

Before You Read

MADAM AND THE RENT MAN

Make the Connection

Face to Face

- “Grin and bear it.”
- “Stand up for yourself.”

What does “grin and bear it” mean? Have you ever been in a situation where you had to “grin and bear it”? What does “stand up for yourself” mean? When do people have to stand up for themselves?

Quickwrite

Write down your thoughts in response to the following questions:



1. Which is harder—to grin and bear it or to stand up for yourself?
2. Can you stand up for yourself and still be polite? still be popular?
3. Will people respect you if you always deal with situations you don't like by grinning and bearing it?



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The Apartment (1943) by Jacob Lawrence. Gouache on paper (21¼" × 29¼") (HMA 1982.10).

Elements of Literature

Tone

Has anyone ever said to you, “Don’t use that tone of voice with me”? Your tone can change the meaning of what you say. Tone can turn a statement like “You’re a big help” into a genuine compliment or a cruel, sarcastic remark.

Poems and stories have tones, too. As you read “Madam and the Rent Man,” think about the **tone**, or the writer’s attitude, and how that tone is conveyed to the reader.

Tone is the attitude a writer takes toward the audience, the subject, or a character. Tone is conveyed through the writer’s choice of words and details.

For more on Tone, see the *Handbook of Literary Terms*.

Madam and the Rent Man

Langston Hughes

The rent man knocked.
He said, Howdy-do?
I said, What
Can I do for you?
5 He said, You know
Your rent is due.

I said, Listen,
Before I'd pay
I'd go to Hades⁹
10 And rot away!

The sink is broke,
The water don't run,
And you ain't done a thing
You promised to've done.

15 Back window's cracked,
Kitchen floor squeaks,
There's rats in the cellar,
And the attic leaks.

He said, Madam,
20 It's not up to me.
I'm just the agent,
Don't you see?

I said, Naturally,
You pass the buck.
25 If it's money you want
You're out of luck.

He said, Madam,
I ain't pleased!
I said, Neither am I.

30 So we agrees!

9. **Hades** (hā'dēz'): in Greek mythology, the underworld, or world of the dead.



Hunter Museum of American Art, Chattanooga, Tennessee. Museum purchase with funds provided by the Benwood Foundation and the 1982 Collectors' Group. Courtesy of the artist and the Francine Seders Gallery, Seattle, Washington.

Background

Literature and Place

This poem is set in Harlem, a section of New York City where most people live in rented apartments. The speaker of the poem is a woman who has reason to be angry with her landlord.

MAKING MEANINGS

• First Thoughts

1. Which of the following would you say to Madam, and why?
 - “Wait a minute, Madam—you might be evicted.”
 - “Why are you picking on the agent? It’s not his fault.”
 - “You tell him, Madam!”

Shaping Interpretations

2. What does “pass the buck” mean? How has the rent man “passed the buck”?
3. The woman in the poem speaks plainly and bluntly. Do you think she is right to speak this way? Explain. Refer to your Quickwrite notes for ideas.
4. What **tones** do you hear expressed in this poem?
5. Do you think this poem has a **message**? Explain.



CHOICES: Building Your Portfolio

Writer's Notebook

1. Collecting Ideas for Supporting a Position



buildings. What positions would you take in support of the tenants? How would you make your positions known?

Creative Writing/

Reading Aloud

3. The Rent Man Knocked

Prepare a read-aloud of “Madam and the Rent Man” in which you and a partner