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An Exploration of Poe's Appeal to American Fear in "The Pit and the Pendulum"

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Abstract

While many literary criticisms analyze Edgar Allan Poe's works through a psychoanalytic lens, "An Exploration of Poe's Appeal to American Fear in 'The Pit and the Pendulum'" examines Poe's short story "The Pit and the Pendulum" through a New Historical literary lens. The short story is analyzed with a focus on the context of societal fears of revolution and religious persecution in early 1800s America, and with a notable examination of the instability in newly founded religious institutions within America that many literary critics have, in the past, overlooked. With a close examination of American views on the Spanish Inquisition, the French Revolution, and the rumored rise of the European Illuminati, Edgar Allan Poe is examined as a political commentator who masked his critique of a culturally unstable America in a horrific tale of the Spanish Inquisition.

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Author's Note on the Spanish Inquisition

To properly comprehend the following analysis of "The Pit and the Pendulum," the reader must first have a baseline understanding of the Spanish Inquisition. In its simplest form, what is crucial for readers to know is that the Inquisition was a series of trials carried out under the rule of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, designed to identify heretics of the Catholic church. For centuries, these trials have widely been known to have been unjust and cruel; the Inquisition has often been painted as a witch-hunt carried out by Christian extremists, the punishments of which included the unfair interrogation and brutal torture of innocent individuals.

In the 1990s, files of the Inquisition were released from the Vatican, which began to reshape the way that the Inquisition is viewed in the current day. However, in the case of this thesis, these files are moot; the validity of the files are not brought into question, nor are they acknowledged whatsoever.

What is most important for readers to acknowledge is not the truths of the Spanish Inquisition as they may be known in the present, but rather what Americans *believed* to be the truths of the Inquisition circa the 1800s. This thesis is simply an examination of American knowledge of the Inquisition in a time period in which information was only beginning to be released to the world, and therefore, may not reflect the truth.

This thesis is in no way attempting to perpetuate any untruths regarding the events of the Spanish Inquisition; rather, it expresses only a reflection of beliefs relevant to a prior time period.

An Introduction to "The Pit and the Pendulum"

Edgar Allan Poe is known foremost for his works of Gothic horror, which often include supernatural elements. However, Poe is also a trailblazer of what is presently known as psychological horror, and quite a few of his tales diverge from the typical ghastly memo to dabble in more realistic murderous matters. One of his foremost tales that diverges from supernatural into realistic horror is "The Pit and the Pendulum," which accounts the brutal trial and punishment of the narrator at the hands of the Spanish Inquisition in the year 1808.

Published originally in 1842, "The Pit and the Pendulum" tells the horrific tale of an unnamed narrator imprisoned in Toledo, having fallen victim to the cruel, unfair judicial system of the Spanish Inquisition and deemed a heretic by the Catholic church. The tale acquired its title from the torture methods that the speaker endures throughout the course of the short story; he awakens in a dark dungeon with a gaping pit in the middle, and later awakens to find that he has been tied to a plank over the pit while a razor-sharp pendulum swings over him, gradually moving lower and signaling his impending death.

Quite frequently are Poe's works dissected and analyzed in a psychological nature, aiming to examine his every symbolic reflection of the human psyche—but seldom are his works examined in such a way that brings to the forefront the historical context of his writings. This thesis will analyze the setting of the time period in which Poe wrote "The Pit and the Pendulum" to bring new meaning to his motives for writing the tale. More specifically, the thesis aims to examine the American cultural setting and Poe's part in that setting to bring to light possible motivations of making an appeal to perhaps one of, if not the biggest, American fears during the period in which the short story was written: religious persecution and revolution. In "The Pit and the Pendulum," Poe focuses on the true—but slightly skewed—horrors of the Spanish Inquisition

to instill fear into the hearts and minds of his readers. The newly founded democratic nation of America feared religious persecution and revolution above all else, and Poe channels these American fears in his writing of "The Pit and the Pendulum," aiming to write a tale that appealed to the very fears that Americans of his time lived with on a daily basis.

Examining Literature Through Historical Context: New Historicism

This thesis will utilize the New Historical critical lens of literary theory to break down "The Pit and the Pendulum" and attempt to define the parameters of Poe's motives when writing the short story based on the historical and cultural background of the time period in which Poe was writing.

New Historicism is a branch of critical literary theory that forefronts historical context in the critical analysis of literature. New Historicists advocate for the historicization of all works of literature. What this means, in its most compacted form, is that New Historicists believe that all literary works should be analyzed with the unique historical and cultural background of the work's time period in the forefront of the mind. New Historicists view a text as a window into its historical time period—a reflection of the societal moods and culture of its era.

Stephen Greenblatt, a prominent literary theorist and historian, is believed to have coined the concept of "New Historicism," referring to it additionally as "Poetics of Culture" (Veenstra 174). In response to both New Criticism, which views a text as an entity in itself that must not be analyzed with any contexts, and Historicism, which analyzed literature with the context of one set history rather than histories unique to each textual work, Greenblatt birthed the concept of a New Historicism, which aimed to "[challenge] the assumptions that guarantee a secure distinction between 'literary foreground' and 'political background' or, more generally, between

artistic production and other kinds of social production" (Greenblatt 6). Greenblatt states that social and cultural constructs of a time period bring representative meaning to text, and that "collective social constructions… link that [representational] mode to the complex network of institutions, practices, and beliefs that constitute the culture as a whole" (6). In short, Greenblatt's literary theory examines text as a product of its time period's culture, and that culture must be examined in an equal amount as the text itself.

In the case of "The Pit and the Pendulum" by Edgar Allan Poe, it is crucial to understand the historical context of America's still-new foundation and the cultural tone of the time period of the 1800s in America. In the view of a New Historicist, "The Pit and the Pendulum" would qualify as a tool that can be utilized to understand 1800s American culture, if only it were examined and analyzed in the context of that particular historical era. This thesis will examine "The Pit and the Pendulum" in the context of the socially constructed fears of revolution and religious persecution within the culture of a newly founded America. To do so, this argument will utilize American primary sources to give light to American feelings toward the Spanish Inquisition, the French Revolution, and the fearfully rumored rise of religious persecution groups in America, such as the Illuminati.

Early Historical Examinations of "The Pit and the Pendulum"

The earliest historical examinations of "The Pit and the Pendulum" can be traced back to the early 20th century. A 1929 article entitled "The Sources of Poe's *The Pit and the Pendulum*" by David Lee Clark first began to analyze historical context to attempt to pinpoint some of Poe's motivations for writing the short story.

Clark's article is, at its core, a response to an 1850 critic's writing which accuses Poe of plagiarizing two works to conceive "The Pit and the Pendulum" as it is known today. Thus, Clark births what can be considered to be the first historical analysis of "The Pit and the Pendulum"; though, as Clark's analysis came roughly fifty years prior to Greenblatt's conception of New Historicism, his article contains the historical context that may have led to Poe's short story but fails to connect that context to a greater representative meaning.

Clark's historical analysis is relatively simple: to defend Poe from the accusations of plagiarism, he examines the recent publications of the early 1800s that Poe may have possibly drawn artistic inspiration from. The plagiarism accuser's statement is as follows, as quoted by Clark:

> The story of 'The Pit and the Pendulum,' in the first of the volumes before us, for instance, is a daring theft and combination of two tales; one in Blackwood, under the title of 'Vivenzio, or Italian Vengeance,' and the other, a tragic scene by the German, Hoffmann. From the Blackwood writer, Mr. Poe took the gradually decreasing dungeon, and from Hoffmann, the pendulum, pointed with an instrument of torture. (349-350)

In rebuttal, Clark refutes these claims—some in part, and some wholly—and instead offers potential source material for the following aspects of Poe's story: the shrinking dungeon, the torturous pendulum, the heated walls of the dungeon, and the pit. Clark determines that Poe had drawn inspiration from numerous tales written by numerous authors, none of whom are relevant to this case; however, what holds relevance is that Clark, through this defense of Poe, unearthed the first possible motivation for Poe's tale through historical research of creative inspirational sources that Poe may have come in contact with.

Though uprooting sources of inspiration from the time period is certainly a crucial element of New Historical analysis, Clark's article misses the mark when assigning a deeper meaning to Poe's message in writing "The Pit and the Pendulum." Clark's analysis reduces "The Pit and the Pendulum" to a simple imaginative reworking of other published works in Poe's time. This conclusion is underwhelming and incorrect, considering the typical complexities and innovation of the rest of Poe's oeuvre.

In 1933, Poe scholar Margaret Alterton wrote an article entitled "An Additional Source for Poe's the Pit and the Pendulum" in response and addition to Clark's original analysis. Alterton's article offers a new source to consider when examining the inspirational materials Poe may have used in the pursuit of writing "The Pit and the Pendulum"; *History of the Spanish Inquisition*, a compiled history of the Inquisition written by Juan Antonio Llorente, who served as a secretary for Inquisitors in Spain (Alterton 349). Alterton's research supports Poe's contact with the work of Llorente, as *History of the Spanish Inquisition* was published throughout Europe and America numerous times in the early 1800s—and Poe was an avid reader of a multitude of literary journals (350). In an even stronger statement, Alterton writes that one of the earliest publications of Llorente's work in America was in Philadelphia, of which Poe was a resident at the time.

In "An Additional Source for Poe's the Pit and the Pendulum," Alterton slowly pieces together the historical significance of Poe's source material. She maintains that Poe would have drawn mainly on Llorente's work and less on the numerous works that Clark had brought to light years prior. Alterton argues that the opening scene that describes the narrator's trial, the concept of the pendulum as a form of torture, and the closing scene in which General Lasalle rescues the narrator were all inspired by Llorente's work, which had incidentally contained information

regarding what Inquisitory officer chambers looked like, the fact that a pendulum was sometimes used as a method of torture by the Inquisition via cutting a prisoner's face, and information regarding the French invasion of Spain, which snuffed out the Inquisition (351-55).

While Alterton's article provides an analysis that would prove more true to a New Historical analysis in the sense that it examines a larger, more culturally known source behind Poe's writing, it still fails to provide an idea of why Poe may have used the source. Here, it has been identified that Poe likely pulled on American knowledge of the happenings of the Inquisition, but what is missing from the analysis is the reason *why*—or what cultural effect using a source such as the Llorente work would bring. It would not be until much later that the full scope of a New Historical analytical lens would be used to examine Poe's "The Pit and the Pendulum."

New Historical Examinations of "The Pit and the Pendulum"

Research into New Historical analyses of "The Pit and the Pendulum" has brought to the forefront two proposed motives for Poe's writing of the short story. The first motive can be defined as an attempt from Poe to comment on the culture of prison and the law within the United States, particularly within Philadelphia, his place of residence at the time of the publication of "The Pit and the Pendulum." The second proposed motive can be characterized as a reflection of opinionated views on the state of democracy and governmental power within the United States at the time of the story's publication. Both of these readings of the short story play with, in some respect, Poe's view on power dynamics within the nation. Whether it be the judicial system, or the executive branch of government, critics are notably agreeing that Poe's "The Pit and the Pendulum" comments on power dynamics between government and citizens.

Poe on Penal Punishment

In 1999, Joan Dayan's article "Poe, Persons, and Property" suggested that Poe had a curious obsession with the law. Of course, it is undeniable that Poe's works are no stranger to motifs of the realm of law and order; many of Poe's characters indulge in criminal mischief and he is considered to be the father of detective fiction. Dayan's article, which refers as "legal personalities," created a chain reaction which called for Poe scholars to investigate his works as reflections of the philosophy of law (Dayan 407).

Part of the aforementioned chain reaction brought to life the 2008 article "Pits, Pendulums, and Penitentiaries: Reframing the Detained Subject" by Jason Haslam. In his analysis, Haslam likened Poe's depiction of torture and wrongful imprisonment to a reflection of era-specific understanding and cultural views of the United States prison system. This may be perhaps one of the earliest examinations of "The Pit and the Pendulum" through the New Historical analytical lens.

Haslam explains that throughout the late 1700s and early 1800s, the Philadelphia prison system and the Auburn prison system in New York were undergoing change and implementing new models of penal detention; these detention centers—one directly in Poe's inhabited city—were beginning to utilize solitary confinement methods as a means of creating more reflective prisoners and reforming criminal behavior (268). In light of these new prison experiments, which kept prisoners isolated from the outside world and from the majority of human connection, Haslam argues that "Poe's representation of the Inquisition echoes some key points in contemporary debates surrounding prisons, punishment, and the public sphere" (269).

Haslam equates “The Pit and the Pendulum” to an allegory of the early nineteenth-century debate between two opposing theorists of the penitentiary experiment—American Founding Father Benjamin Rush, who fully supported the penal shift to private punishment, and historian and writer William Roscoe, who would first support, and then openly criticize the establishment of private punishment within the penitentiary system.

Benjamin Rush’s theories in support of privatized punishment alleged that the penal system needed to bring punishment out of the public eye to ensure two things: reformation of the prisoner and continued societal morality (268). Rush maintained that keeping punishment private would allow for solitary reflection of prisoners, and therefore, ultimately, rehabilitation; at the same time, according to Rush, keeping punishment out of the public eye would only increase the obscurity of the punishment, therefore increasing public fear of penal punishment and maintain societal order (269-70). The more secretive the punishment was, more speculation and fictitious rumors regarding the punishment would arise, and therefore members of society would feel more inclined to stay morally upright to avoid penal punishment.

Contrarily, after initially supporting Rush’s theories, William Roscoe would come to refute the concept of private punishment after observing the newly imposed reformative strategies in practice in the early 1800s (276). Roscoe claimed that Rush’s theories of punishment were not at all about the reformation of the prisoner, but were actually about societal control, exerting superiority and power over the detained, and maintaining overt societal control. Roscoe argued that private punishment did not create an environment for the rehabilitation of a prisoner, but rather allowed barbaric practices to take place behind closed doors, therefore only perpetuating the cycle of impropriety.

Haslam's analysis, in compacted form, correlates the first half of "The Pit and the Pendulum" to an allegory of Rush's theories of punishment: "The Inquisition's dungeon stands in for both the terror of Rush's unknown punishments and for the possible reformation of the prisoner through isolation" (273). First, the plight of Poe's narrator, in a sense, allegorizes the shift in philosophy of penal punishment from that of public physical punishment to private, more psychologically based punishment. Haslam quotes the instance in "The Pit and the Pendulum" in which the narrator falls forward and realizes that there is a chasm in the floor before him: "To the victims of [the Inquisition's] tyranny, there was the choice of death with its direst physical agonies, or death with its most hideous moral horrors. I had been reserved for the latter" (Poe 5).

When Poe's narrator narrowly escapes falling forward into the pit in the middle of his dungeon, Haslam likens the prisoner's realization of the details of his punishment to the shift in punishment methods in the early 1900s:

> Poe here narrativizes the shift from "physical agonies," the embodied punishments of the early prison, to the "hideous moral horrors," or internalized punishments of the penitentiary system. The narrator demonstrates the power of cultural terror as outlined by Rush. (274)

Unlike in Rush's theories of punishment, however, Haslam notes that Poe's narrator does not experience any sort of reformation; the narrator simply begins to experience mental agony and episodes of "swoons," experiencing only more suffering in the isolated prison (275). Haslam writes that Poe was perhaps making a point of siding with William Roscoe's beliefs in the philosophical debate of penal punishment. In Roscoe's writings, particularly his 1819 pamphlet *Observations on Penal Jurisprudence, and the Reformations of Criminals*, he wrote extensively of not only the ineffectiveness of Rush's isolationist theories, but also of the counteractive nature

of those theories, and even described the Spanish Inquisition as a “humble prototype” to the barbaric practices he witnessed at the Philadelphian Eastern State Penitentiary (Haslam 277)—thus creating a direct correlation between the philosophical debate of penal punishment and Poe’s writing material. Additionally, Haslam compares the narrator’s timely rescue at the hands of the French to the impossibility of a prisoner reaching any sort of salvation unless it occurs as the result of action from a party outside of the penal system; Haslam’s analysis of the end of the short story argues that the much-debated ending of the short story reflects the reality of redemption for prisoners, or the lack thereof within the period’s detention system (279).

Conclusively, the analysis in “Pits, Pendulums, and Penitentiaries: Reframing the Detained Subject” states that the perpetuation of Edgar Allan Poe’s detained narrator’s suffering as the short story unfolds and continues allegorizes William Roscoe’s theories, which rebuke Rush’s. Haslam argues that Poe’s “The Pit and the Pendulum” is ultimately a commentary on the ineffectiveness and arbitrariness of isolation as penal punishment—and was inspired by the philosophical debate that was birthed through the contrasting schools of thought between Benjamin Rush and William Roscoe.

Haslam’s writing outlines Poe’s attempt to communicate sociopolitical beliefs through his creative writing, and thoroughly sets up a background in which Poe is trying to comment on power struggles and political debates within his time period. Though Jason Haslam’s analysis is intriguing, captivating, and certainly well-argued, the absence of an analysis of the religious aspect of the story is curious, especially considering the unstable religious background of the nation at the time, and Poe’s extremely religiously charged chosen setting of the Spanish Inquisition.

Poe on Governmental Power

Other critics who have analyzed Poe's "The Pit and the Pendulum" in the context of the piece's historical background read the short story as a critique on the time period's political environment. As established in the earlier David Lee Clark and Margaret Alterton articles, Poe was a well-read individual, and the political happenings of the nation were no exception to that. The following two critical examinations of "The Pit and the Pendulum" will both establish Poe's unhappiness with the sociopolitical environment of America and examine Poe's tale as a vehicle for Poe's perceptions of the political state of his nation.

In the 2008 publication entitled "Poe's Aristocratic Decryptions: Professional Authority in Democratic America," critic Tim Bryant dissected Poe's works in such a way that brought to light Poe's plight in the midst of a nation shifting from aristocracy to democracy (24). Bryant explains in his introduction that critics widely agree that Poe had a general distrust for the newly forming democracy. Bryant's article highlights Poe's struggle to remain relevant as an authoritative voice within the shifting political realm, caught between two philosophies of governmental power, neither of which Poe was completely a supporter.

What is relevant within Bryant's publication is his analysis of "The Pit and the Pendulum," which presents the short story as an exact allegorical representation of fighting for personal authority when caught between two undesirable government entities. Bryant's analysis of the short story is fleeting, but he emphasizes in it Poe's struggle between aristocracy, which Poe viewed as potentially oppressive due to power being placed in the hands of the learned few, and democracy, which Poe viewed as potentially untrustworthy due to power being placed in the widely undereducated whole of society (31-32). Bryant's historical analyses of Poe's stories effectively track Poe's ambivalence toward governmental power throughout the 1900s and sets a

strong foundational base to argue upon that a multitude of Poe's works, including "The Pit and the Pendulum," are likely political allegories—the pendulum representing oppressive authority, and the pit representing the chaos and uncertainty of complete power to the people.

Other critics echo Bryant's analysis of "The Pit and the Pendulum" as a political piece of writing. In a similar vein, in 2011, critic Rick Rodriguez published "Sovereign Authority and the Democratic Subject in Poe," which included an analysis of the short story as a commentary from Poe on America's shift into the Jacksonian Democratic era. Rodriguez notes that Jacksonian Democracy, which was characterized by its strong presidential power, was found to be distasteful in Poe's eyes (39). Poe's distaste for the new era of democracy is widely agreed upon by scholars and proven in the short story "Four Beasts in One—The Homo-Cameleopard," which is a satirical parody of America under President Andrew Jackson's rule (39).

An Original New Historical Examination of "The Pit and the Pendulum"

What the early historical analyses have correctly examined are the potential source materials that Poe drew upon when writing "The Pit and the Pendulum." The later New Historical analyses have correctly drawn upon Poe's message regarding power—particularly governmental power. What is missing from the larger puzzle altogether is the examination of the unignorable religious motif within the short story.

In the remainder of the thesis, the previous historical analyses will be synthesized with the addition of the analysis of the era's cultural American fears of religious persecution and violent revolutionary forces. An argument will be made that Poe wrote "The Pit and the Pendulum" to appeal to those American fears, therefore creating a piece reflective of the unstable culture within the newly founded nation.

Poe's Appeal to American Fears

From the beginning, America was founded upon the basis of religious freedom. The first settlers in British North America were fleeing from the religious persecution taking place within England in the seventeenth century (Huston 3). Settlers were searching for a place to practice any religion they desired without consequence. As the colonies in the New World expanded, settlers of many different religions, primarily branches of Christianity, began to migrate into North America. Americans have always been citizens with great passion for many things, particularly religion, and that passion was carried on through generations, eventually reaching the colonists who declared their independence from England in 1776. The nineteenth century in America was known as the "Century of Religion." A series of what are now called "Religious Revivals" began to develop across the expanse of America, described as "religious awakenings" (Beardsley 2). These Revivals were attempts at further developing and modifying religion in the New World. These attempts at modifying the religious terms and practices were rigorously protested by those with orthodox tendencies, causing a particular tension across multiple branches of religion—most notably Christianity.

One specific attempt at a Revival took place in Boston, when the question of who was granted access to baptism was raised. The Revival called for the lowering of requirements for citizens to be baptized, which was met with protests, and was ultimately ignored by the court due to the controversy (Beardsley 12). With this rapidly increasing concept of Revivals, many Christians began to break away from the orthodox way of practice and began demanding change within those practices.

Another rapidly growing concept within the New World was the idea of the European Illuminati. The Illuminati was believed to be made up of aristocrats who opposed orthodox Puritan practices and ideologies. The earliest recording of the mentioning of Illuminati in America was on May 9, 1798. Reverend Jedidiah Morse warned his congregants against the European Illuminati that had infiltrated America, with the intent of "overthrowing their civil and religious institutions" (Stauffer 11). The idea of an organization looking to destroy the religious practices of a newly founded America had shaken the nation, and mentions of the Illuminati began to appear in many sermons and newspapers. Additionally, the rumors of the Illuminati grew to such popularity that it was at one point addressed by George Washington and John Adams (Stauffer 11).

It was widely agreed upon in later times that this fear of religious and civil destruction stemmed from knowledge of the French Revolution, which had been occurring for nearly a decade at the time of the first recorded mention of Illuminati in America (Stauffer 11). It was believed that a similar republican party such as the Illuminati would conquer America, similar to the way that the republican party of the Jacobins in the French Revolution conquered the French Monarchy (Huston 100). The French Revolution was a decade-long revolution in which a republican party called the Jacobins revolted against the French Monarchy and its officials. The Jacobins partook in unfair trials against the monarchy, and instead took to executing the officials for their supposed crimes, as well as lashed out upon many people who were openly in opposition to the party (Linton 12). The Jacobin's "Reign of Terror," as this bloodbath has been coined, created a deep-seated anxiety regarding the motives of governments, political parties, and of people in general (Linton 13). This feeling of anxiety when regarding other people's

intentions may have been the cause of the fear of religious, moral, and civil revolution in America.

The Spanish Inquisition was a period of time in Europe characterized by unfair trials and imprisonment under the circumstances of heresy. The first globally released records of the Spanish Inquisition, translated from the original Inquisition archives, were published in Boston in 1828 after France invaded Spain in 1808. According to Alterton's analysis, this publication is widely believed to have been Poe's initial inspiration to write "The Pit and the Pendulum." In addition to the Llorente publication, a book entitled *Startling Facts for Native Americans called "Know-Nothings"* by Gordon Lester Ford was published in 1855. Though published at a date later than Poe's publication of "The Pit and the Pendulum," it still represents a time-accurate perspective of American knowledge of the Inquisition in the nineteenth century. Ford describes the process of the unfair Inquisition trials, the conditions of the prisons, and the treatment of the prisoners. In his writing, he describes the Inquisition's three types of torture: squassation, which is also known as suspension, water, and fire (Ford 27-28). Ford speaks of the Inquisition with a disturbed and disgusted tone, which is certainly telling of the general American perspective of the Inquisition and its atrocities, especially seeing as the nation was founded on the basis of fleeing from the religious persecution that the Inquisition was enacting upon Spain's citizens.

Analyzing Edgar Allan Poe's "The Pit and the Pendulum" requires the average American's knowledge of and attitude towards the French Revolution and the Spanish Inquisition, as well as the religious foundation of America. When considering the American knowledge of these three aspects of historical context, one can assume that Poe's intention when writing "The Pit and the Pendulum" was to take advantage of the fear that many Americans had of revolution and the destruction of their religious institutions. A combination of tensions from

Religious Revivals, the French Revolution, and the Spanish Inquisition all fed into these fears; they watched the very events they feared happen all around them and waiting for these events to happen to them as well. In “The Pit and the Pendulum,” Poe writes of a prisoner who is being kept in Toledo, who ultimately meets his fate bestowed upon him by his captors in the form of a swinging pendulum, meant to slice him in half. When taking into consideration the three methods of torture known to Americans as mentioned in Ford’s publication, it is evident that this method of torture was not used in the Inquisition. However, it was known that in the French Revolution, a guillotine was used to decapitate the oppositions of the Jacobins.

In light of this information, it could be inferred that the pendulum is a dramatized version of the French Revolution’s guillotine, serving the same purpose of cutting a person’s body to kill them. Further implying the French Revolution’s role in the short story, when the prisoner is about to fall to their death, they are saved by a man identified as General Lasalle. General Lasalle was a commanding officer under the rule of Napoleon Bonaparte, who had risen to power during the French Revolution (Marbot and Butler 24). The narrator’s tone towards the appearance of Lasalle is indifferent: “An outstretched arm caught my own as I fell, fainting into the abyss. It was that of General Lasalle. The French army had entered Toledo. The Inquisition was in the hands of its enemies” (Poe 12). Poe’s narrator expresses no relief when they realize who has saved them from death. This can be interpreted as an expression of America’s indifference towards both the French and the Spanish. The French were no heroes; they had been doing the same thing that the Inquisition had been—giving their opposers unfair trials and executing them. Poe’s description of the atrocities of the Inquisition and his indifferent tone when speaking of the French expresses clear American disdain for both parties, and Poe’s lack of his signature

supernatural horror is telling of one thing: the American fear needed no supernatural aid when their biggest fears were happening in real-time as they watched.

Edgar Allan Poe's dramatic retelling of the Spanish Inquisition is a chilling tale that contains many historical layers. The religious foundation of America and its turmoil, the French Revolution, the American fear of religious persecution, and the Spanish Inquisition were all true stories that Poe used to create a tale that needed no supernatural factors to horrify his audience. These pieces of historical context are crucial to understanding Poe's intention in his creation of the short story "The Pit and the Pendulum." Poe was an intentionally complex writer; there is always something deeper lying underneath his works. Historical context proves a useful and important aid when attempting to understand Poe's complexities, especially in a piece that doesn't include his signature supernatural touch.

Concluding Statements

Reflecting an Unstable America

This thesis, conclusively, presents a new way of examining an old piece of literature. What matters in the present day is what this analysis of "The Pit and the Pendulum" has brought forth regarding the sociopolitical state of America which Poe was writing in. Poe's short story reflects an America not of strength in its new creation, but a fearful and internally weak America, in which citizens were in constant terror of revolution and vengeful mobs, but also of oppressive governmental power. The citizens of America, in this reading of the short story, were trapped somewhere in between two undesirable potential outcomes: an oppressive, sovereign group of religious terrorists who aimed to uproot their religious freedoms and take control over the nation, and simultaneously, a "wicked mob" that would induce terror and destroy the governmental

power as they knew it, leaving the nation in a governed-less freefall. In a sense, then, these two potential outcomes *are* the pit and the pendulum; there are two options, both of which bring pain and destruction, and neither of which are escapable from within the nation itself. Rescued by the French, who were just as bloody as the Spanish, the narrator, who perhaps represents America, does not feel truly saved. Perhaps, as is constantly argued, he died somewhere along the way. In any sense, Poe's "The Pit and the Pendulum" narrativizes the turmoil and struggle of a newly founded nation in distress, caught between fear of oppression, and fear of savage lawlessness.

Poe as a Political Horror Trailblazer

Additionally, this thesis further adds to the debated concept of Poe as a political writer and not solely an author of Gothic tales and the macabre. This politically charged twist on horror may have been pioneered in part by Poe and morphed over time into the horror presented on the big screen in the modern day. Poe, in his mixing of American sociopolitical views with his signature macabre, horrific touch has paved the way for many beloved tales in the present, from *The Purge* (2013), to *American Psycho*, to *Rosemary's Baby*. Horror, which has been a genre known to comment on a plethora of politically charged topics such as race, gender, class, and government, seems to have been an outlet used to express era-specific fears and discourses of society from its origins. Is this underlying political nature of American horror to be credited to Poe? It is an entirely likely answer. Poe is currently respected as a trailblazer of the psychological subgenre as it is known today, and as such a large influence on the genre of horror altogether, his part in the political nature of horror can and should be recognized.

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