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The Pit and the Pendulum

Amy Huntley

Wouldn't we all be happy to have an intelligent, talented, and enthusiastic writer in our classrooms? Especially one able to incorporate an understanding of multiple subject matters including science and history? But what if that student translated everything he knew into violent writings? Would we allow that student to express himself freely? What would happen if we had Edgar Allan Poe in one of our modern classrooms?

I had a fight with my foster father John before I went to bed one night. We never get along well, and I don't remember what we fought about that night, but I went to bed angry and I had a weird dream—we're talking Stephen King ought to interview me about it. I was working for Old Man Denton down the street, in this dream. He used to have a cataract growing over his left eye until about two months ago when he had cataract surgery. When the cataract was there it looked like an extra, milk-colored flap of skin growing up onto his eye, just like the skin that grows up onto your finger nails if you don't push it back. It was gross in real life, but it was even worse in my dream. It was white and blue in my dream, and thicker. Instead of just reaching around the outside of the eye, it was crawling all the way across it. Denton kept staring at me with his hideous blue eye, and I was freaking out—really freaking out. My heart was racing and I felt sick to my stomach and had to go to the bathroom all at once. I was so sick, I'm surprised I didn't barf in bed for real. And the worst part was that Denton wouldn't stop staring at me, so I finally

killed him. And cut apart his body and stashed it under the floorboards and—then I woke up.

The next day when I got to third hour, Ms. Chester, my English teacher, gave us this ridiculous free writing period. It's a stupid waste of time usually. I don't know what to write about. But that day I had a great idea for a story. I took it straight from my dream. The story turned out fantastic. I got to write about cutting up Denton's body and catching all the blood in this tub. I kept thinking, while I was writing, about the *Naked Bashings* song called "Dead Hearts Don't Beat," so I worked into the story how the murderer gets caught because he keeps hearing this heart beating, and it makes him crazy.

"Violence sells,' I told her, which is only true, so I'm not sure why she looked at me like she thought I was in one of the gangs that regularly roam our hallways."

It didn't go over well with Chester the Jester. She didn't even read the story for a week, then she called me into her room after school and set my story in front of me and said, "I'm uncomfortable with what you've written here. Do you know why?"

Of course I knew why. Adults think they can write about whatever they want, but kids should be writing about stupid boring stuff, like why Tom Sawyer is a funny character.

"No," I said.

"It's very violent," she said in this gentle voice, like she expected me to get angry, which really pissed me off...because she was actually being condescending.

"Violence sells," I told her, which is only true, so I'm not sure why she looked at me like she thought I was in one of the gangs that regularly roam our hallways.

"Do you really believe that?" she asked.

"Sure."

"Is that why you wrote this? Because you think people want to read about someone murdering an old man with a cataract? Cutting his body apart, and stuffing it under the floor boards?"

It was obvious she didn't think so and didn't have the courage to admit it. "Don't you?"

Chester the Jester was completely stuck, I could tell. "No, I guess I don't."

"Seen *Last of the Mohicans* lately?"

"As a book, it's not nearly so—"

"Who cares about the book? Seen *Silence of the Lambs*?"

"Be that as it may, I wish you would refrain from writing such violent stories for my class."

I laughed and left. But when I got home a couple hours later, John was waiting for me, not to ask his usual, "Where have you been?" question, but to inform me that Chester had called and read him my piece of writing over the phone. "All R rated movies are off limits!" He said in that very final voice of his that sounds like a Mack truck running over a rabbit. He walked away (his way of avoiding another fight), and I almost followed him to laugh in his face, but I didn't feel like it. How does John think he's going to stop me from watching R rated movies?

Just to prove he couldn't, I went to my friend David's house that night and we watched *Basic Instinct*. That was almost as weird as my dream. The detective, played by Michael Douglas in that movie, had it bad for Sharon Stone's character. He stayed with her even when he couldn't be sure she wouldn't kill him. That's a powerful physical attraction.

Lucky for me, the next day in Chester's class, we had another free writing period. I was furious with her for calling John, so I decided to write something else that would freak her out. This time I wrote about a girl named Marie Roget, who was in love with a sailor, only she didn't let anyone know it. One day she disappeared and was gone for two weeks. But she returned. A few days later she disappeared again, only when she showed up the next time, it was dead in the river. A clever detective named Auguste Dupin figured out a sailor had brutally murdered her and dragged her body to the river by the hair. She obviously wasn't any smarter about falling in love than Michael Douglas was in *Basic Instinct*. I wanted to be sure that Chester the Jester knew it was my story, so I wrote underneath it, in letters that took up the whole bottom third of the page:

WRITTEN BY ED POE

I went to my next class feeling great about my story...both because it was good, and because Chester deserved it. My next class was history.

I love that class. Mr. Rockford is a super history teacher. He's not all interested in your life the way Chester is, always asking you questions about it, and trying to get you to think about yourself, write about yourself. He just stands at the front of the room, and talks about history, and tells you interesting stuff. He sometimes dresses up like a historical person and comes in and gives that person's autobiography. And he's funny. He cracks jokes all the time. Sometimes they're about history, but mostly they're about things that we can relate to, like the day he got us all going on "Famous Firsts." It started out as a discussion of the technology of the Roman Empire. "They were the first people to have a water pipe system," he said. "And they were the first

people to build it out of lead, thereby poisoning their whole city." We all thought that was pretty funny. But the idea of "First Times" was better, and the conversation degenerated. Although Rockford never said anything outright that could get him in trouble, he was hinting about sex. So we asked him, "When did you first do it?" "Where?" Someone else said. "Yeah, where?" He didn't answer our questions, but he laughed with us.

The day I wrote "The Murder of Marie Roget" Rockford started talking about the Spanish Inquisition. The best part about listening to this lecture on the Inquisition was that it gave me another story idea. I wasn't sure I could wait until the next free write day to write the story, so I decided to do it later that night. We had a research paper due next week in Chester's class, and I thought it'd be fair to call my story a research paper since it would be set during the Inquisition. The Jester would probably fail me, but I didn't really care whether I passed English or not this year, and it'd be worth it just to irritate her.

"I felt a little lonely as soon as she'd walked away with my paper, as if I'd lost something important."

I started the story that night, but it took me the whole next week to finish. A man is found guilty of heresy and tossed into a dungeon. He's left completely in the dark, and the Inquisitors expect that if he tries to explore the dungeon in the darkness he'll fall into a horrible pit with the ghastliest of terrors to torture him on the way down. He doesn't fall in, just through a stroke of luck. So next the Inquisitors tie him down on a slab and a giant, sharp sword begins to descend on him slowly, swinging back and forth like a pendulum (I got that idea from a science experiment we did the same day Rockford started talking about the Spanish Inquisition). He manages to save himself from that fate, and then the walls begin to close in on him as they heat up with a deadly fire. He's finally saved by the French invasion of Spain.

The funny thing was that by the time I finished the story and brought it to class the day our research papers were due, I was just thinking about how great the story was, and I'd forgotten that part of my purpose was to irritate Chester the Jester. I didn't even much care anymore what she thought of the story. I only remembered to think about her reaction right before she collected the papers because she passed back the free write then.

I was disappointed in her response on the paper. She didn't seem mad at all. In fact, she'd written:

Although you are dealing with a crime in this story, it is much different than your last. You take a very logical and detailed approach to solving the mystery. You might think about including more dialog in here, however. And I'd like to know more about Marie as a person so that I might understand better why she ran away with such a dangerous man. Would you consider revising this?

I wanted to throw the paper away for a second because it hadn't done what I'd wanted it to. But the more I thought about it, the more I figured it was a pretty good story. One thing's for sure, Chester doesn't say you've done something well unless you have, and she seemed to think the story was good. So I tucked it into a folder and decided to think about it. I figured I didn't really need to revise it, though. It was good the way it was.

Chester walked up and down the aisles collecting people's research papers. When she got to my desk, she tapped it with her hand and said, "I saw *Silence of the Lambs* last weekend." She paused for a second to wait for me to say something, but I wasn't going to give her the satisfaction. So she took my paper and moved on.

I felt a little lonely as soon as she'd walked away with my paper, as if I'd lost something important.

It was 1 a.m. and Ellen was about to cry. She knew she should stop trying to grade research papers. She was too tired to be fair about the process. But even that didn't feel like a good

enough excuse to stop. These tenth grade research papers weren't the only papers she had to grade. Her two eleventh grade literature classes had a major essay due in two days and her senior composition class was turning in portfolios tomorrow. Besides, she'd already had these research papers for two weeks. They were taking her a half an hour apiece to grade.

She moved out of the comfortable lounge chair and listened to her slippers sliding across the floor (she was too tired to pick her feet up). She found herself in the kitchen, leaning on the open refrigerator door, scanning the contents for caffeine. "The Pepsi Generation" was right. Most of the teachers she worked with were in their forties and used coffee to get needed caffeine. But she usually reached for Pepsi when she needed it. Her first year teaching—three years ago already?—she'd even been driven a few times into pouring down her throat a vile concoction known as "Jolt."

"She'd wanted to validate his writing, encourage him to continue."

She opened the Pepsi, somehow feeling relieved as she heard the air escape its prison, and she thought, as her slippers took her back to the lounge chair, "I've been teaching for four years. Shouldn't I be better at this?"

She plopped into the chair and sighed.

It was on top again.

Staring at her.

Ed Poe's research paper.

She'd been so surprised he'd turned one in at all that she'd started reading it as soon as her third hour left. It was the very first research paper she'd looked at.

She'd buried it immediately in the pile. No idea what to do with it.

It had shown up again her second day grading the papers. She'd buried it again.

It found its way to the top ten papers later. It was haunting her the same way violence seemed to haunt Ed.

She wanted to bury it once more, but she had to decide what to do with it eventually.

On the one hand, he deserved to fail. He had no note cards, no bibliography...no introduction, body, and conclusion. On the other hand he had such a good grasp of the Inquisition and such a sense of how to create suspense...but the violence!

She felt very like the character Ed had created...powerless, tied to a slab, watching a pendulum of violence descend on her.

"No," she said to her cat, Jester, sitting at her feet staring at her. "I've already fallen into the pit. I blew it with that first story, 'The Tell-Tale Heart.'"

The cat stared blankly at her, its pupils dilating for a moment, retracting.

When she'd called Ed into her room after school, she hadn't said at all what she'd intended to. For God's sakes, he'd finally written something with substance. He'd finally written *something*. She'd wanted to validate his writing, encourage him to continue. She'd learned in college that that was how to engage reluctant writers. She knew phrases like "Writing For Their Own World." That was what Ed was doing. He was right. Violence was selling.

It was everywhere...on the news, in the movies, in music. She didn't believe violence had to be present to create entertainment the way most Americans seemed to. And she didn't want to condone it and encourage its representation as a form of entertainment.

And yet, Ed *was* writing for his world.

She knew that she'd panicked—that's why she'd blown it with Ed. That's why she'd gone against her principles in teaching and told him to stop writing such violent papers when she'd met with him about "The Tell Tale Heart." For a second, she'd been so overwhelmed with the problem his story had presented her that she'd wanted the solution to be that easy.

She'd tried to make amends with her response to "The Murder of Marie Roget." But it was too late. She knew that part of the reason Ed was writing such violent stories was to get back at her for rejecting his first piece of writing.

"Still, the kid's not normal." The cat yawned and gave her a sleek black-bodied stretch. "This is too weird. And the scary thing is he's obviously smart! Bad spelling, but he's worked his history

into this paper pretty well. Still, I think he's reaching out for help."

She wanted to forget about the paper, to just help Ed. Somehow, the grading of his paper seemed irrelevant.

But it was required of her. She had to put a grade on it.

She buried the paper again.

She's a witch and I hate her. I've thought about shooting her, but she deserves Denton's mutilated fate more.

But I won't do it.

I'm not crazy. She just thinks I am. So does John. And Mr. Jones, the school counselor. And Mr. Rockford.

That's the worst part.

Mr. Rockford thinks I'm crazy.

"You can redo it," she said. Did she really think I would? "I'll give you a month to redo this paper in the same format everyone else has done it, so it meets the requirements of a research paper."

That's a bunch of crap. There's no way I'm redoing it. I did it once. And it was good. She even admitted it.

"I'm impressed with your story. It's very well written. The way you put the Inquisition in here is sophisticated. And your suspense is well done. But this just isn't a research paper." She looked like she was going to cry, and her voice was all shaky as she said it. The funny thing was I felt sorry for her, just a little, but I wanted to hit her more.

"I know you're angry, Ed, and I don't blame you, but I have to share this with the counselor."

I didn't say anything, but I wished she'd just fall me and leave me alone.

The worst part was that when I wouldn't redo the paper, she sicced Rockford on me, and he tried to convince me to rewrite the paper in research form.

And then John and Mr. Jones said I had to see a psychiatrist.

So I just sit there.

I've been three times, but I never say anything to the psychiatrist. We sit in his neutral colored office, surrounded by brown silence for fifty minutes. And I'm thinking of stories the whole time. Yesterday, I thought about bricking Chester the Jester up in a wall while she was still alive. I'd chain her in so she couldn't get away, and she'd have to watch me add each brick to the wall. I'd be able to see her face the whole time, so I'd know she was aware of exactly what I was doing...and why.

As educators entrusted with developing readers and writers, we English teachers find ourselves and our students in highly contradictory and hypocritical environments that sometimes defy our efforts to control. Our isolation in the face of complex situations makes it even more difficult for us to help students whose needs reach beyond what we have to offer.

But we can come together to confront issues and work toward resolution as a team. Toward that end you are invited to examine these issues:

Did Ellen Chester deal with Ed Poe adequately? Should she have allowed him to continue writing such violent pieces for credit? Should she have given Ed a passing grade and not asked him to redo the paper? Should she have involved the school counselor and another teacher that the student trusted in the problem?

Should we, in a society that is already inundated with violent entertainment, require students to read the works of Edgar Allan Poe? If so, how do we choose which pieces we will expose our students to? Why is it that the most commonly anthologized Poe stories are the most violent? What responsibility do we have to our students to examine the violent heritage of our current entertainment while asking students to read Poe? How can we do so? And how will we deal with the consequences of sensitizing our students to the violence that surrounds them? How will we (or should we?) alleviate for students the fear we create?