



*The City from Greenwich Village, 1922. John Sloan. Oil on Canvas, 26 x 33 3/4 in. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.*

# Thank You, M'am

Langston Hughes



She was a large woman with a large purse that had everything in it but a hammer and nails. It had a long strap, and she carried it slung<sup>1</sup> across her shoulder. It was about eleven o'clock at night, dark, and she was walking alone, when a boy ran up behind her and tried to snatch her purse. The strap broke with the sudden 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. 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 shirtfront, and shook him until his teeth rattled.

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

She still held him tightly. 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 shirtfront, 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.

"Yes'm," said the boy.

"Then I won't turn you loose," said the woman. She did not release him.

"Lady, I'm sorry," whispered the boy.

"Um-hum! 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.

<sup>1</sup> If something is *slung* across your shoulder, it is hung or thrown loosely over it.

**Analyze Setting** When does this story take place? How might the time of day affect the action of the story?

**2 Characterization** What does this dialogue reveal about the two characters?



He looked as if he were fourteen or fifteen, frail<sup>2</sup> and willow-wild,<sup>3</sup> in tennis shoes and blue jeans.

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."

2 If someone looks **frail**, he or she looks weak.

3 **Willow-wild** means looking wild like a willow tree. Willow trees have long, thin, drooping branches.

3 **Characterization** Are you surprised by what Mrs. Jones says and does? What do her actions reveal about her character?

#### Visual Vocabulary

A **half nelson** is a wrestling hold made from behind by hooking one arm under the opponent's arm and pressing the hand across the back of the opponent's neck.



4 **Analyze Setting** Why might this part of the setting be important to the story?

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*Jim*, 1930. William H. Johnson. Oil on canvas,  
21 5/8 x 18 1/4 in. Smithsonian American Art  
Museum, Washington, DC.

*View the Art* In what ways does the subject of  
this painting remind you of Roger?



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

"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 pocketbook! 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 want a pair of blue suede shoes,"<sup>4</sup> 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've 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!*

<sup>4</sup> **Blue suede shoes** are men's shoes made of soft leather. These shoes became  
popular in the late 1950s after Elvis Presley recorded a hit song called "Blue  
Suede Shoes."



The woman was sitting on the daybed.<sup>5</sup> 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, 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. Everybody's got something in common. 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.<sup>6</sup> 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 daybed. But the boy took care to sit on the far side of the room, away from the purse, 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?"

"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.

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

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<sup>5</sup> A **daybed** is a sofa that can be converted into a bed.

<sup>6</sup> The **gas plate** is a small version of a stovetop, with burners fueled by gas. Before electricity, a block of ice cooled food inside a special box. Even today, some people use the word **icebox** to refer to a refrigerator.

5 **Characterization** Why do you think Mrs. Jones says this?

6 **Analyze Setting** Why does the boy choose to sit where Mrs. Jones can see him?



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 got by devilish ways will burn your feet. I got to get my rest now. But from here on in, son, I hope you will behave yourself."

She led him down the hall to the front door and opened it. "Goodnight! Behave yourself, boy!" she said, looking out into the street as he went down the steps.

The boy wanted to say something other than, "Thank you, m'am," to Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones, but although his lips moved, he couldn't even say that as he turned at the foot of the barren stoop and looked up at the large woman in the door. Then she shut the door.

Why does  
he sit where  
she can see him?

**BQ** BIG Question

Think of all of Mrs. Jones's interactions with Roger. How does she show him that he can count on her?

**B** Characterization What does Roger's inability to speak reveal about him?

*Portrait of a Woman*, 1932. John Wesley Hardrick. Oil on board, 30 x 24 in. Hampton University Museum, VA. Indianapolis Museum of Art in cooperation with Indiana University Press.

View the Art How does the author reveal Mrs. Jones's character? How does the painter reveal the character of his subject?



## After You Read

### Respond and Think Critically

1. In the first part of the story, what do you learn about Roger? Why does Roger try to steal Mrs. Jones's purse? [Infer]
2. What happens when Mrs. Jones brings Roger to her home? Explain. [Summarize]
3. What does Mrs. Jones communicate to Roger by leaving her door open? Explain. [Infer]
4. Why do you think Mrs. Jones tells Roger that she has done wrong things too? What does this add to the story? [Analyze]
5. Did you like or dislike the way this story ended? Did the ending surprise you? Explain. [Evaluate]
6. **BQ** **BIG Question** How does this story affect your thoughts about the Big Question, Whom can you count on? [Connect]

### Vocabulary Practice

Choose the sentence that uses the vocabulary word correctly.

- A. The girl yelled out in pain, **whereupon** the game was immediately brought to a halt.
- B. The boy did a flip **whereupon** the grass was soft.
- A. After missing four shots in a row, John **mistrusted** his ability to shoot free throws.
- B. John **mistrusted** his basketball but later remembered leaving it in the garage.

### Academic Vocabulary

Despite Roger's attempt to steal her purse, Mrs. Jones **assists** Roger by feeding him and giving him money for new shoes. Using context clues, try to figure out the meaning of the word *assists* in the sentence above. Check your guess in a dictionary.

### TIP

#### Analyzing

To answer question 4, consider details in the story that describe Roger's behavior. Think about how you would feel in his place. How would Mrs. Jones's statement affect you?

- Examine Roger's behavior before Mrs. Jones tells him that she has done things she is not proud of. What is he tempted to do?
- How does Roger's behavior change after Mrs. Jones's statement?



Keep track of your ideas about the **BIG Question** in your unit Foldable.



Literature Online

#### Selection Resources

For Selection Quizzes, eFlashcards, and Reading-Writing Connection activities, go to [glencoe.com](http://glencoe.com) and enter QuickPass code GL29763u1.

### Literary Element Characterization

1. Find a quotation and an action from the story that show characteristics of Roger's personality. Explain what they reveal.
2. Why doesn't Mrs. Jones ask Roger personal questions? What does this say about her character? Explain.

### Review: Description

As you learned on page 113, authors use **description** to help readers visualize the characters, setting, and events of a story. **Imagery**, or language that appeals to the five senses, helps bring a story to life.

3. Think about this sentence from the selection: "Sweat popped out on the boy's face and he began to struggle." To which of the five senses does this description appeal? Is the description effective? Explain.

### Reading Skill Analyze Setting

#### Test Skills Practice

4. What do you learn about Mrs. Jones from the time of day at which the story takes place?
  - A She works late.
  - B She shops during the day.
  - C She likes to go for walks.
  - D She often invites people to her home.

### Grammar Link

**Verb Tenses** A verb is a word that shows action or a state of being. Verbs have different **tenses** to show when the action takes place.

**Present tense** shows actions and states of being that are happening now or happen regularly. For example:

Mrs. Jones is a strong woman.  
(Mrs. Jones is strong right now.)

**Past tense** shows actions and states of being that are over and done. For example:

Mrs. Jones was a strong woman.  
(Mrs. Jones was strong in the past.)

**Future tense** shows actions that are going to happen. For example:

Mrs. Jones will be a strong woman.  
(Mrs. Jones isn't strong right now, but she's going to be.)

**Practice** Find sentences in "Thank You, M'am" that show the three tenses above. Write down each sentence, circle the verb or verbs, and list the verb tense. Then rewrite each sentence using a different verb tense.

### Write with Style

**Apply Imagery** Write an opening paragraph like the first paragraph of "Thank You, M'am." Your paragraph should be about two characters. Include a variety of sentence types, as Hughes does in his paragraph. Use imagery to describe the characters' physical features, clothing, body language, and actions. Be sure to create imagery that helps your reader see, feel, smell, touch, taste, and hear your characters and the setting.