

A Bully in the Classroom?

Teaching Our Twisted Hero: A Modern Korean Classic

Our Twisted Hero by Yi Munyol

HYPRION, 2001

ENGLISH TRANSLATION BY KEVIN O'ROURKE

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By Constance Vidor with Michelle Schullo, Richard Sandler, and Sarah Campbell

For all its significant political overtones, Our Twisted Hero is the personal story of an individual child struggling with the all-too-common dynamics of bullying and conformism that will immediately engage high school and college readers.

Our Twisted Hero is a novel as dichotomous and complex as Korea itself. It is a classic political allegory, a snapshot of a particular time and place, and a portrait of the human condition. The narrator, Han Pyong'ae, a twelve-year-old boy whose family has been transferred from Seoul to a rural town, expects to be welcomed as being more sophisticated because of his schooling in the capital. On the contrary, he encounters a harrowing year of elementary school when his spirit is crushed by the class bully, Om Sokdae. Pyong'ae recalls how the teacher's connivance, the other students' conformist support for Sokdae, and Pyong'ae's parents' indifference inexorably force Pyong'ae to submit to Sokdae's domination. Sokdae uses force and charm to manipulate his victims in his role as class monitor. Pyong'ae's initial resistance gives way after he is singled out for punishments and socially ostracized for months on end. The school year concludes with the students cheating to enable Sokdae to claim top academic honors.

Han Pyong'ae is appalled at the others' unwillingness to depose the bully, and tries to take it upon himself to rectify the situation. His attempts to inform on Sokdae only make Pyong'ae even more ostracized by his schoolmates. Desperate for inclusion, the would-be reformer becomes the corrupt monitor's right hand man.

When a new teacher takes over the class in the following school year, he becomes suspicious of the conformist, passive mood of the class. He begins to see the corruption crippling the class and forces Sokdae and the other students to confess to the cheating and bullying by beating them. He tries to impress on them that admitting the truth of their oppression is the only way to resist acquiescing to injustice in their later lives.

Pyong'ae's initial relief at the possibility of freedom from Sokdae's domination changes to repugnance and disillusion as he witnesses Sokdae's humiliation and the other students' sudden abandonment of their hero. "They seemed to me no more than traitors who had waited for Sokdae to fall before jumping on him and walking all over him."

The bully's downfall is neither simple nor complete. The students struggle with creating a more democratic system in their classroom, and Sokdae exacts revenge by savagely attacking his former classmates on their way home from school. Violence is again shown as the effective solution as the teacher encourages and even manipulates some students into ganging up and beating Sokdae. Pyong'ae contrasts the chaotic nature of democratic systems with the "convenience and efficiency" of Sokdae's rule.

Sokdae casts a long shadow over Pyong'ae's life, as reflections on his former tormentor and his own complicity in Sokdae's rule haunt his thoughts into adulthood. Pyong'ae imagines Sokdae has gone on to a life of power and privilege, an image that is shattered when he sees the

former bully being arrested and dragged through the streets in chains.

Pyong'ae's reaction encapsulates the novel's tone of compassionate irony: "he had none of the tragic beauty of a fallen hero nor anything else special about him; he was just one among the poor ineffectual lot of us."

As political allegory, *Our Twisted Hero* outlines the dynamics of fear and control that are familiar throughout history. Set in Korea during the 1960s, the book specifically references the April 19 Student Revolution of 1960, during which police killed 142 students who were protesting the fraudulent presidential election of Syngman Rhee. Rhee, himself a kind of "twisted hero," achieved early fame as a great patriot for Korea's independence, but evolved quickly into a dictator who used torture and murder to stifle opposition.

Our Twisted Hero is a story that begins with good versus evil and progresses into increasingly morally ambiguous territory. What degree of responsibility do the students have who supported Sokdae? When even Pyong'ae eventually submits, isn't it clear that resistance is useless? What are we to think of the author's presentation of violence as the only effective solution to tyranny? Has the class merely exchanged one bully for a somewhat more enlightened bully in the form of the teacher? Is this a novel of hopelessness? Or is this

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actually a novel that expresses hope by its demand for readers to boldly examine the intricacies of moral responsibility, the implications of personal decisions, and the dynamics of how societies rule themselves?

For all its significant political overtones, *Our Twisted Hero* is the personal story of an individual child struggling with the all-too-common dynamics of bullying and conformism that will immediately engage high school and college readers. The literature of bullying is vast, and the problem of school bullying has become a topic of national concern, with books, consultants, and programs on anti-bullying appearing prominently on the landscape of education in the United States. (On January 23, 2010, a Google search for “anti-bullying in education” turned up 1,780,000 hits.) Many readers will also see thematic relationships with books such as Robert Cormier’s *The Chocolate War* (1974) and William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* (1954). *The Chocolate War* pits the defiant protagonist against the sadistic bully in a Catholic boy’s boarding school, combining issues of class, sexuality, and specific Christian imagery in an exploration of bullying with a pessimistic conclusion. *The Lord of the Flies* places a group of British school boys on a remote tropical island where they descend into savagery. Each of these books evokes its own nexus of cultural and historical resonance, and each evokes different subsidiary themes and images to complicate the examination of power, injustice, and conformity.

It is striking that of these three most eminent books that portray children enacting the social drama of tyranny and injustice, only *Our Twisted Hero* concludes with a degree of optimism. Democracy succeeds the tyrannical reign of Sokdae, with the class holding elections, discussing their issues, and grappling with all the push-and-pull of equitable decision-making. It is a problematic type of democracy, having been achieved through violence and humiliation, and with the aid of a superior intervening force; but it is a scenario in which there is at least the possibility of openly querying this fault line and its implications. A further element of optimism in the conclusion is that Sokdae’s former victim grows up, finds a profession, has a family, and although disillusioned, retains his ability to be compassionate, and to query the assumptions of his social peers.

The spare writing of *Our Twisted Hero* concentrates the story within dialogue and action. A few telling metaphors and references to Korean culture will speak more eloquently to American readers with some context provided. For example, the father’s lack of support for his son suggests an abandonment of Confucian family values, as does the first teacher’s craven acquiescence to Sokdae’s exploitation of his classmates. Further, the immediate withdrawal of loyalty from Sokdae after he is beaten and humiliated by the new teacher assumes additional significance when seen in the context of the supreme value placed on loyalty in Korean society.

This short, powerful novella will provoke lively discussion, argument, and reflection on literary, political, personal, and universal issues in courses on world literature, Asian literature, or Asian studies.

The teachers who contributed to this article offer the following ideas for guiding discussion and reflection.

MICHELLE SCHULLO teaches English at Newbury High School in Newbury, Ohio. She sees the novel’s multiple levels as having special utility in inclusion classrooms. Regardless of reading level, students easily recognize the characters: the bully, the unsympathetic parents, the indifferent teacher, the boy who tries standing up to the bully, the teacher who means well but nevertheless must coerce students into doing the right thing. An important goal in her teaching is to provide differentiated instruction in order to help slower readers keep up with the class and to encourage faster readers to conduct extension research into the novel as an allegory. All students closely examine character and deal with moral ambiguity.

Michelle Schullo’s complete unit on *Our Twisted Hero* is available at *Teaching East Asian Literature in the High School* at the Indiana University East Asian Studies Center, <http://www.iu.edu/~easc/outreach/educators/literature/workshops/index.shtml>.

Anticipation Guide: *Our Twisted Hero* by Yi Munyol

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Before viewing and reading the novel, place a check mark in the space to the left of each of the statements with which you agree. Students should be able to assign a value to one position and support the position with evidence from the text.
2. Then, during or after the reading, cross through those you wish to change, and check any new ones you find to be true.
3. Include evidence from the text that promotes your position. Include page numbers!

Answers and textual support will vary student to student, promoting discussion.

- ___ 1. Teachers and adults are here to help you. (Students should be able to evaluate the roles the teachers and parents play in the novel.)
- ___ 2. Power corrupts. (Students should be able to analyze the effect power has on Om Sokdae and his inner circle.)
- ___ 3. Sometimes personal freedoms need to be sacrificed in order to maintain control of the larger group. (Students should be able to assign a value to one position and support the position with evidence from the text.)
- ___ 4. Ultimately, justice will triumph over injustice. (Students should be able to evaluate whether Om Sokdae’s downfall, as a child and as an adult, is justice. Some students will consider the unevenly meted justice delivered by their sixth grade teacher and by life.)
- ___ 5. Students should always report violations like cheating or stealing to the school administration. (Students should be able to compare and contrast the methods and relative effectiveness of each teacher.)

RICHARD SANDLER is an English Teacher at John Burroughs School in St. Louis, Missouri. His major goals in teaching the novel are to convey to the students the universal nature of how one learns to cope

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with challenges at a very early age, and how challenges can shape one's perspective as an adult. He asks students to examine how culture guides one's expectations and reactions, and how a very carefully crafted piece of writing can use a personal experience as a means to reveal an insightful perspective on significant political and historical experiences.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

PAGES 1–29

1. What does the first paragraph do to set up the tone and voice in the piece? The time frame suggests that the event which occurred in childhood is essential to Pyongt'ae's adult life. How does his tone and voice influence your reaction to his focus?
2. How does Pyongt'ae set up the contrast between urban and rural values? Can you see any modern American parallels?
3. What does the first scene with Sokdae tell us about Pyongt'ae's expectations and fears in a new school? Does it ring true to your experiences with a social order?
4. Describe the teacher's acceptance of the pecking order. What does it suggest about the link between children and adults and power?
5. Explain Pyongt'ae's father's reaction to Sokdae. Do you see a link between the teacher and Pyongt'ae's father?
6. Explain how Pyongt'ae looks to academics as a way to gain some recognition. How to does it reinforce Korean values?

PAGES 30–61

1. How does Yun Pyongjo's dilemma display Sokdae's ability to "work" the situation? Does it ring true to your experiences as a kid with a bully?
2. Contrast Yun Pyongjo's father's job/role with Pyongt'ae's father. What do they share and how are they different? Whose plight would you prefer?
3. Explain the public performance of the teacher. Does it suggest he wants the opposite effect and is looking to reassure Sodae's power?
4. How does Pyongt'ae misgauge the anonymous writing exercise? What does it suggest about Sokdae's power?
5. What does the physical fighting order suggest about the nature of male social order?
6. How does the shunning finally bring about "the break" and Pyongt'ae's submission?

PAGES 62–90

1. Does the image of the window cleaning serve as any sort of significant metaphor?
2. Explain the line, "And now that Sokadae was certain I had submitted to his rule, his favors fell like a waterfall." (page 70)
3. How does Pyongt'ae's contribution of art to Sokdae's portfolio of work serve as a metaphor?
4. What can one read into all the students giving up their point as part of a rough social contract?
5. How does the invitation to visit the factory destroyed by the Japanese air raid foreshadow Sokdae's fate?
6. How does Sokdae's "First in School" title seem more important than getting caught?

PAGES 90 TO THE END

1. Did your reaction to the severity of the beating surprise you? Did you feel he deserved it?
2. Explain the teacher's line "You weren't even angry. You bent to unjust power and weren't even ashamed." (page 95) Discuss personal experiences or historical events that fit this experience.
3. Explain the line "A butcher they say, can become a buddha if he lays down his knife." (page 100) Why does Pyongt'ae grow suspicious of the speed/degree of change?
4. What does the difficulty of the class election suggest?
5. How does the April 19 Revolution serve as a perfect metaphor for the classroom dilemma?
6. Explain the reemergence of Sokdae and his new role.

CULMINATING WRITING ASSIGNMENT

Select one character and write two dramatic monologues revealing the conscience of that person.

FIRST MONOLOGUE: Writing in first person, justify all your character's actions, thoughts, inactions, and feelings. It is essential that you employ specific lines or dialogue and actions from the text. For example, "When I said, 'Will it take a beating to get you to talk? little did I think . . .'" (page 93).

SECOND MONOLOGUE: Writing in the voice of the same character, create a statement that expresses the doubts, regrets, and afterthoughts about the issues discussed in the first monologue.

Character choices:

- Han Pyongt'ae
- Om Sokdae
- The first teacher
- Han Pyongt'ae's father
- Han Pyongt'ae's mother
- Yun Pyongjo
- The second teacher

SARAH CAMPBELL is an English teacher at Ketchikan High School in Ketchikan, Alaska. She teaches *Our Twisted Hero* in her Asian Literature class. Her primary objective is for students to make connections between the historical record and Yi Munyol's response to it in his political allegory. Examining the novella in terms of historical events gives this dramatic time a personality, and students can better relate to the Korean experience as a result. A junior in Ms. Campbell's class reported that after reading *Our Twisted Hero* with the historical events in mind, he was able to "see what the students were doing, understand what they were thinking and feeling," and went on to add that he had "never been able to do that with a piece of American literature." Analyzing *Our Twisted Hero* with historical texts is a relevant and powerful way to teach Korean history.

Ms. Campbell shares excerpts of historical documents with her students that flesh out the impact of Syngman Rhee's dictatorship. She guides her students to make connections between the historical record and Yi Munyol's response to it in *Our Twisted Hero*.

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Gregg Brazinsky, *Nation Building in South Korea: Koreans, Americans, and the Making of a Democracy* (University of North Carolina Press, 2007). Brazinsky examines America's role in rebuilding South Korea after the Korean War. Chapter Five focuses on Rhee's development of an autocratic regime and suggests how Americans supported the emergence of a developmental autocracy because it was economically viable to do so.

Many students believe Om Sokdae represents Syngman Rhee, and the fifth grade teacher in *Our Twisted Hero* symbolizes the United States. A textual rendering of this section allows students to draw parallels and better understand America's decision to look the other way by allowing Rhee to ruthlessly govern for over a decade.

Lee Gil-sang, ed., *Korea Through the Ages (Vol. 2 Modern)* (The Academy of Korea Studies, 2005). Chapter Seventeen discusses Korean life under the autocracy of the Rhee administration and details the April 19 Democratic Revolution that resulted in Rhee's resignation. This text uses easy-to-understand language and presents facts, pictures, maps, and primary sources for readers unfamiliar with Korean history.

The first section of Chapter Seventeen begins with the primary account: "I can't live like this; let's change the president! Oh forget it, what's the use?" Students relate the sense of hopelessness in this passage to Pyongyang's submission to Sokdae. Through additional textual rendering, students find parallels between Rhee and Sokdae's nefarious methods of rule and dramatic decline.

Mary E. Connor, ed., *Asia in Focus: The Koreas* (California: ABC-CLIO, 2009). This is a comprehensive historical and contemporary text. Connor includes several detailed sections on Syngman Rhee. These sections can easily be juxtaposed with Yi Munyol's novella, giving students the opportunity to decipher meaning from the political allegory.

Andrea Matles Savada and William Shaw, eds., *South Korea: A Country Study* (Washington: Library of Congress, 1990, 2009), <http://memory.loc.gov/frd/cs/krtoc.html>. This Web site contains online versions of books published by the Library of Congress. Savada and Shaw's text is especially helpful, as it highlights the historical setting as well as the social, economic, and political aspects of South Korea. "The Syngman Rhee Era, 1946–1960" section examines society and the economy under Rhee. Students will learn of the methods Rhee used to gain and maintain power. ■

CONSTANCE VIDOR is Director of Library Services at Friends Seminary, an independent K-12 school in New York City. She also teaches courses in children's and young adult literature in the Youth, Literature, and Technology graduate program at Rutgers University. Her online publications relating to Korean children's literature include the Voicethread on Linda Sue Park's *A Single Shard*, <http://voicethread.com/share/584594/>, the Voicethread on Linda Sue Park's *The Kite Fighters*, <http://voicethread.com/share/584594/>, and "The Fascinating World of Linda Sue Park," *International Journal of Multicultural Education* (December, 2009), <http://ijme-journal.org/index.php/ijme>.