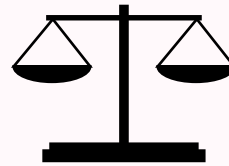


The Pit and the Pendulum

Literary Focus: Symbolic Meaning

When you read a story, you may sometimes sense that it has a deeper meaning that goes beyond what happens on the surface level. For example, if a young girl in a story is in a conflict with her parents over a pair of earrings, you might guess that the earrings symbolize something important to her—such as self-expression or independence. A **symbol** is an object, person, animal, or place that functions as itself but also has a deeper meaning.

What does each of these familiar symbols represent?



Reading Skill: Retelling

It is a good idea to stop at key points in a story and **retell** in your own words what has happened so far. This retelling strategy will help you understand and remember the story.

Into the Short Story

Edgar Allan Poe's frightening stories have inspired many of today's mystery and horror writers. In fact, the Mystery Writers of America honors great works in the field with an award named after Poe—the Edgar. Here is his famous horror story of a man sentenced to death and placed in an extraordinary prison cell in Toledo, Spain. Since the story is told from the first-person point of view—by the prisoner himself—you know that he will survive the torture. Or will he?

The Pit and the Pendulum

BASED ON THE SHORT STORY BY
Edgar Allan Poe





Here's HOW

SYMBOLIC MEANING

The black-robed, white-lipped judges (line 2) remind me of the figure of death with his face hidden by a black-hooded robe. The judges are probably symbols of death.

Your TURN

SYMBOLIC MEANING

Stop at line 8. What do you think the dark place deep below the earth symbolizes? Write your answer on the lines below.

Here's HOW

RETELLING

In lines 1-16, the prisoner is sentenced to death. He faints and is carried to a dark cell, deep in the earth. He feels his way around the cold, slimy walls, but when he tries to cross the room, he falls down. He finds himself at the edge of a deep, smelly pit. He realizes his captors plan for him a slow horrible death.

YOU NEED TO KNOW The Spanish Inquisition was a religious court set up by the Catholic Church and the Spanish government in the 1400s. Its role was to accuse and punish anyone who defied church or government authority.

The death sentence was the last thing I heard. After that, I saw the white lips of the black-robed judges move but heard no sound. Then I fainted, and silence and darkness surrounded me.

Tall, silent figures carried me down—down—still down—into a flat, damp place. After a time, I opened my eyes. My worst fears came true; the blackness of eternal night surrounded me. I struggled for breath. Those sentenced to death by the Spanish Inquisition were usually burned at the stake. What will happen to me?

I felt my way around the cell. The stone walls were slimy and cold as I slowly made my way around them. Then, as I tried to cross the moist, slippery floor, my robe tangled in my legs and I fell. I shuddered to find my chin resting on the edge of a deep pit that stank of decay.

I realized my captors had meant for me to fall into this horrible pit. A quick and easy death was not part of their plan! A slow hideous death awaited me!

At last, I slept. When I woke, a dim blue light showed me that the prison was roughly square and far smaller than I had first thought. The walls seemed to me now to be some kind of huge metal plates. These were painted with frightening pictures of fiends and skeletons. The center of the floor fell away into the round pit, which I had just avoided.

I now lay stretched on a low wooden rack. A long strap wound many times around my body, leaving only my head and left arm free enough that I could feed myself from a dish which lay by my side. It seemed my tormentors meant to torture me with thirst—for the meat in the dish was highly seasoned.

The ceiling was thirty feet overhead. I noticed a strange figure painted there, a picture of Time holding what I thought was a huge
30 clock pendulum. But while I gazed straight upward at the pendulum, I realized it was not a painting but an actual pendulum, which swung slowly back and forth.

Perhaps an hour passed before I looked upward again. What I then saw amazed me. The swing of the pendulum and its speed had
35 both increased. But what mainly bothered me was that it was *lower*. I now saw that its weight was a curved steel blade, with a razor-sharp edge. Since I had not fallen into the hell-like pit as they hoped, the torturers had made a new and different death for me: I should be slowly sliced in two as the pendulum inched down. For what seemed
40 like days, the sharp blade lowered itself toward me!

Then a vague hope came into my mind. As the pendulum swung across my body, I saw it would cross over my heart. I now realized that the strap which bound me was *continuous*. The blade's first stroke on any part of the band would cut it so I might unwind myself with my
45 free left hand. I lifted my head enough to see my chest. The strap tied my body tightly in all directions—*except in the path of the destroying blade*. The pendulum would first slice my body and not the strap.

Then another idea of rescue came to me. For many hours the area around the low framework upon which I lay had been swarming with
50 rats. They were wild, bold—their red eyes glaring at me, waiting only for me to lie still before they began to feast upon me. With the remaining bits of the oily food, I rubbed the ties wherever I could reach them. Then, raising my hand from the floor, I lay perfectly still. Perhaps now the rats could be tempted to gnaw me loose.

55 Eventually, one or two of the boldest rats leaped upon the framework and sniffed the belt. Behind them many more swarmed upon me in heaps and gnawed on the greasy loops. I felt the ties loosen. I knew that it must be already cut in several places. With a more than human courage I lay *still*.

60 At last, I felt that I was free. The belt hung in ribbons from my body. But the pendulum already pressed upon me. It had slit the fibers of the robe, but my moment of escape had arrived. With a cautious, slow, steady movement, I slid from the ties and beyond the reach of the blade. For the moment, at least, *I was free*.



Your TURN

RETELLING

Stop at line 40, and retell what has happened in lines 23–40.

Here's HOW

SYMBOLIC MEANING

Father Time with his scythe is a well-known symbol of death. A clock pendulum is a symbol of time. I'd guess that their symbolic meaning is that time is running out for the poor prisoner.

Your TURN

SYMBOLIC MEANING

What do you think the swarming rats symbolize to the prisoner?



Your TURN

RETELLING

Stop at line 83, and retell what happened after the pendulum went away.

Here's HOW

SYMBOLIC MEANING

The loud voices, trumpet blasts, and sounds of thunder could symbolize the final Judgment Day. Maybe the prisoner has really died.

Your TURN

SYMBOLIC MEANING

What do you think the arrival of the French army symbolizes?

65 *Free!*—yet still in the grasp of the Inquisition! I had barely moved from my wooden bed of horror when the motion of the hellish blade stopped, and I saw it pulled up through the ceiling. I had only exchanged one form of agony for another, maybe worse than death. But now something else which I could not understand had happened
70 in the dungeon. For many minutes I sat thinking about it.

Then the nature of the chamber's change came to me all at once. The colored figures on the walls had now taken on an intense gleam. Demon eyes, wildly alive, glared at me from every side and shone like fire.

As I breathed, I smelled the odor of heated iron! The walls and
75 ceiling began to glow! There could be no doubt what my tormentors meant to do—they were firing the iron walls to roast me to death!

I shrank away from the glowing metal—to the center of the cell. With the thought of the fiery death ahead, the idea of the well's coolness came over me. I rushed to its deadly edge, straining to see
80 below. The glare from the burning ceiling lit its deepest parts. At last I understood what I saw—the bones and rotten flesh, the rats still gnawing on them—oh! any horror but this! With a shriek, I rushed from the edge and buried my face in my hands—weeping bitterly.

The heat rapidly increased, and once again I looked up. There had
85 been a second change in the cell—a change in its *shape*. The Inquisitors' revenge had sped up, and there was to be no more playing games. The room had been square, but now the cell shifted into a diamond shape. Now I was so desperate for relief that I could have hugged the red walls to my breast, giving myself up to eternal
90 peace. “Death,” I said, “any death except that of the pit!” Fool! Could I not see that the burning iron was meant to urge me *into the pit*?

I shrank back—but the closing walls pressed me onward. Finally, for my scorched and writhing body, there was no longer an inch on the floor to stand. I struggled no more, but my agony was released in
95 one loud, long, and final scream of despair. I felt that I tottered upon the edge—I closed my eyes—

There was a noise of human voices, a loud blast as 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,
100 fainting. The French army had entered Toledo. The Inquisition was in the hands of its enemies.

Symbolic Meaning

To figure out the **symbolic meaning** of a story, you first think about what all the individual symbols mean. Then you combine all those meanings to come up with the symbolic meaning of the story as a whole. To determine the symbolic meaning of “The Pit and the Pendulum,” fill in the meanings of the symbols listed below. Then, decide what the symbolic meaning of the whole story is. One has been done for you.

Symbol	Meaning
1. Cell and pit, deep below the earth	
2. Father Time and the pendulum	
3. Strap wrapped around the prisoner	
4. Rats	Death, decay, torture, horror
5. Hot walls moving toward the prisoner	

Symbolic meaning of the story: _____
