

## Thank You, M'am

Short Story by Langston Hughes

# Who sees the **BEST** in you?

### COMMON CORE

**RL 1** Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support inferences drawn from the text. **RL 3** Analyze how particular elements of a story interact.

Have you ever gone through a time when it seemed like you couldn't do anything right? If so, then you know how important it is to have someone have faith in you. When a friend, a family member, or a teacher believes you can do better, it can help you try harder instead of giving up. In "Thank You, M'am," a woman sees potential—or possibility—where others might see a problem.

**QUICKWRITE** Create a web of people you know who see the best in you. Then explain why you have included these people. In what ways do they show their belief in you?



## Meet the Author

### Langston Hughes

1902–1967

#### A Fascinating Journey

As a child being raised by his grandmother in Lawrence, Kansas, Langston Hughes began a lifelong exploration of literature and blues music. He later went to Columbia University, worked in hotels, and traveled the world as a cook's assistant on freighters. Hughes was first recognized as a poet while working as a busboy. He left his poems at a table where the poet Vachel Lindsay was dining. Lindsay promoted the young poet's work, and Hughes's career was launched. Langston Hughes went on to become an influential writer of the 20th century.

#### The People's Poet

After being discovered, Hughes went on to write novels, short stories, and plays as well as poems. Hughes's work shows a special understanding of everyday people—people who may not be famous or rich but whose lives are inspiring and valuable nonetheless.

#### BACKGROUND TO THE STORY

##### Harlem

"Thank You, M'am" takes place in Harlem, a section of New York City. In the early 1900s, Harlem attracted many African-American writers. The stimulating community had a deep influence on their work.

Author  
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## TEXT ANALYSIS: PLOT AND CONFLICT

In most stories, the plot centers on **conflict**, or the struggle between opposing forces. As the characters respond to the conflict, the plot develops and moves forward.

- An **external conflict** is a character's struggle against an outside force. For example, a character may struggle against nature or against another character.
- An **internal conflict** takes place inside the character. For example, a character may struggle between wanting something and knowing that taking it is wrong.

Stories often contain more than one conflict. As you read "Thank You, M'am," look for examples of both types of conflict.

## READING SKILL: MAKE INFERENCES

When you make an **inference**, you use your reason and experience to guess at what a writer doesn't say directly. Combining clues in a passage with your own knowledge helps you understand what characters are feeling and thinking. As you read "Thank You, M'am," make inferences to better understand the characters. Record your inferences on a chart like the one shown.

Detail About Character	What I Infer
Mrs. Jones holds Roger but lets him stoop to pick up her purse.	Mrs. Jones is trying to decide whether to trust Roger.

## VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT

The following words helped Langston Hughes write a story about a boy facing a serious conflict. To see how many words you already know, use them to complete the sentences.

**WORD LIST** barren frail mistrust presentable

1. Don't \_\_\_\_\_ him; he will keep his promise.
2. Because he was \_\_\_\_\_, the hard work tired him.
3. The \_\_\_\_\_ room was a source of loneliness.
4. He wanted to look \_\_\_\_\_ for the assembly.



Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.

# Thank You, M'am

Langston Hughes

**S**he 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. **A**

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.

## **A PLOT AND CONFLICT**

Who is in conflict and why?

## **Analyze Visuals ►**

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

*Faith Ringgold (1977), Alice Neel. Oil on canvas, 48" × 36". Private collection. © 2004 Estate of Alice Neel/Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York/Philadelphia Museum of Art, Special Exhibition.*





"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.

30 "Then it will get washed this evening," said the large woman starting up the street, dragging the frightened boy behind her. **B**

He looked as if he were fourteen or fifteen, **frail** and willow-wild, 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."

40 "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 50 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.* **C**

"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.

"Not with that face, I would not take you nowhere," said the woman.

60 "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." **D**

## **B 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.

**frail** (frāl) *adj.* delicate; weak and fragile

## **◆ GRAMMAR IN CONTEXT**

In the sentence in line 43, the word *boy's* is a **singular possessive** noun that tells whose face is being described. To show possession, an apostrophe followed by an *s* is attached to the word *boy*.

## **C PLOT AND CONFLICT**

What is Roger's internal conflict?

## **D PLOT AND CONFLICT**

What action does Mrs. Jones take as a result of her struggle with Roger?



"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."

70 "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, *run!*

The woman was sitting on the day-bed.<sup>1</sup> After a while she said, "I were young once and I wanted things I could not get."

80 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**."

90 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?"

100 "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. **E**

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



*Gamin* (about 1929), Augusta Savage. Painted plaster, 9" × 5<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" × 4<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub>". Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Benjamin and Olya Margolin.

**presentable**  
(prĭ-zĕn'tə-bəl) *adj.*  
fit to be seen  
by people

**mistrust** (mĭs-trŭst')  
*v.* to think of without  
confidence or trust

## **E 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.

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.

110 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.

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

### Language Coach

**Syntax** The way words are put together in a sentence is called syntax. In line 113, Mrs. Jones says “shoes come by devilish like that will burn your feet.” What does she mean?

**barren** (bărr’ən) *adj.*  
empty; lacking interest or charm

### F 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

5 Or help one fainting Robin  
Unto his Nest again  
I shall not live in Vain.

## 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?



**RL 1** Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support inferences drawn from the text. **RL 3** Analyze how particular elements of a story interact.

## Text Analysis

4. **Identify Conflict in Plot** Using a chart like the one shown, go back through the story and record examples of **internal** and **external** conflict. Which conflict sets the plot in motion?

<i>Conflict</i>	<i>Internal</i>	<i>External</i>
<i>Roger tries to steal Mrs. Jones's purse.</i>		

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 72. 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"? 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.

### Who sees the **BEST** in you?

Is it possible for someone you have just met to see the best in you? Support your answer with evidence from the story and from your own experience.

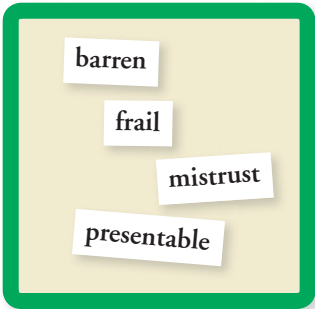


# Vocabulary in Context

## ▲ 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



## ACADEMIC VOCABULARY IN WRITING

- contemporary
- element
- identify
- influence
- structure

Was Mrs. Jones a good **influence** on Roger? Write your response in a paragraph, using at least one of the Academic Vocabulary words.

## VOCABULARY STRATEGY: PREFIXES THAT MEAN “NOT”

Many English prefixes come from Latin, Old English, and French languages. 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-*, which comes from Old English and Old French, is one of several prefixes that mean “not.” Look at the chart to see 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 mistreated.

Prefix	Meanings
dis-	not; opposite of
in-	not; in
un-	not
mis-	not; incorrect or badly
non-	not; opposite of


### COMMON CORE

- L 4b Use common, grade-appropriate Latin affixes as clues to the meaning of a word.
- L 6 Acquire and use accurately grade-appropriate general academic words.

Interactive Vocabulary



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# Language

## GRAMMAR IN CONTEXT: Spell Possessives Correctly

Refer to the Grammar note on page 70. The possessive form of a noun shows ownership or relationship. 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 spelling possessive nouns:

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

**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 spelling of 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*.

## READING-WRITING CONNECTION



Show your understanding of the characters in “Thank You, M’am” by responding to this prompt. Then use the **revising tip** to improve your writing.

### WRITING PROMPT

#### Extended Constructed Response: Comparison

Write **two or three paragraphs** comparing how Roger behaves on the street with how he behaves after spending some time with Mrs. Jones. Explain why Mrs. Jones's belief in his potential helps Roger show his best self.

### REVISING TIP

Review your compare-and-contrast response. If you have used possessives, check your spelling to see that you have correctly placed the apostrophes.



**L 2b** Spell correctly. **W 2** Write explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas.

Interactive Revision

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