



## Teaching Mark Twain in Japan: Lessons on Bullying

by Philip M. Adamek (Kagoshima Prefectural College, Japan)



### Literature, EFL and Global Issues

How does one teach English literature to Japanese college students with an emphasis on global issues? In my view, one of the most challenging things is finding a text to serve as a springboard for reflecting on issues of war and peace, history, culture or the environment that also speaks to the students' own experience.

One text that has served this purpose for me is Mark Twain's essay, *The United States of Lyncherdom*.<sup>i</sup> In it, Twain describes in ugly detail acts of violence against blacks in the American South and tries to explain why such violence occurs, especially when it is carried out by people conforming to peer pressure. Twain's essay raises questions that expose the readers' complicity in potential or real acts of violent group conformity. For this reason, it exposes in somewhat harsh light the dominant cultural value in Japan that places group adherence above individual conscience. In my view, this is one way in which discussing literature can lead students to raise questions that concern them personally and that cause them to reflect on their own choices and assumptions while situating themselves in a global context.

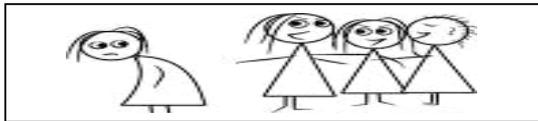
Mark Twain's essay was written in 1901 but not published until 1923, 13 years after his death. It wasn't published in complete form, as Twain had written it, until the year 2000. For the essay title, "The United States of Lyncherdom," Twain joins together the word "lynch" and the suffix "-dom" as in "kingdom." The neologism evokes a nation thoroughly corrupted by its culture of lynching. Twain feared that lynching would spread from the South to the North and even to other countries by means of imitation and moral cowardice. The title expresses Twain's outrage.

### Mark Twain and Social Issues

Twain's reputation as an author of popular juvenile literature (*Tom Sawyer*, *Huckleberry Finn*) is belied by his strident critique of both US foreign policy and American society. One of his unrealized ambitions was to write a six-volume history of lynching in the United States. One sarcastic title he suggested to his editor was the "Rise and Progress of Lynching." These facts are not common knowledge, but with the appearance, in 2010, of the first volume of his 3-volume autobiography, his portrait as a critic of violence and empire should come into greater profile.

For the last 10 years of his life, Twain was vice president of the *Anti-Imperialism League*. The League opposed the militaristic expansionist policies of the US government in, notably, Cuba, the Philippines, and China. This association of intellectuals took positions that were radically opposed to the mindset of the time. For criticizing Christian missionaries in China during the Boxer Rebellion, in which hundreds of Americans were killed, Twain was denounced as a traitor.<sup>ii</sup>

Lynching, to give an uncontroversial definition, is the illegal public torture and killing of a person by a mob. The history of lynching in the United States is generally circumscribed within the years 1882 and 1968, during which nearly 5,000 blacks were lynched. In the decade before Twain wrote his essay, "lynching claimed an average 139 lives each year, 75% of them black."<sup>iii</sup> Twain wanted to understand why lynching had recently spread to Missouri and why large crowds would gather at lynchings in apparent enthusiasm.



### Lynching, Bullying and Japan

The Japanese equivalent of the word "lynch" (*rinchi suru* リンチする) is best rendered back into English as "bullying." This linguistic resonance opens a window into a text whose preoccupations with public killing in the United States might otherwise appear remote to Japanese students. When students read Twain's explanation for the spread and power of lynching, they understand it as an equally compelling explanation for bullying in Japan and are moved to reflect on their own experiences with this form of group control. At the same time, the students need to be aware of the truly violent nature of lynching as it is understood in English. The powerful collection of lynching photos by James Allen helps me to illustrate this.<sup>iv</sup>

I have taught this text to Japanese students three times as part of a course in American literary history. While teaching it, I became aware that bullying in Japan tends to be carried out by groups against individuals. By contrast, in the United States, one often finds the image of 'the bully,' an individual who intimidates or harasses others, in many cases with superior physical strength. The two social

experiences reflect the different societies and cultures, but Twain's essay speaks equally to the psychology of groups that informs both lynching in the U.S. and bullying in Japan.

I should acknowledge also that the presence in my class of several students who had exhibited a bullying-like, cold shoulder attitude towards me was a precipitating factor in choosing this text.<sup>v</sup>

### Peer Pressure and Moral Cowardice

Twain's explanation for the spread of lynching in the US can be summarized as two main points:

- (1) that people tend to imitate others, whether the thing they imitate is good or bad, especially when it is much talked about. Similarly, today, one speaks of "copycat crimes."
- (2) that, despite Twain's belief that everyone has a conscience that tells them what is right or wrong, virtually everyone will ignore their conscience if what it tells them to do does not seem popular. In Twain's own words,

It must be that the increase {in lynching} comes of the inborn human instinct to imitate—*that* and man's commonest weakness, his aversion to being unpleasantly conspicuous, pointed at, shunned, as being on the unpopular side. Its other name is Moral Cowardice, and is the commanding feature of the make-up of 9,999 men in the 10,000. (pg. 142)

Twain rejects the common explanation that people attend lynchings out of a perverse desire to see others suffer. He argues that no such desire exists and that the main impulse of lynchers is to find security in numbers and not to side with the target of group power. For Twain, it is to obtain others' approval that people attend and *pretend to enjoy* painful scenes and public atrocities.<sup>vi</sup>

One has to keep in mind that the charge of "Moral Cowardice," which spurs on what is today called the "herd mentality," would apply to Twain himself. That is why he writes, "We are not any better nor any braver than anybody else and we must not try to creep out of it" (pg. 143). Indeed, this assertion is *required* by Twain's argument.

The resultant view of humanity implied by his accusation of cowardice is that although humans have a conscience that unflinchingly distinguishes between right and wrong, they lack the courage to do what they know is right in cases where it is also deemed unpopular. In short, humanity is not so much wicked as it is weak. This is why it is possible to see Twain as empathizing with the lynchers even as he condemns lynching.

The idea that there is nothing uniquely evil about those who bully others is something that Twain can teach students in today's Japan, most of whom have faced group bullying. Twain's essay also puts in front of students a robust criticism of the herd mentality. To make the most of this opportunity, I ask students to respond to the following end-of-term essay question.

### Writing Assignment

Both Mark Twain and Martin Luther King Jr. were faced with situations in which the demands of the group became the enemy of the good. The individual knows what the right thing to do is, but the group wants to act badly, in some cases illegally. First, describe each situation in detail; then, explain how each man responded to the situation. Second, choose an example from your own life in which the interests or needs of the group conflict with what you think or know to be the right thing to do. Describe the situation and say how Mark Twain or Martin Luther King Jr. might help you to understand the situation differently.<sup>vii</sup>

Though I never mention "bullying" during the semester, virtually every student chooses to write about it. They acknowledge having witnessed and, in a few cases, participated in or been the object of, bullying. Their essays express regret or shame at their own active or passive participation, anger at having been bullied, and a host of other emotions.

The students' essays are a testament to the power of literature to invite critical self-reflection on the issue of violence. The most shocking essay discussed a group of friends who premeditatedly took turns bullying one another. I asked myself what the purpose of that could have been. What good could students have hoped to find in mutual torment? It seems to me that this ritual could only be an instance of their acting out a value dominant in the mainstream culture, the idea that groups must prevail over individuals and individuals have no chance when faced with group power. It's not hard to imagine that this sentiment, inculcated into young Japanese as part of their education, could easily become the seed of the next campaign of locally or nationally organized violence.

Discussing Twain's essay, I hope, can give students a chance to put critical distance between themselves and the idea that group power is always good and should prevail over individual conscience. It can help them to see the actions of a single individual as being in some cases the only refuge and hope for civility or restraint.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> T. Terry Oggel, "Speaking Out about Race: 'The United States of Lyncherdom' Clemens Really Wrote," in *Prospects: An Annual of American Cultural Studies* 25, ed. Jack Salzman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 129.

<sup>2</sup> Despite the courage the anti-imperialists showed, many of their writings were suppressed and their actions did not have the impact they had hoped.

<sup>3</sup> James Allen, Hilton Als, Leon F. Litwack *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Santa Fe, NM: Twin Palms Publishers, 2008) 12.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, James Allen's photo collection prompted the US Senate to make an official apology for not having enacted anti-lynching legislation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>5</sup> Although their behavior did not change significantly during the course of the semester, I can only hope that the discussion of Twain's text caused these students to reflect critically on their actions.

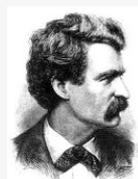
<sup>6</sup> In 1901, Twain read about the Boxer Rebellion in China, a nationalist uprising against Western imperialism and Christianity, which had just been suppressed through military intervention by the so-called Eight-Nation Alliance, which included America and Japan. With the

rebellion quelled, Twain read how the American Board Missionary William Scott Ament guided American troops on a looting expedition in reprisal against local Chinese. Twain sarcastically suggests that the missionaries in China are the best hope for stopping lynching and should return home at once. His tongue-in-cheek argument runs as follows. Whereas a single brave man has the power to turn back a mob intent on lynching, the numbers of such men are desperately few. The Christian missionaries who have been subjected to violent rejection by the Chinese Boxers are well-tested in confronting violence and endowed with the Christian notion of martyrdom. To stem the tide of lynching in the U.S., the 1,500 Christian missionaries should therefore return to their home country and be stationed in areas where lynchings have occurred to prevent them from occurring again.

<sup>7</sup> Kip Cates of Tottori University suggested that in future the essay could also require students to choose and discuss an inspiring figure, Japanese or other, who has courageously confronted a violent majority.

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### Mark Twain: World Citizen

Mark Twain (1835 – 1910) is often considered to be a simple humorist or writer of books for children. In fact, he was a scathing social critic and a staunch advocate of peace, freedom, human rights and international understanding. During his career, he stood up for the rights of Chinese immigrants, fought discrimination against Blacks and Jews, and criticized the war and imperialism of his time.

#### Quotes by Mark Twain

- *Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts.*
- *I am an anti-imperialist. I am opposed to having the eagle put its talons on any other land.*
- *There is but one thing to do when a man in wounded and suffering: relieve him. If we have a curiosity to know his nationality, that is of no consequence and can wait.*
- *Patriotism is being carried to insane excess. I know men who do not love God because he is a Foreigner.*
- *The man who does not read good books has no advantage over the man who can't read them.*
- *I have never let my schooling interfere with my education.*
- *When in doubt, tell the truth.*

### Wikipedia Articles <www.wikipedia.org>

#### (1) Mark Twain

Good overview of Mark Twain, his life and work

#### (2) *The United States of Lyncherdom*

Learn more about Twain's essay on lynching, then click on the link to read the original text.

#### (3) *The War Prayer*

This classic story is a blistering indictment of war, prejudice, blind patriotism and religious bigotry.

#### (4) *Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven*

This famous fable about ethnocentrism features a hilarious dialog with a bureaucrat at heaven's gate.

#### Mark Twain Classics Website

<http://marktwainclassics.com/>

\* Speeches, stories, essays, quotes by Mark Twain

#### Official Mark Twain Website

[www.cmgww.com/historic/twain/](http://www.cmgww.com/historic/twain/)

\* A good overview of Mark Twain's life and work

*Mark Twain: Social Critic* by Philip Foner (1958)

\* A classic book which documents Twain's fight against war, prejudice, racism and imperialism.

*All his life, Mark Twain fought injustice wherever he saw it.* (Helen Keller)