

# Thank You, M'am

by Langston Hughes

## Content Synopsis

"Thank You, Ma'm" is an especially popular and successful short story by Langston Hughes, one of the most respected American writers of the twentieth century. Apparently set in the 1950s, it narrates what happens when Roger, a black teenager, tries to snatch the purse of a mature black woman, Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones. Mrs. Jones is described as "a large woman with a large purse that had everything in it but a hammer and nails." As she walks home late one night, she is accosted by Roger, who tries to steal the purse. But when the long strap breaks as he pulls on it, Roger lands "on his back on the sidewalk," giving Mrs. Jones the chance to kick him, reach down, grab him by his shirt, and shake him as she demands he hand back her purse. When Roger claims he had no intention of stealing it, Mrs. Jones calls him a liar and then, much to Roger's chagrin and discomfort, drags him home, in a wrestling hold, to her room in a busy boarding house.

There, in her cramped quarters, she tells Roger to wash his face, asks him about his circumstances (he tells her, "There's nobody home at my house"), and offers to share a meal with him. Once released, he contemplates running but complies with her directives instead. When she asks him why he tried to steal her purse, he confesses that he wanted "a pair of blue suede shoes." Mrs. Jones, to Roger's surprise, suggests that if he had merely asked her for money to buy shoes, she might actually have given it to him. Mrs. Jones, instead of lecturing him about his youthful bad behavior, then confesses that she also, when young—and perhaps even since then—sometimes misbehaved: "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." But she soon proceeds to prepare a small meal for them. As she does so, Roger has every opportunity either to simply run or to run and successfully steal the purse. Instead, he does neither: he seems now to want to prove to Mrs. Jones that he is trustworthy and that he regrets his earlier conduct.

Mrs. Jones asks him nothing more about his homelife. She has no interest in embarrassing him or making him feel worse than he already feels. Instead, she tells him a little about herself, including 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." Roger seems to appreciate her friendliness even more than the food she gives him. After he has finished eating, she offers him ten dollars and tells him to use the money to buy himself the shoes he covets. She briefly warns him not to misbehave again and then,

unceremoniously, ushers him to the door. As he stands on the sidewalk and looks up at her, wanting to thank her but unable to get the words out, she shuts the door.

## Symbols & Motifs

Despite its apparent simplicity of plot, style, structure, and characterization, "Thank You, Ma'm" is an exceedingly rich work that repays repeated readings. Symbolism abounds, as do numerous themes or motifs. Many of the themes involve important contrasts (at least initially) between the characters: old versus young, large versus small, strong versus weak, mature versus immature. Many of these oppositions reinforce one another and thus contribute to the story's overall structure and coherence. But the clear oppositions soon begin to blur as Mrs. Jones, through her mere example rather than through extended lecturing, begins to exert a positive influence on Roger. Thus, he becomes more mature by the end of the story. And, while at first Mrs. Jones seemed moral and Roger immoral, by the conclusion we learn that she too has sinned (as she would put it), while Roger himself becomes increasingly ethical as the story proceeds. She at first seems honest while he seems dishonest, but by the time the story concludes, that neat opposition has broken down. Likewise, her initial emphasis on apparently punishing the boy evolves into real motherly concern and care. All the neat divisions used to carve up the world slowly collapse as the story unfolds.

Like motifs or themes, symbols and symbolism pervade Hughes's tale. Mrs. Jones embodies the archetypal figure of the wise old woman. She also serves as an archetypal mother. Mrs. Jones is large and strong both physically and spiritually, both in body and in soul. She can be physically forceful but also psychologically tender. From her speech, she appears uneducated, but she is immensely wise. She is financially poor but is rich in character. She makes Roger clean his face even as she helps him clean up his behavior and either improve or restore his sense of right and wrong. She literally feeds him but also nourishes him morally. She gives him the money he wants to buy new shoes, but also a far more important and enduring gift: a life lesson he is unlikely to forget. Her repeated use of the word "son" to address the young man reinforces this figurative relationship. This maternal behavior is especially important because he has no obvious or positive parental role models. By the end of the story, Roger's literal age has not changed, but he has matured greatly from when the story opened. In a sense, he has gone through an important rite of passage.

## Historical Context

This story was published in Hughes's 1958 collection, *The Langston Hughes Reader*, and reprinted again in 1963's *Something in Common and Other Stories*. Both internal and external evidence suggests that this story is set in the United States in the 1950s. The most important clue is Roger's obsession with blue suede shoes. These were a very popular new look in the mid-1950s—popular enough, in fact, to inspire a famous rock-and-roll hit single by Elvis Presley in 1956. Further, whether intentionally or not, Hughes plays on a longstanding trope connecting those who wear sneakers ("tennis shoes") with criminality that dates back to the early twentieth century. Midcentury Americans were also increasingly concerned with so-called juvenile delinquency (serious misconduct by teenagers).

In the aftermath of World War II, the United States was a much wealthier country than most others on earth. Many European nations had been devastated by the war, and even victorious nations such as the United Kingdom faced enormous economic challenges. Conditions in Africa, Asia, and elsewhere were even worse. Roger's shallow obsession with owning a particular style of footwear might itself suggest that he is not suffering in any serious ways. He does not try to steal because he simply needs shoes; indeed, Hughes notes the shoes on Roger's feet at the outset. Roger does not try to steal money to buy food, though he admits to Mrs. Jones that he has not eaten dinner and it is after eleven o'clock. Instead, he says he merely wants fashionable shoes, a novelty item (though, interestingly, they are conventional, mainstream shoes of the time, not those associated with rebels and athletes). Mrs. Jones, in contrast, has almost certainly lived through the Great Depression of the 1930s and World War II and thus known greater privation. Making her ten-dollar gift all the more generous and surprising is that the minimum wage in 1958 was one dollar per hour.

## Societal Context

Roger's decision to steal at all is bad; to steal from a hard-working, poor or lower-middle-class single woman is in some ways even worse. He does not choose an obviously wealthy victim, but instead chooses someone who may be unlikely to cause much trouble or resist much. He also picks someone of his own race, which is implied through their use of a common dialect. This choice, of course, is the typical behavior of many thieves and is typical of the kind of crime that often occurs within relatively homogenous communities, in which perpetrators often prey on other members of their own group.

Roger is living in a society that increasingly values possessions rather than possessing deeper, more important values. Commercial advertising, a growing feature of American life in the 1950s, has helped make blue suede shoes the new "in" thing. Roger, probably lacking in deeper kinds of self-esteem (perhaps because he lacks worthy role models), thinks that owning a particular kind of shoe will make him feel important and will make him more respected by his peers. He lives in the kind of society that has always been fairly common in human

history: a society in which one's worth, and even one's sense of self-worth, seems to depend on the perceived value of one's material possessions. Possessions seem to give (and in fact do often give) a person status and a sense of pride, even though material possessions are ultimately ephemeral.

## Religious Context

Roger lives, apparently, in an increasingly secular society. In such societies, traditional concepts such as God, heaven, hell, and eternal rewards and punishments seem outmoded. The focus of such societies is instead on the here and now and on one's happiness in this life, not in a hereafter. Roger has imbibed the materialism of his era; he has no fear that even if he succeeds in stealing he will be seen and punished by God and will have to live with the nagging sense that he has sinned and fallen short of God's expectations. Mrs. Jones, on the other hand, seems to have imbibed a whole different set of values, and these values seem firmly grounded in her religion, which is presumably Christianity. A crucial turning point in the story occurs when Mrs. Jones confesses that she herself has been a sinner. Her strong sense of right and wrong is rooted in her deep religious faith, and she knows that she, like Roger, has often behaved badly. Therefore, instead of seeming sanctimonious or self-righteous, she humbles herself, not only before God but before Roger as well. She acknowledges that in the grand scheme of things—that is, in God's eyes—she is no better than he is. He has fallen (both literally and figuratively), just as she has, and she helps lift him up in more ways than one.

## Scientific and Technological Context

Science and technology are not especially important factors in this short story, which is focused more on spiritual, than material, concerns. A few mentions help position the story in time, space, and social location, however. Mrs. Jones lives in a city, as suggested by her living in a rooming house and working for a hotel salon at night. However, her own small living space contains no especially impressive technological features: she does have an icebox (an early refrigerator that was outmoded beginning in the 1930s), but she cooks on a simple "gas plate" rather than a large stove and oven. She sleeps on a small, modest "daybed." Her relative poverty helps explain her lack of access to all the latest, expensive gadgets or conveniences, but one senses that Mrs. Jones might be little interested in such things even if she could own them.

## Biographical Context

Langston Hughes (1902–67) was one of the most respected American writers of the first half of the twentieth century. Hughes's own life can seem relevant to "Thank You, Ma'm" in various ways. The most obvious way, of course, is that Hughes was an African American and the same seems true of the story's two main characters. Hughes also lived, at certain points in his life, in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City, one of the largest and most important of all urban black communities in the United States. Harlem (or at least a place like it) seems the

likely setting for “Thank You, Ma’m.” Hughes wrote primarily for and about African Americans, although by now many of his works have become among the most widely admired texts by any American writer of any period. “Thank You, Ma’m” has proven to be especially appealing, partly because it deals with archetypes and basic, universal coming-of-age issues. Hughes himself had a strained and emotionally distant relationship with his biological father as well as a sometimes physically distant relationship with his mother and stepfather. The most influential figure in his early life was his maternal grandmother, who reportedly instilled in him a strong sense of racial pride. It hardly seems a surprise, then, that in this story as well as in other works Hughes would pay tribute to the virtues and endurance and wisdom of strong older women, especially strong older black women.

In 1953, in the midst of the Cold War with the Soviet Union and shortly before he wrote “Thank You, Ma’m,” Hughes found himself called before a congressional committee to explain his early sympathies (especially during the 1930s) with communism. By that point in his life, Hughes had become much less overtly political than he had been in his youth. In the aftermath of his congressional grilling he wrote his second autobiographical piece, *I Wonder as I Wander* (1957), in which he discussed his Soviet experiences. He went on to produce a story as widely appealing and noncontroversial as “Thank You, Ma’m,” which implies traditional all-American values of hard work, civil behavior, law and order, and even the virtues of religion. It was partly because of works like this one that Hughes was sometimes seen, in the 1960s and ’70s, as too conservative a writer to appeal to many of the black radicals and intellectuals of those decades.

## Complementary Works

- **“Harlem,” by Langston Hughes.** In this very brief lyric poem, the speaker suggests that life for the black people of Harlem (and, by implication, for all black Americans) has been a “dream deferred”—a promise made but its satisfaction continually postponed. The speaker imagines a number of possible reactions to this situation, only to raise suddenly, in the final line, the possibility of a violent explosion.
- **Harlem: The Four Hundred Year History from Dutch Village to Capital of Black America, by Jonathan Gill.** The second half of this 2011 historical work delves into Harlem as a black enclave and its role in social movements such as the Harlem Renaissance and the civil rights era. It touches on Hughes’s experience in Harlem as well.
- **“Mother to Son” in The Weary Blues, by Langston Hughes.** In this brief lyric poem, a hard-working mother, presumably African American, speaks in everyday, colloquial language about the difficulties she has faced in her life—a life she compares to the act of climbing a staircase. She encourages her beloved son to not give up when it becomes difficult but instead follow her example of perseverance.

- **Their Eyes Were Watching God, by Zora Neale Hurston.** Much of the early portion of this famous novel deals with the evolving relationship between the protagonist, Janie, and her grandmother, Nanny, a formerly enslaved woman who lives according to traditional moral standards and plans a socially acceptable path for Janie’s future betterment.

## Discussion Questions

1. How would you describe the style of this story—the way it is phrased, word by word? Why does Hughes choose to use the language he does? How is it effective or ineffective? Which words and sentences are particularly memorable, and why?
2. Discuss this sentence, especially the ways its structure, sound, and rhythms reinforce its meanings: “By that time two or three people passed, stopped, turned to look, and some stood watching.”
3. Trace the theme of honesty and dishonesty in the tale. Find as many different examples of this theme as you can and then discuss how they relate to one another and how the theme develops throughout the story.
4. Discuss the theme of loneliness in the story and trace its development. In what ways might both characters be lonely? Does their encounter change just one of them, both, or neither?
5. Examine the various ways in which Mrs. Jones speaks to Roger, and discuss how her ways of addressing him change.
6. Why does Hughes make Mrs. Jones’s full name so long? What does her name tell us about her?
7. Often Roger is called “the boy” and Mrs. Jones, “the woman.” Why might Hughes have described them in these ways so frequently rather than using their given names more often?
8. Compare and contrast the first and second halves of the story. How do they resemble one another? How, why, and with what effects do they differ?
9. What are some possible reasons that Roger finds it difficult to speak at the very end of the story? What could he have said that would have been appropriate, most natural and most in keeping with his character? What would have sounded artificial or unconvincing?
10. Why does Mrs. Jones simply close the door on Roger rather than listening for him to say something? Does her decision resemble any earlier decisions she made in the story?

## Essay Ideas

1. Compare and contrast this story with the two poems by Hughes in the Complementary Texts section. Focus on matters of tone and characterization.

2. Compare and contrast the relationship between Roger and Mrs. Jones with the relationship between Janie and her grandmother Nanny in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.
3. Discuss where, how, and why Hughes uses humor in this story. In what specific ways is the use of humor effective?
4. Discuss the various ways in which Hughes avoids sentimentality and melodrama. Where and how could he have been sentimental or melodramatic?
5. Discuss the ways in which Mrs. Jones practices and exemplifies her religious beliefs. What, if anything, makes her religious views and conduct appealing?

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