

Thank You, M'am

Langston Hughes

She was a large woman with a large purse that had everything in it but hammer and nails. It had a long strap, and she carried it slung across her shoulder. It was about eleven o'clock at night, and she was walking alone, when a boy ran up behind her and tried to snatch her purse. The strap broke with the single tug the boy gave it from behind. But the boy's weight and the weight of the purse combined caused him to lose his balance so, instead of taking off full blast as he had hoped, the boy fell on his back on the sidewalk, and his legs flew up. The large woman simply turned around and kicked him right square in his blue-jeaned sitter. Then she reached down, picked the boy up by his shirt front, and shook him until his teeth rattled.

CONFLICT

Who is in conflict and why?

After that the woman said, "Pick up my pocketbook, boy, and give it here."

She still held him. But she bent down enough to permit him to stoop and pick up her purse. Then she said, "Now ain't you ashamed of yourself?"

Firmly gripped by his shirt front, the boy said, "Yes'm."

The woman said, "What did you want to do it for?"

The boy said, "I didn't aim to."

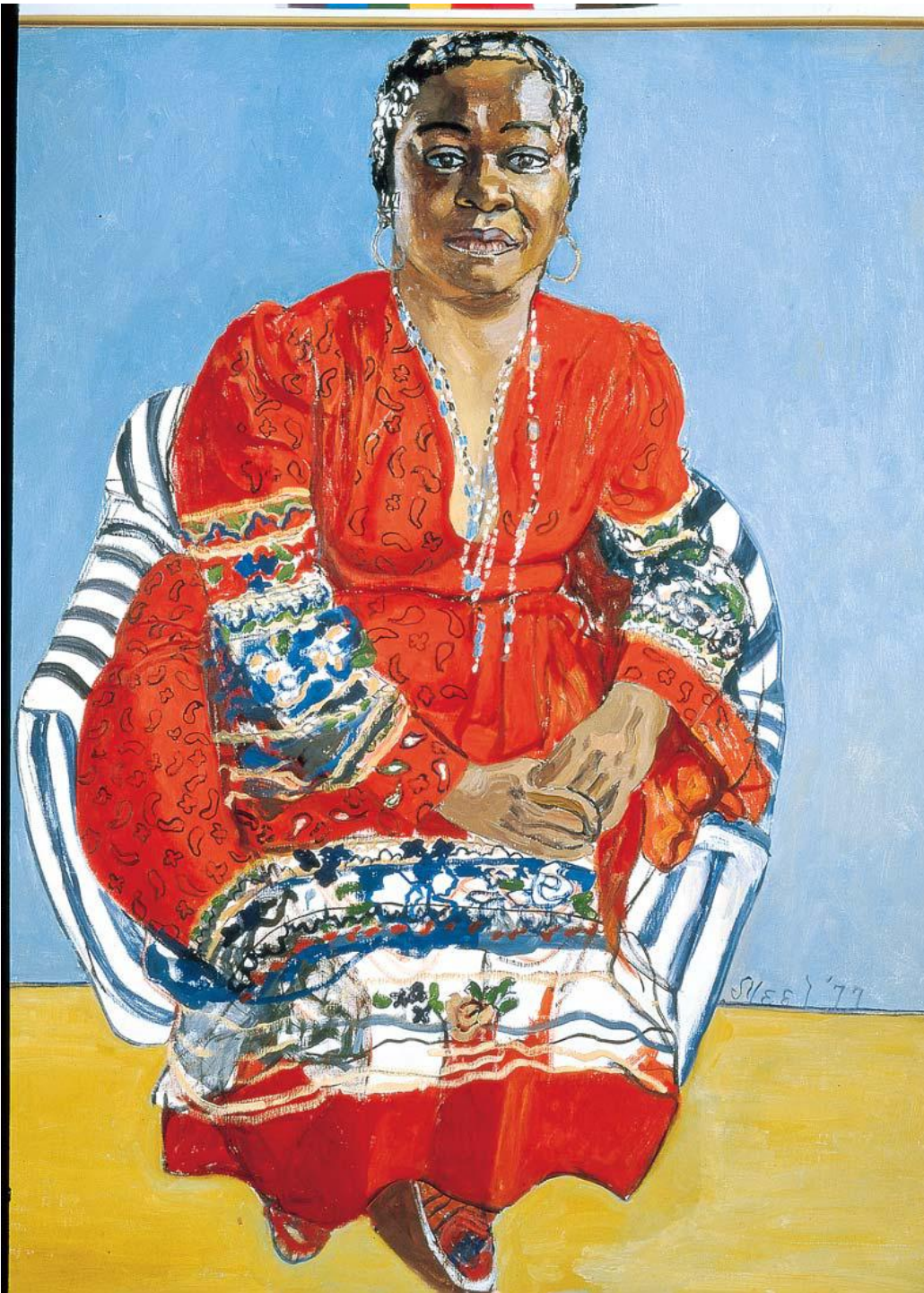
She said, "You a lie!"

By that time two or three people passed, stopped, turned to look, and some stood watching.

"If I turn you loose, will you run?" asked the woman.

ANALYZE VISUALS

Look at the woman in the painting. What might you **infer** about her personality?



“Yes’m,” said the boy.

“Then I won’t turn you loose,” said the woman. She did not release him.

“I’m very sorry, lady, I’m sorry,” whispered the boy.

“Um-hum! And your face is dirty. I got a great mind to wash your face for you. Ain’t you got nobody home to tell you to wash your face?”

“No’m,” said the boy.

“Then it will get washed this evening,” said the large woman starting up the street, dragging the frightened boy behind her.

MAKE INFERENCES

Reread lines 18–31. From the details presented so far, what can you guess about the boy’s background and personality? Add this information to your chart.

He looked as if he were fourteen or fifteen, **frail** and willow-wild, in tennis shoes and blue jeans.

frail *adj.* delicate; weak and fragile

The woman said, “You ought to be my son. I would teach you right from wrong. Least I can do right now is to wash your face. Are you hungry?”

“No’m,” said the being-dragged boy. “I just want you to turn me loose.”

“Was I bothering *YOU* when I turned that corner?” asked the woman.

“No’m.”

“But you put yourself in contact with *me*,” said the woman. “If you think that that contact is not going to last awhile, you got another thought coming. When I get through with you, sir, you are going to remember Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones.”

Sweat popped out on the boy’s face and he began to struggle. Mrs. Jones stopped, jerked him around in front of her, put a half nelson about his neck, and continued to drag him up the street. When she got to her door, she dragged the boy inside, down a hall, and into a large kitchenette-furnished room at the rear of the house. She switched on the light and left the door open. The boy could hear other roomers laughing and talking in the large house. Some of their doors were open, too, so he knew he and the woman were not alone. The woman still had him by the neck in the middle of her room.

She said, “What is your name?”

“Roger,” answered the boy.

“Then, Roger, you go to that sink and wash your face,” said the woman, whereupon she turned him loose—at last. Roger looked at the door—looked at the woman—looked at the door—*and went to the sink*.

“Let the water run until it gets warm,” she said. “Here’s a clean towel.”

“You gonna take me to jail?” asked the boy, bending over the sink.

CONFLICT

What is Roger’s internal conflict?

“Not with that face, I would not take you nowhere,” said the woman.
“Here I am trying to get home to cook me a bite to eat and you snatch my pocket book! Maybe you ain’t been to your supper either, late as it be. Have you?”
“There’s nobody home at my house,” said the boy.
“Then we’ll eat,” said the woman. “I believe you’re hungry—or been hungry—to try to snatch my pocketbook.”

“I wanted a pair of blue suede shoes,” said the boy.
“Well, you didn’t have to snatch *my* pocketbook to get some suede shoes,” said Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones.
“You could of asked me.”
“M’am?”

The water dripping from his face, the boy looked at her. There was a long pause. A very long pause. After he had dried his face and not knowing what else to do dried it again, the boy turned around, wondering what next. The door was open. He could make a dash for it down the hall. He could run, run, run, run, *run!*

The woman was sitting on the day-bed.⁽¹⁾ After a while she said, “I were young once and I wanted things I could not get.”

There was another long pause. The boy’s mouth opened. Then he frowned, but not knowing he frowned.

The woman said, “Um-hum! You thought I was going to say *but*, didn’t you? You thought I was going to say, *but I didn’t snatch people’s pocketbooks*. Well, I wasn’t going to say that.” Pause. Silence. “I have done things, too, which I would not tell you, son—neither tell God, if he didn’t already know. So you set down while I fix us something to eat. You might run that comb through your hair so you will look **presentable**.”

In another corner of the room behind a screen was a gas plate and an icebox. Mrs. Jones got up and went behind the screen. The woman did not watch the boy to see if he was going to run now, nor did she watch her purse which she left behind her on the day-bed. But the boy took care to sit on the far side of the room where he thought she could easily see him out of the corner of her eye, if she wanted to. He did not trust the woman *not* to trust him. And he did not want to be **mistrusted** now.

“Do you need somebody to go to the store,” asked the boy, “maybe to get some milk or something?”

presentable *adj.*
fit to be seen
by people
mistrust
v. to think of without
confidence or trust

“Don’t believe I do,” said the woman, “unless you just want sweet milk yourself. I was going to make cocoa out of this canned milk I got here.”
“That will be fine,” said the boy.

MAKE INFERENCES
Why does Roger want to go to the store for Mrs. Jones? Add this information to your chart

1. **day-bed**: a couch or sofa that can also serve as a bed.

She heated some lima beans and ham she had in the icebox, made the cocoa, and set the table. The woman did not ask the boy anything about where he lived, or his folks, or anything else that would embarrass him. Instead, as they ate, she told him about her job in a hotel beauty shop that stayed open late, what the work was like, and how all kinds of women came in and out, blondes, red-heads, and Spanish. Then she cut him a half of her ten-cent cake.

“Eat some more, son,” she said.

When they were finished eating she got up and said, “Now, here, take this ten dollars and buy yourself some blue suede shoes. And next time, do not make the mistake of latching onto *my* pocketbook *nor nobody else’s*—because shoes come by devilish like that will burn your feet. I got to get my rest now. But I wish you would behave yourself, son, from here on in.”

She led him down the hall to the front door and opened it. “Goodnight! Behave yourself, boy!” she said, looking out into the street.

The boy wanted to say something else other than “Thank you, m’am” to Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones, but he couldn’t do so as he turned at the **barren** stoop and looked back at the large woman in the door.

He barely managed to say “Thank you” before she shut the door. And he never saw her again.

barren *adj.* empty; lacking interest or charm

MAKE INFERENCES

What else might Roger have wanted to say?

Connect: Poem

*If I can
stop one Heart
from breaking*

Emily Dickinson

If I can stop one Heart from breaking
I shall not live in vain
If I can ease one Life the Aching
Or cool one Pain
Or help one fainting Robin
Unto his Nest again
I shall not live in Vain.

After Reading Comprehension

1. **Recall** What happens when Roger tries to steal Mrs. Jones’s purse?
2. **Clarify** What does Mrs. Jones say will happen to Roger if he gets the shoes through dishonest means?
3. **Summarize** What details do you learn about Roger and his life?

Literary Analysis

4. **Identify Conflict** Using a chart like the one shown, go back through the story and record examples of **internal** and **external conflict**. Which conflict is the most important conflict in the story?

Conflict	Internal:	External:
Roger tries to steal Mrs. Jones’s purse.		

5. **Make Inferences** Review the chart you created as you read. Use the inferences you made to answer the following question: Why does Mrs. Jones treat Roger the way she does? Give details from the story to support your answer.
 6. **Analyze a Character** Reread lines 71–101, looking specifically at what Roger says and does. What might Roger’s behavior suggest about his future **potential**? Give evidence to support your answer.
 7. **Compare Literary Works** Reread Emily Dickinson’s poem on page 68. Which lines remind you of the way Mrs. Jones might think? Explain why.
 8. **Evaluate Theme** The theme of a story is a message about life or human nature that the writer shares with readers. What theme do you think Hughes communicates in “Thank You, M’am”? Do you agree with him? Explain your answer.
- ### Extension and Challenge
9. **Readers’ Circle** There’s an African proverb that says, “It takes a village to raise a child.” With your group, discuss how this proverb applies to “Thank You, M’am.” Start by talking about whether the story supports or contradicts the statement.
 10. **Creative Project: Writing** Choose one of the characters in this story and write a poem, song, or rap from his or her perspective. Refer to the events in the story, to the character’s past, and to the character’s imagined hopes for the future.

Vocabulary in Context

Vocabulary Practice

Choose the letter of the word that means the same, or nearly the same, as the boldfaced word.

1. **presentable** clothing: (a) old-fashioned, (b) tattered, (c) proper, (d) sturdy
2. a **barren** house: (a) empty, (b) dark, (c) private, (d) lovely
3. **frail** patients: (a) unconscious, (b) friendly, (c) nervous, (d) weak
4. to **mistrust** someone's advice: (a) accept, (b) doubt, (c) seek, (d) believe

Vocabulary in Writing

Do you think that Mrs. Jones takes the right approach toward Roger? Write a paragraph explaining your opinion. Use at least two vocabulary words in your paragraph. Here is a sample of how you might begin.

example sentence

At first, Mrs. Jones is right to **mistrust** Roger.

Vocabulary Strategy: Prefixes that Mean “not”

A **prefix** is a word part that appears at the beginning of a base word to form a new word, as in the vocabulary word *mistrust* (mis + trust). *Mis-* is one of several prefixes that mean “not.” Look at the chart to see some other prefixes that mean “not” and to see what other meanings these prefixes may have. If you can identify the base word that a prefix is combined with, you can usually figure out the meaning of the new word.

PRACTICE One word in each sentence contains a prefix that can mean “not.” Write the word and the word’s definition.

1. Martin Luther King Jr. preached nonviolence.
2. Our school district has many unpaid teachers’ aides.
3. It is probably inaccurate to say that the universe contains only one solar system.
4. The missile slipped behind the cloud and disappeared from sight.
5. It’s common sense that animals should not be prefix meaning mistreated.

prefix	meaning
<i>dis</i>	not; opposite of
<i>in</i>	not; in
<i>un</i>	not
<i>mis</i>	not; incorrect or badly
<i>non</i>	not; opposite of

Reading-Writing Connection

Show your understanding of the characters in “Thank You, M’am” by responding to these prompts. Then complete the **Grammar and Writing** exercise.

Writing Prompts	Self-check
<p>A. Short Response: Describe a Character’s Life</p> <p>Go back to the story and find details that describe Mrs. Jones’s job, her house, and what she is able to give Roger. From these details, what can you infer about her life? Write one paragraph to describe Mrs. Jones’s situation.</p>	<p><i>A successful description will . . .</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• include a topic sentence that tells what you infer about Mrs. Jones’s life• provide specific details to support the topic sentence
<p>B. Extended Response: Compare and Contrast</p> <p>Write two or three paragraphs comparing how Roger behaves on the street with how he behaves after spending some time with Mrs. Jones. Explain how Mrs. Jones’s belief in his potential helps Roger show his best self.</p>	<p><i>An effective compare-and-contrast response will . . .</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• show an understanding of Roger’s actions before and after he gets to know Mrs. Jones• give an example that shows how Roger values Mrs. Jones’s trust

grammar and writing

PUNCTUATE POSSESSIVES CORRECTLY When forming a possessive noun, be sure to put the **apostrophe** in the correct place. To help keep your writing clear, follow these guidelines for punctuating possessive nouns:

Singular nouns: Add an apostrophe and *s*, even if the word ends in *s* (*book’s cover, waitress’s tray*).

Plural nouns ending in *s*: Add an apostrophe (*songs’ melodies, bees’ honey*).

Plural nouns not ending in *s*: Add an apostrophe and *s* (*women’s sports, people’s health*).

Original: In the beginning, Rogers’ potential is not easy to see.

Revised: In the beginning, Roger’s potential is not easy to see.

PRACTICE Correct the possessive nouns in the following sentences.

1. Mrs. Jones’ treatment of Roger shows her sympathy toward him.
2. She proves that you cannot always prejudge childrens’ actions.
3. She knows that many boy’s actions do not reflect their true personalities.
4. Roger understands that it is wrong to take someone elses’ money.

*For more help with apostrophes, see page R50 in the **Grammar Handbook**.*