also designs painted on the walls; one is a picture representing Time holding a pendulum - the pendulum is real. The narrator notices at this point that there are rats on the floor, crawling all around. Also, he notices that the pendulum is moving down and its sweep has increased; since he avoided the first death, his captors have devised this new fate. When he comprehends his predicament, a plan begins to form. He realizes he can use the rats to his advantage; if he rubs some food onto his bindings, the rats will chew through them. This plan works, and he escapes just as the pendulum is about to chop him in half.

After this second escape from death, the narrator notices that the pictures on the wall seem to be glowing - the iron walls are heating up. The heat almost drives him to throw himself into the water in the pit, but he suddenly sees something unspeakably horrible in the pit that stops him. He discovers that the room is getting smaller, and that the new death plan is to force him into the pit.

Finally, as all hope is lost and he is about to give up and plunge to his death, he hears voices from above, and he faints and is pulled out as the walls recede. It is General Lasalle and the French army, rescuing him from the Inquisition.

The Pit and the Pendulum Analysis

The two elements that heighten the terror of this story are its historical accuracies and a fear of the unknown. Because we know that the Inquisition did indeed occur, and that horrible punishments were doled out to those convicted, there is a heightened sense of unease in that we know something as ghastly as the near-death described could have, and probably did, happen. Poe artfully juxtaposes this with the opposite end of the spectrum - fear of the unknown. Poe does not explain what is in the pit, but it is the narrator's abject terror at what he sees that allows the reader to imagine what is down there. Death, in some inescapable form, is the narrator's future, and the horror lies in the lack of hope.

Characters

Although "The Pit and the Pendulum" focuses on a single character, the reader actually discovers very little about him. One does not know his name, what he has done, whether he is guilty, whether he is a criminal, what he misses about life in the everyday world, whether he loves someone — in short, the reader knows none of those things about the character that one might expect to learn if this were a novel in which a man spends several years in prison. In fact, all that is known is that he faces the horrors of mental and physical torture and then inevitable death.

Although such a lack of knowledge in a novel might lead to the loss of the reader's interest, Poe provides all that is necessary to become engaged with this intense story. For this is not a realistic portrayal of an individual caught in an unjust social system, but rather a nightmarish, symbolic story which focuses on deep-seated human fears. The central character functions as "everyman." What the story is "about," that is, its central human theme, is everyone's fear of being accused without knowing what the crime is, being confronted with the blackness of nothingness, being trapped on the brink of a bottomless pit, being crawled over by repulsive rodents, and being a helpless victim of the inevitable and unceasing pendulum of time.

Objects/Places

The Pit

One of the forms of capital punishment devised by the Spanish Inquisition. The narrator was meant to fall into the pit accidentally. When he discovered the pit, his captors let him see what was in it then began to close the walls in around him in order to force him into the horror below.

The Pendulum

Sharp, swinging object meant to kill the narrator by chopping him in half.

Setting

The entire story takes place inside a pit or prison cell into which the narrator of the story, and indeed the story's only visible character, has been thrown. Although the pit is the immediate setting of the story, the broader historical context is the Spanish Inquisition during the sixteenth century, when the Inquisition, a court of the Roman Catholic Church, persecuted heretics, so-called witches, and members of other religions with torture and execution.

The story does not indicate what the nameless narrator and central character of the story has done to deserve the tortures he endures in the pit, nor does it deal with any of the religious or social implications of the Inquisition. It simply recounts, in excruciatingly exact detail, the step-by-step means by which the torturers try to break the protagonist's spirit and his own step-by-step attempts to escape each new horror that befalls him.

Social Sensitivity

Social Concerns

E dgar Allan Poe is a writer often first discovered by readers when they are still adolescents. His stories are seemingly so simple, so direct and straightforward, so little weighted down with philosophical abstractions or social complexities that they are easily readable by junior high students.

Moreover, although many of his stories focus on murder, vicious revenge, premature burial, and other violent and nightmarish phenomena, they are usually phrased in such general and abstract terms that they are a far cry from the graphic violence typical of present-day horror films. Thus, instead of creating anxiety and fear in the minds of young readers, they seem to stimulate a pleasurable feeling of admiration for Poe as a writer who can so enthrall and entertain. In fact, many successful writers have said that they first fell in love with literature and decided to write after reading Poe.

However, Poe is not merely a simple writer, one who only has the power to create the delicious but harmless sense of momentary horror. He is a writer who, both because of his skill as a creator of highly polished narratives and his genius at understanding some of the most powerful and deep-seated fears and anxieties of human beings, can, and should be, studied more carefully.

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Techniques

Although Poe often declared that the allegory was an inferior form of fiction, he comes close to creating an allegory in "The Pit and the Pendulum." Instead of allegory, Poe favored gothic short fiction, a form that was extremely popular in the early nineteenth century in Germany. Many of Poe's stories reveal that he is familiar with such gothic fiction and is at times parodying the form. Indeed, it is sometimes difficult to determine if he is presenting a seemingly horrific story as a serious experience or as a satiric and comic one.

Although "The Pit and the Pendulum" seems to fit in the serious category, the miraculous escape at the end makes it very similar to the so-called "inescapable predicament" type of short fiction which he did parody in other stories.

The tone and point of view of the story is first-person, a fact which immediately eliminates any suspense or uncertainty about whether the narrator dies in the pit. The story's language is typical of the so-called "inescapable predicament" story of the time; it is melodramatic and highly emotional, filled with exclamations and declara tions of horror and disgust for which the narrator says he has no name. The highly stylized language and highly charged tone are indicative of the narrator's dilemma, but also were a common nineteenth-century literary convention.

Themes

Sanity and Insanity

Poe uses the theme of insanity vs. insanity, and all the nuances in between, in many of his short stories, often charging his insane narrators with the futile task of proving that they are not mad. Often, in stories such as *The Tell-Tale Heart* and *The Imp of the Perverse*, though the respective narrators of each claim they are of sound mind and seem completely unremorseful, they are driven to confess by a persistent reminder of their crime. In other tales, such as *The Cask of Amontillado*, the narrator is unquestionably insane, and yet there is no remorse *and* no confession, and though his *actions* are insane, he is very levelheaded when it comes to their execution. Crime is not the only indicator of insanity, however. In *Ligeia*, the narrator commits no crime that is spoken of, yet there is an air of instability to his narrative. He does admit to heavy opium use, but it is his overwhelming grief and obsessive love for Ligeia that cast a questioning light on his state of mind. All this mental instability leads to a stable of unreliable narrators; Poe was a master at creating believable, unreliable narrators, so much so that many historians have cast him as much less stable than he was, instead of recognizing his skill at crafting first-person narration.

Death and Mortality

In almost all of Poe's works, death is a central issue. Whether a tale of murder (*The Cask of Amontillado*, *The Tell-Tale Heart*), a tale of horror (*The Fall of the House of Usher*), a Gothic horror romance (*Ligeia*), or an allegory (*The Masque of the Red Death*), Poe's stories, by nature of his preferred genres, are full of death. Though many of his stories deal with either the murder of someone, the solving of a murder, or the supernatural resurrection of someone who has died, it is his allegorical look at mortality, *The Masque of the Red Death*, which most clearly sums up Poe's themes of death. Here, very simply, death is seen as inevitable, something that can be avoided by no one, no matter what precautions they take or how wealthy they are. Poe used death to terrify people, as he was a writer of horror stories and most people are afraid of death. Yet he seemed fascinated by it, and with his use of dark and Gothic elements seemed to embrace it.

Isolation and Confinement

Throughout many of Poe's short stories, characters are placed in stifling, claustrophobic settings that add to the overall feeling of panic and fear. In some, such as *Ligeia* and *The Fall of the House of Usher*, most of the action occurs in one room or one house, closing off the characters to any outside influence. *The Pit and the Pendulum* takes this idea a step further, imprisoning the narrator in a dungeon. Poe highlights this theme in *The Cask of Amontillado*, in which the murderous narrator literally encloses his victim in

a tomb. In *The Masque of the Red Death*, the castle is completely cut off from any means of entrance or exit. The most intense confinement, however, can be found in the minds of Poe's narrators. While we as readers experience physical isolation (i.e. one, room, one house, one walled-up vault), the intensity of the confinement is exacerbated by the point of view of the narrators. We see the world through one set of eyes, and the thoughts of these narrators, often thoughts that are unstable at best, imprison us in a non-physical "prison" of panic and fear.

Poe's story is both a fictional account of one of people's worst nightmares and an allegory of the most basic human dilemma. The stark details of the story suggest its universal theme. It begins with the protagonist's being sentenced to death, although he does not seem to be guilty of any crime; his judges are only shadowy, black-robed figures without identity; and he is thrown into absolute darkness, which makes it difficult for him to know whether his experience is a reality or a nightmare. In fact, many aspects of the story suggest that what Poe is trying to create here is a dream experience. Even the conclusion, when the narrator is saved from the pit by the sudden arrival of the French army, seems like the awakening from a nightmare.

The entire story takes place inside a pit or prison cell into which the narrator of the story, and indeed the story's only visible character, has been thrown. Although the pit is the immediate setting of the story, the broader historical context is the Spanish Inquisition during the sixteenth century, when the Inquisition, a court of the Roman Catholic Church, persecuted heretics, so-called witches, and members of other religions with torture and execution.

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Style

Point of View

The narrator of this story is not necessarily unreliable, but the beginning of his account is a little shaky, as he is missing some important memories about his sentence and trial, and his remembrances seem surreal and dream-like. Once he awakens in his dungeon, though, his account seems coherent and reliable. By making this a first-person narrative, Poe exposes his readers to the feelings of hopelessness and terror that accompany certain, horrific death in a way a more distant narration could not.

Setting

Fear and horror are heightened by setting this story in an inescapable dungeon where, even if the narrator is able to avoid one form of painful death, unseen captors are waiting to kill him in some other, even more horrible way. Also, by setting the action during the Spanish Inquisition, we as readers are aware that historically, the tortures we are reading about probably actually occurred, adding an extra layer of dread.

Language and Meaning

By placing us, as readers, solely in the head of a prisoner with nothing more than his own thoughts, Poe intensifies the emotion and sense of "being there."

"*At length, with a wild desperation at heart, I quickly unclosed my eyes. My worst thoughts, then, were confirmed. The blackness of eternal night encompassed me. I struggled for breath. The intensity of the darkness seemed to oppress and stifle me. The atmosphere was intolerably close. I still lay quietly, and made effort to exercise my reason*."

Because we are privy to the intimate thoughts of the narrator, even more so than with most first-person narratives, Poe evokes the breathless and stifling fear accompanying his predicament. Also, in sections such as this:

"*Amid the thought of the fiery destruction that impended, the idea of the coolness of the well came over my soul like balm. I rushed to its deadly brink. I threw my straining vision below. The glare from the enkindled roof illumined its inmost recesses. Yet, for a wild moment, did my spirit refuse to comprehend the meaning of what I saw. At length it forced — it wrestled its way into my soul — it burned itself in upon my shuddering reason. — Oh! for a voice to speak! — oh! horror! — oh! any horror but this!*" (pg. 136),

the horror is intensified by the non-specific threat from below. He does not tell us what the terrible thing in the pit is, but because we are so far into the narrator's head, we are able to imagine our own worst fears looming from the hole.

Structure

This story is built in such a way as to keep the reader right there next to the narrator. It begins with vague, dream-like memories, but as the narrator's haze clears, we enter the body of the story. Each newly devised torturous death brings us closer to the end of the story - and, given the narrator's situation, closer to a grisly end. As the intensity builds, so does the reader's anxiety, until finally, the narrator's swoon as he is rescued at the last second is completely justified, and a fitting ending.

Quotes

These quotes are taken from the Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe.

"True! - nervous - very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why *will* you say that I am mad?" (*The Tell-Tale Heart*, pg. 13)

"'Villains!' I shrieked, 'dissemble no more! I admit the deed! - tear up the planks! - here, here! - it is the beating of his hideous heart!'" (*The Tell-Tale Heart*, pg. 21)

"As the strong man exults in his physical ability, delighting in such exercises as call his muscles into action, so glories the analyst in that moral activity which *disentangles.*" (*The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, pg. 22)

"'The riddle, so far, was now unriddled.'"(*The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, pg. 57)

"Of my country and of my family I have little to say. Ill usage and length of years have driven me from the one, and estranged me from the other." (*MS. Found in a Bottle*, pg, 77)

"When I look around me I feel ashamed of my former apprehensions." (*MS. Found in a Bottle*, pg, 92)

"The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could ; but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge." (*The Cask of Amontillado*, pg. 94*)*

"*For the love of God, Montressor!*" (*The Cask of Amontillado*, pg. 104)

"There was an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart - an unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime. What was it - I paused to think - what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher ?" (*The Fall of the House of Usher*, pg. 106)

"For a moment she remained trembling and reeling to and fro upon the threshold - then, with a low moaning cry, fell heavily inward upon the person of her brother, and in her violent and now final death-agonies, bore him to the floor a corpse, and a victim to the terrors he had anticipated." (*The Fall of the House of Usher*, pg. 133)

"While I gazed, this fissure rapidly widened - there came a fierce breath of the whirlwind - the entire orb of the satellite burst at once upon my sight - my brain reeled as I saw the mighty walls rushing asunder - there was a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters - and the deep and dank tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the *House of Usher*." (*The Fall of the House of Usher*, pg. 133)

"Arousing from the most profound of slumbers, we break the gossamer web of some dream. Yet in a second afterward, (so frail may that web have been) we remember not that we have dreamed." (*The Pit and the Pendulum*, pg. 156)

"Amid the thought of the fiery destruction that impended, the idea of the coolness of the well came over my soul like balm. I rushed to its deadly brink. I threw my straining vision below. The glare from the enkindled roof illumined its inmost recesses. Yet, for a wild moment, did my spirit refuse to comprehend the meaning of what I saw. At length it forced — it wrestled its way into my soul — it burned itself in upon my shuddering reason. — Oh! for a voice to speak! — oh! horror! — oh! any horror but this!" (*The Pit and the Pendulum*, pg. 136)

"The 'strangeness,' however, which I found in the eyes, was of a nature distinct from the formation, or the color, or the brilliancy of the features, and must, after all, be referred to the expression." (*Ligeia,* pg. 163)

"That she loved me I should not have doubted; and I might have been easily aware that, in a bosom such as hers, love would have reigned no ordinary passion. But in death only, was I fully impressed with the strength of her affection." (*Ligeia,* pg. 168)

"I trembled not — I stirred not — for a crowd of unutterable fancies connected with the air, the stature, the demeanor of the figure, rushing hurriedly through my brain, had paralyzed — had chilled me into stone." (*Ligeia,* pg. 182)

"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." (*The Masque of the Red Death*, pg. 184)

"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 light-hearted friends from among the knights and dames of his court, and with these retired to the deep seclusion of one of his castellated abbeys." (*The Masque of the Red Death*, pg. 185)

"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 Masque of the Red Death*, pg. 191)

"And the flames of the tripods expired. And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all" (*The Masque of the Red Death*, pg. 193)

"The intellectual or logical man, rather than the understanding or observant man, set himself to imagine designs — to dictate purposes to God." (*The Imp of the Perverse*, pg. 195)

"Through its promptings we act without comprehensible object; or, if this shall be understood as a contradiction in terms, we may so far modify the proposition as to say,

that through its promptings we act, for the reason that we should not." (*The Imp of the Perverse*, pg. 196)

"They say that I spoke with a distinct enunciation, but with marked emphasis and passionate hurry, as if in dread of interruption before concluding the brief, but pregnant sentences that consigned me to the hangman and to hell." (*The Imp of the Perverse*, pg. 209)

Adaptations

Poe's popularity has lead to a large number of commercial films based on his stories. The most familiar series, a string of low-budget films produced by American International Pictures, was made in the early 1960s by director Roger Gorman and featured such classic and familiar horror-movie actors as Boris Karloff, Vincent Price, Peter Lorre, and John Carradine. The Pit and the Pendulum, released in 1961, featured Vincent Price in a slick and highly polished film in which Price thinks he is his own father, the most vicious and cruel torturer of the Spanish Inquisition. Although the film bears little resemblance to the original Poe tale, in terms of its tone and technique, it is a cut above the usual adaptations of Poe's stories. (May) A more recent motion picture version of the story, 1991's The Pit and Pendulum, tells the tale of a woman accused of witchcraft because she befriended a little boy. The motion picture depicts her humiliation at the hands of the Inquisition. This motion picture gained some notoriety when a teacher who showed it to her high school class was fired because a student complained about the nudity (but not, apparently, about the torture and gore). Aside from that little incident in the history of censorship in American, this motion picture is undeserving of attention. It is idiotic. It was directed by Stuart Gordon. Its cast includes Rona De Ricci, Lance Henrikson, Jonathan Fuller, and Jeffrey Combs.

Topics for Discussion

These topics concern the general works of Edgar Allan Poe.

Explain what is meant by the term "unreliable narrator." How does Poe use this technique in different ways with different stories?

Poe has been called "the father of the detective story" - but does he go too far out of the realm of possibility by making an orangutan the killer? Defend your answer.

Are the crewmen on the "Discovery" ghosts? Is there another explanation as to why they do not acknowledge the narrator?

How does Poe portray the doppelganger, or character double, in *The Fall of the House of Usher*?

How does Poe use a closed setting in *The Pit and the Pendulum*, *The Cask of Amontillado*, and *The Fall of the House of Usher*?

What is the role of history in *The Pit and the Pendulum*? How does the reality of the action contribute to the story's terror?

Compare and contrast the narrator of *The Imp of the Perverse* with the narrator of *The Tell-Tale Heart*.

Do you believe Poe meant for us to believe in the resurrection of Ligeia as a means of proving her strength of will and the great love between herself and the narrator, or as a sign of how far the narrator's mind has slipped?

Did Ligeia poison Rowena, or did the narrator?

1. The story never explains why the central character has been thrown into the pit. Why does Poe not inform the reader of his crime?

2. There are many details in the story which suggest the state of sleep, such as references to dreams and occasions when the character himself falls asleep.

How is it possible to think of this story as a fictional account of a nightmare?

3. The primary dilemma of the narrator is that he is caught between the seemingly bottomless pit and the slowly descending pendulum. What do these two horrors represent?

4. What kinds of methods does the protagonist use to try to save himself? How successful are they?

5. Why is the protagonist finally rescued by some force outside of himself rather than by his own efforts?

6. What is it that keeps the protagonist from simply giving up?

7. Some critics have suggested that the story is an allegory of the basic dilemma of human life, for all the major elements of the story correspond to the universal human dilemma. Can you explain how this might be true?

8. How would you characterize the basic personality of the protagonist?

Consider not only his actions, but also how he describes those actions.

9. This story seems to be set outside of any social context and to be devoid of any significant social theme. If this is so, then what kind of basic human theme or message about the human will does it express?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Many short-story writers in America in the nineteenth century said that they wanted to write a story that seemed like a dream or a nightmare. Show how "The Pit and the Pendulum" is such a story.

2. In some very basic ways, the situation of the narrator in the story suggests that it is a universal human dilemma and that he is a figure representing everyman. Explain how this allegorical reading of the story can be supported.

3. Although the story deals with a horrifying dilemma and makes use of violent actions, it does not seem as shocking as many horror films today. Why not?

4. There is only one character in this story, and all we know about him directly is that he is caught in a horrifying dilemma. Describe what we can infer about his personality from his behavior; discuss how he attempts to cope with his situation.

5. How would you characterize the kinds of fears and anxieties that the protagonist faces? In what ways are they like fears and anxieties that all of us have?

Further Study

Buranelli, Vincent. Edgar Allan Poe. New York: Twayne, 1961. This is a basic introduction to Poe's works, focusing primarily on his fictional and poetic themes.

Carlson, Eric W., ed. The Recognition of Edgar Allan Poe. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966. This is an invaluable collection of the bestknown and most influential essays on Poe and his work.

Davidson, Edward H. Poe: A Critical Study. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957. One of the most intellectually powerful and thus one of the most influential studies of Poe, this book created a new respect for his work.

Hoffmann, Daniel. Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972. Although this is a highly personal and idiosyncratic consideration of Poe, it is worth reading as a psychological study of his tales.

Quinn, Arthur Hobson. Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography. New York: Appleton-Century Crofts, 1941. This is the most authoritative and most trustworthy biography of Poe.

Thompson, G. R. Poe's Fiction: Romantic Irony in the Gothic Tales. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1973.

An important study of Poe's use of romantic irony in his tales to create hoaxes, this work represents a new approach to Poe's fiction.

Thomas, Dwight, and David Jackson, eds. The Poe Log. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1987. This is the most basic biographical source for information about Poe.

It includes thousands of documents and notes about his life on an almost day-to-day basis.

Related Titles

"The Pit and the Pendulum" is similar, both in its technique and its central dilemma, to other Poe stories. For example, Poe often used the concept of a premature burial as the basic predicament of a story. In many ways, the narrator in "The Pit and the Pendulum" also suffers the horror of being made to languish in his gravelike pit.

The manner in which the narrator methodically examines the nature of his cell and attempts to deduce ways he might escape is another characteristic of Poe's fiction. In this regard, the story is not only typical of Poe's nightmare stories, it also shares some of the logical elements of stories such as "The Gold-Bug" (1843) and "The Purloined Letter" (1844).

"The Pit and the Pendulum" is also typical of other Poe stories that present horrifying and extreme predicaments.

In "A Descent into the Maelstrom" (1841) the predicament is natural rather than manmade. "MS. Found in a Bottle" is also a "predicament" story, although in it the dilemma is seemingly supernatural. Poe also wrote several satires of the "predicament" story, such as "How to Write a Blackwood Article" (1838) and a story entitled simply "Predicament" (1838). "The Pit and the Pendulum" is also similar to such Poe stories as "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "The Premature Burial" (1844), which focus on the common nineteenth-century theme of being buried alive.

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