

## QUOTATION

### EDGAR ALLAN POE ON THE EXTINCTION OF NEUROTIC FEAR BY EXPOSURE WITH RESPONSE PREVENTION

In the story *The Premature Burial* Poe describes the case of a young man who suffered a "cataleptic" disorder in which he would lapse into a state of profound unconsciousness. As a result he developed an obsession about being buried alive.

My fancy grew charnel . . . the idea of premature burial held continual possession of my brain. . . . My nerves became thoroughly unstrung, and I fell prey to perpetual horror. I hesitated to ride or to walk, or to indulge in any exercise that would carry me from home . . . I no longer dared trust myself out of the immediate presence of those who were aware of my proneness to catalepsy, lest falling into one of my usual fits, I should be buried before my real condition could be ascertained.

In addition, he arranged a series of "elaborate precautions," so as to make the family burial vault and his coffin easily opened and equipped with food, water, padding, and a rope-operated bell with which to signal for help. These precautions seemed, however, to have been in vain.

. . . I found myself emerging from total unconsciousness into the first feeble and indefinite sense of existence. . . . For some minutes I remained without motion . . . despair alone urged me, after long irresolution, to uplift the heavy lids of my eyes. . . . It was dark—all dark. . . . I endeavoured to shriek . . . but no voice issued. . . . The movement of my jaws . . . showed me that they were bound up, as is usual with the dead. I felt, too, that I lay upon some hard substance; and by something similar my sides were, also, closely compressed. . . . I violently threw up my arms. They struck a solid wooden substance, which extended above my person at an elevation of not more than six inches from my face. I could no longer doubt that I reposed within a coffin at last. . . .

I thought of my precautions. I writhed and made spasmodic exertions to force open the lid: it would not move. . . . and then there came to my nostrils the strong peculiar odour of moist earth. The conclusion was irresistible. I was not within the vault [but] thrust deep into some ordinary and nameless grave. . . . I once again struggled to cry aloud. And in the second endeavour I succeeded. A long, wild and continuous shriek or yell of agony resounded. . . .

"What do you mean by yowling in that ere kind of style" [said a voice] and hereupon I was seized and shaken without ceremony by a junto of very rough looking individuals. . . .

Thus restored to consciousness, he remembered that he had been out with a friend the previous day, had been overtaken by a storm and had sought shelter in a cabin with some men who were transporting garden mould. He had spent the night sleeping soundly in an exceedingly narrow lower bunk.

The tortures endured, however, were indubitably quite equal, for the time, to those of sepulture. They were fearfully—they were inconceivably hideous; but out of Evil proceeded Good. . . . My soul acquired tone—acquired temper. I went abroad. I took vigorous exercise. I breathed the free air of Heaven. I thought upon subjects other than Death. . . . In short I became a new man. . . . From that memorable night I dismissed for ever my charnel apprehensions, and with them vanished the cataleptic disorder, of which, perhaps, they had been less the consequence than the cause.

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From: Poe, Edgar Allan. (1952). *Tales, Poems, Essays*. London: Collins, pp. 257–269.