

## Exploring Kindness and Choice with Langston Hughes' "Thank You M'am"

### Overview

Using the short story "Thank You M'am" by Langston Hughes, a current events story, and role plays, students will explore character issues of kindness and choice.

### Grades

Middle school

### Materials

- "Thank You M'am" by Langston Hughes, story attached
- Choices Scenarios, attached
- Speakers and access to the NPR story, "A Victim Treats His Mugger Right:"  
<http://www.npr.org/2008/03/28/89164759/a-victim-treats-his-mugger-right?ps=cprs>
  - A copy of the transcript of the story is attached

### Duration

45 minutes

### Procedure

#### Random Acts of Kindness

1. As a warm-up, ask students to think of the last kind thing that they did for someone else. Explain that the kind act might be very simple (such as opening the door for someone) or something more time consuming (such as volunteering at a local soup kitchen). Ask students to explain what they did and who they did it for in a paragraph or less. Once students have had a few minutes to compose their thoughts, allow volunteers to share their acts of kindness. Further discuss:
  - Why do we choose to do kind things for (or say kind things to) others?
  - What is the effect on other people? What is the effect on you?
  - When you do kind things, do you find that you are typically doing them for people you know (family and friends) or strangers? Why would you do something kind for someone you don't know?
  - What is our responsibility as members of a community to help our fellow community members, whether we know them or not?

#### "Thank You M'am" by Langston Hughes

2. Tell students they are going to be exploring the concept of kindness today, first by reading a fabulous short story called "Thank You M'am" by Langston Hughes. Pass out the attached copy of "Thank You M'am" and instruct students to read it, either individually or in partners.
3. Since different students will finish at different times, provide an assignment for students to work on while waiting for the entire class to finish. For example, teachers can provide art paper and

crayons, colored pencils, etc. and instruct students to imagine that the story is being made into a book and that they have been hired to create the book jacket.

4. Once students have finished reading, discuss:
  - What surprised you about this story?
  - How would you describe Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones? Why do you think she treated the boy the way that she did?
  - Do you think you would have reacted in the same way? Why or why not?
  - How would you describe Roger? What do you imagine his life is like?
  - Why did Roger rob Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones? Why do you think he chose her as his target? (Discuss with students how beyond the fact that she was elderly and may have appeared to be an easy target, she was also a stranger.) Why do you think those committing crimes often (thought not always) choose people they do not know?
  - Do you think Roger learned a lesson in this story? If so, what lesson and why? Do you think Roger changed after this experience? Explain.
  - What message is the author of this story trying to convey? (Teachers are seeking answers such as "practice human kindness, don't assume anything by the way someone looks, turn the other cheek", etc.)
    - Teachers should take this opportunity to share information about Langston Hughes, his life and career, with students. Sites such as <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/langston-hughes> will provide details.
  - If you were going to give this story another title, what would you call it and why?

### Choices

5. Discuss how in life, we always have choices. Sometimes we make a positive choice and other times we may make a negative choice. Ask students to identify the various choices Roger made in the story and why he may have made each choice. Instruct students to evaluate whether each was a wise choice or not. Also, ask what choices Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones made (she chose to be nice to the boy, she chose to give him a guilt trip, she chose to help him, etc.) and ask why she might have made this choice. Teachers can create a chart on the board and collect student thoughts:

	<b>Choices made</b>	<b>Why choice was made</b>	<b>Evaluate choice made</b>
<b>Roger</b>	Steal handbag	Hungry Wanted shoes Poor Rough home life	This was a negative choice, it's wrong to steal It's wrong to target or take advantage of the elderly Yet, he did meet Mrs. Jones and hopefully learn an important lesson
<b>Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones</b>			

6. Next, tell students you want to share a real life example of such choices being made by playing a three minute clip of a radio interview with them. Go to <http://www.npr.org/2008/03/28/89164759/a-victim-treats-his-mugger-right?ps=cprs> and play the audio for students, asking them to again consider the choices that are made throughout the real life story. (If access to equipment for playing the story is unavailable, the transcripts are attached for reading.) After listening, add Julio Diaz and the teenager to the choices chart. Further discuss and simultaneously fill in the chart regarding the choices these two people made:
- What is your opinion of Mr. Diaz and his actions? Why do you think he made the choices he made?
  - Put yourself in Julio’s shoes. Were his choices easy ones to make? Why or why not? What was he risking by making the choices he made? What did he have to gain?
  - What about the teenager that mugged Mr. Diaz. Why do you think he made this choice?
  - Why do you think the teen agreed to go to dinner with the man that was supposed to be his robbery victim?
  - Why do you think the teen agreed to give Julio his knife?
  - What do these choices tell you about the teenager and why?
  - Based on this story, how would you characterize Mr. Diaz? What particular evidence from the radiocast makes you think this?
  - Consider your experiences as young people and think about the actions of the two adults – Ms. Bates and Mr. Diaz. Do you feel most adults behave in this way towards teens? Why or why not?
  - How might the teen have been impacted from this meeting?

#### **Optional Culminating Activity: Role Playing Choice**

7. Tell students you want to continue exploring the concept of “choice” through role plays. Divide students into groups of four and assign each group one of the attached scenarios to stage and act out. Explain to students that each scenario describes various situations in which young people must make choices. Tell the students they are tasked with turning the scenario into a dramatic scene that covers all the details of the scenario in a creative, realistic and organized way. (Remind students that the goal is not to make classmates laugh, but to depict the facts of the scenario.) Let students know that they can stage their scene anywhere in the room and that they can also create props to use as needed. Go over respectful group work expectations, remind students that the goal of their final scene is to present the facts of the scenario and not to be funny, and allow students 10-15 minutes to work on preparing their scenes.

**Teacher Note:** There are five scenarios attached (with roles for four students in each); if there are more than 20 students who need roles, teachers can add extra roles into each scenario or provide additional scenarios. (Teachers are encouraged to create scenarios that address particular issues students in your community are actually dealing with.)

8. Once students have prepared and practiced their scenes, go over the expectations for being a respectful audience member then allow students to volunteer to present their scenes. After each scene is presented, ensure the class clap loudly as a show of support then discuss:
- What were the various choices made in that scene? Would you evaluate these as good choices or bad choices? Why?

- Are there other choices these students could have made that would have been better? Explain.
    - **Alternative:** Rather than having students answer this question verbally, have them step into the scene and play out their suggestion. To do this, instruct the original actors to be replaying their scene (as close to before as possible.) Tell the students with the alternative suggestion to yell "FREEZE" at the point in the scene where he/she feels a different choice could have been made. At this point the actors will freeze all talking and moving and the audience member can take the place of the one of the actors. The scene will "unfreeze" and continue as the student makes a new choice and thus changes the scene. The other original actors left in the scene must improvise and go with whatever they feel in the moment due to the new choice made. After the replay of the scene ends, lead the students in a discussion regarding how making different choices can lead to different outcomes.
9. Once all scenes have been presented and discussed, wrap up with a closing discussion redefining choices.
- When we are faced with a choice in life (as we often are) why is it important to really consider all the options and possible consequences?
  - We've all made good choices and bad choices at various points in our lives – why do we make the choices we make?
  - What consequences can we face when making a bad choice? Think back to Roger's bad choice of stealing a pocketbook. He lucked out since Mrs. Jones was kind to him, but what consequences might he have faced if his victim were someone not quite as nice as Mrs. Jones?
  - How can we be positive leaders and assist our friends in making good choices?
10. **Optional culminating activity:** Refer students back to the story, "Thank You M'am" and remind them that the story ends with the sentence, "And he never saw her again." Tell students to imagine that the publisher of the story has decided to delete that last sentence and that the publisher has hired each of them to write an alternate ending. Tell students to brainstorm and then write their own continuation/ending of "Thank You M'am."

**Thank You M'am**  
by Langston Hughes

She 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.

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.

"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.

"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 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.

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.*

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. “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.”

“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.”

“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!*

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

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.”

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?”

“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.

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 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.

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. “Good-night! 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. He barely managed to say “Thank you” before she shut the door. And he never saw her again.

## Choices Scenarios

### To Cheat or Not To Cheat

Act out a scene in which three students are taking a test while a teacher grades papers up at her/his desk.

Student A asks to copy off the paper of Student B, explaining that she/he went to the football game last night rather than study. Student B makes the choice to say OK and lets Student A copy her/his paper.

Student C hears all of this and feels it isn't fair. She/he spent all last night studying and knows it isn't right for Student A to get a good grade dishonestly. Student C decides to tell the teacher that Student A was cheating.

The Teacher gives both Student A & B a zero for cheating.



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### Bystander

Student A and B are making fun of Student C at the lunch table.

Student D sits there listening and feels that Student A and B are being really mean and that they should just leave Student C alone. However, Student D makes the choice to stay out of his and doesn't say anything.

Student C, who just found out that her parents are divorcing, is so upset by the teasing that she/he begins to cry. The teasing on top of the trouble at home is just too much for Student C to take.



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### Finder's Keepers

Student's A, B, & C are at the mall walking around.

Student A sees a person drop a \$20 bill about of her wallet.

Student B says that they should go tell the person.

Student C argues they should keep the money.

After discussing it, Students A & B pick up the money and return it to the woman who dropped it.



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### The Truth and Nothing But the Truth

Student A told her/his parents that he/she was attending a study group at the library. Instead of going to the library however, he/she goes to the movies with friends.

When Student A gets home, his/her parents are waiting and ask where he/she has been. Student A makes the choice to again lie, claiming he/she has been at the library the entire time.

The parents then explain that they went by the library and know that he/she wasn't there. They have been worried since they had no idea where he/she was. They ground Student A for lying.



### **Good Sportsmanship**

Student A, B, C & D are playing basket ball.

Student A accidentally knocks student B over while going for the ball. Student B falls down and becomes very angry. He/she gets up and pushes Student A, yelling about being knocked over. Student B pushes back, saying it was only an accident.

Student's C & D come over to where Student A & B are arguing. Student C tells the two to calm down and that fighting isn't worth it.

Student D however instigates the fight, telling Student B he/she shouldn't take being knocked down that way by Student A.

Finally, Student B makes the choice to apologize, saying it really was an accident and Student A accepts the apology.

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