

## Chapter 2

# *Thank You, Ma'am* LANGSTON HUGHES



### A PRE-READING

#### 1. *Think Before You Read*

Read the first paragraph of the story once and think of it as describing the opening scene of a play. Then answer the following questions:

1. Who are the characters in this scene?
2. What is happening?
3. Where and when is the action taking place?
4. Why does the action take place?
5. Do you think a chance encounter between people can sometimes change their lives? Think about chance or fate as you read this story.

## 2. *Literary Term: Dialect*

A **dialect** consists of words or phrases that reflect the regional variety of a language. An author or playwright will often use a regional dialect to make the dialogue more authentic. Initially, a dialect may be difficult to understand; it is similar to watching a foreign film with subtitles. However, the language will become more comfortable as you continue reading, and the rhythm of the dialect will be as natural as if you were one of the characters.

The following examples of dialect occur in the story:

**ain't** aren't

**gonna** going to

**could of** could have

**late as it be** late as it is

**I didn't aim to** I didn't intend to

**sit you down** sit down

**I were** I was

**fix us** prepare for us

## 3. *Idioms and Expressions*

Note the following idioms and expressions that appear in the story:

**I got a great mind to** I should

**get through with** finish

**make a dash for it** run away

**took care** was careful

**set the table** put out plates, glasses,  
and so forth

## B THE STORY

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Langston Hughes (1902–1967) had a varied career that took him far away from his birthplace in Joplin, Missouri. His early love for reading books was encouraged by his mother, who often took him to the library. His mother also wrote poetry and gave dramatic readings. Her work required her to travel extensively.

After his parents separated, his father moved to Mexico and Hughes went to live with his maternal grandmother. She, too, had an influence on his future career. She was a good storyteller, and she often told him about the days of slavery. The maternal influence and the sense of deep pride in his people (then referred to as Negroes) are evident in all of Hughes's writing.

At nineteen, Langston enrolled at Columbia University but left after a year. He traveled throughout Europe and Africa and worked at many jobs, including being a deckhand on a ship and a dishwasher in a Parisian nightclub. Money was always a problem, but he persevered and remained optimistic. Whether he was struggling

as a student at Columbia or working as a waiter in Washington, D.C., he continued writing poetry that praised his race for its beauty and humanity.

In the 1960s, Hughes chronicled the civil rights movement in the United States. He wrote about the sit-ins, the marches, the church bombings, the hatred, and the hope. His poem “I Dream a World” begins:

I dream a world where man  
No other man will scorn  
Where love will bless the earth  
And peace its paths adorn.

Hughes died in 1967. His plays, poems, and stories are the legacy he left to the American people, who he hoped one day could live in racial harmony.



## *Thank You, Ma'm*

**SHE WAS** a large woman with a large purse that had everything in it but a hammer and nails. It had a long strap, and she carried it slung across her shoulder. It was about eleven o'clock at night, dark, and she was walking alone, when a boy ran up behind her and tried to snatch her purse. The strap broke with the sudden single tug the boy gave it from behind. But the boy's weight and the weight of the purse combined caused him to lose his balance. Instead of taking off full blast as he had hoped, the boy fell on his back on the sidewalk and his legs flew up. The large woman simply turned around and kicked him right square in his blue-jeaned sitter. Then she reached down, picked the boy up by his shirt front, and shook him until his teeth rattled.

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

She still held him tightly. But she bent down enough to permit him to stoop and pick up her purse. Then she said, “Now ain't you ashamed of yourself?”

Firmly gripped by his 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.”

By that time two or three people passed, stopped, turned to look, and some stood watching.

“If I turn you loose, will you run?” asked the woman.

“Yes'm,” said the boy.

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

“Lady, I’m sorry,” whispered the boy.

“Um-hum! Your face is dirty. I got a great mind to wash your face for you. Ain’t you got nobody home to tell you to wash your face?”

“No’m,” said the boy.

“Then it will get washed this evening,” said the large woman, starting up the street, dragging the frightened boy behind her.

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.”

“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.”

Sweat popped out on the boy’s face and he began to struggle. Mrs. Jones stopped, jerked him around in front of her, put a half-nelson about his neck, and continued to drag him up the street. When she got to her door, she dragged the boy inside, down a hall, and into a large kitchenette-furnished room at the rear of the house. She switched on the light and left the door open. The boy could hear other roomers laughing and talking in the large house. Some of their doors were

open, too, so he knew he and the woman were not alone. The woman still had him by the neck in the middle of her room. 85

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. 90

“Let the water run until it gets warm,” she said. “Here’s a clean towel.” 95

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

“Not with that face, I would not take you nowhere,” said the woman. “Here I am trying to get home to cook me a bite to eat, and you snatch my pocketbook! Maybe you ain’t been to your supper either, late as it be. Have you?” 100 105

“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!” 110

“I want 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.” 115

“Ma’m?”

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. 120

125 The door was open. He would make a dash for it down the hall. He would run, run, run!

The woman was sitting on the day bed. After a while, she said, “I were  
130 young once and I wanted things I could not get.”

There was another long pause. The boy’s mouth opened. Then he frowned, not knowing he frowned.

135 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  
140 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. Sit you down  
145 while I fix us something to eat. You might run that comb through your hair so you will look presentable.”

In another corner of the room behind a screen was a gas plate and an  
150 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  
155 bed. 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  
160 woman to trust him. And he did not trust the woman not to trust him. And he did not want to be mistrusted now.

165 “Do you need somebody to go to the store,” asked the boy, “maybe to get some milk or something?”

“Don’t believe I do,” said the woman, “unless you just want sweet milk yourself. I was going to make cocoa out of this canned milk I got here.”

She heated some lima beans and  
170 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.  
175 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 came in and out, blondes, redheads and  
180 Spanish. Then she cut him half of her ten-cent cake.

“Eat some more, son,” she said.

When they finished eating, she got up and said, “Now here, take this ten  
185 dollars and buy yourself some blue suede shoes. And, next time, do not make the mistake of latching onto my pocketbook nor nobody else’s – because shoes got by devilish ways will  
190 burn your feet. I got to get my rest now. But from here on in, son, I hope you will behave yourself.”

She led the way down the hall to the front door and opened it. “Good night!  
195 Behave yourself, boy!” she said, looking into the street as he went down the steps.

The boy wanted to say something other than “Thank you, ma’m,”  
200 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.  
205 Then she shut the door.

### 1. *Comprehension*

Answer these questions to determine how well you understood the story.

1. How old do you think Mrs. Jones is?
2. How does she feel about Roger? Is she angry at him? Does she like him?
3. At what point in the story does Mrs. Jones show that she cares about Roger?
4. Describe Roger's physical appearance.
5. Describe his behavior.
6. How does Mrs. Jones treat Roger initially? How does her behavior change?
7. Find examples of sentences that show Mrs. Jones understands Roger very well.

### 2. *Vocabulary*

Each of the numbered vocabulary words appears in Hughes's story. Look at the four definitions for each word and circle the correct one.

1. tug
  - a. force
  - b. steal
  - c. pull
  - d. shoot
2. permit
  - a. allow
  - b. push
  - c. keep
  - d. worry
3. stoop
  - a. forget
  - b. bend over
  - c. run away
  - d. fool
4. frail
  - a. strong
  - b. athletic
  - c. tall
  - d. delicate
5. bothering
  - a. whispering
  - b. stealing
  - c. annoying
  - d. meeting
6. sweat
  - a. perspiration
  - b. dessert
  - c. cake
  - d. blasphemy

7. snatch  
a. trick  
b. grab  
c. watch  
d. follow
8. frowned  
a. grimaced  
b. smiled  
c. discovered  
d. laughed

### 3. Grammar: Verb Tenses

Tenses indicate time. In English, we use six tenses – three simple and three perfect. The simple tenses are past, present, and future. The perfect tenses are past perfect, present perfect, and future perfect.

**Simple tenses** The simple tenses are more specific about when an action or state of being occurs. For example,

**PAST:** They **ran** in the marathon.  
**PRESENT:** They **run** in the marathon every year.  
**FUTURE:** They **will run** in the marathon next year.

**Perfect tenses** The perfect tenses show the time an action or state of being begins and is completed (perfected).

In the **present perfect tense**, a situation exists up to now (the present). The construction would be: *has* (third person singular) or *have* + the *past participle*. For example,

He **has run** in five previous marathons. (up to now)  
They **have run** in many marathons. (up to the present time)

In the **past perfect tense**, the situation was completed by the time another past event occurred. The past perfect can be thought of as a previous past. When a sentence describes two past events, the past perfect tense indicates what happened first. The construction would be: *had* + the *past participle*. For example,

He **had run** in several marathons before he finished in first place.

The **future perfect tense** describes an action or state of being that we are predicting for a time in the future. The construction would be: *will have* + the *past participle*. For example,

By next year, they **will have run** in ten marathons.

**Using the present perfect with *for* and *since*** When you use *since* and *for* to indicate that a passage of time has elapsed, use the perfect tenses. Remember: Use

*since* when you mention an exact date (day, month, or year), and use *for* when you show a period of time. For example,

He **has lived** in Hong Kong *since* 1997. (exact year)

He **has lived** in Hong Kong *for* ten years. (He still lives in Hong Kong.)

#### ■ *Application*

Write the correct present perfect verb form in the following sentences:

1. We \_\_\_\_\_ (study) for the exam for a week.
2. Since last week, he \_\_\_\_\_ (write) five pages of his novel.
3. She \_\_\_\_\_ (fall) many times since she started Rollerblading.
4. For many weeks, the jury \_\_\_\_\_ (hear) testimony.
5. Since last year, Carl \_\_\_\_\_ (feel) happy at work.
6. Michelle \_\_\_\_\_ (sleep) late since she was a teenager.

#### 4. *Grammar: Irregular Verbs*

Most verbs in English change to the past tense by adding *-ed* or *-d* (if the verb already ends in an *e*). However, there are more than one hundred irregular verbs, and these verbs do not follow this rule. The simple past and past participle forms of irregular verbs are listed in the Appendix on pages 278–280.

#### ■ *Application*

Some of the most troublesome irregular verbs are dealt with in the exercise that follows. For each sentence, write the verb(s) in the simple past or one of the perfect tenses. Read the sentences aloud.

1. It \_\_\_\_\_ (begin) to rain before we arrived at the stadium.
2. The children \_\_\_\_\_ (begin) to sing a song after the teacher \_\_\_\_\_ (begin) playing the piano.
3. He \_\_\_\_\_ (bear) the burden of supporting his family for many years.
4. The wild dog \_\_\_\_\_ (bite) the hunter. It was the first time the dog \_\_\_\_\_ (bite) anyone.
5. He \_\_\_\_\_ (buy) a corsage for his girlfriend. It was the first time he \_\_\_\_\_ (buy) her flowers.



6. The voters \_\_\_\_\_ (choose) a new president on Election Day.
7. The morning dew \_\_\_\_\_ (cling) to the rose petals.
8. The two lions \_\_\_\_\_ (creep) slowly toward their prey.
9. As they watched the sunset, they \_\_\_\_\_ (drink) their tea and \_\_\_\_\_ (dream) of former days.
10. After the apples \_\_\_\_\_ (fall) from the trees, we \_\_\_\_\_ (find) them on the ground.
11. Her grandfather \_\_\_\_\_ (teach) her many things before she \_\_\_\_\_ (leave) for college.
12. The lake \_\_\_\_\_ (freeze) two weeks ago, and we \_\_\_\_\_ (slide) on it as we walked.
13. She was pleased to see that her nephew \_\_\_\_\_ (grow) into a fine adult.
14. We \_\_\_\_\_ (hear) the loud music blasting from their car stereo.
15. The scout \_\_\_\_\_ (lead) the way through the woods. He \_\_\_\_\_ (be) their guide many times before.
16. The thief \_\_\_\_\_ (hide) the jewels, and the police never found out where he \_\_\_\_\_ (put) them.

■ *Application*

*Irregular verbs in the story*

These sentences are taken from Hughes's story. Fill in the past tense forms of the verbs in parentheses.

1. The strap \_\_\_\_\_ (break) with the sudden, single tug.
2. The boy \_\_\_\_\_ (fall) on his back, and his legs \_\_\_\_\_ (fly) up.
3. She \_\_\_\_\_ (shake) him until his teeth rattled.
4. She still \_\_\_\_\_ (hold) him tightly.
5. Then she \_\_\_\_\_ (say), "Now ain't you ashamed of yourself?"

6. He \_\_\_\_\_ (begin) to struggle.
7. He \_\_\_\_\_ (think) she could easily see him.
8. As they \_\_\_\_\_ (eat), she told him about her job.
9. All kinds of women \_\_\_\_\_ (come) into the beauty shop.
10. She \_\_\_\_\_ (cut) him half of her ten-cent cake.
11. When they finished eating, she \_\_\_\_\_ (stand) up.
12. She \_\_\_\_\_ (lead) the way down the hall.

### ■ *Application*

**Using past participles as adjectives** The past participle form of a verb may be used as an adjective. In sentences 4, 6, 10, 13, and 16 of the irregular verbs application on pages 22 and 23, change the first verb in parentheses into the past participle form and combine it with the noun it modifies. For example,

the **frozen** lake  
the **stolen** money

## 5. Grammar: Negative Verb Forms

To change the meaning of a sentence to the negative, we use an auxiliary verb plus the main verb. Remember: The auxiliary shows the tense and the main verb stays in its simple form.

**INCORRECT:** I didn't went shopping.  
He didn't swam.

**CORRECT:** I **didn't go shopping.**  
He **didn't swim.**

When changing the present perfect or past perfect to the negative form, *has* becomes *hasn't* (*has not*); *have* becomes *haven't* (*have not*); and *had* becomes *hadn't* (*had not*). Then add the past participle, as shown in the following examples:

I **haven't gone shopping.**  
He **hasn't swum.**

### ■ *Application*

Look at sentences 1, 4, 5, and 14 of the irregular verbs application on pages 22 and 23. Change each sentence to a negative by using a form of *do* or *have* plus *not*. For example, sentence 1 would read:

It **hadn't begun** to rain before we arrived at the stadium.

## 6. *Editing*

Edit the following essay. Correct any errors in grammar, spelling, or punctuation.

I think mrs Jones teached the boy a good lesson she could of reported him to Police but instead she decided she would taught him a lesson herself. The boy who was lucky she was a good-hearted person done wrong when he stealed her purse. I bet he didn't espect this old lady to be strong enuf to knock him over and drag him to her house and he was afraid to run away and also he liked her. She cared more for him then his own family. The boy was lucky to meet someone like mrs jones.

## D THINKING ABOUT THE STORY

### 1. *Sharing Ideas*

Discuss the following questions with a partner, in a small group, or with the whole class:

1. How does Mrs. Jones react when Roger tries to steal her purse?
2. Is her reaction believable? Why or why not?
3. When they arrive at the boarding house, what do you think Roger is thinking or planning to do?
4. Does Mrs. Jones like the boy? Why?
5. How do you think Roger's encounter with Mrs. Jones alters his life?
6. Why does Hughes title the story, "Thank You, Ma'm"?

## 2. *Writing*

Read the writing ideas that follow. Your instructor may make specific assignments, or ask you to choose one of these.

1. Continue the story, assuming that the characters meet again. Write a dialogue between Roger and Mrs. Jones. Describe their second encounter – a week later, a month later, or a year later.
2. Describe Mrs. Jones and the way she treats Roger. Describe Roger and the way he responds to Mrs. Jones.
3. Write a different ending to the story. For example, Mrs. Jones calls the police, or Roger runs away.
4. Have you ever had a purse or wallet stolen from you? How did you feel? Write about the experience.
5. Juvenile crime can be a problem in the United States. Compare the situation with that in your country.
6. Who should be responsible for the moral education of a child? Parents? Society? Schools? Write about your opinion and give reasons for it.