Half-Hanged Mary

SUMMARY

The speaker, a woman named Mary Webster, remembers that there was plenty of free-floating paranoia in the air when she was arrested for witchcraft: it just needed a victim to attach itself to. Mary herself wasn't doing anything more dangerous than milking her cow at sunset, around 7 at night, when her accusers came to arrest her.

She remembers that she didn't have any inkling she was about to be arrested: the "bullet" of the accusation sunk into her body without a sound, her skin seeming to wrap around it much like a body of water smoothly envelops a stone that's been tossed in.

She was arrested and hanged not for any real crime, but for being a poor single woman eking out a living as a farmer and a healer.

And of course, she adds, she had a woman's body—and in her world, that always made it easier to accuse someone of dealings with the devil.

Mary reflects that when the men came to arrest her an hour later, they brought a noose on impulse: if they'd thought about it for a minute, they'd have planned to behead her instead.

Mary remembers being strung up from a tree like a rotting apple. She was gagged and her hands were tied; she felt like a flag paying tribute to the ancient moon goddess, to whom blood sacrifices were once made.

The men who hanged her, all worked up by their violence, hurried home, leaving Mary to bear the consequences of their hatred.

At 9:00 p.m., the townswomen came to gawk at Mary too, staring up at her with tight lips, wide eyes, and flaring nostrils, full of fear.

Mary remembers that she was once friends with several of them: she healed one woman's sick baby and gave an unmarried girl an abortion so that *she* wouldn't end up executed.

But none of these women were brave enough to cut her down, afraid that they'd only meet the same fate: women who help convicted witches will be treated as witches themselves. "Ravens," isolated, clever women like Mary, have to stand alone.

To stay safe, these women can only try to make themselves inconspicuous, and accuse other women to protect themselves.

Mary forgives these women, or at least understands them: in circumstances so desperate, they have to cling to what little security and comfort they can find, and not stick their necks out for other women.

Now, at 10:00 p.m., Mary turns to God, saying that since she's stuck up this tree and has a little free time away from her ceaseless chores, the two of them can continue their old argument about free will.

Mary asks God: *Did I choose to hang from this uncaring tree? If nature reflects your divine will, how does this rope fit into the pattern?*

She goes on: *Does my agony somehow complete your grand plan for my life?* These questions are sarcastic: she seems to see the traditional Christian virtues of Faith, Charity, and Hope dead, shooting across God's impassive face like falling stars or owls on fire.

Now it's midnight, and Mary feels herself choking, unable to breathe or speak, like she's just a bundle of strained, despairing muscle, blood, and teeth.

She feels Death sitting on her shoulder like a carrion bird, waiting to devour her eyes when her heart finally explodes.

But she also imagines death as a lecherous old judge, getting sexual satisfaction from punishing her.

Death also seems to her like a seductive black-winged angel, trying to coax her into taking things easy and surrendering her life, not suffering anymore.

Mary feels almost tempted to allow herself to be gobbled up by death and turn into one of the things these different metaphorical figures want her to be: food, garbage, or a martyr.

Giving into death would mean giving up her own separate identity and beliefs—her understanding of her own story. But it would mean a release from pain, too.

At 2:00 a.m., Mary hears herself, as if from a distance, praying in a thin whine—except, she says, that real prayer isn't choked off like hers is.

But then she asks God: is that true? Maybe praying is actually a lot like being choked and struggling for air. Mary wonders if the Apostles in the biblical tale of Pentecost also might not have felt so great about their involuntarily burning heads, babbling mouths, and bugged-out eyes.

That reminds her that her eyes are bugging out, too. She reflects that prayer isn't what people think it is: it's not about asking God for favors at bedtime. It's much more than that: it's a desperate cry for survival, something that rips its way out of people in their most painful moments, when even Heaven seems like it might collapse and crow-like angels croak.

At 3:00 a.m., Mary hears the wind in the leaves and feels as if the trees are emitting dark birds, which scream in her ears while her heart beats painfully. She hangs there, getting weaker, and hears the wind blowing through her body, ripping up the words she's clinging to. She doesn't have any magical charms or

coins with her. She feels as if she's drowning and calls out for anyone who's listening to witness her declaration of her own innocence: she refuses to accept her unjust punishment. Trying to hang on, she declares that she won't surrender.

Finally, at 6:00 a.m., the sun rises—though it doesn't remind Mary of God anymore. She's been to the very verge of death and knows that the sun isn't what God is like at all.

Her overnight experience seems to have stretched her life out over eons.

Much as Mary would like to claim that her ordeal made her go gray, she says, it was actually her heart that went white from shock, like wet, rotting meat.

She's also taller now, having. been stretched out from the hanging. These, she says, are just the consequences of traveling through death, hearing the stars preach and looking out into the infinite, hearing nothing.

Having been forced to endure the unendurable, she can now talk about God's silence. But that doesn't mean she's ungrateful for what happened to her.

She's gained a special power: most people only die once, but she'll die twice.

When the townsfolk came back to cut her body down at 8:00 the next morning, Mary remembers, she was still alive.

Too bad for the townsfolk, she goes on: the law says you can't punish someone for the same crime twice, so she can't be hung again.

She remembers breathing in the smell of the grass and grinning horribly at the terrified men.

Now, she has a sinister power: when she looks at the men, they see their own hatred looking back at them, and run away from her.

She didn't use to be a witch, but through her hanging, she became one.

Since this ordeal, Mary says, her soft physical body seems to change shape around her real, inner body. She scurries around the countryside talking to herself and eating blackberries, and the villagers run from her.

Her death floats around her like a cloud, a souvenir of her suffering that keeps everyone away.

Ever since she was unjustly hanged, she's had the freedom to say anything she wants.

Even though she's dirty, she feels as if she's shining. She isn't troubled by eating flowers, mice, and cowpats, feeling as if these are all different versions of the same basic substance. Her curses float behind her like bubbles; she speaks to the owls in languages no one can understand.

But mostly, she speaks to God, who's the only person who gets what she's talking about: no one else has had two deaths.

Mary feels her words spilling out of her, full of all the power, possibility, and paradoxical emptiness of the universe.

THEMES

MISOGYNY AND OPPRESSION

When the titular speaker of "Half-hanged Mary" gets hauled away and hanged as a witch, she knows exactly why the townspeople have singled her out: she's a woman who doesn't abide by the 17th-century rules of how a woman should behave. Unmarried, skilled, property-owning Mary presents a challenge to the patriarchal order of her small Puritan village in Massachusetts. The men who try to kill her—and the women who stand by and watch—enact the deep societal misogyny that offers women two bad choices: compliance with men's standards and demands, or death.

Misogyny, the poem suggests, has the power to destroy women's lives by breaking not just their bodies, but their spirits, demanding that they erase their own identities to fit into a narrow idea of what a woman can be. Such misogyny creates a self-perpetuating cycle of fear which oppressed women are too downtrodden to resist their own oppression. And women like Mary, who *do* resist and survive misogyny, are punished with exile: there's no place for them in a misogynist world.

Like all the victims of the 17th-century witch-hunts, Mary is innocent of any crime: she simply doesn't fit into her world's patriarchal order. An unmarried farmer and healer, she knows very well that the men who come to kill her don't really think she's a witch, not deep down. They simply fear her independence—and her femininity. With both "a surefire cure for warts" and a provocative "sweet pear hidden in [her] body" (that is, female genitals), she threatens a power structure in which men sit at the top, controlling women's bodies and lives.

That power structure is so strong that the women around Mary are frightened into compliance. When the "bonnets" (that is, the demurely-hatted women) of the town come to gawk at Mary after her hanging, she remarks that she was once friends with them. She even performed an abortion on one "non-wife" (or unmarried woman) to save her from exactly the kind of violence Mary's suffering now: had Mary not intervened, this woman would have been persecuted for having premarital sex.

But the women's fear that Mary's fate might "rub off" on them means they can't take a stand to help her. The men's violence erodes the women's solidarity: capitulation and silence become their only safe choices. Misogynist oppression, in other words, rests on a foundation of fear and violence that crushes dissent—and that fear only leads to more oppression.

When Mary defies both physical and spiritual death, refusing to accept her unjust persecution, there's thus no place left in society for her. Though she gains a new kind of power as a

feared outsider, she can only live in exile: the misogynistic world around her just can't expand to include a woman who neither dies nor complies.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 10-18
- Between Lines 18-19
- Lines 19-30
- Between Lines 30-31
- Lines 31-55
- Between Lines 55-56
- Lines 56-62
- Lines 85-87
- Lines 178-184
- Between Lines 184-185
- Lines 185-200

RESISTANCE, PERSEVERANCE, AND SACRIFICE

When Mary is unjustly hanged for witchcraft, she refuses to give in either to death or to the reductive, sexist stories the world wants to tell about her: she won't be reduced to either a demonized "witch" or an objectified wife. By the end of the poem, having survived the townsfolks' murder attempt, she feels empowered to say and do whatever she likes. But that power comes at a price: she must spend the rest of her life as an exile and an outsider. Resisting misogyny, the poem suggests, demands that women tell their own stories and stay loyal to their own truths, in spite of the real costs of such perseverance.

As Mary slowly chokes, she steadfastly resists both her literal death and the metaphorical death of her identity. Struggling for breath, she imagines death not just as a carrion crow ready to "eat her eyes," but a sexist judge "muttering about sluts and punishment," and a seductive "dark angel" encouraging her to stop fighting.

But she resists, clinging instead to "[her] own words for [her]self" even though it's tempting to give in and accept one of the roles these figures (and her world) offer her: as a "martyr," "food," or "trash." Dying, here, isn't just a matter of literally giving up the ghost: it's a metaphor for how misogyny erases women's sense of self by stereotyping them as sinners or saints, witches or wives. Mary refuses to give in to such erasure.

It's precisely because Mary resists that she gains a strange new power at the end of the poem. Having survived her hanging, she becomes more a "witch" than she ever was before, now speaking directly to God and terrifying the townspeople. Her voice takes on a new potency: she feels that the "cosmos unravels from [her] mouth," and experiences the "holiness" of her own muddy hands. In other words, by refusing to let misogyny take away her identity, Mary becomes an untouchable truth-speaker with a deep sense of her own value.

But being untouchable also means being an exile: Mary ends her story as a wandering wildwoman, with only "owls" for company. Mary's stalwart resistance is thus a kind of self-preservation, but also a kind of self-sacrifice. Standing up to oppression, this poem suggests, often means standing completely alone. But such resistance is nonetheless valuable and essential, and (the poem hints) paves a way for other oppressed people to follow.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Between Lines 55-56
- Lines 56-74
- Between Lines 74-75
- Lines 75-102
- Between Lines 125-126
- Lines 126-144
- Between Lines 164-165
- Lines 165-184
- Between Lines 184-185
- Lines 185-215

SUFFERING AND TRANSFORMATION

When Mary is "half-hanged," left for dead on a gallows tree, she goes through an intense, transformative ordeal, defying death itself. In fact, Mary feels as if her experience is a *kind* of death, followed by a resurrection: by surviving her hanging, she becomes a new person, with deep insight into "sinuous possibilit[ies]" that her persecutors can't begin to imagine. Suffering, Mary's story suggests, can be transformative, imbuing sufferers with perspective, clarity, and power.

Mary's ordeal recalls any number of tales about people who have gained wisdom or new life through terrible suffering. Like the Norse god Odin, Mary hangs agonizingly from a tree in order to gain wisdom; like Christ, Mary is unjustly tormented and executed, but then reborn into a whole new life. By alluding to these ancient stories, the poem suggests that Mary's suffering is a crucible experience, one in which she's destroyed in order to come back in a new and better form.

In Mary's case, suffering gives her a new identity as the very "witch" the townspeople falsely accused her of being in the first place. As a kind of wild, witchy holy woman, she can sing to herself of the paradoxical "fullness" and "vacancy" of the "cosmos," and recognize that "dung" and "flowers" are just "two forms of the same thing." In other words, through her suffering, she seems to have stepped outside ordinary life, gaining a god's-eye view of time and change.

While few would volunteer to take Mary's place on that tree, her suffering thus has its rewards. By facing up to despair,

agony, and utter aloneness, Mary transforms what could have been meaningless pain into wisdom—and is herself transformed into a figure who "gleams" with a strange "holiness." This poem's very existence suggests that part of her power is her ability to light the path for the generations of non-compliant women who will follow her: her suffering has transformative power as a story, too.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 23-26
- Between Lines 55-56
- Lines 56-74
- Between Lines 102-103
- Lines 103-125
- Between Lines 125-126
- Lines 126-144
- Between Lines 144-145
- Lines 145-164
- Between Lines 164-165
- Lines 165-184
- Between Lines 184-185
- Lines 185-215

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-9

Rumour was loose ...
... a thrown stone.

This poem is a dramatic monologue, spoken by Mary Webster. As Atwood says in a short introduction, Webster was one of many 17th-century victims of the Puritan witch-hunts. A widow from Massachusetts, Webster was accused of witchcraft and hanged by her fellow citizens—but survived her hanging. In this poem, she'll tell her own story in the first person.

"Half-hanged Mary" itself then begins with an ominous moment of personification: "Rumour," the speaker says, "was loose in the air, / hunting for some neck to land on." That predatory "rumour" is about to come for the speaker herself, the word "neck" foreshadowing the hanging to come.

These first lines evoke the claustrophobic, gossipy danger of a small 17th-century town. In Mary's world, it seems, words have a lot of power: the mere "rumour" that Mary's a witch seals her fate.

Take a look at Mary's simile in the second stanza here:

> I didn't feel the aimed word hit
> and go in like a soft bullet.

The "bullet" of the "aimed word"—*witch*—hits so "soft[ly]" that Mary doesn't even know that she's doomed; her "smashed flesh" swallows that bullet as easily as "water" closes over a "thrown stone." But it takes only that one "aimed word" to ruin her life.

But here at "7 p.m.," the outset of Mary's ordeal, she has no idea what she's about to face. She's just placidly "milking the cow" in her barn, minding her own business.

These first stanzas of the poem give readers a preview of the way Mary will shape her story. The poem will chart her suffering like a crime procedural, using sections labeled with times of day to follow her, hour by hour, as she's captured and hanged. And she'll use loose, flexible free verse to tell her tale—a choice that reflects her independence and willpower. She won't fit her language into any particular poetic form: she'll bend form to suit her meaning.

LINES 10-18

I was hanged ...
... come in handy.

As Mary concludes the first section of her story, she reflects on why she, of all people, was singled out as a witch. Both her self-descriptions and her tone here give readers a clear sense of her character.

The townsfolk came for her, Mary suggests, because she was a single, independent woman with her own livelihood. The imagery of her "blue eyes," "sunburned skin," and "tattered skirts" paints a picture of a person who doesn't have a lot of money, but isn't afraid to work. She lives on a "weedy farm" that, unusually for the 17th century, she owns herself; her "surefire cure for warts" suggests that she has a sideline as a healer.

Of course, none of these qualities would have been a problem if she weren't a woman! Listen to Mary's tone (and her metaphor) as she describes the deeper reason her fellow citizens turned on her:

> Oh yes, and breasts,
> and a sweet pear hidden in my body.

There's a bitter irony in that sarcastic "Oh yes": Mary's female body is what makes her independence and skill unacceptable, and well she knows it. This stanza paints a picture not just of Mary, but of the repressively patriarchal world she lives in, a world that sees "demons" in any woman who doesn't abide by a narrow set of rules.

And Mary's metaphorical description of her genitals as a tempting "sweet pear" suggests that part of the trouble here is that she hasn't made herself sexually available to the men of the town: not only is she a property-owning single woman, she's "forbidden fruit."

In other words, merely by being a single woman who lives her life the way she wants to, Mary frustrates and angers her fellow

townsfolk. The dangerous "rumour" floating loose in the air thus lands squarely on her.

LINES 19-22

The rope was ...
... onto the tree.

As the "8 p.m." section of the poem begins, Mary observes that it was really just impulse that made the "men of the town" hang her; if they'd taken a moment to consider, they'd have "thought of axes" instead. This flash of dark wit characterizes Mary: even at this terrible moment, she still has the self-possession to make a joke.

That joke also paints a picture of the men's deep hatred. It's hard to say what's worse: the idea that they're rushing out to commit murder on an impulse, or the idea that if they'd been thinking they would have chosen a bloodier and more efficient axe instead. Clearly, the outward respectability of Mary's small Puritan town is a cover for some deep, violent misogyny.

Mary depicts the actual moment of her hanging with a macabre simile. Take a look at her language here:

> Up I go **like a windfall in reverse,**
> **a blackened apple stuck back onto the tree.**

Here again, there's some grim humor: "up I go" is an oddly jaunty way to describe being hanged! And the idea of a "windfall in reverse," a fallen apple getting "stuck back onto the tree," gestures to Mary's sheer bad luck in being singled out for this violence. The imagery of the "blackened apple," meanwhile, invites readers to imagine Mary through the men's eyes: they see her as a "bad apple," garbage to be disposed of. They might also literally see her face darkening as she begins to suffocate.

These lines also set a pattern that the rest of the "8 p.m." section will follow: every stanza here is an unrhymed couplet. This *one-two, one-two* pattern sounds as grim as an executioner's drumbeat, measuring out the last moments of Mary's life—or so she and her murderers might expect.

LINES 23-30

Trussed hands, rag ...
... me wearing it.

Now dangling from a tree, bound and gagged, Mary feels as if she's a "flag raised to salute the moon"—and as if the moon is an "old bone-faced goddess," ready to accept a blood sacrifice.

Mary's language here suggests that she's seeing something of herself in this bone-white moon—or perhaps something of how the men see *her*. The moon, in this metaphor, is an ancient, frightening goddess, perhaps rather witchy herself. But that this goddess "once took blood in return for food" suggests that her time is long past. Mary, after all, lives in a time and place dominated by a particularly patriarchal flavor of Christianity.

Listen to the echoing, evocative sounds in these lines:

> Trussed hands, rag in my mouth,
> a flag raised to salute the moon,
> old bone-faced goddess, old original,
> who once took blood in return for food.

There are all different flavors of assonance here:

- the long /oo/ of "moon," "food," "who," and "salute"
- the /a/ of "rag" and "flag"
- the /uh/ of "once" and "blood"
- the /oh/ of "old" and "bone"

Taken all together, these sounds fill these lines with an eerie, singsong music, like a ritual chant. And the wide variety of /o/ sounds here means that the actual letter "o" appears over and over—round and staring as the moon itself!

Having made their cruel sacrifice, the men, all worked up by their bloodlust, "stalk homeward" like predatory animals. Even as she fights for breath, Mary's simile of "evil turned inside out **like a glove**" shows she has a clear perspective on what these men are doing: they're projecting all their own inner "evil" onto her, making her their scapegoat. She's left "wearing" their crime.

LINES 31-40

The bonnets come ...
... save your life.

As the "9 p.m." section begins, after the murderous men "stalk homeward," the women of the town creep out like mice to take a good look at Mary as she dangles from the tree.

Mary's metonymy here suggests these women are, at first glance, rather hard to tell apart:

> The **bonnets** come to stare,
> the **dark skirts** also,

These women seem to have become their uniform "bonnets" and "dark skirts"—images that suggest cowed conformity. It's as if the women are trying their hardest not to stand out, not to draw any attention to themselves.

And that only makes sense: they're terrified! From her awful perch, Mary "can see their fear" in their eyes, and in their "lipless" mouths, shut tight as if the women are afraid they'll say the wrong thing. They know it could all too easily be them up in that tree.

Mary knows it, too. Now, she singles out women below her one by one, observing that her former "friend[s]" are among the crowd. She remembers that she "cured" one woman's baby. And, even more meaningfully, she performed an abortion on another woman, an unmarried girl whom the town would

certainly have persecuted if word of her pregnancy had gotten out.

Listen to the sounds of Mary's language as she confronts these women in her mind:

> You were my friend, you too.
> I cured your baby, Mrs.,
> and flushed yours out of you,
> Non-wife, to save your life.

The singsong assonance and internal rhyme here makes it sound as if Mary is almost taunting her former friends with their own cowardice.

LINES 41-49

Help me down? ...
... pointing a finger.

Frightened into silence, Mary's old friends "don't dare" to rescue her. In a "gathering like this one," Mary understands, the only way to be safe is to stay quiet—and even to deflect violence onto other women.

These lines lay out Mary's understanding of the way misogynist violence oppresses women. It's not simply that the townswomen live in constant fear of male violence if they put a toe out of line. It's that they're so scared they can't even support each other. Fear might *homogenize* them, making them into a sea of indistinguishable "bonnets" and "dark skirts," but it doesn't *unite* them.

Instead, fear turns these women into traitors. The "safe stance," Mary notes, is "pointing a finger": you can't be the witch if you're accusing other women of being a witch! Show too much sympathy to a pariah like Mary, and she "might rub off on you."

Take a look at Mary's metaphors here:

> [...] Birds
> of a feather burn together,
> though as a rule ravens are singular.

Mary's play on an old cliché ("birds of a feather" are usually said to "flock together") gestures to the way that misogyny divides women into black-and-white groups: the good and the bad. One can join the "flock" of obedient women and be safe, or join the "flock" of independent women and "burn." Therefore, as Mary notes, most of the women who end up "burn[ing]" are women who stand alone, "singular" as ravens. The word "singular" here might mean either "alone" or "idiosyncratic"—and of course, in this world, women who choose to live alone *are* idiosyncratic.

One part of being a "singular" woman, these lines suggest, is never "pretending you can't dance." This image suggests that, to the townsfolk, Mary's "crime" wasn't just doing her own thing, but enjoying her life and expressing herself. Dance, here, becomes a metaphor for the full, rich life that misogynistic societies deny women.

LINES 50-55

I understand. You ...
... need it all.

Mary might be disgusted by her former friends' treachery, but she's also sympathetic: deep down, she "understand[s]" where it's coming from. These women's lives are so confined and difficult that they feel they need to cling to what little safety and comfort they have.

Mary's "9 p.m." encounter with the women of the town thus ends on a note of mingled sadness, disgust, and sympathy, tinged with sarcasm. Listen to her weary asyndeton in this passage:

> I understand. You can't spare
> anything, a hand, a piece of bread, a shawl
> against the cold,
> a good word.

The lack of conjunctions in these lines makes it sound as if Mary could go on listing things the women "can't spare" forever. Clearly, oppression has left these women no room to be generous or kind to each other.

But the enjambments in this section's closing stanza soften Mary's voice, ever so slightly. By running sentences on swiftly over line breaks, enjambments make Mary sound almost chatty, as if she's sympathizing with the women who can't seem to sympathize with her. Of course, that chattiness might also sound ironic: there's something pretty bleak about the idea of having a nice chat with the neighbors while dangling by one's neck from a tree.

The "9 p.m." section in full, then, paints a picture of some of oppression's deeper horrors. Women in Mary's world don't just live in fear of violence: they have to squash their own personalities and their own morality in order to survive.

LINES 56-68

Well God, now ...
... spell out Grace?

At "10 p.m.," the women creep away, and Mary is left alone. Or perhaps not quite alone. She begins this passage with a steely apostrophe to God himself, reopening an old "quarrel" she's fought out with him over and over: "the one about free will."

She has time to really dig into this argument now, she says. In a voice dripping with black humor, she observes that she has "some time to kill" now that she's free from the "fingerwork, legwork, work / at the hen level" that characterized her former life. The polyptoton in these lines suggests, almost as an aside,

that women like Mary were also oppressed by the sheer "work" it took to stay alive—lowly work that very much fell to the metaphorical "hen[s]," not the roosters. *One advantage of getting strung up from a tree*, Mary seems to say, *is that at least you have a little time to yourself!*

And Mary intends to use this free time to get to the bottom of things with God. If people have "free will," she boldly asks, how is it that she ended up with this undignified and horrible fate, "dangling / like a turkey's wattles" from a tree? It certainly wasn't her own "choice."

Mary's language here alludes to traditional Christian ideas about God as the creator and protector of an ordered and just universe. In this worldview, the natural order of the world could be "read" as a sign of God's presence and guidance. But to the dying Mary, the rope that throttles her doesn't seem to fit into any legible "alphabet" that she can understand—and there's no way that her "twisting body" could possibly "spell out Grace." In her eyes, God has abandoned her.

But these lines in themselves suggest an even deeper structural allusion to Christianity. Slowly dying, unjustly executed, calling out to an apparently deaf God, Mary is directly mirroring the biblical story of the Crucifixion here! Jesus, too, is famously said to have begged God for an explanation for his suffering.

This unspoken allusion hints that Mary, like Jesus, isn't just suffering: she's transforming. As the poem develops, that intuition will prove true.

LINES 68-74

Does my twisting ...
... of Your face.

In this stanza, Mary continues her tirade against God with more allusions to Christian thought—but also to Rene Descartes, the 17th-century French philosopher who famously wrote, "I think, therefore I am." Mary's ironic rephrasing—"*I hurt, therefore I am*"—suggests that Enlightenment logic offers no more explanation of her predicament than Christian faith. What's happening to her is a crime against both virtue and reason.

Take a look at Mary's elaborate sequence of metaphors and similes here:

> Faith, Charity, and Hope
> are three dead angels
> falling like meteors or
> burning owls across
> the profound blank sky of Your face.

- First, Mary refers to "Faith, Charity, and Hope"—the traditional "theological virtues," the qualities that were meant to distinguish a good Christian (and to supplement the secular "cardinal virtues": Prudence, Justice, Temperance, and Fortitude).
    - Here, these virtues have become "dead angels"—an idea that suggests they were once alive! The men's attempted murder of Mary, in this metaphor, is also a successful murder of the virtues they claim to possess.
- In fact, those "dead angels" are going down in flames, spectacular as "meteors" and pathetic as "burning owls."
- And they're shooting across the "profound blank sky" of God's face, an image that suggests that Mary is starting to see God very differently. She can now no longer imagine God as a writer of some cosmic "alphabet": instead, he's a vast silence, as huge as the starry night around Mary.

These images of falling flames and empty skies bring Mary's despair to vivid life. She's undergoing, not just physical agony, but spiritual agony: what faith she had is falling apart in the face of her suffering.

LINES 75-80

My throat is ...
... down on despair.

As the clock strikes "12 midnight," Mary has moved past theological musings and into a pure life-and-death struggle. Here, she feels herself being "reduced to knotted muscle": as death creeps closer and closer, she starts to lose her grip even on her own thoughts, becoming little more than a suffering body.

This "reduc[tion]," the poem implies, is just one way that misogyny destroys women, reducing them to nothing more than their bodies. In this section of the poem, Mary will look at a number of different ways this happens—both literally and metaphorically.

But in this stanza, she's just struggling to stay alive, in an all too literal way. Listen to the way her sounds reflect her pain here:

> Blood bulges in my skull,
> my clenched teeth hold it in;
> I bite down on despair.

From thudding /b/ and /d/ alliteration—to gulping, snapping /l/ and /t/ consonance—to dull /uh/ assonance: all the echoing sounds here evoke Mary's ordeal. Mary's language sounds as strangled as she is. It's no wonder, then, that she's close to "despair" here. The sounds in this passage invite readers to feel Mary's agony along with her—to really imagine what it might be like to spend hours slowly choking.

LINES 81-93

Death sits on ...

... Why suffer?

At the heart of the "12 midnight" section, Mary examines a series of three metaphors for death—or, more precisely, three personifications. Appearing to her as a hungry "crow," a lascivious "judge," and a seductive "dark angel"—all, notably, male—death presents Mary with three different faces. Each of these faces reflects a different way that Mary's misogynistic world oppresses women.

Mary's first encounter here is with death as a crow, who perches on her shoulder. Listen to the assonance she uses to describe this crow:

> waiting for my squeezed beet
> of a heart to burst
> so he can eat my eyes

All those tight /ee/ sounds might point readers back to the images of clenched teeth and bulging blood in the previous stanza, reminding readers of Mary's strangulation. They also draw attention to Mary's image of her own heart as a "squeezed beet"—a squashed, dark purple vegetable—and to the pun on *beet/beat*: Mary's heartbeat is indeed "squeezed" and pressured here. Besides evoking Mary's suffering, all these sounds and ideas direct readers to the idea that this "crow" sees Mary as *food*: something it can devour if it just waits long enough.

Next, Mary imagines death as a prurient judge, who seems to be getting no small pleasure from punishing her. Again, assonance plays an important role here: the dark, grunting /uh/ sound of this judge's "muttering[s] about sluts and punishment" invites readers to think about the role that sexuality plays in misogynistic oppression. This judge-like death treats Mary as something *dirty*—perhaps rather provocatively dirty!

The last personification of death here seems, at first, a lot less ominous and disgusting than the other two. This one is a "dark angel" with "glossy feathers," "caressing" Mary. Listen to his sounds:

> whispering to me to be easy
> on myself. To breathe out finally.
> *Trust me*, he says, caressing
> me. *Why suffer?*

All those sibilant /s/ sounds make this angel's whispers feel seductive and inviting. This last figure is clearly Mary's biggest temptation: if she stops struggling against death, she won't be in pain anymore.

But this alluring angel travels with some pretty unpleasant company. As the third in a procession of devouring crows and lascivious judges, perhaps this angel is the most dangerous death of them all: while the first two wanted to eat Mary or to get pleasure from punishing and judging her, the third just wants her to give up.

LINES 94-102

A temptation, to ...
... To let go.

Mary's encounter with three personified deaths dramatizes, not just her current predicament, but her lifelong struggle to be herself in a sexist world. In resisting literal death, Mary is also resisting the metaphorical deaths of being "reduced" to a "martyr," "food," or "trash":

- The crow represents the idea of women as "food," mere consumable bodies, there to be used by men.
- The judge represents the idea of women as either virgins or "sluts," good or "trash"—not complex people, but members of reductive, punitive categories.
- And the "dark angel" represents the idea of women as "martyrs," people who live (and die) for others—never for themselves.

In Mary's eyes, there's something "tempt[ing]" about "sink[ing] down / into these definitions." The seductiveness of the "dark angel" in particular suggests that there's something appealing about the idea of *giving up*, no longer struggling against what the world expects—perhaps living a life rather like those frightened women who huddled below Mary's tree back at "9 p.m."

But doing so would mean a huge and devastating sacrifice. Listen to how Mary describes what surrendering to any of these deaths would mean:

> To give up my own words for myself,
> my own refusals.
> To give up knowing.
> To give up pain.
> To let go.

Mary's anaphora here helps readers to feel her inner struggle. "To give up" feels like both a loss and a relief: Mary would have to "give up" her "own words" for herself—that is, her voice and her very identity—if she wanted to "give up" pain.

The "dark angel" is thus dangerous precisely because he's so appealing. "To let go" and die would mean Mary wouldn't have to suffer anymore—and she's suffering unbearably. But it would also mean she'd have to give up her sense of who she is and let the people who killed her tell her story, defining her as "a martyr in reverse"—a rightful sacrifice, a piece of "trash" who was appropriately discarded.

LINES 103-116

Out of my ...
... as mine are.

As "2 a.m." rolls around, Mary can hear herself praying, in a "thin gnawing" voice that seems to be coming from "some distance" away. In other words, she's hanging on to life by her fingernails and feels as if she's almost left her own agonized body.

This distance from her own suffering seems to give her a little room to think again—and even to philosophize. Here, she imagines that the sound she's making *would* be prayer, except "praying is not constrained." Here, the word "constrained" might mean either "restricted" or "enforced"—both meanings that Mary will question in the stanza to follow. Maybe, Mary reflects, prayer is actually an awful lot "like being strangled": maybe real prayer is what's forced out of people who have no options.

Expanding on this idea, Mary makes another apostrophe to God, asking the "Lord" whether prayer might actually be a "gasp for air," an involuntary cry for some life-giving relief.

Mary then begins a long allusion to Pentecost. In this biblical story, the Apostles are celebrating a holiday together after Christ's resurrection and ascension—when, all of a sudden, the Holy Spirit descends on them, flames leap from their heads, and they find they have the power to speak in all the languages of the world (the better to preach!).

In Mary's imagining of the story, the Apostles aren't necessarily happy about this experience: they feel frightened, and even humiliated, by this powerful and involuntary possession. Take a look at Mary's simile here:

> Did they ask to be tossed
> on the ground, gabbling like holy poultry,
> eyeballs bulging?

This comical comparison echoes Mary's earlier image of herself dangling from the tree like "a turkey's wattles," and of work at the "hen level": being like "poultry," in her imagination, means being both undignified and helpless!

Mary's rhetorical questions to God here suggest that she's starting to understand her experience in a new way. Perhaps her persistence can transform her humiliation and suffering into more than a shameful waste. Perhaps, by refusing to give in to her "constrained" situation and die, she's actually undergoing a kind of sacred transformation—no matter how ugly it looks and feels.

Mary begins the next stanza by explicitly comparing herself to the Apostles, whose eyes she imagined "bulging" just "as [hers] are." She's joining a group of people who have gained wisdom and power through involuntary suffering.

LINES 117-125

There is only ...
... the angels caw.

As this section comes to a close, Mary reflects on prayer—which isn't, she says, what people think it is.

She begins by raising and rejecting a traditional image of prayer. Take a look at her description here:

> There is only one prayer; it is not
> the knees in the clean nightgown
> on the hooked rug,
> *I want this, I want that.*

Mary's images of a well-scrubbed bedtime prayer session evoke a cozy, childlike, simplistic vision of the world, in which one asks a parental God for petty favors. This, Mary suggests, has nothing to do with the kind of prayer she's discovering through her ordeal.

That kind of prayer has a lot more in common with the helpless terror of the Apostles, she goes on. Real prayer, in her eyes, is both involuntary and tormented: "constrained" in more than one sense. It's what happens in the depths of suffering, when a person begs for "Mercy" and for life itself. The "thin gnawing sound" that Mary described issuing from her strangled throat at the beginning of the stanza isn't so much a considered request for a favor: it's a desperate reflex that happens on the very verge of annihilation, as "Heaven" itself "threatens to explode."

Mary's repetitions in these lines emphasize her new, desperate understanding of what prayer really means:

> Call it *Please*. Call it *Mercy*.
> Call it *Not yet, not yet,*

The anaphora here suggests that all these pleas are just variations on the same central theme: "I don't want to die!" And the epizeuxis of "not yet, not yet" underlines such prayers' urgency.

Drawing a connection between praying and being strangled—and between herself and the Apostles—Mary thus suggests she's going through a kind of terrible initiation in this section of the poem. The longer she hangs from this tree, the longer she has to stare death right in the eye—and that confrontation is changing her.

LINES 126-136

wind seethes in ...
... or silver disc

At "3 a.m.," Mary's voice changes dramatically. Each of the previous sections has been broken up into a number of stanzas. This section, however, is one long, heavily enjambed rush,

evoking Mary's desperate, racing thoughts as she struggles to hold on.

Meaning, in these lines, starts to get slippery. Take a look at the enjambments in just the first few lines of this section:

> wind seethes in the leaves around
> me the trees exude night
> birds night birds yell inside
> my ears [...]

These unpunctuated lines can be read in a couple of ways. Take a look at what happens if one adds some of the possible punctuation options:

- "Wind seethes in the leaves around me. The trees exude night. Birds, night birds yell inside my ears..."
- "Wind seethes in the leaves around me. The trees exude night birds. Night birds yell inside my ears..."

The enjambments and the lack of punctuation here work together to make the night, the trees, and the birds all seem to blend into one terrible dark mass. Near-dead, Mary is losing her grip on reality.

Urgent repetitions make these rushing, desperate lines feel even more intense. Mary returns and returns, for instance, to the words "wind seethes"—words that both suggest the wind's thin, edgy sound and Mary's own "seeth[ing]" fury. And listen to the sounds of these lines:

> [...] my heart
> stutters in my fluttering cloth
> body [...]

The /t/ consonance and /uh/ and /aw/ assonance here evoke both Mary's rapid, weakening heartbeat and her gulps for air. Not only that, they draw attention to the metaphor of Mary's "fluttering cloth / body": it's as if she's becoming limp as a dangling rag doll. That "seeth[ing]" wind seems to blow right through her.

Not only is Mary losing her grip on consciousness and on life, she's losing "the words" to describe what's happening to her. She's past the point of philosophizing about her fate: now she's just holding on for dear life. But she's not ready to die. As she puts it, her "fists hold no / talisman or silver disc," an allusion to a classical myth about Charon, the ferryman who carried souls over the river Styx in the underworld. Without a "coin," Charon won't let Mary pass.

LINES 136-144

my lungs ...
... not give in

In the closing lines of this long, desperate stanza, Mary makes another apostrophe. This time, though, she's not clearly speaking to God, or to anyone else; in fact, she might be speaking to readers, calling on them to "witness" that she "did / no crime." Even at the absolute limits of her endurance, Mary is maintaining her innocence and her sense of who she is.

This plea for a "witness" to her innocent suffering leads into a kind of self-declaration, in which Mary tells the whole story of her life in a rush of puns and polyptoton:

> [...] I was born I have borne I
> bear I will be born [...]

In other words, Mary was "born," then "b[ore]" all kind of suffering, now "bear[s]" even more suffering, and will soon—she insists—be "born" once more.

That insistence—in language and in thought—marks this last stage of Mary's suffering. She's been pushed to the edge of death, but she refuses to "acknowledge" it: giving into death, at this stage, would feel to her like giving into that hungry crow, sinister judge, or seductive angel who visited her at "12 midnight." She's not ready and not willing to become a "martyr," "food," or "trash." So she sends up one last "constrained" prayer, this time to the "leaves and wind," begging them:

> hold on to me
> I will not give in

This section of the poem suggests that Mary's ordeal isn't just about enduring suffering. It's about *resistance*. If one reads the poem as an extended metaphor for what it takes to survive the slow throttling of misogynist oppression, this stanza makes its point clear: survival means refusing to "give in" even when it would be far easier and more comfortable to do so.

LINES 145-149

Sun comes up, ...
... lived a millennium.

At a moment of high tension, the poem skips over three whole hours, leaving readers to imagine what Mary must have been through since the closing words of the "3 a.m." section: "I will not give in." By "6 a.m.," it seems that she hasn't. She's still alive to see the sunrise.

But this sunrise looks different to her. Take a look at her description here:

> Sun comes up, huge and blaring,
> no longer a simile for God.

The synesthetic imagery of that loud, "blaring" sunlight suggests that Mary's very perceptions have changed: it's as if she's *hearing* the light. And not only is she hearing it, she's hearing it differently. The sun is "no longer a simile for God":

that is, Mary no longer imagines God as a force of metaphorical warmth, light, and life. Her encounter with death has given her a whole new perspective on the universe.

That new perspective appears not just in Mary's perception of the world, but in her tone. The rushing, enjambed desperation of the previous stanza here turns into firm, declarative end-stopped lines full of dry humor and informal, colloquial language. Mary doesn't say that her vision of God has changed by declaring that she's had an epiphany; instead, she merely says that, if one is looking for God, the sun is the "Wrong address."

But this casual tone makes Mary sound even more sure of herself and what she's seen. Sometime during the hours between "3 a.m." and "6 a.m.," she's "lived a millennium," and is here to describe what she's learned.

The sudden, striking tonal change in these lines—and the long time gap between sections—suggests that Mary has been through an almost indescribable transformation. The poem's earlier Christian allusions might even hint that, in some sense, Mary has died and been reborn as a whole new person. Mary herself will make this very comparison later on.

LINES 150-159

I would like ...
... revelation of deafness.

In these stanzas, Mary begins to describe the nature of her transformation. Her hanging has left its marks on both her body and her mind.

But while Mary feels she's died and been reborn, she's not a totally different person: her wit seems to have survived. She begins these lines with a characteristic dark joke. Much as she'd like to claim that her "hair turned white / overnight," she says, that didn't happen:

> Instead it was my heart:
> bleached out like meat in water.

Her queasy /ee/ assonance in these lines makes that shocking, ambivalent simile land even harder, and invites readers to take a moment to consider what that "bleached" heart might suggest. On the one hand, Mary's heart seems to be rotting like wet meat. On the other, if it's "bleached," it might also be purified or cleansed somehow.

"Also," Mary adds, "I'm about three inches taller." That "also" makes this disturbing revelation sound like a casual afterthought. And to Mary, perhaps it is: these physical changes are just the outward marks of her real transformation. Getting stretched out and "bleached out," she goes on, are just "what happens":

> when you drift in space
> listening to the gospel
> of the red-hot stars.

This sibilant passage sounds like a conspiratorial whisper: Mary is trying to recount an almost indescribable mystery here. Sometime in the hours between 3 and 6, she seems to have had an encounter with the infinite universe itself.

That universe's "gospel" (a word that suggests both preaching and truth) has given her, not a reassuring meeting with a luminous, sun-like God, but a "revelation of deafness": what she's discovered is a great big silence, one that might call to mind her image of the "profound blank sky of [God's] face" back in the "10 p.m." section.

Perhaps this discovery has even driven her a little mad. Her experience has "riddle[d] her brain" with "pinpoints of infinity," as if she has some kind of cosmic mad cow disease. Pushed beyond the limits of human endurance, she feels as if she has visited the very depths of the universe—and found an infinite silence there.

LINES 160-164

At the end ...
... will have two.

To cap off her description of her "revelation," Mary puns: both literally and figuratively, she's "at the end of [her] rope." From this breaking point, she's gained a paradoxical power to "testify to silence." In other words, she can speak, and even preach—but all that speaking will only be about the infinite emptiness of the universe.

These lines recall all Mary's earlier allusions to biblical figures. Back when she was talking about Pentecost in the "2 a.m." section, she aligned herself with the Apostles, whose intense, involuntary, "constrained" encounter with the Holy Spirit gave them the power to preach in all the world's languages. Mary's experience also allows her to "testify" in a new way—but she, unlike the Apostles, has only "silence" to report.

And listen to the proclamation with which Mary ends this section:

> Most will have only one death.
> I will have two.

Here, Mary flat-out claims that she, Christlike, has died and been resurrected. Her suffering has killed the person she used to be—but here she is, still alive, here to spread the "gospel / of the red-hot stars."

These allusions paint Mary as a holy or redemptive figure. If she's gone through a kind of crucifixion at the hands of a misogynistic and patriarchal society, she's returned to speak of her own survival against the odds—and to preach a whole new view of the universe. Mary's refusal to give in and die—to allow

the men to tell her story the way they want to—has given her a powerful new voice.

LINES 165-177

When they came ...
... that went over.

At "8 a.m.," Mary's ordeal finally ends. When the men come to "harvest [her] corpse"—a metaphor that hearkens back to the early image of Mary as a "blackened apple stuck back onto the tree"—she's there to greet them with a "filthy grin," knowing that, by law, they can't "execute her twice." By surviving, she's become untouchable.

Mary's tone changes yet again in these stanzas. Here, her language becomes even more colloquial as she gleefully relishes both a full lungful of "clover"-scented air and the men's terror. "Surprise, surprise," she says, when the men discover her still breathing; "tough luck, folks" she tells them, when they realize that they can't hang her again. Her voice here sounds a lot like a sinister playground taunt: *neener-neener, can't kill me*! She's really enjoying the men's shock and terror, relishing her own new power over them.

The rhymes and assonance in these stanzas only add to that effect. Listen to the echoes in lines 174-177:

> I fell to the clover, breathed it in,
> and bared my teeth at them
> in a filthy grin.
> You can imagine how that went over.

The internal rhyme of "clover" and "over," the end rhymes of "in" and "grin," and the /ih/ and /ee/ assonance here all work together to give this passage an eerie, singsongy music—music that makes these lines sound almost like a chant or a spell. By surviving her hanging, Mary seems to have become far more witchy than she ever was before!

This passage also vividly depicts Mary's sheer joy in being alive, breathing that "clover" in. And it uses a clever trick to evoke the men's shock and horror. By describing only how *she* looked and what *she* did, Mary invites readers to stand in the men's shoes, picturing a supposedly-dead woman's "filthy grin"—and thus to viscerally "imagine how that went over": poorly!

These stanzas introduce the beginning of Mary's new life as a truly witchy figure, practically cackling over her new power.

LINES 178-184

Now I only ...
... I am one.

As Mary begins her new life, the whole power structure around her seems to have flipped. Earlier in the poem, she imagined herself as a scapegoat: the men projected their "own evil" onto her so that they could feel that they were righteous and just in punishing her. "Now," though, Mary "only need[s] to look" at them for them to see their "own ill will" staring back.

In other words, Mary's survival means that the men are forced to confront what they've done—in the form of a figure who must *truly* seem like a witch now that she's survived her own execution! Since "the law" forbids them to hang her again, all they can do is flee from this evidence of their own corruption and wickedness.

And that, Mary says, is the real nature of her transformation:

> Before, I was not a witch.
> But now I am one.

By refusing to submit to the kind of death that would make her into a "martyr," "food," or "trash," she's gained a witchy power and untouchability. Since she refuses either to die or to agree to one of the narrow roles her society offers her, she becomes a figure the men just don't know what to do with: she's both frightening and free:

- She's no longer a "witch" in the sense of "a disobedient woman who we, the menfolk, do not like";
- She's a "witch" in the sense of "a woman with real power."

But Mary's power doesn't just come from resistance. It also comes from real suffering, and even from undergoing a kind of death and resurrection. Witchhood doesn't come cheap.

LINES 185-193

My body of ...
... of my way.

So far, the poem has charted Mary's experience hour by hour. Now, it's merely "Later": the poem's final stanza follows Mary's unlikely happily-ever-after as she roams the outskirts of town as an untouchable witch.

Mary's new life is marked by an influx of color and sensation. Much of the imagery earlier in the poem was in stark black and white, from the "bone-faced" moon to the "dark skirts." Now, Mary relishes mouthfuls of "juicy adjectives / and purple berries" as she roams the fields, "mumbling to [her]self like crazy."

Even her own body feels different to her. She knows that inside the "tender nimbus" of her flesh, she has a "true body": an inner core of soul or selfhood that her physical body merely surrounds. As that physical body "waxes and wanes" like the moon or the seasons, she can feel that central self unchanged in the middle.

There's something double-edged about Mary's depiction of her new life. On the one hand, she seems unambiguously gleeful

about her experience: she's savoring every word she says and every berry she eats, and she obviously finds it hilarious when "the townsfolk dive headfirst into the bushes" when they see her coming.

On the other hand, readers only need to step back a little to imagine Mary from the outside as a homeless wildwoman, "skitter[ing] over the paths and fields," insane and isolated. Mary's new wisdom and power have come at a price: she can no longer be part of a society that just doesn't know what to do with her. Both in standing up for her own identity and in confronting the vast emptiness of the universe, she's made herself into a pariah, someone who has to stand totally alone.

LINES 194-200

My first death ...
... I can say.

As Mary "skitters" through the fields, her "body of skin" isn't the only "nimbus" she carries around with her. She also travels in the "ambiguous nimbus" of her "first death": a cloud or halo of taboo that "no one crosses."

This repetition suggests that Mary's very body seems enchanted. Her botched execution hasn't just made her untouchable for legal reasons, but given her an eerie power. No one who sees her can forget that she survived death, or avoid wondering *how* she survived. Wearing the metaphorical "medallion" of her "ordeal"—an image that suggests she bears her survival as proudly as an award—Mary is set apart from the crowd in more ways than one.

The townspeople's hypocrisy and cruelty have thus doubled back on them. Because Mary has survived their persecution, she has become the "witch" they feared: a person who can "say anything [she] can say" without consequences, a threat to the very foundations of their restrictive society.

These lines might once again encourage readers to recall Mary's allusions to the Pentecost story, which is also all about the power of language. Now untouchable, Mary can fearlessly *speak*, in any words she chooses.

But this power only goes so far! It's no good speaking if nobody listens. Mary's "message" here seems not so much to reach the people around her—who, remember, "dive headfirst into the bushes" when they see her coming. Rather, she speaks to her *readers*. These lines suggest that the lives of women like Mary Webster might gain their power as *stories:* Mary's world wasn't able to handle her or listen to her, but the tale of her ordeal can still "speak" across the generations.

LINES 201-211

Holiness gleams on ...
... been dead twice?

In these stanzas, Mary presents a vision of her new life that is at once grim and beautiful. On the one hand, she's living in the mud, eating "flowers," "dung," and "mice," and cursing to herself—an isolated madwoman. On the other, she sees all of these experiences from a mystical perspective.

In Mary's eyes, her "dirty fingers" actually "gleam" with "holiness," and the "flowers and dung" are just "two forms of the same thing": her ordeal has given her a broad enough view that she can see the cycles of birth, growth, and death as all part of one big cosmic process. She doesn't feel hungry or miserable, but "give[s] thanks."

Even the sounds of the language here makes it seem like she's enjoying herself:

> [...] blasphemies
> gleam and burst in my wake
> like lovely bubbles.

These lines are filled with music: alliterative and consonant /b/ and /l/ sounds, and assonant /ee/ and /uh/ sounds. Besides evoking the shimmer and pop of those metaphorical "lovely bubbles," these sounds make it seem almost as if Mary is singing to herself as she "speak[s] in tongues" to her audience of "owls."

In other words, Mary's ordeal seems to have transformed her into a kind of off-kilter holy woman. Her "blasphemies" are her Apostle-like preaching: having seen the universe from a god's-eye view, she can speak to a very different vision of the world than her fellow citizens.

In fact, she speaks directly to "God" himself. God is the only person who can understand her, she says, because God is the only other person who has been "dead twice." This is yet another allusion to the biblical story of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection—this time, a highly personal one, and perhaps one of those "blasphemies" that Mary mentions above.

To Mary's Puritan town, it would have been rather shocking to say that God had been dead "twice." The Christian story holds that Christ died, was resurrected, and then ascended to heaven: that's just one death! But Mary's version of God died again while she was dangling from a tree, when she lost her faith in a God who orders "Nature" like an "alphabet."

That doesn't seem to mean that Mary has lost faith altogether. Paradoxically, she still speaks—and "testif[ies]"—to the infinite silence which she *calls* God. Her ordeal has allowed her to see the world from this "God's" perspective, a perspective in which "flowers and dung"really are one and the same, when you get right down to it.

LINES 212-215

The words boil ...
... fullness, all vacancy.

As Mary wanders the world, babbling and mad from the outside, holy and joyful from the inside, she imagines that words "boil out" of her mouth in "coil after coil of sinuous

possibility." This image has a dangerous edge: that "boil[ing]" could scald, and those sinuous coils might evoke a snake, or the very rope Mary was hanged with. But Mary feels this serpentine language is full of "possibility." Her freedom to "say anything I can say" also means a freedom to imagine, and to see things differently.

Part of that different kind of seeing is an ability to understand (and speak about!) the paradoxical "fullness" and "vacancy" of the "cosmos." Mary has come to see the universe (and even God) as a vast, infinite silence—an emptiness, a "vacancy." But that emptiness also "gleams" with "holiness" and meaning. By resisting misogynistic violence, enduring suffering, and being "reborn," Mary has gained both a strange wisdom and an unshakeable sense of her place in the "cosmos."

Mary's closing thoughts might lead readers to imagine that this whole poem is itself one of Mary's "coil[s] of sinuous possibility"—and that one of those "possibilit[ies]" is the idea that a person who was punished and exiled can "speak" across time and space. In imagining that Mary becomes a kind of wild, prophetic truth-teller, Atwood's poem suggests that resistance and sacrifice can have enduring meaning beyond a person's lifetime.

POETIC DEVICES

IMAGERY

The imagery in "Half-hanged Mary" invites readers into Mary's macabre and glorious imagination.

The first passage of imagery in the poem is gentle enough: Mary simply describes herself in her former life, when, with her "blue eyes," "sunburned skin," and "tattered skirts," she mostly minded her own business, curing "warts" and tending her "weedy farm." The images she chooses here make her sound hardy, skillful, and pragmatic: she may not have had much money, but she was eking out a living.

Sadly for her, she also has something that seals many women's terrible fates: a "sweet pear hidden in [her] body" (that is, female genitals). The "sweet[ness]" of this "pear" suggests that, as a single woman living on her own, she's both tantalizing and frustrating to the town's sexist men. But there's something poignant about this image, too: in a less violently misogynistic world, perhaps Mary would have been able to enjoy this "sweet pear" more herself!

Later, though, the poem transforms Mary into a different kind of fruit: a "blackened apple stuck back onto the tree." That "blacken[ing]" is both emotionally and physically evocative, suggesting that the tormented Mary feels she's being treated like a piece of rotting garbage—and that her face is literally dark from suffocation. Only the impassive moon stays to witness this suffering: it's "bone-faced," an image that makes it seem coldly white and deathly, and stands in contrast to Mary's own "blacken[ing]."

The women who come to stare at Mary, identical in their "dark skirts," are similarly unsympathetic: their "lipless" mouths and "upturned" faces only reflect their own fear. These flashes of imagery paint a portrait of huddled women in long dark dresses—an indistinguishable crowd of women too scared to help their former friend.

The tenor of the imagery changes when the sun rises the next morning and Mary gets cut down from the tree. Much of the imagery in the hanging section of the poem evokes darkness: there's a lot of stark black and white in there. Now, color and feeling creep in, and even synesthesia: when Mary sees the sun rise "huge and blaring," it's as if its light is an intolerably loud *sound*.

In her new, second life, Mary experiences the world in full color: she hears the "red-hot stars" speaking to her, looks at the world through "sky-blue eyes," and relishes mouthfuls of "juicy adjectives / and purple berries." All this bright, sensuous imagery suggests that her ordeal has given her a richer, stranger life than she had before: once she lived on a "weedy" farm in "tattered" skirts, but now even her dirty hands "gleam" with "holiness."

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-13:** "for having blue eyes and a sunburned skin, / tattered skirts, few buttons, / a weedy farm in my own name,"
- **Line 16:** "and a sweet pear hidden in my body."
- **Line 22:** "a blackened apple stuck back onto the tree."
- **Line 25:** "old bone-faced goddess, old original, "
- **Line 32:** "the dark skirts also,"
- **Lines 33-34:** "the upturned faces in between, / mouths closed so tight they're lipless."
- **Lines 88-89:** "or like a dark angel / insidious in his glossy feathers"
- **Line 145:** "Sun comes up, huge and blaring,"
- **Lines 156-157:** "listening to the gospel / of the red-hot stars."
- **Line 179:** "through my sky-blue eyes."
- **Lines 190-191:** "mouth full of juicy adjectives / and purple berries."
- **Line 201:** "Holiness gleams on my dirty fingers,"
- **Lines 204-206:** "blasphemies / gleam and burst in my wake / like lovely bubbles."

SIMILE

The poem's frequent similes invite readers into Mary's inner world and give the poem its sinister, folkloric tone.

The poem's first similes turn up in the second stanza, where Mary imagines the "aimed word" hitting her like a "soft

bullet"—a bullet that enters her body without her even noticing, her "smashed flesh" absorbing it like water absorbs a stone. This mixture of images suggests the dreadful ease of Mary's doom. The "aimed word" that destroys her—*witch*—can "hit" her without her even noticing, and without giving her a chance to defend herself. Language and thought, these similes suggest, can be as wounding as physical violence; indeed, physical violence can grow from "aimed word[s]."

Later on, Mary pictures death as a series of horrible fairy-tale figures: a "crow" that wants to devour her eyes, a "judge" who takes a creepy pleasure in her suffering, and a "dark angel" who tries to seduce her to relax into her own destruction. These aren't just images of death as a devourer or a condemner: they're embodiments of the misogyny that kills not just women's bodies, but their souls. To these three deathly figures, Mary can be "food," "trash," or a "martyr"—but she can't be the full and complex human being that she is. These similes suggest that Mary is resisting not just a literal murder attempt, but the metaphorical soul-murder of being reduced to a stereotype.

By the time Mary emerges from her ordeal into her new life as a holy madwoman, she interacts with this repressive world in a whole new way. As she roams the fields "mumbling" to herself, "blasphemies" float from her mouth "like lovely bubbles." Mary's supposed "blasphemies" are airy, iridescent, and "lovely": she's seen past the hypocrisy and misogyny of the culture around her, and what that world calls blasphemy looks to her a lot like truth and beauty.

These similes—among many others—help readers to understand Mary's perspective, not just with their minds, but with their minds' eyes.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-9:** "I didn't feel the aimed word hit / and go in like a soft bullet. / I didn't feel the smashed flesh / closing over it like water / over a thrown stone."
- **Lines 21-22:** "Up I go like a windfall in reverse, / a blackened apple stuck back onto the tree."
- **Lines 29-30:** "their own evil turned inside out like a glove, / and me wearing it."
- **Lines 42-43:** "I might rub off on you, / like soot or gossip."
- **Lines 63-65:** "Is it my choice that I'm dangling / like a turkey's wattles from this / more than indifferent tree?"
- **Lines 72-74:** "falling like meteors or / burning owls across / the profound blank sky of Your face."
- **Lines 81-84:** "Death sits on my shoulder like a crow / waiting for my squeezed beet / of a heart to burst / so he can eat my eyes"
- **Lines 85-87:** "or like a judge / muttering about sluts and punishment / and licking his lips"
- **Lines 88-93:** "or like a dark angel / insidious in his glossy feathers / whispering to me to be easy / on myself. To breathe out finally. / Trust me, / he says, caressing / me. / Why suffer?"
- **Lines 108-109:** "Maybe it's more like being strangled / than I once thought."
- **Lines 113-115:** "Did they ask to be tossed / on the ground, gabbling like holy poultry, / eyeballs bulging?"
- **Lines 128-129:** "night birds yell inside / my ears like stabbed hearts"
- **Lines 152-153:** "Instead it was my heart: / bleached out like meat in water."
- **Lines 204-206:** "blasphemies / gleam and burst in my wake / like lovely bubbles."

METAPHOR

The poem's metaphors, like its similes, help readers share in Mary's experience and understand her inner life.

Mary's shrewdness and cynicism emerge in the poem's first metaphor, when she refers to the "sweet pear hidden in [her] body"—that is, her genitals. It's in part because of this "sweet pear" that the men of the village come to murder her, she believes: she rouses the misogynist men's suspicion and anger just for being female. This metaphor might quietly allude to the "forbidden fruit" of the Biblical Eden story; the sweetness of that tempting "pear" might anger the men, Mary hints, because it's off limits to them!

Later on, Mary reflects further on her predicament in a conversation with God: "If Nature is Your alphabet," she asks a silent deity, "what letter is this rope?" This metaphorical (and rhetorical) question presents a challenge to a Christian idea of an ordered universe and a just god. Mary's rather sarcastic point here is that her suffering can't fit into any system of justice that's legible to her.

After Mary's confrontation with God and death, she emerges a completely different person. At the end of the poem, she feels as if her death has created an "ambiguous nimbus" around her, a cloud that is also a "medallion," a token that marks her achievement. These images suggest that she's both isolated and sanctified by her suffering. "No one crosses" the borders of her "nimbus," but she doesn't seem to mind: her own visions keep her company. Now, she sees her own "dirty fingers" "gleam[ing]" with "holiness," a metaphor that suggests she can see the beauty in everything her society rejects and degrades—including, and especially, her own body.

She also has her own language to fall back on. As she feels words "boil[ing] out" of her mouth in "coil after coil of sinuous possibility," it's as if her speech has become a kind of world-creating god, birthing a snake-like "cosmos." These closing metaphors invite readers to reflect on language and its power to change the world. At the beginning of the poem, an "aimed word"—*witch*—hit Mary "like a bullet," nearly killing her; here at the end, she's able to build a whole universe from her own unfettered speech.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 16:** "and a sweet pear hidden in my body."
- **Lines 66-67:** "If Nature is Your alphabet, / what letter is this rope?"
- **Lines 94-95:** "A temptation, to sink down / into these definitions."
- **Lines 109-110:** "Maybe it's / a gasp for air, prayer."
- **Lines 194-196:** "My first death orbits my head, / an ambiguous nimbus, / medallion of my ordeal."
- **Line 201:** "Holiness gleams on my dirty fingers,"
- **Lines 212-215:** "The words boil out of me, / coil after coil of sinuous possibility. / The cosmos unravels from my mouth, / all fullness, all vacancy."

METONYMY

The poem's metonymy gestures to the way a misogynistic society crushes and oppresses women.

When the women of the town creep over to gawk at Mary after her (male) attackers have "stalk[ed]" home, here's how she describes them:

> The bonnets come to stare,
> the dark skirts also,

The metonymy here reduces these women to the clothes they wear—clothes that seem to be practically a uniform. Transformed into a series of identical "bonnets" and "dark skirts," the women seem faceless and characterless, as if years of oppression have bleached the personalities right out of them.

Of course, that's exactly Mary's point. She herself, with her "tattered skirts" and "few buttons," resisted this kind of homogenization—and look what the consequences were. In Mary's world, women must obey a restrictive set of rules that cover everything from dress to behavior, and woe to the woman who does not.

In the next stanza, though, Mary looks past the "bonnets" and "dark skirts" to see the women as former "friend[s]," and as people who've had their own struggles. One unmarried girl, for instance, came to Mary for an abortion—an abortion that, Mary notes, "save[d] her life." In other words, all these women *are* real people under their cowed, identical exteriors, and they're all afraid of falling afoul of the same male violence that left Mary dangling from a tree.

In just a couple of lines, then, metonymy makes it clear that sexist oppression works by forcing women to toe a narrow line, using fear to rob them of their identities and their power.

Where Metonymy appears in the poem:

- **Lines 31-32:** "The bonnets come to stare, / the dark skirts also,"

PERSONIFICATION

Personification evokes a claustrophobic and oppressive society, making it feel as if Mary's world is always watching and judging her.

That feeling shows up in the poem's very first lines, where Mary remembers that "Rumour" was out "hunting for some neck to land on." In other words, the gossip flying around her little town seems to have taken on a life of its own. It's not that any one person has it in for Mary, but that the collective force of the townspeople's whispers becomes a dangerous "hunt[er]" in its own right.

Later on, when that "rumour" gets Mary strung up on a tree, she looks up to see the moon as an "old bone-faced goddess" accepting a sacrifice. Bloodthirsty and ancient, this goddess suggests that the townsfolk's rage against Mary isn't anything new, but an old, old force—one that substantially predates the Puritan town's Christianity. In the face of such bloodlust, the traditional theological virtues, "Faith, Charity, and Hope," seem as impotent as "dead angels" falling from the sky.

The poem's longest passage of personification presents death as three figures in a row: a gluttonous crow, a lecherous judge, and a seductive "dark angel." Besides offering reflections of the way Mary's society treats women, these personified deaths appear as active opponents, enemies for Mary to fight back against.

Personification thus gives the dark forces of Mary's world their own bodies and identities, allowing her to meet them face to face.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Rumour was loose in the air, / hunting for some neck to land on."
- **Lines 24-26:** "a flag raised to salute the moon, / old bone-faced goddess, old original, / who once took blood in return for food."
- **Lines 70-71:** "Faith, Charity, and Hope / are three dead angels"
- **Lines 81-93:** "Death sits on my shoulder like a crow / waiting for my squeezed beet / of a heart to burst / so he can eat my eyes / or like a judge / muttering about sluts and punishment / and licking his lips / or like a dark angel / insidious in his glossy feathers / whispering to me to be easy / on myself. To breathe out finally. / Trust me, / he says, caressing / me. / Why suffer?"

REPETITION

Different flavors of repetition help to evoke Mary's emotions,

and her terrible suffering.

For instance, take a look at the anaphora that heralds the beginning of Mary's troubles:

> I didn't feel the aimed word hit
> and go in like a soft bullet.
> I didn't feel the smashed flesh
> closing over it like water

This repetition works like the beat of an executioner's drum, and it emphasizes the fact that Mary had no idea what was about to hit her.

Something similar happens as Mary staves off death up in a tree. As she struggles for breath, she feels the temptation:

> To give up my own words for myself,
> my own refusals.
> To give up knowing.
> To give up pain.
> To let go.

Anaphora here suggests that Mary is fighting for her life second by second. The idea that she could "give up" is always there, and she has to reject it over and over.

Elsewhere, though, different kinds of repetition give Mary's language a strange sparkle and glee. For instance, when the men come to cut her down and find she's still alive, she greets them with an inner "surprise, surprise": a moment of mock-casual epizeuxis that suggests she's enjoying the men's horror more than a little. And as her repetition of the word "gleam[s]" shows, her new life after her first "death" has many rewards: both dirty hands and dirty words seem, in the light of her new understanding of the "cosmos," to shine:

> Holiness gleams on my dirty fingers,
> [...] blasphemies
> gleam and burst in my wake

The poem's repetitions, in other words, have a lot of dramatic power, both characterizing Mary and allowing readers to imagine the pain of her botched execution.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "I didn't feel"
- **Line 7:** "I didn't feel"
- **Line 47:** "the safe place"
- **Line 49:** "the safe stance"
- **Line 59:** "fingerwork, legwork, work"
- **Line 98:** "To give up"
- **Line 100:** "To give up"
- **Line 101:** "To give up"
- **Line 102:** "To"
- **Line 111:** "Did"
- **Line 113:** "Did"
- **Line 116:** "As mine are, as mine are."
- **Line 122:** "Call it," "Call it"
- **Line 123:** "Call it"
- **Line 126:** "wind seethes"
- **Lines 127-128:** "night / birds night birds"
- **Line 129:** "like stabbed hearts my heart"
- **Line 132:** "wind seethes"
- **Lines 139-140:** "I was born I have borne I / bear I will be born"
- **Line 168:** "surprise, surprise"
- **Line 201:** "gleams"
- **Line 202:** "I eat"
- **Line 203:** "I eat"
- **Line 205:** "gleam"
- **Line 207:** "I speak"
- **Line 208:** "my audience is owls."
- **Line 209:** "My audience is God,"
- **Line 213:** "coil after coil"

ALLUSION

Mary's religious allusions put her suffering into a Christian framework, underlining the townsfolk's Puritanical hypocrisy.

As an unjustly executed person who feels she's been through death and back, Mary bears a none-too-subtle resemblance to Christ himself—a comparison Mary makes herself when she observes that only God can understand her, since no one else "has been dead twice."

The poem draws attention to the comparison through frequent allusions to Christian language and Christian stories. For instance, when Mary imagines "Faith, Charity, and Hope" as "three dead angels," she's referring to the three traditional "theological virtues"—aspects of the ideal Christian character, meant to complement the secular "cardinal virtues" of Prudence, Fortitude, Temperance, and Justice. Through the eyes of someone being persecuted by an oppressive, reactionary, purportedly Christian society, those virtues might well look pretty "dead"!

That doesn't mean Mary's a rationalist, either. She also pours a little scorn on the Enlightenment philosopher Rene Descartes when she alludes to his famous line, "I think, therefore I am": "I hurt, therefore I am" seems as nonsensical to her as those three dead angels.

Mary doesn't altogether reject her world's religious framework: she also appropriates it, carving out a place for herself. For instance, she imagines herself being very much like one of "those men at Pentecost"—in other words, the Apostles:

- In the New Testament story of Pentecost, the

Apostles were hanging out one day not long after Christ's resurrection when their heads suddenly emitted tongues of flame, and they discovered that they could speak in all the languages of the world (the better to preach, of course).

- Mary imagines that, in these circumstances, the Apostles might have felt just as helpless and desperate as she does now, terrified by the "flames [...] shoot[ing] out of their heads."
- Her allusion to this story suggests that she's undergoing a kind of holy transformation, too—one to do with the power to speak, teach, and preach. (Of course, she also pokes a little irreverent fun at the Apostles when she imagines them "gabbling like holy poultry.")

These kinds of allusions are double-edged. On the one hand, Mary is claiming Christian language for herself, observing that she's more Christlike and more holy than any of her persecutors. On the other, she's rejecting the Christianity of her world, a narrow conception of God as a kindly/sadistic male figure who organizes the world in a legible "alphabet." The God she speaks to at the end of the poem is an altogether more awesome and incomprehensible force, a "cosmos" whose "gospel" is the "red-hot stars."

Her allusions to even older religious traditions also ground this poem in a world of ancient powers. She refers to the "old bone-faced goddess" of the moon; she notes that she holds "no talisman or silver disc" (that is, she has nothing to pay Charon, the legendary ferryman who carried souls across the river Styx in classical mythology). The forces of death and sacrifice she's encountering during her ordeal, these allusions suggest, are as old as humanity itself.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 25-26:** "old bone-faced goddess, old original, / who once took blood in return for food."
- **Lines 66-67:** "If Nature is Your alphabet, / what letter is this rope?"
- **Lines 69-69:** "I hurt, therefore I am / ."
- **Lines 70-71:** "Faith, Charity, and Hope / are three dead angels"
- **Lines 111-115:** "Did those men at Pentecost / want flames to shoot out of their heads? / Did they ask to be tossed / on the ground, gabbling like holy poultry, / eyeballs bulging?"
- **Lines 135-136:** "my fists hold No / talisman or silver disc"
- **Lines 209-211:** "My audience is God, / because who the hell else could understand me? / Who else has been dead twice?"

ENJAMBMENT

Occasional enjambments give Mary's voice momentum and drama.

Some enjambments help to set Mary's tone—like those in lines 50-55, in which Mary matter-of-factly tells her fellow townswomen that she "understands" why they can't offer her any help:

> I understand. You can't spare
> anything, a hand, a piece of bread, a shawl
> against the cold,
> a good word. Lord
> knows there isn't much
> to go around. You need it all.

Enjambment helps this passage to rattle along as if Mary is just gossiping with the women: "Don't worry, I know how it is!" she seems to say. Of course, there's something ironic and grotesque about chit-chatting from the gallows, and the enjambments give this moment some grim comedy.

But the poem's most striking and meaningful enjambments appear in the "3 a.m." section, when Mary is clinging to life by a fingernail. All but the last of this stanza's 19 lines are enjambed—a choice that evokes Mary's racing, desperate, slippery thoughts. But these enjambments also play with meaning in some tricky ways. Take a look at these lines:

> [...] my lungs
> flail as if drowning I call
> on you as witness I did
> no crime I was born I have borne I
> bear I will be born this is
> a crime I will not
> acknowledge leaves and wind
> hold on to me

Enjambments (plus a lack of punctuation) mean that number of these lines can be read in multiple ways. For instance, one can parse lines 140-141 to mean "this is a crime! I will not acknowledge leaves and wind," or to mean "this is a crime I will not acknowledge! leaves and wind hold onto me." The second reading is more coherent, but the first is suggestive, and also true in its way: Mary's attempted murder *is* a crime, and the unacknowledged "leaves and wind" might be read as the empty judgments of the townsfolk.

Enjambment here thus helps readers to feel the way that Mary's thoughts swirl as she runs out of air; she almost seems to be hallucinating, making strange and unexpected connections between her inner and outer worlds.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "hit / and"
- **Lines 7-8:** "flesh / closing"
- **Lines 8-9:** "water / over"
- **Lines 17-18:** "demons / these"
- **Lines 35-36:** "eyeholes / and"
- **Lines 43-44:** "Birds / of"
- **Lines 46-47:** "one / the"
- **Lines 50-51:** "spare / anything"
- **Lines 51-52:** "shawl / against"
- **Lines 53-54:** "Lord / knows"
- **Lines 54-55:** "much / to"
- **Lines 56-57:** "here / with"
- **Lines 57-58:** "kill / away"
- **Lines 58-59:** "daily / fingerwork"
- **Lines 59-60:** "work / at"
- **Lines 63-64:** "dangling / like"
- **Lines 64-65:** "this / more"
- **Lines 70-71:** "Hope / are"
- **Lines 71-72:** "angels / falling"
- **Lines 72-73:** "or / burning"
- **Lines 73-74:** "across / the"
- **Lines 75-76:** "rope / choking"
- **Lines 81-82:** "crow / waiting"
- **Lines 82-83:** "beet / of"
- **Lines 83-84:** "burst / so"
- **Lines 84-85:** "eyes / or"
- **Lines 85-86:** "judge / muttering"
- **Lines 86-87:** "punishment / and"
- **Lines 87-88:** "lips / or"
- **Lines 88-89:** "angel / insidious"
- **Lines 89-90:** "feathers / whispering"
- **Lines 90-91:** "easy / on"
- **Lines 94-95:** "down / into"
- **Lines 103-104:** "some / distance"
- **Lines 104-105:** "sound / which"
- **Lines 105-106:** "that / praying"
- **Lines 108-109:** "strangled / than"
- **Lines 109-110:** " it's / a"
- **Lines 111-112:** "Pentecost / want"
- **Lines 113-114:** "tossed / on"
- **Lines 117-118:** "not / the"
- **Lines 118-119:** "nightgown / on"
- **Lines 124-125:** "explode / inwards"
- **Lines 126-127:** "around / me"
- **Lines 127-128:** "night / birds"
- **Lines 128-129:** "inside / my"
- **Lines 129-130:** "heart / stutters"
- **Lines 130-131:** "cloth / body"
- **Lines 131-132:** "strength / going"
- **Lines 132-133:** "seethes / in"
- **Lines 133-134:** "tattering / the"
- **Lines 134-135:** "clench / my"
- **Lines 135-136:** "No / talisman"
- **Lines 136-137:** "lungs / flail"
- **Lines 137-138:** "call / on"
- **Lines 138-139:** "did / no"
- **Lines 139-140:** "I / bear"
- **Lines 140-141:** "is / a"
- **Lines 141-142:** "not / acknowledge"
- **Lines 142-143:** "wind / hold"
- **Lines 148-149:** "you / I"
- **Lines 150-151:** "white / overnight"
- **Lines 155-156:** "space / listening"
- **Lines 160-161:** "rope / I"
- **Lines 172-173:** "twice / for"
- **Lines 175-176:** "them / in"
- **Lines 178-179:** "look / out"
- **Lines 180-181:** "will / staring"
- **Lines 181-182:** "forehead / and"
- **Lines 185-186:** "wanes / around"
- **Lines 188-189:** "fields / mumbling"
- **Lines 190-191:** "adjectives / and"
- **Lines 192-193:** "bushes / to"
- **Lines 198-199:** "something / I"
- **Lines 203-204:** "mice / and"
- **Lines 204-205:** "blasphemies / gleam"
- **Lines 205-206:** "wake / like"

ASSONANCE

Vibrant assonance gives this poem a lot of its flavor. Echoing vowel sounds evoke both the poem's events and Mary's dark, glittering inner world.

For instance, listen to the assonance in this disturbing moment toward the end of the poem:

> I would like to say my hair turned white
> overnight, but it didn't.
> Instead it was my heart:
> bleached out like meat in water.

The long /i/ sounds in lines 150-151 feel snappy and brisk: Mary's trying to be precise here, telling the truth about how her ordeal changed her. That even backdrop of sounds makes the awful image of a heart like "bleached [...] meat" land even harder: the queasy /ee/ assonance stands out!

And listen to the effects of assonance in the passage where Mary personifies death, imagining it perched next to her:

> [...] like a judge
> muttering about sluts and punishment
> and licking his lips

The sludgy /uh/ sounds here evoke this imagined judge's prurient satisfaction in Mary's suffering: it's as if he's grunting

with pleasure. And the thin, slithery /ih/ sound of "licking his lips" only makes the effect grosser.

Assonance can also give the poem an eerie singsong quality. For instance, consider this sinister passage:

> Trussed hands, rag in my mouth,
> a flag raised to salute the moon,
> old bone-faced goddess, old original,
> who once took blood in return for food.

Here, assonance creates flickers of rhyme:

- The long /oo/ of "moon" and "food" bridges these two couplets with an end rhyme, as well as chiming with "who" and "salute."
- And the /a/ of "rag" and "flag" creates an internal rhyme.

Meanwhile, the dull /uh/ of "once" and "blood" and the pure /oh/ of "old" and "bone" pack these lines with even more creepy music. All in all, assonance makes this passage sound like a horrible nursery rhyme or a ritual chant.

Readers might also notice that the assonance in this passage plays a clever trick with the way the poem *looks* on the page. The wide variety of /o/ sounds here means that the actual letter "o" appears over and over, as round and staring as the moon it describes! In all kinds of ways, then, assonance gives this poem its distinctive atmosphere, and Mary her distinctive voice.

(Note that we've highlighted only a sliver of the assonance here: the poem is absolutely riddled with it, and there's plenty more to find!)

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 14:** "surefire cure"
- **Line 15:** "yes," "breasts"
- **Line 23:** "rag"
- **Line 24:** "flag," "salute," "moon"
- **Line 25:** "old bone," "old"
- **Line 26:** "who," "once," "blood," "food"
- **Line 40:** "wife," "life"
- **Line 44:** "feather," "together"
- **Line 48:** "dance"
- **Line 49:** "stance"
- **Line 78:** "bulges," "skull"
- **Line 85:** "judge"
- **Line 86:** "muttering," "sluts," "punishment"
- **Line 87:** "licking," "lips"
- **Line 89:** "insidious in his"
- **Line 90:** "whispering"
- **Line 150:** "I," "like," "white"
- **Line 151:** "overnight"
- **Line 153:** "bleached," "meat"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration, like assonance, gives this poem meaning and music.

For instance, listen to the alliteration in this passage, in which Mary feels herself slowly choking:

> Blood bulges in my skull,
> my clenched teeth hold it in;
> I bite down on despair.

All those /b/ sounds in a row feel pressurized and tense, evoking both the physical experience Mary describes and her desperation.

And listen to the emphatic sounds in line 41:

> Help me down? You don't dare.

Those hard /d/ sounds hit like stones, suggesting Mary's disdain for the women—her former friends—who are too frightened to help her. Throughout the poem, the speaker turns to repeated sounds like this to add emphasis to certain words and images, and to fill the poem with intensity.

(Note that we've only highlighted a couple of examples here—there's more alliteration to find!)

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** "sunburned skin"
- **Line 41:** "down," "don't dare"
- **Line 45:** "rule ravens"
- **Line 49:** "safe stance"
- **Line 61:** "can continue," "quarrel"
- **Line 78:** "Blood," "bulges"
- **Line 80:** "bite"
- **Line 87:** "licking," "lips"

CONSONANCE

Consonance interweaves with assonance and alliteration to give this poem its sinister music.

For instance, listen to the sounds in this grim passage:

> birds night birds yell inside
> my ears like stabbed hearts my heart
> stutters in my fluttering cloth
> body [...]

The densely woven sounds in this passage help readers to feel Mary's panic, desperation, and determination on the very edge of death. Here, /t/, /b/, and /l/ consonance (and some /b/

alliteration) sound exactly like what they describe: a racing, "stutter[ing]," weakening heartbeat.

Later, in Mary's new life as a roving wildwoman, she uses a different version of the same effect:

> [...] blasphemies
> gleam and burst in my wake
> like lovely bubbles.

Here, a mixture of /l/ and /b/ consonance and alliteration makes these lines sound both appealing and a little sinister: the /b/ feels pleasantly round, while the drawn-out /l/ sounds suggest Mary's relish of her new "blasphem[ous]" power.

(Note that we've only marked a couple of instances of consonance here. There's much, much more to find.)

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "smashed flesh"
- **Line 11:** "sunburned skin"
- **Line 12:** "tattered skirts"
- **Line 22:** "blackened apple stuck back"
- **Line 31:** "bonnets," "stare"
- **Line 32:** "dark skirts"
- **Line 89:** "insidious," "glossy"
- **Line 90:** "whispering"
- **Line 92:** "Trust," "says, caressing"
- **Line 93:** "suffer"
- **Line 128:** "birds," "night," "birds"
- **Line 129:** "stabbed hearts"
- **Lines 129-130:** "heart / stutters"
- **Line 130:** "fluttering cloth"
- **Line 131:** "body," "dangle"
- **Line 170:** "Tough luck, folks"
- **Line 204:** "blasphemies"
- **Line 205:** "gleam," "burst"
- **Line 206:** "like lovely," "bubbles"

IRONY

Mary's biting irony gives readers a sense of her anger, frustration, and disdain.

Much of the poem's irony appears in the form of sarcastic understatement. For instance, in the first section, Mary explains that she was "hanged for living alone," and then adds, as if in afterthought, "Oh yes, and breasts." The irony here is that all of the other reasons Mary gives for her persecution would have meant nothing if it weren't for her "breasts"—that is, if it weren't for the fact that she was a woman. Mary knows that misogyny is the real issue here, and her ironic "Oh yes" underscores that point.

Mary also treats her own suffering with a degree of ironic archness. When she remarks that, "with time," the murderous men would "have thought of axes," she's imagining her own execution as a mere practical matter for these guys: *if they hadn't have been in such a rush, they'd have picked a more efficient method*. This moment reflects Mary's scorn for these bloodthirsty, fumbling murderers.

Later on, Mary also uses a series of ironic rhetorical questions to confront God himself:

> Is it my choice that I'm dangling
> like a turkey's wattles from this
> more than indifferent tree?
> If Nature is Your alphabet,
> what letter is this rope?

There's a double irony here. On the one hand, Mary is not asking sincere questions; rather, she's accusing God of injustice and cruelty. On the other hand, as the poem progresses, it becomes clear that Mary doesn't even believe in a God who listens and hears. Instead, she sees God as a vast and unresponsive "silence."

The poem's irony thus develops both Mary's voice and her wrathful, righteous perspective on the world.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Lines 15-18:** "Oh yes, and breasts, / and a sweet pear hidden in my body. / Whenever there's talk of demons / these come in handy."
- **Lines 19-20:** "The rope was an improvisation. / With time they'd have thought of axes."
- **Lines 50-55:** "I understand. You can't spare / anything, a hand, a piece of bread, a shawl / against the cold, / a good word. Lord / knows there isn't much / to go around. You need it all."
- **Lines 56-57:** "Well God, now that I'm up here / with maybe some time to kill"
- **Lines 63-68:** "Is it my choice that I'm dangling / like a turkey's wattles from this / more than indifferent tree? / If Nature is Your alphabet, / what letter is this rope? / Does my twisting body spell out Grace?"
- **Lines 170-173:** "Tough luck, folks, / I know the law: / you can't execute me twice / for the same thing. How nice."

VOCABULARY

A sweet pear hidden in my body (Line 16) - A euphemism for Mary's genitals.

Windfall (Line 21) - A piece of fruit knocked loose from the tree by wind—but also, metaphorically, a lucky find. Mary uses this word more than a little ironically!

Trussed (Line 23) - Tied up, bound.

Stalk (Line 27) - Stride menacingly, like predatory animals.

Quarrel (Line 61) - An argument.

Indifferent (Lines 64-65) - Uncaring, unfeeling.

Faith, Charity, and Hope (Line 70) - The three traditional Christian virtues.

Taut (Line 75) - Stretched tightly.

Insidious (Lines 88-89) - Subtly treacherous or dangerous.

Caressing (Lines 92-93) - Stroking.

Martyr (Line 96) - A person who dies or suffers for a cause, often a religious cause.

Constrained (Line 106) - This word can mean either "forced" or "restricted, choked off."

Pentecost (Lines 111-112) - An event in the Bible during which flames appeared over the Apostle's heads and they miraculously gained the ability to speak in many different languages.

Gabbling (Line 114) - Babbling nonsensically.

Poultry (Line 114) - Farmyard birds, like chickens and turkeys.

Seethes (Line 126, Line 132) - This word can mean both "bubbles hectically," like boiling water, or "feels silently furious."

Exude (Line 127) - Discharge or secrete.

Talisman (Lines 135-136) - A meaningful, holy, or protective object.

Testify (Line 161) - Give evidence of, serve as proof of.

Waxes and wanes (Line 185) - Grows and shrinks.

Nimbus (Line 187, Line 195) - A halo or a glowing cloud.

Sinuous (Line 213) - Winding, curvy.

Vacancy (Line 215) - Emptiness.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Half-hanged Mary" is a dramatic monologue told in the voice of Mary Webster, using an irregular structure that charts her ordeal hour by hour.

There's no consistent stanza form or meter here. This free verse poem is instead built from ten sections of various lengths and styles, all but the last titled with a time of day.

The poem first runs through the hours from "7 p.m." to "8 a.m.," each section describing Mary's thoughts and feelings as she's abducted and hanged. The form changes meaningfully between these sections. For instance, in the first section, "7 p.m.," Mary remembers her capture in neat quatrains; by "3 a.m.," though, she's speaking in one long, heavily enjambed 19-line stanza. The poem's changing structural choices all reflect Mary's inner world, evoking her thoughtfulness, her wit, her suffering, and her desperation in turn.

METER

Written in free verse, "Half-hanged Mary" doesn't use a meter. Instead, the speaker uses changing line lengths, repetition, and enjambments to create interesting rhythms and a sense of motion throughout.

For example, take a look at this disturbing excerpt from the "3 a.m." section, when Mary refuses to surrender to death:

> [...] I call
> on you as witness I did
> no crime I was born I have borne I
> bear I will be born this is
> a crime I will not
> acknowledge leaves and wind
> hold on to me

The aggressive enjambments here give this passage a desperate, slippery quality, reflecting Mary's racing thoughts.

Compare these lines to the stanzas that come right after them in the "6 a.m." section, lines 145-147:

> Sun comes up, || huge and blaring,
> no longer a simile for God.
> Wrong address. || I've been out there.

These matter-of-fact end-stopped lines (with some help from caesurae) read much more slowly and deliberately, suggesting that Mary has come through her suffering as a completely different person. The measured pace here gives her words a chilling flatness.

The poem thus uses the flexibility of free verse to evoke Mary's emotions, from panic to numbness to glee.

RHYME SCHEME

Like much free verse poetry, "Half-hanged Mary" doesn't use a regular rhyme scheme. But it's riddled with internal rhymes, which help to give even Mary's darkest moments a kind of witchy wit.

For instance, look at Mary's scalding remarks to the women who come to stare at her as she dangles from the tree in lines 37-40:

> You were my friend, you too.
> I cured your baby, Mrs.,
> and flushed yours out of you,
> Non-wife, to save your life.

Recognizing the village women's hypocrisy, Mary menaces them—particularly that "Non-wife," who might easily have found herself in Mary's position had her illegitimate pregnancy

come to term. The internal rhyme here gives this passage a singsongy, taunting quality, like a grim playground "nyah-na nyah-na nyaaaah-na."

The poem's vibrant assonance often creates a similar effect, as in lines 85-87, in which Mary imagines death perched on her shoulder:

> [...] like a judge
> muttering about sluts and punishment
> and licking his lips

All those repeated vowels give this passage a strange music; it's like a grotesque nursery rhyme.

The poem might not use a rhyme scheme, but it doesn't stint on rhyme: the echoing sounds that haunt this poem give Mary's voice its blackly comic tone.

SPEAKER

This poem's speaker is "Half-hanged Mary" herself: that is, Mary Webster, a victim of the 17th-century witch-hunt mania in Massachusetts. As Atwood explains in a short introduction, Webster was a real historical figure whom her fellow citizens hanged for witchcraft. But she survived and was discovered alive the next morning.

The Mary Webster of this poem tells her tale in a voice that is by turns defiant, sinister, tongue-in-cheek, and traumatized. A woman who has made her living as a healer and a farmer, who is respected and feared for being both single and powerful, Mary is unsurprised by the Puritanical sexism that seals her fate. But she also rages against it, decrying a world of lecherous, power-hungry men and cowed, oppressed women from her horrible perch in the gallows tree.

The trauma of her botched execution gives Mary a whole new kind of power. Once only a woman trying to make a living, her hanging makes her into a witch for real, a frightening figure who "skitters over the paths and fields" like a wild animal, speaking only to God: because "Who else has been dead twice?"

SETTING

"Half-hanged Mary" is set in 17th-century Massachusetts—a time and place when a craze for witch-hunting took myriad innocent lives. Mary lives in a Puritan town, where a narrow and unbending Protestantism spills out into violence against any woman who doesn't toe the approved patriarchal line of meek submission.

Even more specifically, much of the poem takes place in one spot: the tree where Mary is "half-hanged." As Mary dangles above the gawking townsfolk, slowly choking, she gains a new (and terrifying) perspective: literally above it all, she accuses not only her fellow citizens, but God himself of inhuman cruelty and injustice.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Canadian author Margaret Atwood (1939-present) is one of the most influential modern writers. She's most famous for *The Handmaid's Tale*, a dystopian novel in which women are forced into a sex-based caste system. Atwood dedicated that important novel to Mary Webster, the subject of "Half-hanged Mary," whose story made a deep impression on her.

"Half-Hanged Mary" was first published in Atwood's 1995 collection *Morning in the Burned House*. Atwood had been writing poetry for a long time before this book appeared; she broke out in the 1970s and 1980s with books of poetry that some unfriendly critics saw as stridently feminist. But more sensitive readers appreciated Atwood's work for its uncompromising readings of gendered violence, as well as its lively language and wit.

Like her contemporaries Angela Carter and Octavia Butler, Atwood often wrote in the fairy-tale or sci-fi traditions; the dark magic of "Half-hanged Mary," with its lurking death-crows and cosmic transformations, fits right into Atwood's literary moment.

Atwood remains an important writer to this day and has won many awards and honors, including two Booker Prizes.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Half-Hanged Mary" is just one of the many poems that reflects Margaret Atwood's commitment (and contribution) to feminist thought.

Atwood's poem is based on real historical events. In 1683, Mary Webster—a widow who lived in Northampton, Massachusetts—was tried for witchcraft and acquitted. But her fellow townspeople decided they'd hang her anyway. She survived the hanging and lived on for at least another decade.

Mary Webster was only one of many women (and a few men) who fell prey to a 17th-century Puritanical craze for witch-hunting. The most famous of these horrific crusades was the Salem Witch Trials, a collective hysteria that overtook parts of colonial Massachusetts from 1692-1693. Fired up by religious paranoia, the people of Salem and some surrounding towns executed 20 supposed witches (many of them elderly women), and imprisoned, harassed, and tortured dozens more.

Atwood is one of many thinkers to see such witch trials as an outpouring of misogyny. While some men were accused, most "witches" were women who lived a little apart from the mainstream of society: women who lived alone, who didn't

quite play by the rules, or who just didn't get along with their fellow citizens. Women were often the accusers in the witch trials, too: as Atwood points out, sometimes the only "safe stance" for women in a violently sexist world was "pointing a finger" in order to direct misogynist ire somewhere else.

Atwood's reflections on these patterns of sexism—historical and ongoing—have inspired some of her most famous work, including her dystopian *The Handmaid's Tale*. The book's stories of institutionalized misogyny might sound too terrible to be believed, but alas, Atwood writes that she included nothing in the book that hadn't really happened somewhere in the world.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- More of Atwood's Work — Read more of Atwood's poems at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/margaret-atwood)
- An Interview with Atwood — Watch an interview in which Atwood discusses her writing. (https://youtu.be/D5Wj_JQ6NhY)
- The Life of Mary Webster — Learn more about Mary Webster, the real-life figure whose botched execution inspired this poem. (https://www.newenglandhistoricalsociety.com/mary-webster-witch-hadley-survives-hanging/)
- Atwood's Feminism — Listen to Margaret Atwood discussing The Handmaid's Tale, her famous novel about sexism and oppression. Atwood dedicated the novel to Mary Webster, and many of its themes are related to this poem's. (https://youtu.be/7a8LnKCzsBw)
- Atwood on Freedom — Read Atwood's recent op-ed on political oppression and freedom. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/sep/18/margaret-atwood-we-are-double-plus-unfree)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER MARGARET ATWOOD POEMS

- This Is a Photograph of Me
- [you fit into me]

HOW TO CITE

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