

6 The Hundred Dresses-II

El Bsoor Esler

WHILE the class was circling the room, the monitor from the principal's office brought Miss Mason a note. Miss Mason read it several times and studied it thoughtfully for a while. Then she clapped her hands.

"Attention, class. Everyone back to their seat."

When the shuffling of feet had stopped and the room was still and quiet, Miss Mason said, "I have a letter from Wanda's father that I want to read to you."

Miss Mason stood there a moment and the silence in the room grew tense and expectant. The teacher adjusted her glasses slowly and deliberately. Her manner indicated that what was coming — this letter from Wanda's father — was a matter of great importance. Everybody listened closely as Miss Mason read the brief note.

listened closely
listened with
attention

Dear Teacher:

My Wanda will not come to your school any more. Jake also. Now we move away to big city. No more holler 'Pollack'. No more ask why funny name. Plenty of funny names in the big city.

Yours truly,
Jan Petronski

A deep silence met the reading of this letter. Miss Mason took off her glasses, blew on them and wiped them on her soft white handkerchief. Then she put them on again and looked at the class. When she spoke her voice was very low.

"I am sure that none of the boys and girls in Room Thirteen would purposely and deliberately hurt anyone's feelings because his or her name happened to be a long, unfamiliar one. I prefer

to think that what was said was said in thoughtlessness. I know that all of you feel the way I do, that this is a very unfortunate thing to have happened — unfortunate and sad, both. And I want you all to think about it.”

The first period was a study period. Maddie tried to prepare her lessons, but she could not put her mind on her work. She had a very sick feeling in the bottom of her stomach. True, she had not enjoyed listening to Peggy ask Wanda how many dresses she had in her closet, but she had said nothing. She had stood by silently, and that was just as bad as what Peggy had done. Worse. She was a coward. At least Peggy hadn't considered they were being mean but she, Maddie, had thought they were doing wrong. She could put herself in Wanda's shoes.

Goodness! Wasn't there anything she could do? If only she could tell Wanda she hadn't meant to hurt her feelings. She turned around and stole a glance at Peggy, but Peggy did not look up. She seemed to be studying hard. Well, whether Peggy felt badly or not, she, Maddie, had to do something. She had to find Wanda Petronski. Maybe she had not yet moved away. Maybe Peggy would climb the Heights with her, and they would tell Wanda she had won the contest, that they thought she was smart and the hundred dresses were beautiful.

Oral Comprehension Check

1. *What did Mr Petronski's letter say?*
2. *Is Miss Mason angry with the class, or is she unhappy and upset?*
3. *How does Maddie feel after listening to the note from Wanda's father?*
4. *What does Maddie want to do?*



When school was dismissed in the afternoon, Peggy said, with pretended casualness, "Hey, let's go and see if that kid has left town or not."

So Peggy had had the same idea! Maddie glowed. Peg was really all right.

The two girls hurried out of the building, up the street toward Boggins Heights, the part of town that wore such a forbidding air on this kind of a November afternoon, drizzly, damp and dismal.

"Well, at least," said Peggy gruffly, "I never did call her a foreigner or make fun of her name. I never thought she had the sense to know we were making fun of her anyway. I thought she was too dumb. And gee, look how she can draw!"

Maddie could say nothing. All she hoped was that they would find Wanda. She wanted to tell her that they were sorry they had picked on her, and how wonderful the whole school thought she was, and please, not to move away and everybody would be nice. She and Peggy would fight anybody who was not nice.

The two girls hurried on. They hoped to get to the top of the hill before dark.

"I think that's where the Petronskis live," said Maddie, pointing to a little white house. Wisps of old grass stuck up here and there along the pathway like thin kittens. The house and its sparse little yard looked shabby but clean. It reminded Maddie of Wanda's one dress, her faded blue cotton dress, shabby but clean.

There was not a sign of life about the house. Peggy knocked firmly on the door, but there was no answer. She and Maddie went around to the back yard and knocked there. Still there was no answer.



damp and dismal
wet and sad (here,
expressing a state of
hopelessness)

There was no doubt about it. The Petronskis were gone. How could they ever make amends?

They turned slowly and made their way back down the hill.

"Well, anyway," said Peggy, "she's gone now, so what can we do? Besides, when I was asking her about all her dresses, she probably was getting good ideas for her drawings. She might not even have won the contest, otherwise."

Maddie turned this idea carefully over in her head, for if there were anything in it she would not have to feel so badly. But that night she could not get to sleep. She thought about Wanda and her faded blue dress and the little house she had lived in. And she thought of the glowing picture those hundred dresses made — all lined up in the classroom. At last Maddie sat up in bed and pressed her forehead tight in her hands and really thought. This was the hardest thinking she had ever done. After a long, long time, she reached an important conclusion.

She was never going to stand by and say nothing again.

If she ever heard anybody picking on someone because they were funny looking or because they had strange names, she'd speak up. Even if it meant losing Peggy's friendship. She had no way of making things right with Wanda, but from now on she would never make anybody else that unhappy again.

(to) make amends
to show that one is sorry by doing something good

picking on someone
treating someone unkindly, unfairly
criticising them

Oral Comprehension Check

1. What excuses does Peggy think up for her behaviour? Why?
2. What are Maddie's thoughts as they go to Boggins Heights?
3. Why does Wanda's house remind Maddie of Wanda's blue dress?



4. What does Maddie think hard about? What important decision does she come to?

On Saturday Maddie spent the afternoon with Peggy. They were writing a letter to Wanda Petronski. It was just a friendly letter telling about the contest and telling Wanda she had won. They told her how pretty her drawings were. And they asked her if she liked where she was living and if she liked her new teacher. They had meant to say they were sorry, but it ended up with their just writing a friendly letter, the kind they would have written to any good friend, and they signed it with lots of X's for love. They mailed the letter to Boggins Heights, writing 'Please Forward' on the envelope.

Days passed and there was no answer, but the letter did not come back, so maybe Wanda had received it. Perhaps she was so hurt and angry she was not going to answer. You could not blame her.

Weeks went by and still Wanda did not answer. Peggy had begun to forget the whole business, and Maddie put herself to sleep at night making speeches about Wanda, defending her from great crowds of girls who were trying to tease her with, "How many dresses have you got?" And before Wanda could press her lips together in a tight line, the way she did before answering, Maddie would cry out, "Stop!" Then everybody would feel ashamed the way she used to feel.

Now it was Christmas time and there was snow on the ground. Christmas bells and a small tree decorated the classroom. On the last day of school before the holidays, the teacher showed the class a letter she had received that morning.



"You remember Wanda Petronski, the gifted little artist who won the drawing contest? Well, she has written me, and I am glad to know where she lives, because now I can send her medal. I want to read her letter to you."

The class sat up with a sudden interest and listened intently.

Dear Miss Mason,

How are you and Room Thirteen? Please tell the girls they can keep those hundred dresses, because in my new house I have a hundred new ones, all lined up in my closet. I'd like that girl Peggy to have the drawing of the green dress with the red trimming, and her friend Maddie to have the blue one. For Christmas, I miss that school and my new teacher does not equalise with you. Merry Christmas to you and everybody.

Yours truly,
Wanda Petronski

On the way home from school Maddie and Peggy held their drawings very carefully. All the houses had wreaths and holly in the windows. Outside the grocery store, hundreds of Christmas trees were stacked, and in the window, candy peppermint sticks and cornucopias of shiny transparent paper were strung. The air smelled like Christmas and light shining everywhere reflected different colours on the snow.

"Boy!" said Peggy, "this shows she really likes us. It shows she got our letter and this is her way of saying that everything's all right. And that's that."

"I hope so," said Maddie sadly. She felt sad because she knew she would never see the little tight-lipped Polish girl again and couldn't ever really make things right between them.

She went home and she pinned her drawing over a torn place in the pink-flowered wallpaper in the bedroom. The shabby room came alive from the brilliancy of the colours. Maddie sat down on her bed and looked at the drawing. She had stood by and said nothing, but Wanda had been nice to her, anyway.

cornucopias
decorative
containers (usually
full of flowers and
fruits)

Tears blurred her eyes and she gazed for a long time at the picture. Then hastily she rubbed her eyes and studied it intently. The colours in the dress were so vivid that she had scarcely noticed the face and head of the drawing. But it looked like her, Maddie! It really looked like her own mouth. Why it really looked like her own self! Wanda had really drawn this for her. Excitedly, she ran over to Peggy's.

"Peg!" she said, "let me see your picture."

"What's the matter?" asked Peggy, as they clattered up to her room where Wanda's drawing was lying face down on the bed. Maddie carefully raised it.

"Look! She drew you. That's you!" she exclaimed. And the head and face of this picture did look like Peggy.

"What did I say!" said Peggy, "She must have really liked us, anyway."

"Yes, she must have," agreed Maddie, and she blinked away the tears that came every time she thought of Wanda standing alone in that sunny spot in the school yard, looking stolidly over at the group of laughing girls after she had walked off, after she had said, "Sure, a hundred of them, all lined up."

Oral Comprehension Check

1. What did the girls write to Wanda?
2. Did they get a reply? Who was more anxious for a reply, Peggy or Maddie? How do you know?
3. How did the girls know that Wanda liked them even though they had teased her?

Thinking about the Text

1. Why do you think Wanda's family moved to a different city? Do you think life there was going to be different for their family?
2. Maddie thought her silence was as bad as Peggy's teasing. Was she right?
3. Peggy says, "I never thought she had the sense to know we were making fun of her anyway. I thought she was too dumb. And gee, look how she can draw!" What led Peggy to believe that Wanda was dumb? Did she change her opinion later?

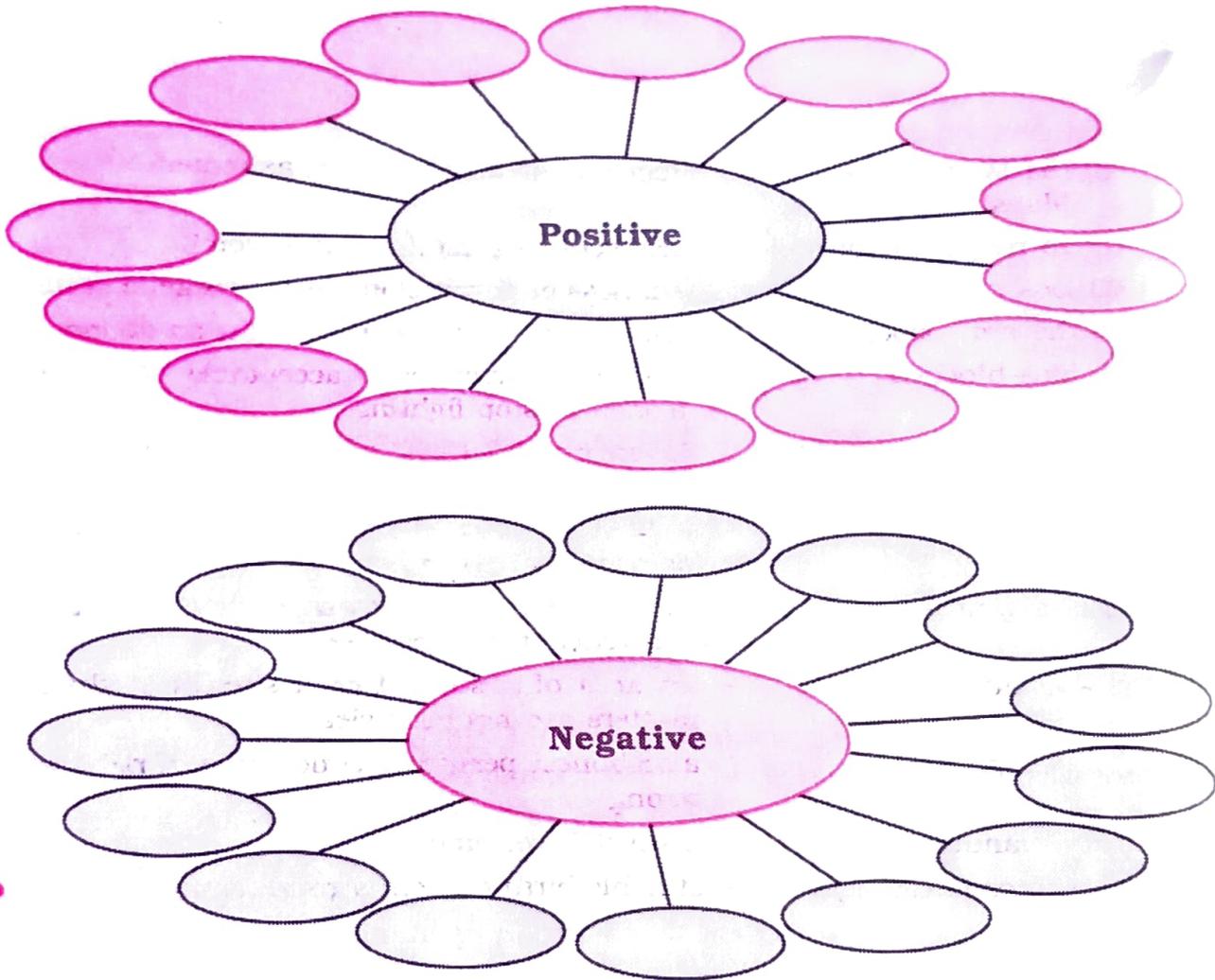


4. What important decision did Maddie make? Why did she have to think hard to do so?
5. Why do you think Wanda gave Maddie and Peggy the drawings of the dresses? Why are they surprised?
6. Do you think Wanda really thought the girls were teasing her? Why or Why not?

Thinking about Language

1. Here are thirty adjectives describing human qualities. Discuss them with your partner and put them in the two word webs (given below) according to whether you think they show positive or negative qualities. You can consult a dictionary if you are not sure of the meanings of some of the words. You may also add to the list the positive or negative 'pair' of a given word.

kind, sarcastic, courteous, arrogant, insipid, timid, placid, cruel, haughty, proud, zealous, intrepid, sensitive, compassionate, introverted, stolid, cheerful, contented, thoughtless, vain, friendly, unforgiving, fashionable, generous, talented, lonely, determined, creative, miserable, complacent



II. What adjectives can we use to describe Peggy, Wanda and Maddie? You can choose adjectives from the list above. You can also add some of your own.

1. Peggy _____
2. Wanda _____
3. Maddie _____

III. 1. Find the sentences in the story with the following phrasal verbs.

lined up thought up took off stood by

2. Look up these phrasal verbs in a dictionary to find out if they can be used in some other way. (Look at the entries for *line*, *think*, *take* and *stand* in the dictionary.) Find out what other prepositions can go with these verbs. What does each of these phrasal verbs mean?
3. Use at least five such phrasal verbs in sentences of your own.

IV. Colours are used to describe feelings, moods and emotions. Match the following 'colour expressions' with a suggested paraphrase.

- | | |
|------------------------------|--|
| (i) the Monday morning blues | - feel embarrassed/angry/ashamed |
| (ii) go red in the face | - feel very sick, as if about to vomit |
| (iii) look green | - sadness or depression after a weekend of fun |
| (iv) the red carpet | - the sign or permission to begin an action |
| (v) blue-blooded | - a sign of surrender or acceptance of defeat; a wish to stop fighting |
| (vi) a green belt | - in an unlawful act; while doing something wrong |
| (vii) a blackguard | - a photographic print of building plans; a detailed plan or scheme |
| (viii) a grey area | - land around a town or city where construction is prohibited by law |
| (ix) a white flag | - an area of a subject or a situation where matters are not very clear |
| (x) a blueprint | - a dishonest person with no sense of right or wrong |
| (xi) red-handed | - a special welcome |
| (xii) the green light | - of noble birth or from a royal family |



Speaking

Role Play

The story of Wanda Petronski presents many characters engaged in many kinds of behaviour (teasing, playing, sitting in class...). Form groups. Choose an episode or episodes from the story. Assign roles to each member of the group from that episode, and try to act it out like a play, using the words in the story.

Writing

1. Look again at the letter which Wanda's father writes to Miss Mason, Wanda's teacher. Mr Petronski is not quite aware how to write a formal letter in English. Can you rewrite it more appropriately? Discuss the following with your partner before you do so.

The format of a formal letter: How to begin the letter and how to end it; the language of the letter needs to be formal. (Avoid informal words like "holler" and fragments like "No more ask why funny name.") Write complete sentences.

2. Are you interested in drawing and painting? Ritu Kumar, one of India's best known dress designers, has no formal training in designing. She started by sketching ideas for her own dresses, and getting them stitched by a tailor. Ritu's friends liked her dresses so much that they asked her to design clothes for them, and even paid her for it!

Imagine you are going to make a career out of your hobby. What sort of things will you need to learn? Write a paragraph or two on this topic after consulting an expert or doing reference work on your chosen area.

3. Rewrite a part of the story as if Wanda is telling us her own story.

In This Lesson

WHAT WE HAVE DONE

Narrated the story of Wanda Petronski, a poor little Polish girl in an American school, and how her amazing drawing skills made her classmates feel ashamed about how they had treated her.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Help your students conduct a survey in their class to find out about the different talents that their classmates possess — anything from cooking to painting to singing to gardening. Divide the class into two equal sections, A and B. Each student from Section A talks with one student from Section B, and they interview each other for five or ten minutes, so that at the end of that time all the students have been interviewed. Then about five students from each section (more if there is time) talk about the talents of the person they interviewed. Make sure that some of the more 'marginalised' students from your class (each class has some of them) have their moment of 'fame.'

This exercise can be done after Units 5 and 6 have been completed, so that students understand the point of the exercise better.

The Ball Poem

A boy loses a ball. He is very upset. A ball doesn't cost much, nor is it difficult to buy another ball. Why then is the boy so upset? Read the poem to see what the poet thinks has been lost, and what the boy has to learn from the experience of losing something.

What is the boy now, who has lost his ball,
What, what is he to do? I saw it go
Merrily bouncing, down the street, and then
Merrily over — there it is in the water!
No use to say 'O there are other balls':
An ultimate shaking grief fixes the boy
As he stands rigid, trembling, staring down
All his young days into the harbour where
His ball went. I would not intrude on him;
A dime, another ball, is worthless. Now
He senses first responsibility
In a world of possessions. People will take
Balls, balls will be lost always, little boy.
And no one buys a ball back. Money is external.
He is learning, well behind his desperate eyes,
The epistemology of loss, how to stand up
Knowing what every man must one day know
And most know many days, how to stand up.

JOHN BERRYMAN

Glossary

O there are other balls: The words suggest that the loss is not important enough to worry about

shaking grief: sadness which greatly affects the boy

rigid: stiff

(to) **intrude on**: here, to enter a situation where one is not welcome

a dime: ten cents (U.S.)

desperate: hopeless

epistemology of loss: understanding the nature of loss — what it means to lose something

epistemology: The Greek word *episteme* means 'knowledge' (it comes from a word meaning 'to understand, to know'). Epistemology is the study of the nature of knowledge itself.

Thinking about the Poem

In pairs, attempt the following questions.

1. Why does the poet say, "I would not intrude on him"? Why doesn't he offer him money to buy another ball?
2. "... staring down/All his young days into the harbour where/His ball went ..."
Do you think the boy has had the ball for a long time? Is it linked to the memories of days when he played with it?
3. What does "in the world of possessions" mean?
4. Do you think the boy has lost anything earlier? Pick out the words that suggest the answer.
5. What does the poet say the boy is learning from the loss of the ball? Try to explain this in your own words.
6. Have you ever lost something you liked very much? Write a paragraph describing how you felt then, and saying whether — and how — you got over your loss.

