The Pit and the Pendelum

Plot: ......

.......The unnamed narrator laments that he is “sick unto death” after agents of the Spanish Inquisition in Toledo used torture while questioning him. When they unbind him, they allow him to sit while robed judges sentence him to death. Thereafter he cannot make out what they are saying; he can hear only a low hum while their lips move with “immoveable resolution.”    
.......In the apartment where he sits, the slight movement of the black draperies unnerves him, but seven burning candles hearten him, like rescuing angels, until nausea overcomes him as he realizes the hopelessness of his predicament. He begins to long for the “sweet rest there must be in the grave.” Suddenly, the judges disappear, the candles go out, and darkness and stillness prevail.   
.......He had passed out, he says. When he awakens, he remembers that tall figures had carried him down to a place of flatness, dampness, and madness. He is lying on his back in darkness, wondering where he is—in a dungeon to await public execution? On the very day of his trial, an execution had taken place. Rising, he feels around in all directions, perspiring heavily from fear, and looks for a single ray of light. But there is only the darkness. He recalls ghastly stories about the fates of Inquisition victims held in Toledo dungeons. Would he be starved to death—or worse? This much he could be sure of: Death awaited him. His hands find a wall. He wanders around the dungeon on its wet, slippery floor, feeling as he goes and calculating distances, to determine the size and layout of the place. After he stumbles and falls, he does not get up but instead falls asleep.   
.......When he awakens, he finds bread and water next to him. He eats and drinks eagerly. Then he resumes walking and feeling, determining that the perimeter of his cell measures 50 yards. Such information holds no hope of benefiting him, but out of curiosity he continues to find out more. While walking around the cell, he again loses his footing on the slimy floor and falls, ending up at the edge of a circular pit. When he gropes at the edge, a loose rock tumbles into the chasm, sending back echoes after it strikes walls and splashes into water. A door opens and closes overhead, admitting light to the cell for a few seconds.   
.......The narrator is now extremely anxious; even the sound of his own voice frightens him. He crawls back to a wall and remains there, fearing that there could be other pits in the dungeon. After several hours, he falls asleep again. Upon awakening, he again finds bread and water. Terribly thirsty, he gulps down the water. When he feels suddenly drowsy, he assumes the water contained a drug. He sleeps a long time. When he wakes up, a sulfurous light enables him to see his chamber, which is only about half as big as he thought. He attributes his error in calculating its size to unwittingly counting his steps twice. Also, contrary to his earlier conclusion that his cell had an irregular shape, he discovers that it is square. He also discovers that the walls are made of iron plates, not masonry. On the walls are frightful sights: “Figures of fiends in aspects of menace, with skeleton forms, and other more really fearful images. . . .” In the center of the floor is the pit—as it turns out, the only one in the cell.    
.......As he observes his surroundings, the narrator is lying strapped to a board so that he can move only his head and his left arm, which he uses to eat food from a dish set next to him. Because the food is highly salted, he becomes very thirsty. But this time, there is no water provided to quench his thirst.   
.......The ceiling of the cell is extremely high, between 30 and 40 feet. On it he sees a personified painting of Time. But instead of holding a scythe, as in the traditional depictions, Time is holding a pendulum like the ones on clocks. Something strange then happens: The pendulum begins to swing slowly. The narrator becomes frightened at first, but then loses interest in the sight and shifts his attention elsewhere—in particular to huge rats coming up from the pit, apparently after detecting the presence of the narrator through their keen sense of smell.   
.......“It required much effort and attention to scare them away,” the narrator says.   
.......He again looks up and notices that the pendulum is descending and sweeping back and forth at a great speed. The bob of the pendulum is a crescent blade of gleaming steel. As the pendulum swings, it makes a hissing sound. For many hours—for many days—the pendulum descends, getting so close that the narrator can feel it fanning him and smell the odor of the steel. Suddenly, he becomes calm and accepts his fate.   
.......Then he faints. When he opens his eyes, he has no idea how long he has been unconscious.  However, the pendulum has descended no further. Raging hunger overcomes him, and he snahes up a morsel left by the rats. For a moment, he becomes hopeful.    
.......Unfortunately, the pendulum resumes its descent. It is aimed at his heart. When it is three inches above him, he struggles violently. Then he has new hope: Would the pendulum cut the strap binding him? It was a single, continuous length of material enveloping him in all directions.   
.......Meanwhile, rats are swarming around him, apparently waiting for his death. He wonders, "To what food have they been accustomed in the well?" They nip at his left hand, seeking the spicy residue of the food he had eaten. This activity gives him an idea, one that could save his life. He passes his fingers across the food dish to pick up oily food remnants and spices, then rubs his bindings with his fingers. A moment later, the rats are upon him and soon nip and bite through the bindings. He is free!    
.......After he slides off the board, the pendulum stops swinging, and, the narrator says, “I beheld it drawn up, by some invisible force, through the ceiling.” Apparently, he concludes, someone has been watching him. Did he escape the pendulum only to be subjected to another form of torture?   
.......At that moment, he notices that the sulfurous light in the cell is coming through a fissure running around the base of the walls. He also notices that the images on the wall are now staring at him with fiery demonic eyes and that the smell of hot metal has invaded the cell. It is the iron walls; they are heating up. To avoid the intense heat, he moves to the edge of the pit. Because of the glare from the hot ceiling, he is able to see to the bottom of the well. The sight “burned itself in upon 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.”   
.......As the heat in the cell increases, the walls begin to close in, apparently to force him into the pit, and burn his back. At the edge of the pit, he looks away and waits for the end. Then he hears the blare of trumpets, the hum of voices, and the grating of the walls. They are moving back! Just as begins to fall into the pit, an arm reaches down and pulls him to safety. His rescuer is General Lasalle, of the French army. The French forces—enemies of the Inquisition—have invaded Toledo and taken control.   
.

**Setting**   
**/.**   
The action takes place in the city of Toledo in central Spain. When the Romans conquered the site in 193 B.C., they named the settlement there *Toletum*, from which the name *Toledo* was derived. *Toletum* meant "raised high" or "raised aloft," because the settlement sat on a rocky promontory about 2,400 feet above sea level. It became an important cultural center and was famous for the skill with which its artisans produced swords. Toledo is about 40 miles southwest of Madrid.

**Characters**

.......Narrator, an unnamed person who tells of the torture inflicted on him by the Spanish Inquisition. He identifies himself as a recusant (one who refuses to conform to established rules and refuses to yield to the established authority).    
.......General Lasalle, a French army officer who rescues the narrator.    
.......Inquisitors, black-robed judges who sentence the narrator. The narrator hears their voices and sees blurred images of them.

**Type of Work**

"The Pit and the Pendulum" is a short story about the horrors of undergoing torture. Poe completed it in August 1842 and published it the following year. It is written in first-person point of view.

**Climax**

The climax of "The Pit and the Pendulum" occurs when the walls close in on the narrator, then retract just as a hand reaches out to save him from falling into the pit.

**Style and Imagery**

Word Choice

Poe carefully makes every word, every phrase, every sentence in the story contribute to the overall effect, horror, accompanied by oppressing morbidity and anxious anticipation of terrifying events. Notice, for example, the tenor of the following paragraph from the story. I have underlined the words and phrases that underscore the the mood and atmosphere.

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 fibre. 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 a tomb. Perspiration burst from every pore, and stood in cold big beads upon 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.

Use of Alliteration

Alliteration—a figure of speech involving repetition of a consonant sound—occurs frequently in the story, in such phrases as the following:

1. They appeared to me **w**hite—**w**hiter than the sheet upon **w**hich I trace these **w**ords—
2. I **f**elt every **f**ibre in my **f**rame thrill
3. The blackne**ss** of darkne**ss** **s**upervened; all **s**en**s**ation appeared **s**wallowed up in that mad rushing de**sc**ent as of the **s**oul into Hades
4. And the **d**eath just avoi**d**e**d** was of that very character which I ha**d** regar**d**e**d** as **f**abulous and **f**rivolous  It passed in many convo**l**utions about my **l**imbs and body, **l**eaving at **l**iberty on**l**y my head, and my **l**eft arm
5. I **s**till quivered in every nerve to think how **s**light a **s**inking or **s**lipping of the machinery would pre**c**ipitate that keen, gli**s**tening axe upon my bosom
6. In their **v**oracity, the **v**ermin **f**requently **f**astened their sharp **f**angs in my **f**ingers.

Use of Anaphora

As in his other short stories, Poe frequently uses anaphora in "The Pit and the Pendulum." Anaphora is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is repeated at the beginning of a clause or another group of words. Anaphora imparts emphasis and balance. Here are boldfaced examples from the story:

**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 enwrapped the walls of the apartment.

In the deepest slumber—**no! In** delirium—**no! In** a swoon—**no! In** death—**no! even in** the grave all is not lost.

My cognizance of the pit had become known to the inquisitorial agents—**the pit**, whose horrors had been destined for so bold a recusant as myself—**the pit**, typical of hell, and regarded by rumor as the Ultima Thule of all their punishments.

**Nor had I** erred in my calculations -- **nor had I** endured in vain.

**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.

Other Figures of Speech: Metaphor and Simile

And there stole into my fancy, like a rich musical note, the thought of what sweet rest there must be in the grave. (Simile)    
Arousing from the most profound of slumbers, we break the gossamer web of some dream. (Metaphor)    
In the centre yawned the circular pit from whose jaws I had escaped. (Metaphor)    
The idea of the coolness of the well came over my soul like balm. (Simile)    
Then **silence, and stillness, and** **night** were the **universe**. (Alliteration and Metaphor)    
.

**Themes**

(1) The terror a human being experiences when confined and subjected to mental and physical torture; (2) the cruelty or unjust treatment suffered by any individual who dissents from established beliefs or is falsely accused of doing so.: