

Hangman Checklist

Directions. Before reading the poem, check those statements with which you agree. After reading the poem, check those statements with which you believe the poet, Maurice Ogden, would agree.

You	Poet	
_____	_____	1. A person who commits a crime should be punished.
_____	_____	2. I don't care what happens, as long as it doesn't disturb me.
_____	_____	3. Evil actions occur because of bad people.
_____	_____	4. It is difficult for me to give support to someone who is being taken advantage of by someone else.
_____	_____	5. It is important to mind only your own business.
_____	_____	6. Getting involved in other people's problems is not the responsible thing to do.
_____	_____	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. People should help other people who are being wronged.
_____	_____	10. The ultimate crime is murder.
_____	_____	11. I think many people have been murdered for no reason whatsoever.
_____	_____	12. I would defend one of my own group only.
_____	_____	13. I expect help if I am wronged.
_____	_____	14. Someone else can help others who are wronged even if I'm unable to intervene.
_____	_____	15. I think people who infringe on the rights of others would do the same to me.
_____	_____	16. People should stick together for the common good.

Hangman

by
Maurice Ogden

SOURCE: Maurice Ogden, *Hangman* (Tustin, California: Media Masters, Inc. for Regina Publications, Third Edition, June 1968). Printed with permission from 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,
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 businesslike.

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 the rope when the rope is new."

Then one cried "Murderer!" 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 the 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 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 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
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 die 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 more faithfully
Than 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 amiably
"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.

Hangman Worksheet

1. Whenever they had the time, the townspeople wondered who was the _____ and what was the _____.
2. When a townspeople asked the hangman who the gallows were for, the hangman answered in a _____ instead of a reply.
3. What was the hangman's answer? _____

4. Why do you think the hangman answered this way? _____

5. What mistake did the townspeople make when the hangman executed the alien? _____

6. When the townspeople sought an excuse for their lack of action, they said it was in _____ for the hangman's _____.
7. How do the townspeople react when they find out that the gallows were not for the alien? _____

8. When the hangman lets them know that the gallows are not for just one man, one townspeople cries, "Murderer!" What is this person's fate? _____
9. Who tries to stop the hangman then? _____ Why? _____

Foundations of the Holocaust

10. The hangman always points out that his victims are different from the rest of the remaining townspeople. Why? _____

11. After the sixth victim, how did the townspeople feel? _____

12. When the hangman called the last man's name, the last man thought the hangman wanted help to _____
13. How did the last man feel when the hangman laid his hands on him? _____
14. The last man said he was no _____ of the hangman.
15. The hangman calls the last man a _____.
16. How did the last man feel when he realized there was no one to help him? _____
17. At the end of the poem, the hangman identifies the last man as the one who served the hangman more _____.
What did the hangman mean? _____
18. The last man says all the other townspeople are _____, but the hangman corrects him and says they were _____.
19. What happened to the last man? _____

20. What is the poet saying about human relationships?

