Smith, 1

*Highlight your favorite lines/arguments as you read…*

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AP Literature and Composition

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Foster Application Paper

Literature can expand beyond the page; the ink induced words and pristine white pages can represent more than it surface value. Each reader takes something different from the literature they pursue, and it is Thomas C. Foster who argues there is so much more to a piece of literature that its basic setting, plots, and characters. His book—How to Read Literature Like a Professor—offers an array of theories and pushes readers to think more critically about the poems, short stories, and novels we study. Although he is a contemporary critic of today, his analysis of literature across the ages proves to be fruitful and accurate. Many of his theories can be applied to Langston Hughes and his sudden fiction, “Thank You, M’am,” in which a simple botched attempt of stealing an old lady’s handbag can mean so much more.

Langston’s young protagonist, Roger, is on a mission—or rather he is on *a quest*. The teenager seeks to grab the handbag of Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones in one swift swipe, and gets pummeled by the woman as a result. Foster argues that every fictional trip can be classified into a five criteria quest and Roger is no except— he fits the M.O. offered by Foster in his book’s first chapter. Foster states that “questers are [so] often young, inexperienced, immature, sheltered” (Foster, 3) characters and Roger fits the bill. Roger is around 14-15 years old (Hughes, 65) and his immature desire to steal reflects his role of the quester. Foster continues to argue that questers will face some type of hardship, challenge, or ordeal in their pursuits, and Roger faces one very large challenge: Mrs. Luella. Mrs. Jones doesn’t hesitant to knock Roger down and humorously, “put a half nelson about his neck” (Hughes, 65). From the street, and until they arrive at Luella’s house, Roger is fraught against the strength of Mrs. Jones, which is a true physical struggle in the story’s rising action. But, perhaps the strongest of Foster’s arguments in his quest theory is his belief a quest serves a higher and nobler purpose. Roger’s original goal was to steal money for the shoes he envied, and in the end he learns a fine lesson about right and wrong; Foster believes that a “quest is educational” and is always about “self-knowledge (Foster, 3). Roger learns a great life lesson from Luella, and although he was trying to steal, the ending resolution was more beneficial for him.

Mrs. Luella’s character is interesting, and in some ways it could be argued, that she is a one of the “Christ figures” that Foster discusses in chapter fourteen. The allusion towards Mrs. Jones and Jesus is subtle, but still present in the story, for Foster argues these key traits about a Christ figure, he claims that they are:

“(4) Good with Children

(17) Very Forgiving

(18) [They] Come to redeem an unworthy world” (Foster, 119).

Although the traits don’t fit Mrs. Luella perfectly, Foster points out that, “a Christ figure doesn’t need to resemble Christ in every way” (Foster, 122). True, some may say Mrs. Jones wasn’t good with children because she put Roger is a choke hold, but towards the end of the story she feeds him, converses with him, and offers him some money. She is very forgiving of Roger’s crime towards her and Roger realizes that as he struggles to “say something other than, ‘Thank you, M’am’” (Hughes, 67). While she doesn’t redeem the entire world, she does redeem a boy who represents a future generation. She impacts Roger. She helps change him. The image of Luella as Christ-like is further emphasized with Hughes’ first description of her as a woman with a purse “that had everything in it but hammer and nails” (Hughes, 64). The hyperbole brings up images of Jesus and his nailing to the cross for some who read it, especially as they get to know her personality throughout the story.

Mrs. Jones reinforces her Christ-like image further with Roger’s baptism; baptism is another theory that is promoted in Foster’s book, in chapter fifteen. Roger is told by Mrs. Luella to, “go to the sink and wash your face (Hughes, 65). Roger is given a moment of freedom—an opportunity to bolt for the door—and yet he “went to the sink” (Hughes, 65). Luella directs him on how to wash and it is this act that seems to symbolize Roger’s rebirth and transition from resisting Luella and committing petty theft, to listening to her and learning a valuable moral lesson. Foster says that, “death and rebirth” are presented “through the medium of water” (Foster, 155). Roger does change and it is the act of washing his face—*with water*—in the sink that represents that change, and its Luella who overlooks it—much like Jesus did for his apostles.

Some of Foster’s strongest arguments in his book are on the way meals can represents so much more for the characters and their relationships with one another. Food brings characters together, and after Roger’s attack on Mrs. Jones, she drags him to her house and—ironically—shares dinner with him. Foster argues, “in the real world, breaking bread together is an act of sharing and peace, since if your breaking bread, you’re not breaking heads (Foster, 8). This rings true in Hughes’ fictional world, for after Luella has physically overpowered and assaulted Roger, she offers Roger a sign of peace with, “some lima beans and ham she had in the icebox” (Hughes,66). The two come together, and it is in this moment of kindness and cocoa that Roger truly appreciates Luella’s compassion.

At least four of Foster’s arguments translate well to Langston Hughes’ story. He presents argues about the power of allusion with the many traditions and traits of the bible that resonated in “Thank You, Ma’m.” The story is short and appears simple in its lesson, which is: compassion can teach volumes, but the story is so much more complex beneath the surface. Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones becomes an icon of physical strength and reveals the power of psychology when reconditioning flawed humanity. By looking beyond the page and taking on Thomas C. Foster’s professor persona, you can find so much more to this 3 ½ page sudden fiction story, and the author, Langston Hughes.

***Directions:***

Activity #1: After reading this sample essay, what are some good ideas that you want to steal, borrow, or recreate…list them below…

Activity #2: Now, to help you review the rubric, grade the essay on the rubric by circling where they scored…tally up their final score when you finish!