

The Pit and the Pendulum

by Edgar Allan Poe

In this passage from Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Pit and the Pendulum," 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.

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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!

Questions

1. In the passage, Poe starts three paragraphs with the word "down." What effect does this have on the passage?
2. What does "arrest" mean in this quotation from the passage: "I could *arrest* here the descent of the steel"?
3. Poe uses many sensory phrases to allow the reader to see, hear, and feel the scene. One example of such a phrase is "the hissing vigor of its descent." List two other sensory phrases.
4. Citing text from the passage, tell how the narrator feels.

Vocabulary List

Each of the vocabulary words below are used in the reading passage. As you read the passage, pay attention to context clues that suggest the word's meaning.

1. vigor
2. pertinacity
3. arrest
4. frivolity
5. frenzied
6. predominant
7. seized
8. unceasingly

Context Clues

Using context clues from the sentences in the passage, underline the correct meaning of the word in boldface.

- 1) Notwithstanding terrifically wide sweep (some thirty feet or more) and the hissing **vigor** of its descent, sufficient to sunder these very walls of iron...
- a. decline b. mechanics c. strength d. weakness
- 2) And at this thought I paused. I dared not go farther than this reflection. I dwelt upon it with a **pertinacity** of attention—
- a. fading b. persistent c. transient d. small amount
- 3) "...as if, in so dwelling, I could **arrest** here the descent of the steel."
- a. speed up b. slow down c. stop d. start
- 4) I pondered upon all this **frivolity** until my teeth were on edge.
- a. importance b. insignificance c. confusion d. peculiarity
- 5) I took a **frenzied** pleasure in contrasting its downward with its lateral velocity.
- a. frantic b. frozen c. worried d. freeing
- 6) I alternately laughed and howled as the one or the other idea grew **predominant**.
- a. less powerful b. more powerful c. unreal d. real
- 7) Could I have broken the fastenings above the elbow, I would have **seized** and attempted to arrest the pendulum.
- a. released b. broken c. grabbed d. collapsed
- 8) Down—still **unceasingly**—still inevitably down!
- a. not slowing b. not stopping c. not speeding up d. not wavering