

FOLKWAYS RECORDS FL 9705

EDGAR ALLAN POE READ BY DAVID KURLAN

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THE PIT AND THE PENDULUM

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David Kurlan Reads

The PIT and the PENDULUM

by Edgar Allan Poe

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"I gasped for breath—I felt that I must scream or die!"

From *Ten Great Mysteries* by

Edgar Allan Poe: Master of Horror

"The Pit and the Pendulum"

Young people enjoy being scared, and Edgar Allan Poe can scare them more than almost anyone. He is one of the all-time masters of creeping flesh and goose-pimple raisers. In one of his tales of terror, "The Pit and the Pendulum," he stirs, in the minds and hearts of his readers, a prickly sense of terror. "The Pit and the Pendulum," like ghost stories around a campfire, fulfills Poe's intention more successfully when heard.

With this recording you will find the text of "The Pit and the Pendulum" together with nine other Poe tales in *Ten Great Mysteries* by Edgar Allan Poe, a Scholastic Book Services paperback. (Copies available @ 50¢ each.)

As a teacher, you know that when literature really reaches young people it touches each one of them in different ways. "The Pit and the Pendulum" provides you with an electric charge, one that you and your class can explore together. It enables you, as an instructor, to find out how that charge affects your students. Therefore the record-book combination of Poe's classic, which serves a dual purpose, is a valuable teaching aid.

In this booklet are directions that student interest may take and some suggestions for capturing that interest to motivate writing, discussion, and other activities.

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Poe on:

The Short Story Versus the Poem

In the brief tale, the author is enabled to carry out the fulness of his intention, be it what it may. During the hour of perusal the soul of the reader is at the writer's control. There are no external or extrinsic influences resulting from weariness or interruption.

A skilful literary artist has constructed a tale. If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived with deliberate care, a certain unique or single effect to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents, he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect. If his very initial sentence tend not to the out-bringing of this effect, then he has failed in his first step. In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design. And by such means, with such care and skill, a picture is at length painted which leaves in the mind of him who contemplates it with a kindred art, a sense of the fullest satisfaction. The idea of the tale has been presented unblemished because undisturbed; and this is an end unattainable by the novel. Undue brevity is just as exceptionable here as in the poem; but undue length is yet more to be avoided.

We have said that the tale has a point of superiority even over the poem. In fact, while the rhythm of this latter is an essential aid in the development of the poem's highest idea, the idea of the beautiful, the artificialities of this rhythm are an inseparable bar to the development of all points of thought or expression which have their basis in truth. But truth is often, and in very great degree, the aim of the tale. Some of the finest tales are tales of ratiocination. Thus the field of this species of composition, if not in so elevated a region on the mountain of mind, is a tableland of far vaster extent than the domain of the mere poem. Its products are never so rich, but infinitely more numerous and more appreciable by the mass of mankind. The writer of the prose tale, in short, may bring to his theme a vast variety of modes or inflections of thought or expression (the ratiocinative, for example, the sarcastic or the humorous), which are not only antagonistical to the nature of the poem, but absolutely forbidden by one of its most peculiar and indispensable adjuncts; we allude, of course, to rhythm. It may be added here, *parenthèse*, that the author who aims at the purely beautiful in a prose tale is laboring at a great disadvantage. For beauty can be better treated in the poem. Not so with terror, or passion, or horror, or a multitude of such other points.

From Poe's Literary Criticism of
Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*,
The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe, New York,
Putnam, Vol. 7, 1902.

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About Poe: the Man and the Writer

1. "The Pit and the Pendulum" arouses curiosity about what manner of man Poe was. For a writing or discussion assignment, students might be asked how "The Pit and the Pendulum" reflects Poe's turbulent life.
2. Students might read Poe's theory of the short story and then discuss it in terms of "The Pit and the Pendulum." Does "The Pit and the Pendulum" have the characteristics Poe considers essential to the short story?
3. Poe's stories range through a catalogue of man's basic fears. Have students locate in other works by Poe the fears he employs in his tales.
4. How does the rational man act under duress? Invite students to consider the workings of the prisoner's mind as he awaits his fate. Does he think reasonably or irrationally? Can students make comparisons with the reactions of other fictional characters under stress?
5. In "The Tell-Tale Heart" Poe states: "TRUE! — nervous — very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses—not destroyed—not dulled them." The author is actually assuming the first person in that tale. Is sharpening of senses an important factor in "The Pit and the Pendulum"?

More About Poe for Student and Teacher

The following offer interesting background material on Poe and his works: Literary Criticism of Edgar Allan Poe, edited by Robert L. Hough (Univ. of Nebraska Press, Regents Critics Series, 1965); The Haunted Palace; A Life of Edgar Allan Poe, by Frances Winwar (Harper, 1959).

"The Pit and the Pendulum" is available as a rental movie (an American International Release, 1961, starring Vincent Price and John Kerr in color), as are several other movies of Poe's short stories.

Using the Record to Lead into Other Avenues

1. Can students identify other works in the contemporary world — books, films, television shows — which compete with Poe in raising goose pimples?
2. Poe can lure almost anyone into exchanging scary experiences. When students tell about their own experiences in class they may find that writing their personal accounts is an even better way of exchanging experiences.
3. Does the fact that Poe's victim is a political prisoner stir up the interest of your class? If so, this can lead to a discussion of the treatment of other political prisoners — in books and today's news.

4. Students, with a little help from you, will find that terror is today as reliable a stimulator of nerve ends as it was in Poe's day. Invite them to bring in examples of the use of terror in advertisements. This can lead into a discussion of the kinds of emotional appeals used by ad copywriters.

5. Does "The Pit and the Pendulum" whet the appetite for other creepy tales? How about Dracula and Frankenstein? "The Hound of the Baskervilles"? "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde"?

6. How do people from primitive societies react to fear? Students might be interested in exploring the following questions: What provokes fear in our highly technical societies? What provokes fear in primitive cultures? Or, what provokes fear in young babies, adolescents, middle-aged people, and the elderly?

7. Dracula or Mummy movies build terror by obvious means; but how do recent horror movies do it? Have students discuss the various means of building terror — obviousness, subtleness, suddenness, etc. — with reference to techniques used in familiar movies or books. As a reference, you might use Carlos Clarens's book An Illustrated History of the Horror Film, Putnam, 1967.

8. For the shutterbug in the classroom, photography is a natural medium for exploring the world of spine chillers. Suggest that students take their cameras and shoot pictures or slides which they may use to illustrate a tale of terror they have written or one which they have read.

9. Poe even provides a challenge to the musical composer who is staging a television spectacular or writing the score for a movie. Ask students to discuss the instruments and instrumentation they think would best be used to illustrate Poe's tales through music in traditional composition. What music or sound effects back up "The Pit and the Pendulum"? "The Tell-Tale Heart"? Then give students an even wider range by asking them what variations on the theme could be created with the concepts of modern musical composition (using such "instruments" as John Cage's Programmed Piano, computer music, and the fringe area of music-noise).

10. Students who have little knowledge of musical composition but a good background in general music might find it enjoyable to make tapes of music which they believe has terror or horror as the theme. Ask them to discuss each selection on the tape and explain how the composer or orchestra revealed terror or horror.

11. Many students own, or have access to, small tape recorders and profess an interest in sound. Give these students a relevant assignment that uses their skill in the recording of sound. Ask them to make tapes of sounds which they think might terrify. If they are particularly skilled, they might tape a tale of terror with the appropriate sound effects.

12. Poe's tale should make many students aware of the role that the senses play in a tale of terror. To make this even more realistic in the classroom, have the students conduct a mock "chamber of horrors." This is an old Halloween trick which can be quite effective in demonstrating the importance of the senses. They can blindfold several classmates and, while conducting the tour, ask them to feel the ghost's heart (gelatin), or to listen for his footsteps (recorded sound), etc. When the tour is complete, have the students who were blindfolded describe the sensations. Help for conducting this assignment will be found in an exercise in Tactics I, a workbook of reading skills published by Scott, Foresman.