

## Exploring Community Responsibility with “The Hangman”

*“I am part of all that I have met.” Alfred Tennyson*

### Overview

Students will read and discuss Maurice Ogden’s poem, “The Hangman,” using it as a basis for exploring the dangers of remaining silent, apathetic, and indifferent in the face of oppression of others. Students will connect the themes of the poem to events that occur in their own community and school, recognizing the importance of maintaining a tolerant and cohesive classroom community.

### Grades

Middle & high

### Activity Type

Small Group or Whole Class

### Materials

- Checklist, attached
- Copy of “The Hangman,” attached
- Discussing the Hangman, group instructions attached

### Duration

- 45 minutes

### Procedure

1. Write the following quote on the board and as a warm-up, ask students to share their interpretation of the quote. Ask students to share what message they think Tennyson is trying to convey, as well as how this quote might apply to their individual lives and to society at large. Chart student thoughts under the quote.
  - “I am part of all that I have met.” Alfred Tennyson
2. Hopefully, students will share thoughts that get to the core of the quote, which speaks to the interconnectedness between humans (and perhaps all living things). Further discuss:
  - If we believe that we are part of all that we have met (meaning, if we value others as much as we value ourselves) how might this affect our communities?
  - If we see our similarities rather than our differences, how might this affect our behavior as a society?
  - Imagine a community where everyone lives by this motto, that they are all one family, a part of one another, and that they are all connected. How do you imagine these people would behave towards one another?
  - Do you think most people view our world in this way, that we are all “one?” What evidence makes you think this?

- Imagine a community who does not live by this motto; rather everyone only cares for themselves. How do you imagine living in such a community would be?
3. Tell students they will be exploring the ways people behave towards their fellow citizens, as well as their attitudes about others further by reading a poem called *The Hangman*, by Maurice Ogden. As an introduction to the poem, hand out the attached *Hangman Checklist* and instruct students to place a check in the first column beside each statement that is true of them or that they agree with.

Once students have finished, hand out the attached poem, *The Hangman*, and the attached “Discussing the Hangman” group instructions. Tell students that in small groups, they will read the poem together then discuss and answer the accompanying questions.

**Note:** Teachers can alternatively have students read the poem individually or in partners, and discuss the poem as a whole class rather than in small groups.

4. Divide students, tell them where each group should meet, and give them approximately 20 minutes to read and discuss the poem. As each group finishes, instruct students to individually return to their *Hangman Checklist*. Tell students they should review the statements once more, this time placing a check in the second blank beside each statement they believe the poet would agree with. Once all groups are finished and students have completed the second column of the “Hangman Checklist,” have groups report back on their conversations. (What was your group’s opinion of this poem? What stood out for your group? How did it make you feel as you read it? What message did your group feel the poet is trying to convey?) Teachers may also choose particular discussion questions from the sheet to further explore as a class. After groups have debriefed, further reflect:
- What lesson do you think can we take from this poem regarding society today?
  - Review your individual Hangman Checklist responses. Discuss the statements you felt strongly about and why. Discuss the comments that you chose not to place a check beside and why. (Teachers should allow students to share freely, as well as use this as an opportunity to ask additional clarifying questions to encourage student learning and understanding regarding the themes present in the various statements.)
  - What types of things did you and the poet agree on? What did you disagree on?
  - How can you relate this poem to things that take place at school?
  - As a community, why is it important to stand together against bullying, intolerance, violence, etc.? If just one of us accepts it, due to fear or apathy, how can our classroom community be negatively impacted?
5. **Personal Reflection:** “All men make mistakes, but only wise men learn from their mistakes.” - Winston Churchill
- Ask students to do an honest reflection and think of a moment in their own lives when they made a choice to not stand up for someone or something that they since regret (for example, perhaps they can pinpoint a moment when they wish they would have stood up for a peer being picked on, or invited someone sitting along to join them at the lunch table; they might have heard someone make a racist joke and didn’t say anything, or failed to voice their opinion about something important due to fear of others disagreeing.)

- Instruct students to brainstorm then focus on a particular instance or period from their life when they felt they were not being the best person they could be. Students should write a one-page reflection describing the incident, their behavior, their evaluation of why they made the choices they made, and their assessment of what they have since learned from the situation and/or what they would do differently.
- Remind students that the purpose of this writing assignment is to describe a poor choice that they regret and to learn from it through reflection. It is advised that students not share these reflections out loud; rather they turn the assignments in for teacher review and comments.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

### Checklist

*Directions.* Before reading the poem, put a check in Column A beside the statements with which you agree. After reading the poem, cover the first column and this time check the statements in Column B you think the poet would agree with.

- | A   | B   |  |
|-----|-----|--|
| ___ | ___ | 1. It is important to help others in your community, regardless of who they are.                     |
| ___ | ___ | 2. I don't care if I see something bad happen to someone, as long as it doesn't happen to me.        |
| ___ | ___ | 3. Hurting people emotionally is just as bad as hurting them physically.                             |
| ___ | ___ | 4. I don't like to give support to someone who is being taken advantage of by someone else.          |
| ___ | ___ | 5. If you see someone being bullied or mistreated, it is your responsibility to stand up for them.   |
| ___ | ___ | 6. Bad things happen in our society because people let them happen.                                  |
| ___ | ___ | 7. Many people need to be persecuted to be kept in line.   |
| ___ | ___ | 8. If someone pushes me around, I want everyone to know about it.                                    |
| ___ | ___ | 9. A person should stand up for what they believe in, regardless of the consequences.                |
| ___ | ___ | 10. The best thing someone who is being mistreated or bullied can do is to ignore it and keep quiet. |
| ___ | ___ | 11. I think many people have been murdered for no reason whatsoever other than being "different."    |
| ___ | ___ | 12. I would defend or protect a family member or friend, but <u>not</u> a stranger.                  |
| ___ | ___ | 13. I expect help if I am mistreated.  |
| ___ | ___ | 14. I think people who are bullied or teased generally deserve it; they are usually annoying people. |
| ___ | ___ | 15. I think people who tease or bully others would probably do the same to me.                       |
| ___ | ___ | 16. People should stick together for the common good, standing up for what is right.                 |
| ___ | ___ | 17. People generally get what they deserve.  |
| ___ | ___ | 18. The bad things that happen outside of my life are not my problems to deal with.                  |

*Adapted from Georgia Commission on the Holocaust:*

[http://holocaust.georgia.gov/vgn/images/portal/cit\\_1210/31/2/26497476Study%20Guide%20one1.pdf](http://holocaust.georgia.gov/vgn/images/portal/cit_1210/31/2/26497476Study%20Guide%20one1.pdf)

## Hangman

by Maurice Ogden

### 1.

Into our town the Hangman came,  
Smelling of gold and blood and flame.  
And he paced our bricks with a diffident air,  
And built his frame in the courthouse square.  
The scaffold stood by the courthouse side,  
Only as wide as the door was wide;  
A frame as tall, or little more,  
Than the capping sill of the courthouse door.  
And we wondered, whenever we had the time,  
Who the criminal, what the crime  
That the Hangman judged with the yellow twist  
of knotted hemp in his busy fist.  
And innocent though we were, with dread,  
We passed those eyes of buckshot lead --  
Till one cried: "Hangman, who is he  
For whom you raised the gallows-tree?"  
Then a twinkle grew in the buckshot eye,  
And he gave us a riddle instead of reply:  
"He who serves me best," said he,  
"Shall earn the rope of the gallows-tree."  
And he stepped down, and laid his hand  
On a man who came from another land.  
And we breathed again, for another's grief  
At the Hangman's hand was our relief  
And the gallows-frame on the courthouse lawn  
By tomorrow's sun would be struck and gone.  
So we gave him way, and no one spoke,  
Out of respect for his Hangman's cloak.

### 2.

The next day's sun looked mildly down  
On roof and street in our quiet town,  
And stark and black in the morning air  
Was the gallows-tree in the courthouse square.  
And the Hangman stood at his usual stand  
With the yellow hemp in his busy hand;  
With his buckshot eye and his jaw like a pike  
And his air so knowing and business-like.  
And we cried, "Hangman, have you not done  
Yesterday, with the foreign one?"  
Then we fell silent, and stood amazed,  
"Oh, not for him was the gallows raised."  
He laughed a laugh as he looked at us:  
"Did you think I'd gone to all this fuss  
To hang one man? That's a thing I do  
To stretch a rope when the rope is new."  
Then one cried "Murder!" and one cried "Shame!"  
And into our midst the Hangman came  
To that man's place. "Do you hold," said he,  
"with him that was meant for the gallows-tree?"  
And he laid his hand on that one's arm.  
And we shrank back in quick alarm!  
And we gave him way, and no one spoke  
Out of fear of his Hangman's cloak.  
That night we saw with dread surprise  
The Hangman's scaffold had grown in size.  
Fed by the blood beneath the chute,  
The gallows-tree had taken root;  
Now as wide, or a little more,  
Than the steps that led to the courthouse door,  
As tall as the writing, or nearly as tall,  
Halfway up on the courthouse wall.

3.

The third he took -- we had all heard tell --  
Was a usurer, and an infidel.

"What," said the Hangman "have you to do  
With the gallows-bound, and he a Jew?"

And we cried out, "Is this one he  
Who has served you well and faithfully?"  
The Hangman smiled: "It's a clever scheme  
to try the strength of the gallows-beam."

The fourth man's dark, accusing song  
Had scratched our comfort hard and long;  
"And what concern," he gave us back.  
"Have you for the doomed -- the doomed and Black?"

The fifth. The sixth. And we cried again,  
"Hangman, Hangman, is this the man?"  
"It's a trick," he said. "that we hangmen know  
For easing the trap when the trap springs slow."

And so we ceased, and asked no more,  
As the Hangman tallied his bloody score.  
And sun by sun, and night by night,  
The gallows grew to monstrous height.

The wings of the scaffold opened wide  
Till they covered the square from side to side;  
And the monster cross-beam, looking down,  
Cast its shadow across the town.

4.

Then through the town the Hangman came,  
Through the empty streets, and called my name  
-- And I looked at the gallows soaring tall,  
And thought, "There is no one left at all

For hanging, and so he calls to me  
To help pull down the gallows-tree."  
So I went out with right good hope  
To the Hangman's tree and the Hangman's rope.

He smiled at me as I came down  
To the courthouse square through the silent town.  
And supple and stretched in his busy hand  
Was the yellow twist of the hempen strand.

And he whistled his tune as he tried the trap,  
And it sprang down with a ready snap --  
And then with a smile of awful command  
He laid his hand upon my hand.

"You tricked me. Hangman!," I shouted then,  
"That your scaffold was built for other men...  
And I no henchman of yours," I cried,  
"You lied to me, Hangman. Foully lied!"

Then a twinkle grew in the buckshot eye,  
"Lied to you? Tricked you?" he said. "Not I.  
For I answered straight and I told you true --  
The scaffold was raised for none but you.

For who has served me more faithfully  
Then you with your coward's hope?" said he,  
"And where are the others who might have stood  
Side by your side in the common good?"

"Dead," I whispered. And amiably  
"Murdered," the Hangman corrected me:  
"First the foreigner, then the Jew...  
I did no more than you let me do."

Beneath the beam that blocked the sky  
None had stood so alone as I.  
The Hangman noosed me, and no voice there  
Cried "Stop!" for me in the empty square.

## Discussing “The Hangman” by Maurice Ogden

### Directions for reading:

- One person should read each numbered stanza to the group, while everyone else follows along.
- Everyone should mark the text as you read:
  - Circle any words that are unfamiliar to you.
  - Underline any parts of the poem that stick out to you (for example, if a line paints a strong image in your mind).
  - If you are confused by any part of the poem, write a question mark by that line or section. You can also write out questions on the text.
  - If anything surprises you or evokes a strong emotional response from you, you can write an exclamation mark by the line or section,
  - If a particular thought pops in your head that connects to the poem, write it in the margins.
- After you have read the poem, someone will lead the group through discussing the questions below.
- Everyone should participate in the discussion, following our class expectations for respectful dialogue.
- As you discuss, one person should take notes.
- Role Assignments:
  - Discussion Leader: \_\_\_\_\_
  - Note Taker: \_\_\_\_\_
  - Reader 1, 2, 3, & 4: \_\_\_\_\_

### Discussion Questions

1. After reading this poem, if asked to describe it, what words would first come to mind?
2. Who is most responsible for this incident and why?
3. What does the Hangman mean when he says, “He who serves me best...shall earn the rope of the gallows-tree”?
4. How is the first victim described? Why do you think this victim was chosen?
5. Why do the townspeople remain silent as the first victim is hung?
6. Why are the townspeople surprised in part 2 of the poem?
7. How do the townspeople react when one townspeople speaks out against the Hangman?
8. Why did the townspeople allow these executions to take place?
9. How would you describe the townspeople? Can you make any comparison between the townspeople and students at our school?
10. What do the townspeople notice about the gallows? (“The gallows-tree had taken root”) What does this symbolize?
11. What does the third and fourth victim in section three have in common with the first?
12. Why is it that the last man standing is told that he is the one for whom the gallows was built?
13. What is the Hangman’s purpose or goal?
14. What do you imagine the last victim wanted most at the end of the poem?
15. Who or what could have stopped the Hangman?
16. What events throughout history can you connect to the themes present in this poem?
17. What examples of the Hangman exist in society today? In our school?
18. How do the themes in this poem relate to bullying?
19. Who or what does the Hangman represent or symbolize?
20. What message is this poet trying to convey?