

Edgar Allan Poe, *The Pit and the Pendulum*

This is an extract from the *The Pit and the Pendulum*, a short story published in 1842 and set at the times of the Spanish Inquisition, a powerful religious court of law which punished people whose religious beliefs and practices did not agree with those of the Church. Their punishments were often extremely cruel and severe. The narrator of the story has been convicted 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.

In great fear, I saw that the lower end of the pendulum was formed of a blade of shining steel, shaped like the new moon, and about a foot in length from point to point. The ends of the blade turned upward; and the lower edge looked as sharp as a razor. Like a razor also, it seemed heavy and solid above. It was fixed to a thick rod of brass, and the whole whistled as it swung through the air.

I could no longer doubt the death that had been prepared for me by the human devils of the Inquisition. I had avoided the pit by a mere accident, and I knew that surprise was an important part of the cruelty of these prison deaths. As I had failed to fall, I was not simply to be thrown into the well. A different and a milder destruction was made ready for me. Milder! I trembled as I thought about the word.

What use is it to tell of the long, long hours of suffering that followed, during which I counted the swings of the steel? Inch by inch it fell - down and still down it came! The downward movement was extremely slow, and it was only after several hours that I noticed any increase in the length of the brass rod. Days passed - it might have been many days - before the blade swept so closely over me as to fan me with its bitter breath. The smell of the sharp steel came to me in waves. I prayed for it to reach me quickly. I struggled to force myself upwards against

the razor-sharp edge, as it swung across my body. And then I grew suddenly calm, and lay smiling at the shining death, as a child smiles at some bright jewel.

For a short time I lost consciousness. When my senses returned, I felt sick and weak; but in spite of my suffering, I wanted food. With painful effort I reached for the few pieces of meat beside me. As I put some of it to my lips, a half-formed thought of joy - of hope - rushed into my mind. I struggled to make it complete, but it escaped me. Long suffering had nearly killed all my ordinary powers of mind.

The swing of the pendulum was across my body - directly across my heart. It would first touch the cloth of my wrap; it would return and cut deeper - again - and again. In spite of its wide swing (which was now thirty feet or more), and its great speed, it would not, for several minutes, cut into my flesh. At this thought, I paused. I dared not think further. I watched the blade as it flew above me.

Down - steadily down it crept. To the right - to the left - far and wide - with the terrible whistle of death! Down certainly down within three inches of my chest! I struggled violently to free my left arm. I shook and turned my head at every swing. I opened and closed my eyes as the bright blade flashed above me. Oh, what wonderful relief if I could die!

↓ WRITING

How is tension created in the passage above?

Quote from the text to support your analysis.

