

Poem, "The Hangman" for students in grades 6-12

This is a long poem but it is VERY worth the effort for reading as well as for the extended activities. It is provided for reading first.

Quick Facts: American poet Ogden Nash (1902-1971) published 19 books of poetry. Chiefly a humourist, he's best known for his ditty, "Candy is nice, but liquor is quicker." This is one of his longest works and it's very serious.

Before the Reading:

1. In olden times, in what part of the town or city did the public hangings take place? Why were the hangings in public?
2. The children's game called hangman uses a scaffold. Describe what a scaffold is and how it works in the games.
3. List some materials used to make rope for sailing and for ships? How do you make ropes thicker?
4. In playing tag or murder ball have you ever used someone else as a shield to help you stay in the game?
5. Riddles used to be very popular as a means to get people thinking. The sphinx in the ancient play Oedipus Rex, poses the following riddle: What walks on four legs in the morning, two at noon and three legs in the afternoon? The answer is man. He crawls on all fours as an infant, walks upright as a man and with a cane in old age. What is put into the riddle to be somewhat misleading?

The 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 on 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 raise 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 on 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,
 The gallows-tree on 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 alien 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!" 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 user and infidel, and
 "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 out 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 last?"
 "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.

During the Reading

1. The scaffold is first only as tall as the top of a door sill. How tall is it by the time it has claimed two victims?
 What makes the scaffold grow?
2. First two people protest the second hanging. Why does the protest against the killings stop? Relate this to the silences you have seen in your own life when no one spoke out even though he/she witnessed a crime.
3. What do you think is the trick in the hangman's riddle that the noose is meant for "He who serves me best"?
 Who would ALWAYS end up serving the hangman?
4. Why did the Hangman start with the man from the foreign land. Who else would be easy targets and why?

4. Then through the town the Hangman came
 And called in the empty streets 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.
 And 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 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 that might have stood
 Side by your side in the common good?"
 "Dead," I whispered, and sadly
 "Murdered," the Hangman corrected me:
 "First the alien, 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
 And the Hangman strapped me, and no voice there
 Cried "Stay!" for me in the empty square

After the Reading

1. The scaffold grows larger with each death. What animal or being does it eventually look like?
2. How does the Hangman explain why he's taking more people? What excuses does he make? Why should these excuses NOT work?
3. Who are the 3rd and 4th victims and why does no one speak up for them?
4. How does the 'coward's hope' always serve the Hangman and the criminal?

Writing Activities – Extensions

1. An epitaph is what is written on a tombstone. What would you write on the tombstone of the last man who helped none of the Hangman's victims? Here's a sample epitaph from a tombstone at Tombstone:

"Here lies George Johnson
 hanged by mistake 1882
 – he was right we was wrong
 but we strung him up
 and now he's gone"
2. History shows us that there have been those Davids who stood their ground against the Goliath figure who threatened the innocent. Did these examples from history have good or bad endings? Find one example of a person who risked his or her life to protect or to advance others.
3. Assuming that Canadian veterans stood up against Hitler, the Hangman, write a letter to a veteran to thank him or her.