Read the short story “The Pit and the Pendulum” by Edgar Allan Poe. Then, reread the lines indicated with each question below. Answer each question, citing text evidence.

1. Lines 15–23: What creates an atmosphere of horror in these lines? Give examples from the text.
   Poe creates an atmosphere of horror by describing the judges’ lips as grotesque and inhuman. In lines 17–18, the narrator says that they are as white as paper, in lines 18–19 he says that they are grotesquely thin, and in line 22 he calls them deadly and describes them writhing as though they had a life of their own.

2. Lines 42–54: Based on these lines, what might be a theme of the story?
   Some sort of consciousness survives trauma or even death. The narrator repeats that all is not lost in lines 42–46. He emphasizes that consciousness is not completely lost by repeating “no!” [lines 44–46].

3. Lines 111–120: How do these lines build dramatic tension?
   By giving the reader details about what usually happened to those sentenced to death, Poe makes the narrator’s fate seem more real.

4. Lines 128–140: Does the narrator’s hopeful state of mind continue? How can you tell? What happens to cause a change?
   The narrator does not remain hopeful; in lines 137–138 he says that he does not doubt that he faces a bitter death.
   In lines 132–137, the narrator remembers the horrible rumors he has heard about the dungeons of Toledo.

5. Lines 179–196: What sensory details contribute to the atmosphere? To which sense does each detail appeal?
   Clammy vapor,” line 188, touch; “decayed fungus,” line 189, smell; “groping,” line 192, touch; “I hearkened to its reverberations” and “sullen plunge into water, succeeded by loud echoes,” lines 194–196, hearing.

6. Lines 204–210: Based on these lines, do you think the narrator fears physical agony more, or moral—meaning psychological—horror? Explain using evidence from the text.
   The narrator fears the moral horrors more. He says in lines 207–210 that his “nerves had been unstrung” and that he is a “fitting subject” for moral horrors. In addition, we know from the narrator’s fear of the unknown that his own imaginings are what frightens him most, so he would be more afraid of psychological torture than physical pain.

7. Lines 224–260: Does the narrator find his prison more or less horrible than he had supposed? How does it differ from what he originally thought? Explain.
   He finds the prison less horrible than he had supposed. He does not express terror at anything he sees, and in line 260 he says that there was only one pit; in lines 211–212 he had imagined that there might be many pits in his cell. He also discovers the cell is smaller [lines 229–230], differently shaped [lines 244–249], and made of different material [lines 249–251] than he originally guessed.

8. Lines 251–259: Which words in these lines have strong connotations of horror?
   Hideous, repulsive, fiends, menace, disfigured, monstrosities.

9. Lines 318–325: Is it fitting that the image of Father Time is attached to the pendulum? Why or why not?
   The image is appropriate because the pendulum comes slowly closer over time. This torture makes time seem longer to the narrator. He says the pendulum seemed to descend for “long, long hours” [line 318], “ages” and “days” [line 321], and “many days” [line 322]. The passage of time itself becomes a torture, and in lines 324–325 the narrator prays that the pendulum would descend more quickly.

10. Lines 334–344: Describe the narrator’s emotions. What is their effect on the story?
    In line 334, he feels “sick and weak”; in line 336, he makes a “painful effort”; in lines 339 and 341, he feels “joy” and “hope”; and in line 343, he feels “annihilated.” These emotions contribute to the Romantics’ fascination with madness and death.
11. Lines 381–402: What gives the narrator hope in these lines?
   The realization that he was tied by only one cord and that the blade of the pendulum could cut him free [lines 384–388], and he realizes he now has a complete plan of action to free himself [lines 397–401].

12. Lines 428–432: How does Poe convey the sensation of the swarming rats? Support your answer with evidence from the text.
   He gives sensory details related to touch such as “writhe upon my throat,” “cold lips,” and “thronging pressure.”

13. Lines 483–489: How does Poe convey the horror of the pit? Why do you think Poe might choose not to tell readers what the narrator sees in the pit?
   By saying that the narrator had a hard time understanding what he saw, by having him exclaim in horror and shriek, and by having him rush away from the pit toward the red-hot iron walls.

14. Lines 508–513: What is the narrator’s ultimate fear? Describe the narrator’s state of mind as he teeters on the brink of the pit.
   Whatever he saw in the pit. He has finally given up hope. He says he “struggled no more” [line 511], screamed in despair [line 512], and averted his eyes [line 513].

15. Lines 514–519: Why do you think Poe might have ended the story so abruptly? Do you think the protagonist is actually rescued? Explain your response.
   The story is about the narrator’s interior response to his imprisonment and torture, so once the torture ends, so does the story.
   Poe’s techniques make it impossible for the reader to distinguish between what is truly happening and what is imagined by the narrator. Perhaps he does not escape his fate and instead imagines his rescue at the last possible moment, or maybe he has lost his mind and tumbled into the abyss of insanity in order to “survive” the horrors of the pit and burning walls.