

DEPICTION OF RACIAL AND FAMILY PROBLEMS OF AMERICANS IN THE STORY “THANK YOU, MA’AM” BY LANGSTON HUGHES

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Abstract

The American short story is regarded as a milestone in the American literary tradition. Langston Hughes was an outstanding and prolific writer during the period called the Harlem Renaissance of the early 20th century. In his story, Hughes depicted the central theme - power of kindness by revealing how a kind gesture makes softer the heart of a thieving teenage boy.

Keywords: American short story, Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes, racial and social problems, African-American's hardship life, old working woman, teenager, lower social groups.

Introduction

A genre of storytelling has emerged in literature that serves the public good, enhances people's spiritual lives, and restores universal values. Social stories, in particular, can be considered a mirror of public life. American short stories also play an important role in the world literature and are examples of a productive progress for many countries. One of the outstanding American short stories "Thank You, Ma'am" is written by Langston Hughes. Hughes was an outstanding and prolific writer during the period called the Harlem Renaissance of the early 20th century. He mostly wrote about African-American's hardship life, traditions and their experience. "Thank You, Ma'am" is about a young Afro-American boy's encounter with an old woman, it occurs when a teenage boy and an old working woman have a collision on the Harlem Street. The short story was published in the year of 1958. It is not only a great sample of the short narrative form in general, it is also one of those essential short stories that carries grand social value and has the ability to instruct and educate its wide readers.

The narrative begins with an encounter between a teenage boy Roger, and an older woman Mrs. Luella Jones, arriving home from work late at night. The boy attempts to steal Mrs. Jones's purse, but for the reason that it is so heavy, and the woman is quite stout, instead Roger simply ends up breaking the strap. Mrs. Jones kicks the boy and grabs him by the shirt, inquiring if he feels embarrassed of himself. At that moment Roger confesses that he does. Then the woman notices that Roger has a dirty face and his hair is not combed. She asks if there is anyone to take care of him. When the boy replies "no", she carries him home with her. When Roger and Mrs. Jones together arrive at the woman's house, she asks the boy if he has had supper. Mrs. Jones supposes that since the boy tried to steal the purse, he should be hungry. However, it is found out that Roger wanted to take the money in order to purchase a pair of blue suede shoes. When she informs Roger that he could have asked her for the money, he does not rather accept it as true. Mrs. Jones explicates to him that she also was young once, and could not find the money for the things she needs. She reveals that, like the boy, she used to do some obscene and



shameful things, too. While they have a meal, Mrs. Jones avoids embarrassing the teenage boy by not asking him over his life and condition; instead, she converses about her job in a hotel beauty shop, where she encounters women with all diverse colors of hair. At the end of the story, she gives the boy ten dollars for buying the blue suede shoes and tells him not to steal anyone else's money for this, as shoes or other items that purchased with stolen money bring on more trouble than they are worth. When the woman leads Roger to the door and utters to him farewell, he desires to say something other than "Thank you, ma'am" however nothing worthy comes to his mind. As he turns to look at Mrs. Jones in the doorway, he could barely tell the words "Thank you" out of his mouth before she closes the door. In the story, a teenager learns an essential lesson about kindness and confidence from an unexpected cause. This story is set in Harlem; it is a community in New York. Like other urban areas, in the early twentieth century, a rapid population growth occurrence in Harlem. As it is described, the protagonist Mrs. Jones lives in one of the "kitchenette" apartment buildings-a bathroom and a large room with the kitchen in the corner. In this story, a boy steals a purse since he needs money in order to buy shoes. By the end of the story, Roger realizes that he desires something more precious. After that his motives and so do his actions change.

In his writings, Langston Hughes principally focused on the lives of Afro-Americans from lower social groups, including both the struggles many faced due to poor social conditions as well as the varied and rich culture, aspiring to confront the readers' preconceived views and stereotypes about Afro-Americans. "Thank you, Ma'am" is a most important model of how Hughes bends and humanizes the characters in a stereotypical picture in order to reveal the social and economic efforts behind them. Roger as the teenager tries to steal Mrs. Jones' purse for money in order to purchase blue suede shoes. He does not succeed and gets caught, however is surprised by the stout woman who doesn't take him to the police, and rather takes to her apartment, makes him wash his face, offers him dinner and ten dollars for buying the shoes he wanted. Mrs. Jones is the woman whose purse Roger tries to snatch. She is a stout and strong lady, and so is able to be careful for herself and her items. She is kind, accepting, and caring to poor Roger's condition, and so she gives him food, money, and advice, and sends him away with an appreciative heart.

To reveal the deep meaning of the title, it is important to consider the whole context of the story. In the first place, it refers to the moment at the end of the short narrative when Roger wants and attempts to say more to Mrs. Jones, unfortunately he could not. The closing lines of the story demonstrate this wonderfully in the author's great style: "The boy wanted to say something other than "Thank you, Ma'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." ¹ Here the title is a direct indication to how Mrs. Jones addressed the condition of the youth trying to steal her money. Mrs. Jones's approach of taking the teenager to her house, feeding and caring for him shows the spirit of the writer's desire to change what is into what can be, and also strikes at indeed humanistic approach to criminal action. At some point, empathy is necessary to help eliminate the basis behind why people commit crimes. In demonstrating the woman's sense of empathy behind Roger's predicament and

¹ <https://americanliterature.com/author/langston-hughes/short-story/thank-you-mam>



caring for him, she has disarmed the teenager, and caused him to reproduce his options and future decisions.

In this short story, the central theme is the power of kindness. The work reveals how a kind gesture makes softer the heart of a thieving teenage boy. When Roger gets caught by Mrs. Jones, he expects her to take him to the police. But her kind motion in taking him to home and giving him meal touches him, and he feels thankful to her. Roger tries to find words to express his gratefulness for the woman's kindness; however, he is not able to find suitable words to explain it. When the boy gets caught, he supposes to get punishment. Instead of this, he is given kindness and forgiveness. Roger, when he is forgiven, wants to confirm himself trustworthy to Mrs. Jones, which would not have happened if he had been taken to the police. The writer tries to represent trust as a give and take relationship. In the story, when Mrs. Jones leaves Roger alone with her purse, to go and make dinner, he sits where she can look at him, and he does not want to be mistrusted then.

Instead of notifying the police about Roger or taking other legal action, Mrs. Jones suggests the boy maternal control and home. Her sudden choices can be read through the historical background of the story's supposed setting: Hughes was a central figure in the Harlem Renaissance of the early twentieth century, a period when New York's famous borough was associated with art innovation and changing cityscape. The rapid growth of the city, like other urban areas during this period, led to changes in the structure of the neighborhood, and though Langston Hughes does not clearly state where the story is set, the boarding house with many "roomers" where the woman lives reminds the many single-family Harlem houses that were adapted to apartment buildings at this time. Although Mrs. Jones lacks her own family and traditional home, she nonetheless offers Roger the qualities of both - and thereby forges a meaningful bond with the "frail and wild willow" teenage boy. By demonstrating the pain of isolation as it affects two different members of an area, Hughes emphasizes the importance of community. What is more, the unexpected yet comforting relationship between Roger and Mrs. Jones implies that family and home are flexible concepts, things that people may characterize and create for themselves. At first, the author's portrayal of his characters makes it seem like they are basically different - if Mrs. Jones is stout, solid, and certain of her views, Roger is weak and equivocal. Nevertheless, they are both alike in that they are essentially alone. The woman's late-night job and living condition-she is one of many "roomers" in boarding house hints at her current lack of family. Furthermore, her three surnames imply that before she has been married at least twice. Roger wanders the streets unattended at eleven o'clock at night when he bumps into Mrs. Jones - a sign that no one is watching him. This is demonstrated when Mrs. Jones asks the boy if he is hungry and he says, "There's nobody home at my house." Roger again replies in a negative tone when she asks over him, "Ain't you got nobody home to tell you to wash your face?" Obviously, Roger has neither home nor family members or relatives to care for him. Though different they might appear, Mrs. Jones and Roger's shared lack of family binds them together.

The narrative further hints the pain of loneliness and proposes that both characters long for a sense of relation; this meeting is therefore valuable not only for Roger, but also for the lady.

2 https://wikis.westchesterlibraries.org/occfles/Thank_You_Ma'am.pdf



The narrator of the story identifies Roger's likely shame about his dysfunctional home life while reviewing their talk 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."³ The fact that Mrs Jones willingly intervenes speaks volumes of her own desire for family. After catching the boy when he first attempts to steal the purse, she states, "You ought to be my son. I would teach you right from wrong."⁴ She continues to insist that Roger wash his face and eat his dinner - which is what a mother usually does for her child. This strengthens her faith in her own potential as a caregiver, as well as in the value of the family in order to guide young people on the right path in life. This seems like a fortunate assumption: since Mrs. Jones is essentially Roger's mother, the boy feels a desire to be helpful and trustworthy in order to please her. He enters into the role of a child as quickly as she enters into the role of a mother, creating a sense of family and home that is strong, even if it is temporary. Of course, the story ultimately leaves the problems of home and family unresolved: Roger leaves after dinner, instructed by Mrs. Jones to simply "behave himself." When they leave at the end of the evening, two people, accidentally together for a short time, find themselves on their own again. Nevertheless, it is clear that Roger is now taking a step into the world better than he was before. Clean, plump and with money for a pair of elegant blue suede shoes, it's possible that Mrs. Jones really set her "child" for a brighter future. His gratitude to Mrs. Jones - the simple statement that the story is named after - suggests his transition from a desperate thief to a capable young man. Thus, this story implies that the highest value of family, community and home lies, ironically, in preparing people to take care of themselves.

It is sure that one of the great things Langston Hughes has done with "Thank You Ma'am" is finding the perfect balance with the racial and moral elements of the story. The characters are clearly Afro- American, but this is not an African American story. Skin color is present and well represented in the vernacular, but that is not the point of the story. Langston Hughes has left an indelible mark on literature, especially in storytelling, with its own direction of artistic expression, plot, theme and image-making principles.

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³ https://wikis.westchesterlibraries.org/occfles/Thank_You_Ma'am.pdf

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