

Across the sidewalk, his shadow was cast, reaching out to the brick of the many buildings around him. It was dark. Late. He looked left and right and decided to act. He ran toward the woman and grabbed her purse; however, what he got was not the purse. What he received was something more. Roger learned something about himself. Langston Hughes' short story, *Thank You, M'am*, poses the idea of what it means to be human, and leaves the reader to consider the lengths a person will go to in order to show compassion.

Compassion is shown, although oddly at first, when Mrs. Jones is holding Roger by his shirt and asks "what did [he] want to do it for?" (78). On the surface, Mrs. Jones appears to be mad, and to some extent she is because she was almost robbed. Yet, she asks Roger a question. This shows she wants to engage with him, hear about his needs. She could have easily took him to the police and been done, but by starting a conversation, she showed her compassion, her care, of his life situation. Roger replies that he didn't mean to rob her, to which she replies that he is lying. Mrs. Jones, in this way, continues to work with Roger. The reader has to wonder why she is putting this much care into a boy who attempted to rob her. The answer is not learned until later, when at her house, but there is an inkling that she has something to teach Roger and that their meeting was not an accident; it was serendipity.

In her house, Roger washes his face, and Mrs. Jones shares a bit about herself, that builds on the theme of compassion, telling Roger, "I were young once and wanted things I could not get" and continues with "I have done things, too..." (79). Mrs. Jones confesses to Roger, and the reader, that she has done bad things in her past; things that might be similar to Roger's attempted robbery. With Mrs. Jones sharing this information, she is sharing with Roger that she understands, and she is setting up a situation where Roger can connect with her. She wants to help Roger—she did not take him to jail; she takes him home; she gets him cleaned up; she feeds

him; and at the end, she gives him ten dollars. All along she is showing compassion. Mrs. Jones has knowledge of how life worked out for her, given the way she behaved as a youth, and she wants to impart this wisdom to Roger. This shows that she cares about Roger to give him the time and energy that a mother would a son, or a grandmother a grandchild. Mrs. Jones does not tell Roger, or the reader, what she did, rather she just says she did “things.” This shows a bit of regret in her past decisions, and something that she would not want for Roger. Roger responds to her compassion, and a shift is made in his behavior with Mrs. Jones.

Roger does not run away from Mrs. Jones; he does not make a dash for the door; and equally important, he does not disregard her teachings. Roger listens because he feels the compassion Mrs. Jones has for him. Through Roger’s change in behavior, the reader sees the theme of compassion in difficult situations. This is easily seen after dinner when Roger asks if Mrs. Jones “... needed somebody to go to the store?” (79). Only a few hours before, Roger attempted to steal Mrs. Jones’s pocketbook, and now he asks if he can be of service to her. This change comes as a result of her caring for him. He wants to give back; he wants to show equal compassion to her in a way that he can which, for him, is running errands. Roger even uses the word “needed” rather than *want*. It is a subtle tone difference but one that was intentional by the author. Roger wants to feel needed because to be needed means that he has value and to have value means that someone cares. Roger gets this value from Mrs. Jones’s as she treats Roger with respect and humanity, something he has probably not felt in a long time, and includes him in her personal life, sharing stories, sharing food. “Want” is a whim. “Need” is a requirement, and Roger needs more from Mrs. Jones to fill up his reserves with compassion.

Caring about another human is something that people do every day for their immediate loved ones—family and friends—but sometimes, a person may be “lost” to this care. For these

times, it is crucial that another human step in and provide that human contact, the compassion, that the family or friends could not provide. Mrs. Luella Washington Bates Jones does just this for Roger—she becomes family. She shows compassion, and as Roger stood on her stoop looking at her door, wanting to have said more than *Thank You*, the reader gets a sense of how much change she made in his life.