

"This is one of the scariest books I've ever read.
I loved it!" Maryanne, 12



THE PIT AND THE PENDULUM

EDGAR ALLAN POE

The blackness of eternal night encompassed me. The intense darkness oppressed and stifled me so that I struggled for breath.

Having been condemned to death by the Spanish Inquisition, the narrator descends into a kind of hell. Dizzy with weakness and fainting with fear, he experiences such torments that death itself would be welcome. What troubles him most is the eternal question: how will he die?

Toledo Prison is notorious for the torture of the condemned. What minds have dreamed up the terror of the pit in the centre of the cell? What is the significance of the painted figure of Time with his menacing pendulum? Why do the walls glow with heat?

Experience with the narrator the intensity of his suffering, when death seems inevitable but its form uncertain. Can anything or anybody help him?



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Retold by Gill Tavner
Illustrated by Felix Bennett



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CONTENTS

The Characters	4
The Pit and the Pendulum	7
Taking things further	55

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THE CHARACTERS

The Inquisition

How can the Spanish king and queen ensure that Jews, Muslims and even Protestants are converting to Catholicism? Perhaps prison, torture and execution will help. Welcome to the Spanish Inquisition. Welcome to my suffering.

Me, the narrator

You'll never know my name, and you'll never know my crime. Maybe it wasn't a crime at all. Nevertheless, by the end of this tale you'll know me well.



My torturers

Although I never see them, I know my torturers are watching me every minute of every hour of every day.



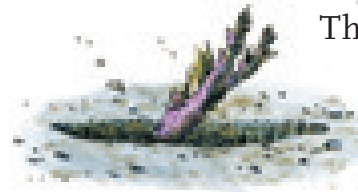
The rats

The rats, ever hungry, await my death. Could their macabre appetite be my liberation?



My fate

I know that my ultimate end will almost certainly be a painful, bitter death. All that occupies my mind is how, and when? Which will it be?



The dark pit with its unknown terrors. Oh! Any horror but this!

Agony beneath the pendulum. How unspeakable, how fearful, how deadly!



Searing heat. What unrelenting, demoniacal mind created this?

Is there any hope of rescue? Alas! I have no expectation of this.





THE PIT AND THE PENDULUM

‘Sentenced to death.’

They were the last distinct words I heard. After that, voices murmured together in a hum, like the hum of a wheel going round and round and round. The long agony of waiting had sickened me nearly to death. Exhausted both emotionally and physically, I slid dizzily, nauseously towards unconsciousness.

If you have ever clung desperately to the edge of reason before a swoon or a faint, you know how it feels to see strange shapes in burning coals; to see sad visions unseen by others; to feel your brain bewildered by music and to see clear edges blurring into dreams.

The lips of the black-robed judges who had sentenced me seemed whiter and colder than snow. These white lips were grotesquely thin; thin with sternness, thin with decisiveness, thin with contempt for human suffering.



I saw the thin white lips writhe and shape my name, but I heard nothing. My vision fell upon seven tall candles, which seemed at first like white and slender angels, but, as the deadly nausea smothered my spirit, these angels became indifferent ghosts with heads of flame. They would offer no help.

How sweet and gentle death would be were it to creep upon me now. The judges vanished before me, the candles' flames fluttered out utterly, leaving a nothingness in which blackness and darkness reigned. I was descending swiftly towards hell; the universe was nothing but silence and stillness.



a particular way in elections. However, this is not certain, and other causes such as tuberculosis or a brain haemorrhage are still considered possible.

As a writer, Poe is now best known for his *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*, of which *The Pit and the Pendulum* is one of the more famous. However, most of his life he earned money as a literary critic and assistant editor of periodicals. Although already a prolific writer of poetry and prose, it wasn't until the publication, in 1845, of his poem, *The Raven*, that he became a household name.

Well known for his tales of torment and terror, Poe is also considered to have greatly influenced the genres of detective fiction and science fiction, as well as being the first writer to establish the requirements of an effective short story. He is regarded as one of America's most important writers, helping them to move out of the shadow of English writers.

Some of the better known of his *Tales of Mystery and Imagination* include *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* and *The Gold Bug* (both available

as *Real Reads*), *The Tell-Tale Heart*, *A Premature Burial* and *The Fall of the House of Usher*. We recommend reading them all – if you dare!

The Pit and the Pendulum is set at the time of the Spanish Inquisition (known in Spanish as 'Inquisicion Espanola'). This was established in 1481 by the Catholic King Ferdinand II and Queen Isabella I. The Toledo, where the narrator is imprisoned, was a famous Spanish prison.

By the late 1400s, Spain's strong and successful army had acquired many new foreign territories, which meant bringing a lot of different people together as 'Spanish'. Many of these new Spanish subjects were Jews or Muslims. The aim of the Inquisition was to ensure that people would convert to Catholicism, and to check that their conversion was genuine and complete. Protestants in Spain were also victims of the Inquisition.

A succession of Popes, as leaders of the Catholic Church, were not keen to support the Inquisition. However, because they for many years depended on the Spanish army for their own protection, they tended to do what Spanish kings and queens wanted.