Thank You, M'am

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF LANGSTON HUGHES

Hughes was born in 1902 to mixed-race parents in Joplin, Missouri. His parents' marriage was unhappy, and they divorced when he was a young child. As a result, Hughes's living situation was often in flux; he lived in 12 different cities before the age of 12. His relationship with his parents, especially his mother, continued to be strained throughout his life. Indeed, some have suggested that the plot of "Thank you, M'am" may draw on Hughes's own tenuous childhood and the eventual stability he found living with his grandmother, with whom he moved in as a teenager. His storied career as a poet had an unlikely start: as a high schooler, his all-white classmates named him class poet, on the basis that his race gave him an innate understanding of rhythm. Despite the dubiousness of this claim, Hughes discovered his natural aptitude for verse. He published his first book of poetry, *The Weary Blues*, in 1926, before finishing his college degree. His poetry was influenced by jazz and the experience of working-class black Americans. As Harlem became a center for art and social protest, Hughes's work and life became inextricably linked to the Harlem Renaissance. To this day, Hughes remains one of the most-read and beloved writers of this period. While most celebrated for his poetry, Hughes also wrote novels, musicals, children's literature, short stories, essays, and plays. He died in 1967 from complications from cancer.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This story reflects the complex state of race relations in twentieth-century America. The placement of the story in an urban environment, perhaps Harlem itself, reflects the effect of the mass movement of black Americans from the rural South to urban coastal cities. Starting in 1915, over six million black Americans fled the Jim Crow laws of the South to search for more opportunity in the norther and western United States. Increasing discontent among black Americans also lead to the burgeoning Civil Rights movement at the time of Hughes's writing (though that reached its apex in the 1960s). Those in urban areas often led protests and attended rallies. In 1955, Martin Luther King, Jr organized the Montgomery Bus Boycott after Rosa Parks was arrested and fined for refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger. The subsequent Montgomery Bus Boycott, which encouraged African-Americans to boycott the city bus system in response to segregated seating, became one of the most influential protests of the era. The 1954 *Brown v. Board* of Education ruling, which formally desegregated schools, was another pivotal moment in the history of civil rights. It was against this backdrop of a volatile and shifting American society that Hughes wrote.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Hughes's work is often labeled as being part of the Harlem Renaissance, a concentrated period in the 1920s and 1930s in which black Americans living in the New York City neighborhood produced artistic work alongside social critique that highlighted the black experience. Hughes's work can be most obviously compared to the production of fellow artists associated with the Harlem Renaissance, including Alain Locke, Zora Neale Hurston, and Carl Van Vechten. Less obvious literary forebears include Walt Whitman and Carl Sandburg, whose commitment to innovation in poetic forms and to drawing inspiration from ordinary life similarly color Hughes's work. For instance, productive comparisons can be drawn between the autobiographical everyman of Whitman's "Song of Myself" and Hughes's own interest in conflating his background with the wider issues of black Americans.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "Thank You, M'am"
- **When Written:** 1950s
- **When Published:** 1958
- **Literary Period:** Harlem Renaissance
- **Genre:** Short story
- **Setting:** An unnamed city at night
- **Climax:** Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones gives Roger ten dollars to buy a pair of shoes before sending him on his way
- **Antagonist:** Poverty
- **Point of View:** Third person

EXTRA CREDIT

Age-Old Parental Pressure. Hughes attended two colleges: first Columbia, which he left because of racial discrimination by his fellow students. Several years later, he took up studies at Lincoln College. At both schools, his father insisted he would only pay for his college if he studied engineering.

PLOT SUMMARY

A large, unnamed woman is lugging her heavy purse late at night when a dirty and disheveled young boy runs up behind her and attempts to steal her bag. He fails when the purse's strap snaps, sending the boy toppling onto the sidewalk. The woman yanks the frail, frightened boy up by his shirt and scolds

him. Though the boy wants nothing more than to run away, the woman insists on dragging him home with her to wash his face and feed him some supper. While explaining her decision, she declares that he will never forget his evening with Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones.

The boy continues to struggle but Mrs. Jones is firm in her grip as they enter her house, which he realizes must be a boarding house with other tenants. She asks his name—Roger—before finally letting go of him and directing him to wash his face in the sink. For a moment, the now free Roger looks towards the door, before looking back at Mrs. Jones and then following her instruction. He asks if she will take him to jail, which she denies and tosses him a clean towel.

Mrs. Jones proposes that hunger must have driven Roger's attempted theft, but Roger denies this; he simply had his heart set on a pair of **blue suede shoes**. Instead of condemning this desire, Mrs. Jones surprised Roger by admitting she, too, wanted things she couldn't have when she was young and did things of which she is ashamed.

Mrs. Jones proceeds to make the promised dinner. Roger, attempting to be helpful, asks if she needs him to pick up anything at the store, though she does not. They then share a simple but hearty meal, during which Mrs. Jones tells Roger about her late-night work at a hotel beauty shop and notably avoids grilling him about his family or home. After both have eaten their fill, their impromptu evening ends abruptly. Mrs. Jones surprises Roger with ten dollars for his wished-for shoes and sends him out in the night. Though he wishes to say "thank you," Roger cannot manage to even make a sound before Mrs. Jones closes her door.

CHARACTERS

Roger — The frail, impoverished young boy who attempts to rob Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones at the start of the story in the hopes of being able to buy himself a pair of **blue suede shoes**. When his robbery fails, Mrs. Jones drags the frightened Roger back to her house, where she insists he clean himself up and eat some supper. Although the details of Roger's background are largely unspoken, his many silences signal that he is likely embarrassed by his home, his absent family, and his poverty. At the start of the story he refuses to take responsibility for his actions, instead struggling to escape Mrs. Jones's grasp and lying about his attempted theft. As the story progresses, however, the story implies that Mrs. Jones's kindness has a meaningful impact on Roger—who, having been treated as a human being worthy of trust and compassion, is able to reorient his life for the better. For example, he chooses follow Mrs. Jones's instructions to wash his face rather than run away when given the chance; later, when she leaves her purse within his reach, he decides he wants her to trust him and does not take it. At the end of the story, Mrs. Jones sends Roger on his way with money for his shoes—a signal of her faith in him to take his life in the right direction, and a message of encouragement that prompts his sincere gratitude. Though the story ends rather ambiguously, Roger's positive changes within a single evening of meeting Mrs. Jones suggest that he has already taken steps toward a brighter future.

Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones — The protagonist of the story, Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones is the stern yet immensely generous woman whom Roger attempts to rob. Introduced as a older, "large woman with a large purse," Mrs. Jones refuses to let Roger run off after his bungled robbery. She at first scolds him, and then—upon realizing that he likely has no family looking out for him—drags him home with her to get him cleaned up and fed. Despite her numerous last names (and implied marriages), she lives on her own in a boarding house; her comment to Roger that he "ought to be [her] son" so that she could teach him "right from wrong" quickly establishes her as a maternal figure for the young boy. Mrs. Jones treats Roger not only with kindness but also with true respect, trusting him not to run off or attempt to steal her purse again once they enter her home. This, in turn, is revealed to have a meaningful effect on the boy, who longs to become worthy of her trust. She further reveals her empathy by refusing to judge Roger's behavior, not pressing him on his clearly troubled home life nor moralizing about his attempted crime. Instead, she insists that she, too, has "done things" she's not proud of. At the end of the story Mrs. Jones gives Roger money before sending him on his way, a gesture of trust and goodwill that signals her faith in his ability to make better decisions for himself.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

EMPATHY, KINDNESS, AND PUNISHMENT

Langston Hughes's "Thank You, M'am" tells the story of a young boy, Roger, who meets an older woman, Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones, while attempting to steal her purse. When Roger is initially confronted by the firm and imposing Mrs. Jones, he clearly believes he will be punished for his crime; indeed, she takes him in hand, kicks him "square in the blue-jeaned sitter," and shakes him "until his teeth rattled." Yet it quickly becomes evident that punishment is not what she has in mind for Roger. Instead, Mrs. Jones engages with the boy to teach him why what he did was wrong,

to discover what his motivations were in attempting to rob her, and to recommend how he should act with honesty and good faith in the future. Roger's ultimate gratitude towards Mrs. Jones—reflected in the title of the story itself—suggests that her actions do indeed change Roger for the better. Hughes thus models how kindness differs from punishment both in method and in effect, ultimately arguing for the value of compassion and shared understanding in helping set people on the right path.

Mrs. Jones's lesson in kindness begins through teaching Roger "right from wrong." Rather than simply telling Roger his actions were wrong, though, she invites him to embrace this realization on his own. First, she instructs him to return her purse, which allows Roger to make his mistake right. She next seeks to activate his conscience. Her motherly query—"Now ain't you ashamed of yourself?"—sets the stage for the rest of their conversation and forces Roger to contemplate his actions. Her line of questions also reveals Roger's desire to run away, suggesting that he does indeed feel guilty about what he's done and thus is capable of distinguishing between right and wrong on his own. Rather than simply allowing Roger to disappear into the night, shaken but otherwise undeterred, Mrs. Jones then drags him home, learns his name, makes him wash his face, and feeds him dinner. By refusing to merely dismiss Roger as a bad kid incapable of learning from his mistakes, she implicitly honors Roger's humanity and encourages him to do the same for himself—that is, to respect and listen to his conscience.

The decision to choose kindness rather than punishment notably develops from a sense of empathy, or being able to genuinely understand another's feelings and desires. Rather than attributing his actions to some innate character flaw, Mrs. Jones seeks to learn the reason behind Roger's crime. At first, she suggests that hunger lay behind his thievery, but Roger corrects her mistake, explaining he had wanted "a pair of **blue suede shoes**." Mrs. Jones then surprises Roger by not immediately condemning his desire, saying, "I were young once and I wanted things I could not get." Because Mrs. Jones can imagine how Roger is feeling and how this drives his actions, she judges him less harshly.

It's notable that Hughes doesn't fall back on tropes about poverty to explain Roger's actions; Roger is a complex character who, like any other human being, may desire certain luxuries. Mrs. Jones continues to overturn Roger's expectations for the typical order of a conversation after wrong-doing. "Um-hum! You thought I was going to say but, didn't you?" she says. "You thought I was going to say, but I didn't snatch people's pocketbooks. Well, I wasn't going to say that." She narrates the difference between judgment and kindness, explaining how most corrections (even those masked by kindness) come with "but" statements exonerating the speaker from similar wrongdoing. Instead, after a silent pause, Mrs. Jones empathizes with Roger's actions: "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." Mrs. Jones's empathy for Roger underscores that his impulse, though wrongly expressed, doesn't make him an inherently bad person. And again, since Mrs. Jones never suggests that something is inherently wrong with Roger, she allows him the space to learn and do better in the future.

Mrs. Jones's kindness has a demonstrable effect on Roger. While in her house, Roger has multiple opportunities to run away or to steal from the woman. Yet having been shown a modicum of kindness and respect, he does "not want to be mistrusted now." This marks a dramatic shift from the beginning of the story when Roger is clearly afraid of punishment, signaled by his repetitive wish to run away from an uncomfortable situation.

Hughes's story thus displays the transformational nature of kindness and empathy, which instill an invaluable sense of mutual trust. The openness that grows between Mrs. Jones and Roger further suggests that this lesson will not last for only one night. Rather, the implication is that Roger will change his behavior out of desire to be worthy of Mrs. Jones's kindness. Moreover, based on the story's likely historical context in diverse, urban New York, it's not a stretch to imagine that Hughes imagined the lessons of this story shouldn't just be limited to its two characters. Rather, it could serve as a broad call for greater understanding and empathy specifically toward black communities often singled out for crime and punishment.

FAMILY, COMMUNITY, AND HOME

"Thank You, M'am" narrates the events of one night for Roger, a young boy, and Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones, the older woman he attempts to rob. Rather than reporting Roger to the police or take other legal action, Mrs. Jones offers the boy motherly guidance and a temporary home. Her unexpected choice can be read through the historical background of the story's implied setting: Hughes was a central figure in the early twentieth century's "Harlem Renaissance," a period during which the famed New York City neighborhood was associated with innovation in the arts and with a changing urban landscape. The city's rapid growth, like many urban areas during this era, led to changes in the construction of the neighborhood, and though Hughes doesn't explicitly state where his story is set, the boarding house with many "roomers" where Mrs. Jones lives evokes the many single-family Harlem houses that were converted into multi-person dwellings at this time. Despite the implication that Mrs. Jones lacks her own family and traditional home, she nevertheless offers Roger qualities of both—and in doing so forges a meaningful connection with the "frail and willow-wild" teenaged-boy. By displaying the pain of solitude as it affects two different members of a neighborhood, Hughes underscores the importance of community. What's more, the

unexpected yet comforting bond between Roger and Mrs. Jones suggests that family and home are flexible concepts, things that people may define and create for themselves.

At first, Hughes's description of his characters makes it seem like they are essentially different—if Mrs. Jones is large, solid, and certain of her opinions, Roger is frail and equivocal. Yet they are both alike in that they are basically alone. Mrs. Jones's late-night job and living situation—she is one of many "roomers" in a boarding house—hints at her present lack of family. Moreover, her three surnames suggest that she has been married at least twice. Nevertheless, these missing spouses or family members are absent from the story—either by direct mention or description. Roger is also clearly on his own. For one thing, he is wandering unsupervised the streets at eleven o'clock at night when he runs into Mrs. Jones—an indication that no one is watching over him. This is confirmed when Mrs. Jones asks Roger if he's eaten and he replies, "There's nobody home at my house." Roger again answers in the negative when Mrs. Jones asks him, "Ain't you got nobody home to tell you to wash your face?" Clearly, Roger has neither a true home nor family members to care for him. However different they might appear, then, Mrs. Jones and Roger's shared lack of family ties them together.

The story further implies the pain of solitude and suggests that both characters long for a sense of connection; their meeting is thus valuable not only for Roger, but also for the woman who takes him in. The narrator diagnoses Roger's likely shame about his dysfunctional home life while recapping their conversation over a meal: "the woman did not ask the boy anything about where he lived, or his folks, or anything else that would embarrass him." The fact that Mrs. Jones eagerly steps in suggests her own desire for family. After catching Roger when he first tries to steal her purse, she declares, "You ought to be my son. I would teach you right from wrong." She goes on to insist that Roger wash his face and eat his supper, things a mother would typically do for her child. This establishes her belief in her own potential as a guardian as well as the value of family to set young people on the right path in life. This seems to be an apt assumption: as Mrs. Jones essentially mothers Roger, the boy feels a desire to be helpful and trustworthy to please her. He steps into the role of child just as quickly as she steps into that of mother, creating a sense of family and home that proves powerful even if it is only temporary.

Of course, the story ultimately leaves the problems of home and family as unresolved: Roger leaves after supper, instructed by Mrs. Jones simply to "behave" himself. When they separate at the end of the evening, two people, together for a short time by happenstance, are once again on their own. Yet it's clear that Roger now steps into the world better off than he was before. Clean, full, and with money for a smart pair of **blue suede shoes**, it is very possible that Mrs. Jones has indeed set her "child" up for a brighter future. His gratitude toward Mrs. Jones—a simple assertion that titles the story itself—suggests his transition from desperate thief to capable young man. The story thus implies that the ultimate value of family, community, and home lies, rather ironically, in preparing people to fend for themselves.

CHOICE VS. CIRCUMSTANCE

"Thank You, M'am" demonstrates that individuals make better choices—and even become more upstanding, more moral people—when they are honest about their shortcomings and mistakes. A more stereotypical, less nuanced version of this story might have blamed or excused Roger's attempted theft of Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones's purse on his income, race, or class. Instead, through observing the series of decisions made by Roger and Mrs. Jones, Hughes's story presents a more complex view of morality in which neither character is painted as all good or all bad. Mrs. Jones, drawing on her own mixed circumstances and past choices, recognizes the difficulties that Roger faces. She doesn't let Roger off the hook for his attempted robbery, but creates a space for him to realize that hardship is no excuse for morally wrong behavior. Hughes thereby suggests that a nuanced understanding of circumstance and personal responsibility can provide individuals with much needed agency and autotomy.

For Hughes, any circumstantial hardships Roger has experienced do not excuse his choice toward stealing other's possessions: the story clearly defines his initial choice as morally wrong behavior. To this end, it's no coincidence that Roger's specific background is never fully revealed. While it is heavily implied from the description of his appearance and his unsupervised evening activities that the young boy is poor and largely on his own, the story never provides enough detail for a reader to view him as merely the victim of his circumstances.

Crucially, Mrs. Jones offers Roger the opportunity to change his pattern of choices on his own by giving him ten dollars at the end of the story with which to buy the **blue suede shoes** he so covets. With this gift, she includes instruction that her choice should shape his subsequent decisions. One imagines that Mrs. Jones hopes that each time Roger looks at his stylish shoes he will not only feel the pride of ownership but also remember a lesson learned: "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," Mrs. Jones tells him.

Mrs. Jones clearly doesn't assume that simply because of their interaction Roger will never again have a desire that could get him in trouble. Rather, she offers him advice and recognizes he has to make his own decisions, mixing compassion with concern for Roger's improvement. When Mrs. Jones gives Roger money, she effectively is reminding him that he possesses agency. By giving him money rather than buying him the shoes outright (or

giving him nothing at all), Mrs. Jones places his decision-making back firmly in his control—implying that, whatever his circumstances, he has the power to make better choices.

Given his behavior throughout the story, it would not have been surprising had Mrs. Jones instead shown mistrust in Roger's ability to make good decisions. Indeed, the narrator describes how Roger worries about this very issue: "He did not trust the woman not to trust him. And he did not want to be mistrusted now." This phrase reveals how mistrust has characterized Roger's choices up to this point—and suggests that when individuals assume that they will always be mistrusted, they often frame their decisions with this in mind. For Roger, each use of the word "trust" is couched in the negative, revealing how he doesn't believe he can be trusted. This adds emotional weight to his behavior: if, as this seems to indicate, Roger assumes he is someone who cannot be trusted, he may simply be acting accordingly.

Yet, remarkably, despite the circumstances of their meeting, Mrs. Jones does not constantly watch the boy in her apartment, nor does she supervise his behavior after leaving with her money. Mrs. Jones's actions are effective and a radical change from what Roger has experienced before, and Roger decides to prove himself *worthy* of her trust. Still surprised by this circumstance, places himself in Mrs. Jones's sight and resolutely decides not to flee.

Roger's future remains a matter of speculation because the story ends as he leaves Mrs. Jones's home. Nevertheless, his acceptance of Mrs. Jones's money and his gratitude suggests a genuine change how he interacts with his circumstances. Initially, Roger makes reactive decisions motivated by fear of punishment, such as when he lies or wants to run away from Mrs. Jones. Being granted the dignity and agency to make his own decisions is implied to have a positive effect, however; while he's still learning this new style (as seen by his uncertainty about how to voice his gratitude), he seems to be, at the very least, moving in a more productive, healthy direction.

Hughes's story honors both choice and circumstance, offering sympathy for Roger's difficult background without excusing his criminal behavior. More broadly, given the social background in which Hughes wrote, the story could be read as arguing for the importance of refusing to use the oppressive status quo as an excuse for either misbehavior or overly harsh judgment of various communities. Read in this light, this story champions the power and importance of personal responsibility while also understanding that individual actions are almost never divorced from circumstance.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

BLUE SUEDE SHOES

Roger explains his attempted theft as being fueled not by hunger or homelessness, but rather by his desire to buy a pair of blue suede shoes. These shoes represent prosperity and indulgence, and are the kind of luxury goods that someone in Roger's situation could never afford on his own. The shoes are the forbidden fruit for Roger, and he is so tempted by the thought of owning such fine, smart shoes—and, likely, by the respect that wearing such shoes might entail—that he is willing to commit a crime.

Notably, the story seems to sympathize rather than condemn this temptation. Rather ironically, Roger's desire to steal in the name of obtaining for fancy shoes—as opposed to more practical concerns like food or shelter—adds nuance to the story's depiction of poverty. People in Roger's situation are human beings like anyone else, the story insists, and desire items that go beyond fulfilling their basic needs. What's more, Roger clearly dreams of being the kind of person who owns fine shoes; this suggests he is ashamed of his dirty, disheveled appearance and wishes to be treated as something more than just another poor street kid. The shoes thus represent the possibility of being seen as a full *person*—that is, as *more* than his poverty.

The problem is the shortcut he decides to take in order to achieve his goals. Rather than working hard to earn money for the shoes (though doing so much be extremely difficult for someone in his financial circumstances), he resorts to "devilish means." Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones warns Roger away from such action in the future, but quickly transforms the symbol of the shoes with her final financial gift to the boy. She freely offers him the money for the shoes, establishing her confidence in Roger to make good use of her investment in him. This grants Roger agency and freedom to make better choices, and thus may allow him to become worthy of the shoes he so desires.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Little, Brown and Company edition of *The Best Short Stories by Black Writers 1899-1967* published in 1967.

Thank You, M'am Quotes

"You ought to be my son. I would teach you right from wrong."

Related Characters: Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones (speaker), Roger

Related Themes:

Page Number: 71

Explanation and Analysis

This exchange occurs shortly after Roger has attempted to rob Mrs. Jones, directly before Mrs. Jones reveals her name. She again reveals her compassion even as she scolds the boy, astutely surmising that he lacks a parental figure to teach him "right from wrong." Mrs. Jones isn't interested in mere punishment; rather, she wants to "teach" Roger a better, more upstanding way to live—which is exactly what she will go on to do. Teaching Roger implicitly places autonomy back in his hands, granting him the tools to be a more moral citizen and asserting that it's ultimately up to him to make good choices based on what he learns.

Mrs. Jones's use of the word "son" is also telling. As the reader soon learns, Mrs. Jones lives in a sort of rooming house with other tenants, and not with any immediate family. Though her specific backstory is never revealed, this interaction implies that she views herself as a maternal figure. Her interactions with Roger, then, help not only the boy become a better person, but also allow Mrs. Jones the chance to have a makeshift family for an evening.

"[…] 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 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."

Related Characters: Roger, Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 71

Explanation and Analysis

Having deduced that the boy has no one looking out for him, Mrs. Jones continues to essentially mother, rather than punish, Roger. Her kindness is clear even through her stern demeanor. Also notable in this moment is the fact that Roger still just wants to be let loose. For Roger to accept Mrs. Jones's charity would be to implicitly accept responsibility for his attempted theft, which he clearly does not want to do quite yet. This suggests that redemption can only come about if one takes ownership of their choices. Indeed, Mrs. Jones points out the inconsistency of Roger's statement, in light of his decision to place himself in her path by attempting to steal her purse.

While she didn't initiate their interactions, she does decide that their meeting will be significant. After interacting with Mrs. Jones, the boy will be changed, and notably, he will "remember" her. This sets the stage for the lasting value their subsequent evening together will hold for Roger.

"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*.

Related Characters: Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones (speaker), Roger

Related Themes:

Page Number: 71

Explanation and Analysis

This dialogue between Mrs. Jones and Roger occurs after they arrive at her house. Roger has resisted Mrs. Jones's efforts to help him thus far, wishing instead only to run away from her (and, it follows, away from owning up to his attempted theft). This moment thus marks a dramatic shift: Roger is finally presented with a clear opportunity to escape—he has finally been "turned loose," the exact thing he wished for earlier in the story—and yet he *chooses* to stay. By setting him loose, Mrs. Jones has put the decision back into Roger's hand as to whether he will own up to his crime and accept her kindness, or flee back into the night. In going to the sink to wash his face—symbolically cleansing himself of his previous sins—Roger takes ownership of his choices and takes the first step towards a more moral path.

"I believe you're hungry — or been hungry — to try to snatch my pocketbook!"

"I want a pair of blue suede shoes," said the boy.

Related Characters: Roger (speaker), Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

Having surmised that Roger is lacking parental supervision and is likely on his own in the world, Mrs. Jones suggests a possible motive for Roger's attempted theft: hunger. This isn't an unreasonable assumption, yet he immediately corrects her misunderstanding. His act was driven by a *want*, not a *need*. In this moment, Hughes complicates and humanizes Roger's character by granting Roger a perfectly normal desire for fine things. Roger is not painted as an irredeemable street thug just because he has a rough home life. He's a young boy who wants something he's seen, and does not know the right way to go about asking or earning it. This adds nuance to the story's portrayal of poverty, and affirms that one need not be acting out of a "pure" need to be worthy of compassion.

> The door was open. He could make a dash for it down the hall. He could run, run, run, *run!*

The woman was sitting on the daybed. After a while she said, "I were young once and I wanted things I could not get."

Related Characters: Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones (speaker), Roger

Related Themes:

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

After Roger admits to attempting to steal her purse in order to buy himself a pair of blue suede shoes, Mrs. Jones grows reflective. In the intervening silence, Roger again contemplates how easy it would be in this moment to escape. He could run away from owning up to his mistakes, yet doing so would also signify running away from a chance at redemption.

Importantly, Mrs. Jones interrupts Roger's thinking with a moment of empathy; she does not condemn his desire for things he cannot have, and instead affirms that she, too, has felt similar desires. This admission pushes Roger to stay, and thus underscores the story's broader argument that compassion and understanding are far better tools than punishment when it comes to helping people become better citizens. In revealing her own story, Mrs. Jones helps Roger feel less alone, less irredeemable. What's more, this although the story presents Mrs. Jones as an older, wiser woman, this quote suggest that her life story is more complicated than it appears. While acknowledging that people are often faced with difficult circumstances, the story upholds that it's ultimately up to individuals to make good choices that will shape their future.

> "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."

Related Characters: Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones (speaker), Roger

Related Themes:

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Jones has just confessed to Roger that she, too, has wanted things she couldn't have. She refuses to then sanctimoniously condemn Roger's actions as one might expect, however. Instead she lets her admission sit in silence between them, before continuing to imply that she, too, has made mistakes, and as such is not going to judge Roger for his. This emphasizes to Roger that he is not uniquely bad, because *everyone* does things that they aren't proud of.

This is an extremely important moment in the story, as Mrs. Jones manages to at once affirm that Roger's actions were wrong without condemning Roger *himself*. Pretending that she herself is above reproach would simply make it easy for Roger to assume that he is personally irredeemable, and, as such, that there's no point in trying to make better choices. Instead, Mrs. Jones effectively puts the ball back in Roger's court. Telling him to comb his hair is, in its own way, another subtle assertion that he is a full human being rather than his one mistake; she grants him the possibility of being better, and then asserts that it's up to him to work towards that.

Finally, while her colloquial use of the word "son" fits in with her dialect, in this situation, it also signals the parental role she is assuming toward Roger.

> 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.

Related Characters: Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones, Roger

Related Themes:

Page Number: 72-73

Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Jones gets up to prepare their supper, leaving Roger unsupervised. This moment marks another important shift in Roger's behavior: earlier in the story he wanted to be let loose, and has repeatedly eyed the door in Mrs. Jones's home. Now, however, he stays put exactly where she can see him. He no longer wants to run away and hide from his mistake; instead, he wants to be *seen*. Mrs. Jones has granted Roger the possibility of being better, and this clearly has had an effect on him. He wants to be worthy of her compassion, and to be seen as the kind of person worth trusting. This again underscores the story's broader point about the power of empathy versus punishment.

> 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's else's* – because shoes got by devilish ways will burn your feet.

Related Characters: Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones (speaker), Roger

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

As Mrs. Jones prepares to send Roger back into the world, she surprises him by giving him the money he had first hoped to steal. This final reversal places Roger in command of his next move. While Mrs. Jones includes an admonishment toward good behavior in the future, her choice to give him cash symbolizes her trust in him. She has no guarantee how Roger will use the funds, but she allows him the dignity of deciding for himself. Based on how deeply her kindness has affected Roger thus far, it seems promising that the boy will indeed try to make himself worthy of Mrs. Jones's generosity.

> 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 [...]

Related Characters: Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones, Roger

Related Themes:

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

The story's final moments grant the tale its title. Roger, clearly moved by his experiences with Mrs. Jones, tries and fails to express his gratitude for her generosity. The narrator notes that while Roger's "lips moved," no sound came out. This suggests that Roger finds pat responses now inadequate for expressing his deep appreciation for Mrs. Jones's kindness. The story ends here, which means that the characters' ongoing history is unresolved. However, it seems likely, that as Mrs. Jones predicted, Roger will remember their meeting. His behavior has already shifted dramatically for the better throughout the story, and the tale thus ends on a cautiously hopeful note that Mrs. Jones has sent Roger out into the world better than she found him.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THANK YOU, M'AM

At 11:00 in the evening, "a large woman" is walking alone "with a large purse" slung across her shoulder. A young boy runs up and attempts to snatch the bag, only for its strap to break; the momentum from his tug causes the boy, who'd been hoping to flee, to instead fall over. The woman kicks him "in the blue jean sitter" before yanking him up by the shirt so roughly that "his teeth rattl[e]."

Hughes begins by undermining readers' likely expectations. One might expect a woman walking home alone at night to be an easy target for a thief, but this woman quickly proves herself more than a match for her would be attacker. Although there's no audible dialogue in this section, the actions establish the woman's formidable presence and the boy's frailty.

Still gripping the boy's shirtfront, the woman tells him to pick up her now-broken purse and hand it back to her. She scolds the boy and asks why he'd tried to rob her, to which he responds, "I didn't aim to." Quickly rejecting this as a lie, the woman asks whether the boy will run if she lets go of him. He responds in the affirmative. The woman then points out the boy's dirty face and confirms that he doesn't have anybody at home telling him to wash it. She declares that she will wash it herself and begins dragging the "frightened boy" to her own house.

The boy refuses in this moment to take responsibility for his attempted theft, setting the scene for his character growth throughout the story. The woman further subverts expectations by not condemning the boy outright, but rather astutely judging him to have no one looking out for him. By taking the boy to her place, the woman steps in and acts for his missing or absent family.

The boy, who looks "as if he were fourteen or fifteen," is "frail and willow-wild, in tennis shoes and blue jeans." The woman declares that if he were her "son" she'd teach him "right from wrong" and asks if he's hungry. The boy only wants her to let him go, but she reminds him that *his* actions first put them together. "When I get through with you, sir," she says, "you are going to remember Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones."

The description of boy's appearance emphasizes his youth and unimposing stature; he is not a hardened criminal, but a child. When Mrs. Jones's reminds the boy that his decisions originally placed them in contact, she is insisting that he take responsibility for his choices. At the same time, she again reveals motherly compassion that suggests she knows he is more than one bad decision.

The young boy continues to struggle uselessly as Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones physically restrains him. She takes him to her room in a boarding house--a small, one-bedroom space equipped with a kitchenette. She leaves the door open, which allows the boy to hear the laughter and talking of the other "roomers" who live elsewhere in the house. Finally, she asks the boy for his name: Roger. Wheedling him to clean up his face, she provides him with warm water and a towel. When Roger asks if Mrs. Jones will take him to jail, she quips back: "Not with that face, I would not take you nowhere." Then, she abruptly switches the conversation to dinner.

The boy's physical struggle against Mrs. Jones mirrors his taciturn answers: both are attempts to keep her away, suggesting he is not yet ready to own up to his mistake. The fact that Mrs. Jones resides in a communal living space suggests her own lack of immediate family. Mrs. Jones's ready assertion that she won't take Roger to jail reveals that she is not interested in punishing him, but rather in helping him.

Talking about food leads Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones to suggest that Roger wanted money from her purse for food. Quickly, Roger corrects her mistake: he wanted a pair of **blue suede shoes**. With a face still dripping from washing, Roger contemplates escape through the open door. Sitting on her daybed, Mrs. Jones interrupts his runaway thoughts: "I were young once and I wanted things I could not get." Roger is silent. Mrs. Jones continues, "You thought I was going to say, *but*, didn't you?" After admitting she, too, has done disreputable things, she instructs Roger to comb his hair.

The fact that Roger eyes the door suggests he is still not entirely ready to own up to his behavior, yet he also doesn't leave—revealing that he is changing. For Roger, these shoes embody the kind of person he wants to be and the kind of life he hopes to have. By stealing from Mrs. Jones, he was taking a shortcut to his aspirations. Mrs. Jones once again offers empathy rather than condemnation, furthering the story's argument that kindness is often more powerful than outright punishment.

The story shifts its attention to the divisions of Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones's room, which incorporates some basic kitchen supplies behind a screen. For the first time, Mrs. Jones leaves Roger and the purse out of her sight. Roger takes care to remain in a spot where she can see him with her peripheral vision, however, not wanting to be "mistrusted."

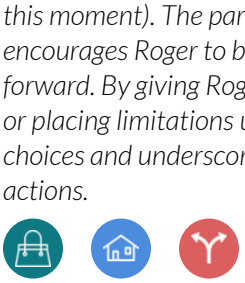
This is an extremely important moment for Roger: whereas before he tried to steal Mrs. Jones's purse and then lied to her about it, he now actively refuses to partake in thievery. Mrs. Jones has treated him as more than a thief, and he clearly wants to be worthy of her kindness. This again underscores the story's point that empathy can be more powerful than mere punishment.

While Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones makes dinner, Roger asks if she needs him to run to the store. She checks if he wants "sweet milk" rather than "canned" for cocoa. Hearing no, her pantry is ample for their purposes. She makes him dinner, and leads him through a conversation about her life, without prying into his. She shares the food she has—including giving him half of the "ten-cent cake."

Roger not only refuses to rob Mrs. Jones, but in fact wants to prove himself helpful. This is a major shift in behavior from the squirming boy he presented as in the story's beginning, and reveals just how much Mrs. Jones kindness has affected him. There's nothing particularly fancy about the spread that Mrs. Jones presents to Roger, but the mere fact that she feeds him this late in the evening makes this scene feel like a family meal between parent and child.

Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones surprises Roger with the ten dollars he had originally wanted to steal. With this gift, she offers a warning and an encouragement to "behave" himself in the future. Roger attempts to express his gratitude to Mrs. Jones, but though "his lips moved" he cannot even manage to say that before Mrs. Jones shuts her door.

At the time, ten dollars would have been quite a bit of money. This is a major moment of generosity on the part of Mrs. Jones, and, based on his behavior thus far, it's safe to assume that Roger will try to prove himself worthy of it (even if he can't quite find the words in this moment). The parent-like guidance attached to this surprise encourages Roger to be thoughtful about his decisions moving forward. By giving Roger cash rather than supervising his purchase or placing limitations upon her gift, Mrs. Jones shows trust in his choices and underscores that he must take responsibility for his actions.



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