

## Story and Film Summaries: Teacher Resource

### “The Pit and the Pendulum” Story Summary

**T**HE SETTING IS a dungeon during the Spanish Inquisition. The hero is an unnamed man who is trapped in a dark prison cell. His trial and the sentencing that landed him in jail are briefly described. The hero tries to search the cell to learn all he can and perhaps discover a way out, but it's too dark. He stumbles around and nearly falls into a cavernous pit in the center of the cell. He is knocked unconscious. When he wakes up, he realizes that he is strapped into a torture device that houses a swinging, razor-sharp pendulum. The pendulum gradually lowers closer and closer to his heart. The man goes mad as he watches the pendulum grow near. He uses his free hand to wipe the remains of his last meal onto the strap that sits between his body and the pendulum. This attracts the rats, and they chew through the strap, freeing him. As soon as he stands, the pendulum is raised and the iron walls—which have been heated to a dangerous level—close in on him. The hero is forced closer to the pit's opening. Just before he falls, General Lasalle's French army arrives and rescues him.

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### *The Pit and the Pendulum* Film Summary

**T**HE SETTING IS the 16th-century Spanish castle of Nicholas Medina. Francis Bernard shows up there to investigate the mysterious circumstances surrounding the sudden death of his sister Elizabeth, Nicholas's wife. First he is told that Elizabeth died from a blood disease. Then Nicholas reluctantly admits that she died after going insane. She had been toying obsessively with the many devices in the castle's torture chamber, and she was fatally injured. Francis decides to stay on until he feels he knows the truth. Nicholas's sister Catherine shares that their father, Sebastian Medina, was a member of the Spanish Inquisition. As a small child playing in the torture chamber (where he wasn't supposed to be), Nicholas saw his uncle murdered and his mother tortured to death by Sebastian. Dr. Leon visits and further explains that Nicholas hadn't actually seen his mother die, that she had in fact been sealed—alive—behind a brick wall in the family crypt. He asserts that Nicholas is so

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frightened by the idea of being interred before death that he's convinced that that happened to Elizabeth and she is now haunting him. When Elizabeth's "ghost" haunts the castle that night, Nicholas opens Elizabeth's tomb to try to prove that he's not playing tricks on the others. His worst fear is realized: The corpse appears to be clawing at the casket with its mouth forming a silent scream. Later, Nicholas follows Elizabeth's voice to the dungeon. It becomes clear that she is alive and in cahoots with Dr. Leon. Nicholas realizes the two are having an affair, just like his mother and uncle did so many years ago. Crazed, he assumes the persona of his father. During a struggle, Dr. Leon falls into a pit and dies. Nicholas then locks Elizabeth into a torture device called the iron maiden, where she remains unseen and unheard when Francis comes looking for Nicholas. Nicholas forces Francis into the pendulum torture device. As the pendulum is about to slice into Francis, Catherine and a servant arrive to save him. Nicholas falls to his death, alongside the doctor, in the pit. Francis, the servant, and Catherine leave the dungeon with Catherine's promise that no one will ever enter that chamber again. As the door slams shut, we see the image of Elizabeth alive, looking out from the iron maiden in horror.