

Literary Analysis: Margaret Atwood's poem "Half-Hanged Mary"

Directions: Answer the following questions fully **on a separate sheet of paper** for each section of Margaret Atwood's poem "Half-Hanged Mary."

7 pm:

1. Who is the narrator of this poem?
2. Is the narrator aware that she is accused?
3. What is the narrator accused of?
4. In the third stanza, why is she accused? What are the causes?
5. What does the speaker perceive to be her "true" crime?

8 pm:

1. Define the word "trussed"?
2. How is the narrator similar to a flag?
3. How are the men in stanza 4 the same as the onlookers at Betty's bedside in *The Crucible*?
4. What does the sixth stanza mean?

9 pm:

1. Who are the "bonnets"?
2. Why are they afraid to help the speaker?
3. What favors had the narrator done for the women in stanza two?
4. What do the last three lines of stanza 3 mean? Why are ravens singular?
5. What could happen if they try to help her? What would "rub off"?

10 pm:

1. How does the narrator feel about God in this section? What is her tone?
2. How is her reaction a non-traditional one?
3. What is her argument about free will in the 1st and 2nd stanza?
4. How does she characterize God in the third stanza?
5. How does she question God's design and plan in this section?
6. How does the narrator describe God's angels in stanza 3?

12 midnight:

1. How does the punctuation change throughout this section? What does this shift signify?
2. What does the diction suggest in stanza 1?
3. What stages does she go through as she gets closer and closer to death? (look at the middle 3 stanzas).
4. How is Death like a crow? A judge? A dark angel?
5. What does she mean by "a martyr in reverse"? Who would she become a martyr for if she "let go"?
6. What is she trying to convince herself to do?

2 am:

1. What two prayers is she talking about?
2. What does she compare prayer to? What does this comparison show?
3. What is *her* prayer?
4. What does the last phrase suggest about God's angels?

3 am:

1. How is this section written? Look carefully at what is missing.
2. Why is the wording awkward here? What does it show?
3. How does the author play on “birth” in this stanza?
4. What does the repetition of the idea of birth represent?

6 am:

1. How long has she been hanging? (Hint: the poem starts at 7 pm and she is hung at 8 pm.)
2. Why is the sun not a “simile for God”? What is it now?
3. What does she mean when she says her heart was “bleached out” and “white”?
4. How is there a shift in tone in this section?

8 am:

1. Why is the first stanza important? What is the speaker telling herself to do?
2. Why does she wait to let everyone know that she is alive until after the rope is cut?
3. How does she become an active presence in this stanza? (look at the language and her actions)
4. What do the last two lines signify? What is she trying to say about the Puritan society?
5. How do the last two lines of this section relate to *The Crucible*?

Later:

1. How do the townsfolk feel about her now? Why?
2. How has the speaker changed since being hanged?
3. What does her “first death” signify? What has died?
4. What is she free from now that she has died once?
5. What do the speaker and God have in common? Why would God be the only one to be able to understand her after her hanging?
6. What does the last line of this section mean (all fullness, all vacancy)?