

# Tension in The Pit and the Pendulum

*Edgar Allan Poe was a master of creating tension in his writings. Below is a passage from Poe's short story, "The Pit and the Pendulum." In the story, the narrator has been convicted during the Spanish Inquisition of an unnamed crime and sentenced to death. He is tied on the floor and a large, sharp blade is swinging back and forth towards his body.*

The vibration of the pendulum was at right angles to my length. I saw that the crescent was designed to cross the region of the heart. It would fray the serge of my robe—it would return and repeat its operations—again—and again. Notwithstanding terrifically wide sweep (some thirty feet or more) and the hissing vigor of its descent, sufficient to sunder these very walls of iron, still the fraying of my robe would be all that, for several minutes, it would accomplish. And at this thought I paused. I dared not go farther than this reflection. I dwelt upon it with a pertinacity of attention—as if, in so dwelling, I could arrest here the descent of the steel. I forced myself to ponder upon the sound of the crescent as it should pass across the garment—upon the peculiar thrilling sensation which the friction of cloth produces on the nerves. I pondered upon all this frivolity until my teeth were on edge.

Down—steadily down it crept. I took a frenzied pleasure in contrasting its downward with its lateral velocity. To the

right—to the left—far and wide—with the shriek of a damned spirit; to my heart with the stealthy pace of the tiger! I alternately laughed and howled as the one or the other idea grew predominant.

Down—certainly, relentlessly down! It vibrated within three inches of my bosom! I struggled violently, furiously, to free my left arm. This was free only from the elbow to the hand. I could reach the latter, from the platter beside me, to my mouth, with great effort, but no farther. Could I have broken the fastenings above the elbow, I would have seized and attempted to arrest the pendulum. I might as well have attempted to arrest an avalanche!

Down—still unceasingly—still inevitably down! I gasped and struggled at each vibration. I shrunk convulsively at its every sweep. My eyes followed its outward or upward whirls with the eagerness of the most unmeaning despair; they closed themselves spasmodically at the descent, although death would have been a relief, oh! how unspeakable!

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How does Poe add tension to the passage? Use text examples to support your analysis.

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How does Poe add tension to the passage? Use text examples to support your analysis.

**Actual answers will vary. Some points that may be included:**

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**1) Poe uses repetition to mimic the swing of the pendulum blade and to bring the reader into the scene. He starts three paragraphs with "Down."**

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**2) He adds sensory language to allow the reader to feel, hear and see the scene, e.g. "hissing vigor," and "peculiar thrilling sensation" and "My eyes followed its outward or upward whirls."**

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**3) Poe describes the narrator's emotions alternating between hysteria and fear, as in "I alternately laughed and howled," and "I pondered upon all this frivolity until my teeth were on edge."**

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