

NAME:

# “Half-Hanged Mary”

**Analysis and Reflection:** Below are several close-reading questions organized by section of the poem. For each section, answer at least two questions. You will have a total of twenty answers.

## Close Reading Questions

	Indicate which questions you are responding to.
<p>7 pm:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Who is the speaker? Provide two details from the section to support your answer.</li><li>2. What is the occasion? Again, provide support.</li><li>3. What does Atwood compare “rumour” to in lines one and two? What does the comparison suggest about the nature of rumours? Do you agree or disagree? Explain.</li><li>4. How does the “aimed word” of the second stanza develop the metaphor of rumours in the first stanza?</li><li>5. What simile does Atwood use to convey the speaker’s shock and ignorance of the accusation that she is a witch?</li><li>6. The speaker identifies several reasons for her execution. List three:</li><li>7. Speculate on the reasons why the Puritan community would object to the speaker’s actions and circumstances.</li><li>8. Describe the speaker’s attitude toward her situation (use your tone word handout) and provide support for your answer.</li><li>9. How does your understanding of the history of witchcraft persecutions inform your understanding of this section? Cite a detail from the history reading and explain its relationship to this section.</li><li>10. The speaker’s language is decidedly modern, even though Atwood is portraying a woman from the 1680’s. What words or phrases seem particularly contemporary? Why is Atwood’s diction and syntax modern and not colonial? How might these choices reveal her purpose in composing this poem?</li></ol>	
<p>8 pm</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. To whom does the pronoun they in line 22 refer?</li><li>2. What does their preference for axes suggest about their character?</li><li>3. Summarize the action of this section:</li><li>4. The speaker compares her hanging to “a windfall in reverse, / a blackened apple stuck back onto the tree.” Explain the image and discuss the symbolism of the apple.</li><li>5. How does the speaker portray the moon? Why does Atwood include ancient moon worship in this poem? (Artemis (aka Selene was the Greek goddess of the moon; many ancient cultures celebrated lunar deities, not just the Greeks and Romans.)</li><li>6. What does the word “stalk” suggest about the men of the town (line 29)?</li><li>7. In what way are the men “excited”?</li><li>8. Why does the speaker compare their evil to an inside out glove? What is such a comparison called?</li><li>9. Projection is a Freudian term that describes the process of attributing your own repressed thoughts to another. How does this section convey the process of projection?</li><li>10. Note two uses of action verbs and explain how their presence contributes to the meaning of the sentence and or section.</li></ol>	
<p>9 pm</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Define synecdoche. Cite two examples of it from the first stanza.</li><li>2. How is the women’s response to the speaker’s execution different from that of the men on the preceding stanza?</li><li>3. Why does Atwood describe the women’s mouths as “closed so tight their lipless” (37)? What does this description suggest about the women?</li><li>4. Why are the women afraid? Consider at least two reasons for their fear.</li></ol>	

<p>5. What kinds of services did the speaker provide to women in her audience? What is significant about these actions?</p> <p>6. Why does Atwood compare soot to gossip?</p> <p>7. Atwood ironically refers to the old adage “birds of a feather flock together” in this section. What is her purpose in incorporating this saying here?</p> <p>8. Why is it safer to “[point] a finger” according to the speaker? Does Atwood agree or disagree with this sentiment?</p> <p>9. Why does the speaker catalog kindnesses in the final stanza of this section?</p> <p>10. What do you think is Atwood’s attitude toward the Puritan community—use your tone word handout and provide support for your answer.</p>	
<p>10 pm</p> <p>1. Whom does the speaker address in this section? Why?</p> <p>2. Characterize the speaker’s attitude toward her situation as revealed by Atwood’s diction and syntax of the opening stanza.</p> <p>3. Ironically, the speaker’s execution provides her some time away from work to consider some philosophical issues. What kind of work is the speaker usually occupied by?</p> <p>4. What central philosophical question does the speaker consider? What Puritan belief does Atwood’s speaker question?</p> <p>5. The Puritan minister Jonathan Edwards believed that nature reflected spiritual realities. How does Atwood make use of this belief in this section?</p> <p>6. Atwood has her speaker appropriate Rene Descartes’—a French Enlightenment philosopher—famous conclusion: “I think; therefore, I am.” How does her usage reveal her criticism of the Puritanism?</p> <p>7. 1 Corinthians 13:13 reads “And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.” Why does Atwood allude to this passage in this section?</p> <p>8. Name three things to which Atwood compares “Faith, Hope, and Charity.” What attitude toward these Christian virtues do these comparisons suggest?</p> <p>9. What quality of the speaker’s perception of God does the final line suggest?</p> <p>10. Is this view of God understandable? Why or why not. Explain you are your group’s thoughts.</p>	
<p>12 midnight</p> <p>1. Describe the sensations of the speaker in the first stanza. Provide a physiological explanation for these sensations.</p> <p>2. What do the words “choking,” “knotted,” “bulges,” “clenched,” and “bite” suggest about the speaker’s internal experience?</p> <p>3. What is death compared to? Explain the appropriateness of this simile.</p> <p>4. What is the speaker’s heart compared to? Again, explain the appropriateness of this metaphor.</p> <p>5. Explain the relationship between the simile of death and the metaphor of the heart.</p> <p>6. In the third stanza, Atwood compares death to a judge. How does she portray this judge? What qualities or characteristics does he possess?</p> <p>7. Atwood also compares death to a dark angel who is “insidious.” What does this word mean and how does it develop a quality of the dark angel of death?</p> <p>8. With what temptation does the dark angel lure the speaker? What do these temptations reveal about the speaker’s mental state?</p> <p>9. What definitions does the speaker refer to in line 101?</p> <p>10. What do you think are the speaker’s “own words” for herself that she would give up by dying? Support your interpretation with evidence from this section or elsewhere in the poem.</p>	

<p>2 am</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Why does the speaker describe her cries as “a thin gnawing sound” that originates “at some distance”? Explore how this description conveys the speaker’s mental state.</li> <li>2. What is the difference between this sound and that of prayer according to the speaker? What “constrain[s]” the speaker?</li> <li>3. How does the speaker’s question in line 114 complicate the distinction she made in the first stanza?</li> <li>4. How might prayer be a kind of strangulation? Record your group’s views here.</li> <li>5. The second stanza describes some of the practices of some sects of Pentacostalism, “a renewalist religious movement within Christianity that places special emphasis on the direct personal experience of God through the baptism of the Holy Spirit.” These practices include speaking in tongues, interpreting tongues, and the laying out of hands. What connection does the speaker share with these practices of Pentacostalism?</li> <li>6. Explain the irony of the comparison of the speaker to Pentacostal Christians.</li> <li>7. How does Atwood make a distinction between the traditional image of prayer and that of the speaker?</li> <li>8. What is the prayer the speaker implies in the words “Please,” “Mercy,” and “Not yet”?</li> <li>9. What does the word “caw” mean and how does it develop the image of angels?</li> <li>10. To what does the speaker compare heaven in the final two lines of this section? What view of heaven does this comparison illustrate? Do you and your group members agree or disagree? Record your thoughts here.</li> </ol>	
<p>3 am</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What does the word “seethes” mean and how does it help characterize the wind?</li> <li>2. This section is the most challenging of the poem because it is written in stream of consciousness. What does this term mean and how does the passage demonstrate its use?</li> <li>3. Note at least two instances of repetition then explain the purpose of each repeated word or phrase.</li> <li>4. Why is the word “No” the only one (except “I”) capitalized? What central view of the speaker does it convey?</li> <li>5. What does the word “talisman” mean and explain its purpose in the section.</li> <li>6. Translate lines 135-140 into standard syntax (in other words, paraphrase the lines)</li> <li>7. Translate lines 140-145</li> <li>8. Translate lines 145-151</li> <li>9. Provide a physiological explanation for the speaker’s distortion of language.</li> <li>10. Why do you think the final line of this stanza returns to standard syntax? How does this return emphasize the main idea of this section?</li> </ol>	
<p>6 am</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What is synesthesia and how does the first line exemplify the term? What added meaning does its use give to our understanding of how the speaker’s experiences the sunrise?</li> <li>2. Why is the sun “no longer a simile for God”? Explain your interpretation with evidence from earlier sections of the poem.</li> <li>3. What does the speaker mean by the statement “time is relative”? Why is the statement particularly true for the speaker?</li> <li>4. How has the speaker’s heart changed as a result of her experience? What does it mean to have one’s heart “bleached”?</li> <li>5. The word “gospel” has two etymological roots: god [god = Proto-Indo-European <i>Guth</i>, meaning that which is invoked or called] and spel</li> </ol>	

<p>[spell = Gothic <i>spillan</i>, meaning to talk or announce]. Given these etymological meanings, what do you think God announced to the speaker that night?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. Explain the paradox "pinpoints of infinity."</li> <li>7. Explain the connection between the two statements: "a revelation of deafness" and "I testify to silence." Note the religious diction of "revelation" and "testify" in your interpretation.</li> <li>8. Define the word "pun" and explain the playful double meaning of the following line: "At the end of my rope" (170).</li> <li>9. Of what is the speaker grateful? How is this gratitude ironic?</li> <li>10. The speaker's language is decidedly modern, even though Atwood is portraying a woman from the 1680's. What words or phrases seem particularly contemporary? Why is Atwood's diction and syntax modern and not colonial? How might do these choices reveal her purpose in composing this poem?</li> </ol>	
<p>8 am</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Explain the meaning of the metaphor of the first line.</li> <li>2. What Christian ritual does Atwood suggest in the second line?</li> <li>3. Given the religious allusion of line 177, to whom does Atwood ironically compare the speaker? Explain two similarities in the comparison.</li> <li>4. Describe the speaker's attitude toward her situation (use your tone word handout) and provide support for your answer.</li> <li>5. What emotional experience does Atwood convey in line 185? Discuss how the images of clover and breathing help convey this experience.</li> <li>6. Atwood doesn't directly identify how the community responded to the speaker when she "bared [her] teeth at them / in a filthy grin" (186-187). What message was the speaker sending with this behavior and how did her community react to this message?</li> <li>7. Was the intended message received by the community? Provide evidence from the section in your response.</li> <li>8. In lines 189-193 Atwood describes the fear of the community members. What psychological explanation for fear does Atwood include in these lines?</li> <li>9. What "ill will" will the townspeople see reflected in the speaker?</li> <li>10. Explain the irony of the final two lines of this section.</li> </ol>	
<p>Later</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To what does Atwood compare her "body of skin"?</li> <li>2. Reread lines 25 through 28 of the 8 pm section and discuss the connection to the comparison in this section.</li> <li>3. What does the word "nimbus" mean and discuss two possible reasons for Atwood's usage of the word.</li> <li>4. To what does Atwood compare her words? What does this comparison suggest about her attitude toward language as a result of this experience?</li> <li>5. How do you know the speaker enjoys scaring the townspeople? Provide evidence.</li> <li>6. To what three things does Atwood compare the speaker's "first death"? What benefit has the speaker gained as a result of this "first death"?</li> <li>7. Explain the paradox in line 213.</li> <li>8. How are flowers and dung two forms of the same thing?</li> <li>9. The speaker claims her audience is both owls and God? Why would each of these audiences understand the speaker?</li> <li>10. Discuss the symbolic significance of the final stanza. Figuratively the speaker has become what kind of entity?</li> </ol>	



