Before Reading

The Pit and the Pendulum
Short Story by Edgar Allan Poe

The Lake
Poem by Edgar Allan Poe

What breeds TERROR?

What causes your heart to race and your palms to sweat? Perhaps it’s a deserted alley, a snarling dog, or a shadowy stranger. In the following selections by Edgar Allan Poe, you will read about both the physical and the psychological effects of fear.

DISCUSS With a large group, categorize the things that terrify people. What distinguishes the fear of snakes from the fear of being buried alive, for example? What categories do you come up with?
Meet the Author

Edgar Allan Poe
1809–1849

Living a Nightmare
Edgar Allan Poe was born in Boston, the son of traveling actors. Following Poe’s birth, his father deserted the family, and his mother moved to Virginia. She died in 1811, shortly after the move. An orphan, Poe was raised by his mother’s friend Frances Allan and her husband, John, a merchant. In 1831, after brief studies at the University of Virginia and West Point, Poe, 21, sought work as a writer. Allan did not approve of Poe’s literary ambitions and, in time, severed all ties with his foster son.

A Valuable Legacy
The 1845 publication of his eerie poem “The Raven” made Poe famous. His success, however, was soon marred by personal tragedy. In 1847, his wife, Virginia, fell victim to tuberculosis. Two years later, at the age of 40, Poe himself grew ill and died. Although Poe’s life was brief, his contribution to literature was great. He is widely credited with the invention of modern horror and detective literature.

Background to the Story
Tortured Times
“The Pit and the Pendulum” is set in the Spanish city of Toledo during the grim age of the Spanish Inquisition. Since the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic Church had authorized priests to try heretics—people who opposed the teachings of the church. The priests, or inquisitors, frequently misused their power. Some suspects were tortured, and those found guilty were often executed at elaborate public ceremonies called autos-da-fé.

Text Analysis: Poe’s Style
A writer’s style is the particular way he or she uses language to communicate ideas. Some writers are famous for their distinctive, innovative styles. This is true of Edgar Allan Poe, whose dark, suspenseful works helped create the genre of modern horror literature. The following characteristics frequently mark his style:

• a first-person point of view in which the narrator expresses emotional intensity, creating a tone of horror and terror
• repeated or italicized words
• unusual choice of words, phrases, and expressions
• long sentences or sentences with interruptions
• strange or grotesque sensory images

As you read, think about how Poe’s choice of a narrator affects the tone of the work.

Reading Strategy: Paraphrase
Poe’s works can be challenging because they often feature unfamiliar words and complex sentences. One way that you can make sense of his writing as you read is to paraphrase, or restate information in your own words. A paraphrase is usually the same length as the original text but contains simpler language.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poe’s Words</th>
<th>Paraphrase</th>
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<tr>
<td>“Very suddenly there came back to my soul motion and sound…” (line 66)</td>
<td>I very quickly regained consciousness and was able to see and hear.</td>
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Review: Make Inferences

Vocabulary in Context
Many of Poe’s words may seem unusual or old-fashioned. Review the list, noting any familiar roots, prefixes, or suffixes that might help you unlock the meanings of these words.

| Word List | confound | eloquent | indeterminate | insuperable | lethargy | lucid | indeterminate | pertinacity | pervade | supposition | voracity |

Complete the activities in your Reader/Writer Notebook.
I was sick—sick unto death with that long agony; and when they at length unbound me, and I was permitted to sit, I felt that my senses were leaving me. The sentence—the dread sentence of death—was the last of distinct accentuation which reached my ears. After that, the sound of the inquisitorial voices seemed merged in one dreamy indeterminate hum. It conveyed to my soul the idea of revolution—perhaps from its association in fancy with the burr of a millwheel. This only for a brief period; for presently I heard no more. Yet, for a while, I saw; but with how terrible an exaggeration! I saw the lips of the black-robed judges. They appeared to me white—whiter than the sheet upon which I trace these words—and thin even to grotesqueness; thin with the intensity of their expression of firmness—of immoveable resolution—of stern contempt of human torture. I saw that the decrees of what to me was Fate, were still issuing from those lips. I saw them writhe with a deadly locution. I saw them fashion the syllables of my name; and I shuddered because no sound succeeded. I saw, too, for a few moments of delirious horror, the soft and nearly imperceptible waving of the sable draperies which enveloped the walls of the apartment. And then my vision fell upon the seven tall candles upon the table. At first they wore the aspect of charity, and seemed white.
slender angels who would save me; but then, all at once, there came a most
deadly nausea over my spirit, and I felt every fiber in my frame thrill as if
I had touched the wire of a galvanic5 battery, while the angel forms became
meaningless specters, with heads of flame, and I saw that from them there
would be no help. And then there stole into my fancy, like a rich musical note,
the thought of what sweet rest there must be in the grave. The thought came
gently and stealthily, and it seemed long before it attained full appreciation;6
but just as my spirit came at length properly to feel and entertain it, the figures
of the judges vanished, as if magically, from before me; the tall candles sank
into nothingness; their flames went out utterly; the blackness of darkness
supervened; all sensations appeared swallowed up in a mad rushing descent as of
the soul into Hades.7 Then silence, and stillness, and night were the universe.

I had swooned;8 but still will not say that all of consciousness was lost. What
of it there remained I will not attempt to define, or even to describe; yet all
was not lost. In the deepest slumber—no! In delirium—no! In a swoon—no!
In death—no! even in the grave all is not lost. Else there is no immortality for
man. 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. In the return to life from
the swoon there are two stages; first, that of the sense of mental or spiritual;
secondly, that of the sense of physical, existence. It seems probable that if,
upon reaching the second stage, we could recall the impressions of the first, we
should find these impressions eloquent in memories of the gulf beyond. And
that gulf is—what? How at least shall we distinguish its shadows from those
of the tomb? But if the impressions of what I have termed the first stage, are
not, at will, recalled, yet, after long interval, do they not come unbidden, while
we marvel whence9 they come? He who has never swooned, is not he who
finds strange palaces and wildly familiar faces in coals that glow; is not he who
beholds floating in midair the sad visions that the many may not view; is not
he who ponders over the perfume of some novel flower—is not he whose brain
grows bewildered with the meaning of some musical cadence which has never
before arrested his attention.

Amid frequent and thoughtful endeavors to remember; amid earnest
struggles to regather some token of the state of seeming nothingness into
which my soul had lapsed, there have been moments when I have dreamed
of success; there have been brief, very brief periods when I have conjured
up remembrances which the lucid reason of a later epoch assures me could
have had reference only to that condition of seeming unconsciousness. These

5. galvanic (gäl-vân’ik): electric.
6. attained full appreciation: was fully understood.
7. Hades (hā’dāz): the underworld in Greek mythology.
8. swooned: passed out from weakness or distress.
9. whence: from where.
shadows of memory tell, indistinctly, of tall figures that lifted and bore me in silence down—down—still down—till a hideous dizziness oppressed me at the mere idea of the interminableness of the descent. They tell also of a vague horror at my heart, on account of that heart’s unnatural stillness. Then comes a sense of sudden motionlessness throughout all things; as if those who bore me (a ghastly train!) had outrun, in their descent, the limits of the limitless, and paused from the weariness of their toil. After this I call to mind flatness and dampness; and that all is madness—the madness of a memory which busies itself among forbidden things.

VeRY suddenly there came back to my soul motion and sound—the tumultuous motion of the heart, and, in my ears, the sound of its beating. Then a pause in which all is blank. Then again sound, and motion, and touch—a tingling sensation pervading my frame. Then the mere consciousness of existence, without thought—a condition which lasted long. Then, very suddenly, thought, and shuddering terror, and earnest endeavor to comprehend my true state. Then a strong desire to lapse into insensibility. Then a rushing revival of soul and a successful effort to move. And now a full memory of the trial, of the judges, of the sable draperies, of the sentence, of the sickness, of the swoon. Then entire forgetfulness of all that followed; of all that a later day and much earnestness of endeavor have enabled me vaguely to recall.

So far, I had not opened my eyes. I felt that I lay upon my back, unbound. I reached out my hand, and it fell heavily upon something damp and hard. There I suffered it to remain for many minutes, while I strove to imagine where and what I could be. I longed, yet dared not to employ my vision. I dreaded the first glance at objects around me. It was not that I feared to look upon things horrible, but that I grew aghast lest there should be nothing to see. 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. I brought to mind the inquisitorial proceedings, and attempted from that point to deduce my real condition. The sentence had passed; and it appeared to me that a very long interval of time had since elapsed. Yet not for a moment did I suppose myself actually dead. Such a supposition, notwithstanding what we read in fiction, is altogether inconsistent with real existence;—but where and in what state was I? The condemned to death, I knew, perished usually at the autos-da-fé, and

10. suffered: allowed.
11. autos-da-fé (ou’tôz-da-fé’) Portuguese: acts of faith—public executions of people tried by the Inquisition, carried out by the civil authorities.
one of these had been held on the very night of the day of my trial. Had I been remanded to my dungeon, to await the next sacrifice, which would not take place for many months? This I at once saw could not be. Victims had been in immediate demand. Moreover, my dungeon, as well as all the condemned cells at Toledo, had stone floors, and light was not altogether excluded.

A fearful idea now suddenly drove the blood in torrents upon my heart, and for a brief period, I once more relapsed into insensibility. Upon recovering, I at once started to my feet, trembling convulsively in every fiber. I thrust my arms wildly above and around me in all directions. I felt nothing; yet dreaded to move a step, lest I should be impeded by the walls of the tomb. Perspiration burst from every pore and stood in cold big beads on my forehead. The agony of suspense grew at length intolerable, and I cautiously moved forward, with my arms extended, and my eyes straining from their sockets, in the hope of catching some faint ray of light. I proceeded for many paces; but still all was blackness and vacancy. I breathed more freely. It seemed evident that mine was not, at least, the most hideous of fates.

And now, as I still continued to step cautiously onward, there came thronging upon my recollection a thousand vague rumors of the horrors of Toledo. Of the dungeons there had been strange things narrated—fables I

**Poe’s Style**

Reread lines 100–110. What unusual words and phrases express the narrator’s dread of the dungeon?
had always deemed them—but yet strange, and too ghastly to repeat, save
in a whisper. Was I left to perish of starvation in the subterranean world of
darkness; or what fate, perhaps even more fearful, awaited me? That the result
would be death, and a death of more than customary bitterness, I knew too
well the character of my judges to doubt. The mode and the hour were all that
occupied or distracted me.

My outstretched hands at length encountered some solid obstruction.
It was a wall, seemingly of stone masonry—very smooth, slimy, and cold.
I followed it up! stepping with all the careful distrust with which certain
antique narratives had inspired me. This process, however, afforded me no
means of ascertaining the dimensions of my dungeon; as I might make its
circuit, and return to the point whence I set out, without being aware of the
fact; so perfectly uniform seemed the wall. I therefore sought the knife which
had been in my pocket, when led into the inquisitorial chamber; but it was
gone; my clothes had been exchanged for a wrapper of coarse serge. I had
thought of forcing the blade in some minute crevice of the masonry, so as to
identify my point of departure. The difficulty, nevertheless, was but trivial;
although, in the disorder of my fancy, it seemed at first insuperable. I tore a
part of the hem from the robe and placed the fragment at full length, and at
right angles to the wall. In groping my way around the prison I could not fail
to encounter this rag upon completing the circuit. So, at least I thought: but I
had not counted upon the extent of the dungeon, or upon my own weakness.
The ground was moist and slippery. I staggered onward for some time, when
I stumbled and fell. My excessive fatigue induced me to remain prostrate; and
sleep soon overtook me as I lay.

Upon awakening, and stretching forth an arm, I found beside me a loaf
and a pitcher with water. I was too much exhausted to reflect upon this
circumstance, but ate and drank with avidity. Shortly afterward, I resumed my
tour around the prison, and with much toil, came at last upon the fragment of
the serge. Up to the period when I fell I had counted fifty-two paces, and upon
resuming my walk, I counted forty-eight more;—when I arrived at the rag.
There were in all, then, a hundred paces; and, admitting two paces to the yard,
I presumed the dungeon to be fifty yards in circuit. I had met, however, with
many angles in the wall, and thus I could form no guess at the shape of the
vault; for vault I could not help supposing it to be.

I had little object—certainly no hope—in these researches; but a vague
curiosity prompted me to continue them. Quitting the wall, I resolved to cross
the area of the enclosure. At first I proceeded with extreme caution, for the
floor, although seemingly of solid material, was treacherous with slime. At
length, however, I took courage, and did not hesitate to step firmly; endeavoring

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12. **serge** (sûr̥j): a woolen cloth.
to cross in as direct a line as possible. I had advanced some ten or twelve
paces in this manner, when the remnant of the torn hem of my robe became
entangled between my legs. I stepped on it, and fell violently on my face.

In the confusion attending my fall, I did not immediately apprehend a
somewhat startling circumstance, which yet, in a few seconds afterward, and
while I still lay prostrate, arrested my attention. It was this—my chin rested
upon the floor of the prison, but my lips and the upper portion of my head,
although seemingly at a less elevation than the chin, touched nothing. At the
same time my forehead seemed bathed in a clammy vapor, and the peculiar
smell of decayed fungus arose to my nostrils. I put forward my arm, and
shuddered to find that I had fallen at the very brink of a circular pit, whose
extent, of course, I had no means of ascertaining at the moment. Gropping
about the masonry just below the margin, I succeeded in dislodging a small
fragment, and let it fall into the abyss. For many seconds I hearkened to its
reverberations as it dashed against the sides of the chasm in its descent; at
length there was a sullen plunge into water, succeeded by loud echoes. At
the same moment there came a sound resembling the quick opening, and as
rapid closing of a door overhead, while a faint gleam of light flashed suddenly
through the gloom, and as suddenly faded away.

I saw clearly the doom which had been prepared for me, and congratulated
myself upon the timely accident by which I had escaped. Another step before
my fall, and the world had seen me no more. And the death just avoided, was
of that very character which I had regarded as fabulous and frivolous in the
tales respecting the Inquisition. To the victims of its tyranny, there was the
choice of death with its direst physical agonies, or death with its most hideous
moral horrors. I had been reserved for the latter. By long suffering my nerves
had been unstrung, until I trembled at the sound of my own voice, and had
become in every respect a fitting subject for the species of torture which
awaited me.

Shaking in every limb, I groped my way back to the wall; resolving there to
perish rather than risk the terrors of the wells, of which my imagination now
pictured many in various positions about the dungeon. In other conditions of
mind I might have had courage to end my misery at once by a plunge into one
of these abysses; but now I was the veriest of cowards. Neither could I forget
what I had read of these pits—that the sudden extinction of life formed no part
of their most horrible plan.

Agitation of spirit kept me awake for many long hours; but at length I again
slumbered. Upon arousing, I found by my side as before, a loaf and a pitcher
of water. A burning thirst consumed me, and I emptied the vessel at a draft. It
must have been drugged; for scarcely had I drunk, before I became irresistibly
drowsy. A deep sleep fell upon me—a sleep like that of death. How long it
lasted of course, I know not; but when, once again, I unclosed my eyes, the
objects around me were visible. By a wild sulphurous luster,\(^{13}\) the origin of which I could not at first determine, I was enabled to see the extent and aspect of the prison.

In its size I had been greatly mistaken. The whole circuit of its walls did not exceed twenty-five yards. For some minutes this fact occasioned me a world of vain trouble;\(^{14}\) vain indeed! for what could be of less importance, under the terrible circumstances which environed me, than the mere dimensions of my dungeon? But my soul took a wild interest in trifles, and I busied myself in endeavors to account for the error I had committed in my measurement. The truth at length flashed upon me. In my first attempt at exploration I had counted fifty-two paces, up to the period when I fell; I must then have been within a pace or two of the fragments of serge; in fact, I had nearly performed the circuit of the vault. I then slept, and upon awaking, I must have returned upon my steps—thus supposing the circuit nearly double what it actually was. My confusion of mind prevented me from observing that I began my tour with the wall to the left, and ended it with the wall to the right.

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13. sulphurous (sül′fo-ras) luster: fiery glow.

14. occasioned . . . trouble: caused me a great deal of useless worry.
I had been deceived, too, in respect to the shape of the enclosure. In feeling my way around I had found many angles, and thus deduced an idea of great irregularity; so potent is the effect of total darkness upon one arousing from lethargy or sleep! The angles were simply those of a few slight depressions, or niches, at odd intervals. The general shape of the prison was square. What I had taken for masonry seemed now to be iron, or some other metal, in huge plates, whose sutures or joints occasioned the depression. The entire surface of this metallic enclosure was rudely daubed in all the hideous and repulsive devices to which the charnel superstitions\(^{15}\) of the monks has given rise. The figures of fiends in aspects of menace, with skeleton forms, and other more really fearful images, overspread and disfigured the walls. I observed that the outlines of these monstrosities were sufficiently distinct, but that the colors seemed faded and blurred, as if from the effects of a damp atmosphere. I now noticed the floor, too, which was of stone. In the center yawned the circular pit from whose jaws I had escaped; but it was the only one in the dungeon.

All this I saw distinctly and by much effort: for my personal condition had been greatly changed during slumber. I now lay upon my back, and at full length, on a species of low framework of wood. To this I was securely bound by a long strap resembling a surcingle.\(^{16}\) It passed in many convolutions about my limbs and body, leaving at liberty only my head, and my left arm to such extent that I could, by dint\(^{17}\) of much exertion, supply myself with food from an earthen dish which lay by my side on the floor. I saw, to my horror, that the pitcher had been removed. I say to my horror; for I was consumed with intolerable thirst. This thirst it appeared to be the design of my persecutors to stimulate: for the food in the dish was meat pungently seasoned.

Looking upward I surveyed the ceiling of my prison. It was some thirty or forty feet overhead, and constructed much as the side walls. In one of its panels a very singular figure riveted my whole attention. It was the painted figure of Time as he is commonly represented, save that, in lieu of a scythe, he held what, at a casual glance, I supposed to be the pictured image of a huge pendulum such as we see on antique clocks. There was something, however, in the appearance of this machine which caused me to regard it more attentively. While I gazed directly upward at it (for its position was immediately over my own) I fancied that I saw it in motion. In an instant afterward the fancy was confirmed. Its sweep was brief, and of course slow. I watched it for some minutes, somewhat in fear, but more in wonder. Wearied at length with observing its dull movement, I turned my eyes upon the other objects in the cell.

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\(^{15}\) charnel (chär’nel) superstitions: ghastly irrational beliefs.

\(^{16}\) surcingle (sûr’sîng’gal): a band used to tie a pack or saddle to a horse.

\(^{17}\) dint: force.
A slight noise attracted my notice, and, looking to the floor, I saw several enormous rats traversing it. They had issued from the well, which lay just within view to my right. Even then, while I gazed, they came up in troops, hurriedly, with ravenous eyes, allured by the scent of the meat. From this it required much effort and attention to scare them away.

It might have been half an hour, perhaps even an hour, (for I could take but imperfect note of time) before I again cast my eyes upward. What I then saw confounded and amazed me. The sweep of the pendulum had increased in extent by nearly a yard. As a natural consequence, its velocity was also much greater. But what mainly disturbed me was the idea that it had perceptibly descended. I now observed—with what horror it is needless to say—that its nether extremity was formed of a crescent of glittering steel, about a foot in length from horn to horn; the horns upward, and the under edge evidently as keen as that of a razor. Like a razor also, it seemed massy and heavy, tapering from the edge into a solid and broad structure above. It was appended to a weighty rod of brass, and the whole hissed as it swung through the air.

I could no longer doubt the doom prepared for me by monkish ingenuity in torture. My cognizance of the pit had become known to the inquisitorial agents—the pit whose horrors had been destined for so bold a recusant 18 as myself—the pit, typical of hell, and regarded by rumor as the Ultima Thule 19 of all their punishments. The plunge into this pit I had avoided by the merest of accidents, and I knew that surprise, or entrapment into torment, formed an important portion of all the grotesquerie of these dungeon deaths. Having failed to fall, it was no part of the demon plan to hurl me into the abyss; and thus (there being no alternative) a different and a milder destruction awaited me. Milder! I half smiled in my agony as I thought of such application of such a term.

What boots it 20 to tell of the long, long hours of horror more than mortal, during which I counted the rushing vibrations of the steel! Inch by inch—line by line—with a descent only appreciable at intervals that seemed ages—down and still down it came! Days passed—it might have been that many days passed—ere it swept so closely over me as to fan me with its acrid breath. The odor of the sharp steel forced itself into my nostrils. I prayed—I wearied heaven with my prayer for its more speedy descent. I grew frantically mad, and struggled to force myself upward against the sweep of the fearful scimitar. 21 And then I fell suddenly calm, and lay smiling at the glittering death, as a child at some rare bauble.

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18. recusant (rē′kənz′) a religious dissenter; heretic.
19. Ultima Thule (ol′tə-mə thō′ə-lē) according to ancient geographers, the most remote region of the habitable world—here used figuratively to mean "most extreme achievement; summit."
20. what boots it: what good is it.
21. scimitar (sīm′ə-tər) a curved, single-edged Asian sword.
HERE was another interval of utter insensibility; it was brief; for, upon
again lapsing into life there had been no perceptible descent in the
pendulum. But it might have been long; for I knew there were demons who
took note of my swoon, and who could have arrested the vibration at pleasure.

Upon my recovery, too, I felt very—oh, inexpressibly sick and weak, as if
through long inanition. Even amid the agonies of that period, the human
nature craved food. With painful effort I outstretched my left arm as far as my
bonds permitted, and took possession of the small remnant which had been
spared me by the rats. As I put a portion of it within my lips, there rushed to
my mind a half formed thought of joy—of hope. Yet what business had I with
hope? It was, as I say, a half formed thought—man has many such which are
never completed. I felt that it was of joy—of hope; but I felt also that it had
perished in its formation. In vain I struggled to perfect—to regain it. Long
suffering had nearly annihilated all my ordinary powers of mind. I was an
imbecile—an idiot.

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 its 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 . . . 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! Still I quivered in every nerve to think
how slight a sinking of the machinery would precipitate that keen, glistening

22. inanition (in’a-nish’an): wasting away from lack of food.
axe upon my bosom. It was hope that prompted the nerve to quiver—the frame
to shrink. It was hope—the hope that triumphs on the rack—\(^{23}\)—that whispers
to the death-condemned even in the dungeons of the Inquisition. \(^{1}\)

I saw that some ten or twelve vibrations would bring the steel in actual
contact with my robe, and with this observation there suddenly came over
my spirit all the keen, collected calmness of despair. For the first time during
many hours—or perhaps days—I thought. It now occurred to me that the
bandage, or surcingle, which enveloped me, was unique. I was tied by no
separate cord. The first stroke of the razor-like crescent athwart\(^{24}\) any portion
of the band, would so detach it that it might be unwound from my person
by means of my left hand. But how fearful, in that case, the proximity of the
steel! The result of the slightest struggle how deadly! Was it likely, moreover,
that the minions\(^{25}\) of the torturer had not foreseen and provided for this
possibility! Was it probable that the bandage crossed my bosom in the track
of the pendulum? Dreading to find my faint, and, as it seemed, my last hope
frustrated, I so far elevated my head as to obtain a distinct view of my breast.
The surcingle enveloped my limbs and body close in all directions—save in
the path of the destroying crescent.

Scarcely had I dropped my head back into its original position, when there
flashed upon my mind what I cannot better describe than as the unformed half
of that idea of deliverance to which I have previously alluded, and of which a
moiety\(^{26}\) only floated indeterminately through my brain when I raised food to
my burning lips. The whole thought was now present—feeble, scarcely sane,
scarcely definite,—but still entire. I proceeded at once, with the nervous
energy of despair, to attempt its execution.

For many hours the immediate vicinity of the low framework upon which
I lay, had been literally swarming with rats. They were wild, bold, ravenous;
their red eyes glaring upon me as if they waited but for motionlessness on
my part to make me their prey. “To what food,” I thought, “have they been
accustomed in the well?”

They had devoured, in spite of all my efforts to prevent them, all but a
small remnant of the contents of the dish. I had fallen into an habitual see-
saw, or wave of the hand about the platter, and, at length, the unconscious
uniformity of the movement deprived it of effect. In their voracity\(^{27}\) the vermin
frequently fastened their sharp fangs into my fingers. With the particles of
the oily and spicy viand\(^{28}\) which now remained, I thoroughly rubbed the
bandage wherever I could reach it; then, raising my hand from the floor, I lay
breathlessly still. \(^{m}\)

At first the ravenous animals were startled and terrified at the change—at
the cessation of movement. They shrunk alarmedly back; many sought the

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\(^{23}\) rack: a device for torturing people by gradually stretching their bodies.

\(^{24}\) athwart: across.

\(^{25}\) minions (mɪˈnɪnz): followers; servants.

\(^{26}\) moiety (moiˈIti): half.

\(^{27}\) viand (viˈand): food.
well. But this was only for a moment. I had not counted in vain upon their voracity. Observing that I remained without motion, one or two of the boldest leaped upon the framework, and smelt at the surcingle. This seemed the signal for a general rush. Forth from the well they hurried in fresh troops. They clung to the wood—they overran it, and leaped in hundreds upon my person. The measured movement of the pendulum disturbed them not at all. Avoiding its strokes they busied themselves with the anointed bandage. They pressed—they swarmed upon me in ever accumulating heaps. They writhed upon my throat; their cold lips sought my own; I was half stifled by their thronging pressure; disgust, for which the world has no name, swelled my bosom, and chilled, with a heavy clamminess, my heart. Yet one minute, and I felt that the struggle would be over. Plainly I perceived the loosening of the bandage. I knew that in more than one place it must be already severed. With a more than human resolution I lay still.

Nor had I erred in my calculations—nor had I endured in vain. I at length felt that I was free. The surcingle hung in ribands\(^{28}\) from my body. But the stroke of the pendulum already pressed upon my bosom. It had divided the serge of the robe. It had cut through the linen beneath. Twice again it swung, and a sharp sense of pain shot through every nerve. But the moment of escape

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\(\text{28. ribands} \text{ (rɪˈbændz): ribbons.}\)
had arrived. At a wave of my hand my deliverers hurried tumultuously away. With a steady movement—cautious, sidelong, shrinking, and slow—I slid from the embrace of the bandage and beyond the reach of the scimitar. For the moment, at least, I was free.

Free!—and in the grasp of the Inquisition! I had scarcely stepped from my wooden bed of horror upon the stone floor of the prison, when the motion of the hellish machine ceased and I beheld it drawn up, by some invisible force, through the ceiling. This was a lesson which I took desperately to heart. My every motion was undoubtedly watched. Free!—I had but escaped death in one form of agony, to be delivered unto worse than death in some other. With that thought I rolled my eyes nervously around the barriers of iron that hemmed me in. Something unusual—some change which at first I could not appreciate distinctly—it was obvious, had taken place in the apartment. For many minutes in a dreamy and trembling abstraction, I busied myself in vain, unconnected conjecture. During this period, I became aware, for the first time, of the origin of the sulphurous light which illuminated the cell. It proceeded from a fissure, about half an inch in width, extending entirely around the prison at the base of the walls, which thus appeared, and were, completely separated from the floor. I endeavored, but of course in vain, to look through the aperture.

As I arose from the attempt, the mystery of the alteration in the chamber broke at once upon my understanding. I have observed that, although the outlines of the figures upon the walls were sufficiently distinct, yet the colors seemed blurred and indefinite. These colors had now assumed, and were momentarily assuming, a startling and most intense brilliancy, that gave to the spectral and fiendish portraiture an aspect that might have thrilled even firmer nerves than my own. Demon eyes, of a wild and ghastly vivacity, glared upon me in a thousand directions, where none had been visible before, and gleamed with the lurid luster of a fire that I could not force my imagination to regard as unreal.

Unreal!—Even while I breathed there came to my nostrils the breath of the vapor of heated iron! A suffocating odor pervaded the prison! A deeper glow settled each moment in the eyes that glared at my agonies! A richer tint of crimson diffused itself over the pictured horrors of blood. I panted! I gasped for breath! There could be no doubt of the design of my tormentors—oh! most unrelenting! oh! most demoniac of men! I shrank from the glowing metal to the center of the cell. 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

29. aperture (əpˈər-chər): opening.
my shuddering reason.—Oh! for a voice to speak!—oh! horror!—oh! any 
horror but this! With a shriek, I rushed from the margin, and buried my face 
in my hands—weeping bitterly.

The heat rapidly increased, and once again I looked up, shuddering as with 
a fit of the ague.30 There had been a second change in the cell—and now the 
change was obviously in the form. As before, it was in vain that I, at first, 
endeavored to appreciate or understand what was taking place. But not long 
was I left in doubt. The Inquisitorial vengeance had been hurried by my two-
fold escape, and there was to be no more dallying with the King of Terrors. 
The room had been square. I saw that two of its iron angles were now acute—
two, consequently, obtuse. The fearful difference quickly increased with a 
low rumbling or moaning sound. In an instant the apartment had shifted its 
form into that of a lozenge. But the alteration stopped not here—I neither 
hoped nor desired it to stop. I could have clasped the red walls to my bosom 
as a garment of eternal peace. “Death,” I said, “any death but that of the pit!” 
Fool! might I have not known that into the pit it was the object of the burning 
iron to urge me? Could I resist its glow? or, if even that, could I withstand its 
pressure? And now, flatter and flatter grew the lozenge, with a rapidity that 
left me no time for contemplation. Its center, and of course, its greatest width, 
came just over the yawning gulf. I shrank back—but the closing walls pressed 
me resistlessly onward. At length for my seared and writhing body there was 
no longer an inch of foothold on the firm floor of the prison. I struggled no 
more, but the agony of my soul found vent in one loud, long, and final scream 
of despair. I felt that I tottered upon the brink—I averted my eyes—

There was a discordant hum of human voices! There was a loud blast of 
many trumpets! There was a harsh grating as of a thousand thunders! The 
fiery walls rushed back! An outstretched arm caught my own as I fell, fainting, 
into the abyss. It was that of General Lasalle. The French army had entered 
Toledo. The Inquisition was in the hands of its enemies.  

30. **the ague** (ə’gyo0): a feverish illness.
In youth’s spring, it was my lot
To haunt of the wide earth a spot
The which I could not love the less;
So lovely was the loneliness
Of a wild lake, with black rock bound,
And the tall pines that tower’d around.
But when the night had thrown her pall
Upon that spot—as upon all,
And the wind would pass me by
In its still melody,
My infant spirit would awake
To the terror of that lone lake.
Yet that terror was not fright—
But a tremulous delight,
And a feeling undefin’d,
Springing from a darken’d mind.  
Death was in that poison’d wave
And in its gulf a fitting grave
For him who thence could solace bring
To his dark imagining;
Whose wild’ring thought could even make
An Eden of that dim lake.

**POE’S STYLE**
Reread lines 1–16. Which words and phrases help communicate the emotional intensity of the speaker?

**PARAPHRASE**
Paraphrase lines 17–22. What comfort does the speaker find in visiting the eerie lake?
Comprehension

1. Recall  What are the first two dangers the narrator faces in the story?
2. Clarify  Who or what seems to save the narrator at the end?
3. Summarize  In the poem, what effect does the lake have on the speaker?

Text Analysis

4. Make Inferences About Character  Consider the narrator’s words, thoughts, and actions in “The Pit and the Pendulum.” What can you infer are his greatest strengths in his battle against the inquisitors? Support your answer with details from the story.

5. Paraphrase the Ending  Paraphrase the story’s conclusion, lines 454–458. Do you think the narrator is truly saved, or is he simply imagining a rescue as he falls? Cite evidence to support your opinion.

6. Examine Sound Devices  Reread “The Lake,” looking for examples of alliteration (repetition of consonant sounds at the beginnings of words) and assonance (repetition of vowel sounds). Which sound device does Poe use more extensively? What effect does this have on the reader?

7. Analyze Imagery and Mood  Find several examples of sensory imagery—words and phrases that appeal to the senses—in the story and in the poem. In what way do these images help convey the tone of the story?

8. Analyze Poe’s Style  Poe has fascinated readers with his tales of horror and haunting poetry. Identify the stylistic characteristics that are common to both selections you have just read. Use the following list to help you:
   - a first-person point of view that expresses emotional intensity
   - repeated or italicized words
   - unusual choice of words, phrases, and expressions
   - long sentences or sentences with interruptions
   - strange or grotesque sensory images

Text Criticism

9. Critical Interpretations  One literary critic has noted that Poe’s “imagination is visual and three-dimensional. . . . If he had been alive today he probably would be a filmmaker.” Do you think “The Pit and the Pendulum” would succeed as a movie? What would have to be changed in order to adapt the story for the screen? Explain.

What breeds TERROR?

What could a person do to overcome his or her fear?
Vocabulary in Context

▲ VOCABULARY PRACTICE

Indicate whether the words in each pair are synonyms or antonyms.

1. precise/indeterminate
2. eloquent/inarticulate
3. lucid/clear
4. spread/pervade
5. supposition/evidence
6. insuperable/unconquerable
7. lethargy/excitement
8. bewilder/confound
9. reluctance/pertinacity
10. hunger/voracity

ACADEMIC VOCABULARY IN WRITING

- clarify
- feature
- precise
- style
- transmit

Imagine that you are able to view the narrator in the dungeon. Write a paragraph to transmit your feelings about him and his circumstances. Highlight one feature that makes a strong impression on you, and choose precise words to describe it. Use at least one Academic Vocabulary word in your response.

VOCABULARY STRATEGY: FOREIGN WORDS USED IN ENGLISH

The English language changes all the time. Over its history, it has continually acquired new words from other languages and from historical events. For example, in line 94 of “The Pit and the Pendulum,” Poe uses the term *autos-da-fé* (literally, “acts of faith”), which arose during the Spanish Inquisition to describe public executions, and then made its way into English usage. Other words that entered English from Spanish and Portuguese languages include *armada, galleon,* and *guerilla.*

PRACTICE Match each word below with its original meaning from Spanish. You can use a dictionary to help you.

1. armada a Spanish ship of war
2. galleon a Spanish-Portuguese irregular army member who fought against Napoleon
3. guerilla a Spanish fleet of ships sent against England in 1588
Language

◆ GRAMMAR AND STYLE: Use Personification

Review the Grammar and Style note on page 866. Poe uses a type of figurative language known as **personification**, in which a writer gives human characteristics to an animal, a thing, or an idea. To create personification, choose **nouns**, **verbs**, and **adjectives** that are usually used to refer to people. In the following example, Poe refers to the pendulum that moves to “fan” the narrator with its “breath”:

*Days passed—it might have been that many days passed—ere it swept so closely over me as to fan me with its acrid breath.* (lines 279–280)

Notice how the revisions in blue make the images in this first draft more memorable. Revise your response to the prompt by incorporating examples of personification.

**STUDENT MODEL**

In “The Pit and the Pendulum,” the narrator is trapped between the pit and the enclosing walls, with the added danger of the sharp pendulum above him.

**READING-WRITING CONNECTION**

Broaden your understanding of Poe’s works by responding to this prompt. Then use the **revising tip** to improve your writing.

**WRITING PROMPT**

Extended Constructed Response: Write Across Texts

According to one critic, Poe’s work is concerned with “death-in-life” and “life-in-death.” How do “The Pit and the Pendulum” and “The Lake” deal with these themes? Using examples from the texts, write a three- to five-paragraph response.

**REVISING TIP**

Review your response. Have you used personification to make your descriptions memorable? If not, revise to give human characteristics to an animal, thing, or idea.