



The Hundred Dresses Part 1



BEFORE YOU READ

- **How do we judge the people around us — by their money, wealth and possessions? Or is there something of more enduring value to look for in a person?**
 - **This story is a sensitive account of how a poor young girl is judged by her classmates. Wanda Petronski is a young Polish girl who goes to school with other American children in an American town. These other children see Wanda as ‘different’ in many ways. Can you guess how they treat her?**
 - **Read the information in the box below. Find out more about this community (or about a related topic) from an encyclopedia, or the Internet.**
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BEFORE YOU READ

The Polish-American Community in the United States

The first Polish immigrants arrived in America in 1608, but the largest wave of Polish immigration occurred in the early twentieth century, when more than one million Poles migrated to the United States. The Polish State did not exist at that time, and the immigrants were identified according to their country of origin rather than to ethnicity. They were identified as Russian Poles, German Poles and Austrian Poles.

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One of the most notable Polish-American communities is in Chicago and its suburbs; so Chicago is sometimes called the second largest ‘Polish’ city in the world, next only to Warsaw, the capital of Poland. Polish-Americans were sometimes discriminated against in the United States, as were the Irish, Italians, and Jews.

According to the United States 2000 Census, 667,414 Americans of age five years and older reported Polish as the language spoken at home, which is about 1.4 per cent of the people who speak languages other than English, or 0.25 per cent of the U.S. population.

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TODAY, Monday, Wanda Petronski was not in her seat. But nobody, not even Peggy and Madeline, the girls who started all the fun, noticed her absence. Usually Wanda sat in the seat next to the last seat in the last row in Room Thirteen. She sat in the corner of the room where the rough boys who did not make good marks sat, the corner of the room where there was most scuffling of feet, most roars of laughter when anything funny was said, and most mud and dirt on the floor.

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Wanda did not sit there because she was rough and noisy. On the contrary, she was very quiet and rarely said anything at all. And nobody had ever heard her laugh out loud. Sometimes she twisted her mouth into a crooked sort of smile, but that was all. Nobody knew exactly why Wanda sat in that seat, unless it was because she came all the way from Boggins Heights and her feet were usually caked with dry mud. But no one really thought much about Wanda Petronski, once she sat in the corner of the room.

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The time when they thought about Wanda was outside of school hours — at noon-time when they were coming back to school or in the morning early before school began, when groups of two or three, or even more, would be talking and laughing on their way to the school yard. Then, sometimes, they waited for Wanda — to have fun with her.

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The next day, Tuesday, Wanda was not in school, either. And nobody noticed her absence again. But on Wednesday, Peggy and Maddie, who sat down front with other children who got good marks and who didn't track in a whole lot of mud, did notice that Wanda wasn't there. Peggy was the most popular girl in school. She was pretty, she had many pretty clothes and her hair was curly. Maddie was her closest friend. The reason Peggy and Maddie noticed Wanda's absence was because Wanda had made them late to school. They had waited and waited for Wanda, to have some fun with her, and she just hadn't come. They often waited for Wanda Petronski — to have fun with her.

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Wanda Petronski. Most of the children in Room Thirteen didn't have names like that. They had names easy to say, like Thomas, Smith or Allen. There was one boy named Bounce, Willie Bounce, and people thought that was funny, but not funny in the same way that Petronski was.

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Wanda didn't have any friends. She came to school alone and went home alone. She always wore a faded blue dress that didn't hang right. It was clean, but it looked as though it had never been ironed properly. She didn't have any friends, but a lot of girls talked to her. Sometimes, they surrounded her in the school yard as she stood watching the little girls play hopscotch on the worn hard ground.

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“Wanda,” Peggy would say in a most courteous manner as though she were talking to Miss Mason. “Wanda,” she’d say, giving one of her friends a nudge, “tell us. How many dresses did you say you had hanging up in your closet?”



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“A hundred,” Wanda would say.

“A hundred!” exclaimed all the little girls incredulously, and the little ones would stop playing hopscotch and listen.

“Yeah, a hundred, all lined up,” said Wanda. Then her thin lips drew together in silence.

“What are they like? All silk, I bet,” said Peggy.

“Yeah, all silk, all colours.”

“Velvet, too?”

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“Yeah, velvet too. A hundred dresses,” Wanda would repeat stolidly. “All lined up in my closet.”

Then they’d let her go. And then before she’d gone very far, they couldn’t help bursting into shrieks and peals of laughter.

A hundred dresses! Obviously, the only dress Wanda had was the blue one she wore every day. So why did she say she had a hundred? What a story!

“How many shoes did you say you had?”

“Sixty pairs. All lined up in my closet.”

Cries of exaggerated politeness greeted this. “All alike?” “Oh, no. Every pair is different. All colours. All lined up.”

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“Oh, no. Every pair is different. All colours. All lined up.”

Peggy, who had thought up this game, and Maddie, her inseparable friend, were always the last to leave. Finally Wanda would move up the street, her eyes dull and her mouth closed, hitching her left shoulder every now and then in the funny way she had, finishing the walk to school alone.

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Peggy was not really cruel. She protected small children from bullies. And she cried for hours if she saw an animal mistreated. If anybody had said to her, “Don’t you think that is a cruel way to treat Wanda?” she would have been very surprised. Cruel? Why did the girl say she had a hundred dresses? Anybody could tell that that was a lie. Why did she want to lie? And she wasn’t just an ordinary person, else why did she have a name like that? Anyway, they never made her cry.

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As for Maddie, this business of asking Wanda every day how many dresses and how many hats, and how many this and that she had was bothering her. Maddie was poor herself. She usually wore somebody's hand-me-down clothes. Thank goodness, she didn't live up on Boggins Heights or have a funny name.

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Sometimes, when Peggy was asking Wanda those questions in that mocking polite voice, Maddie felt embarrassed and studied the marbles in the palm of her hand, rolling them around and saying nothing herself. Not that she felt sorry for Wanda, exactly. She would never have paid any attention to Wanda if Peggy hadn't invented the dresses game. But suppose Peggy and all the others started in on her next? She wasn't as poor as Wanda, perhaps, but she was poor. Of course she would have more sense than to say she had a hundred dresses. Still she would not like for them to begin on her. She wished Peggy would stop teasing Wanda Petronski.

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Today, even though they had been late to school, Maddie was glad she had not had to make fun of Wanda. She worked her arithmetic problems absentmindedly. “Eight times eight — let’s see...” She wished she had the nerve to write Peggy a note, because she knew she never would have the courage to speak right out to Peggy, to say, “Hey, Peg, let’s stop asking Wanda how many dresses she has.” When she finished her arithmetic she did start a note to Peggy. Suddenly she paused and shuddered.

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She pictured herself in the school yard, a new target for Peggy and the girls. Peggy might ask her where she got the dress that she had on, and Maddie would have to say it was one of Peggy's old ones that Maddie's mother had tried to disguise with new trimmings so no one in Room Thirteen would recognise it.

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If only Peggy would decide of her own accord to stop having fun with Wanda. Oh, well! Maddie ran her hand through her short blonde hair as though to push the uncomfortable thoughts away. What difference did it make? Slowly Maddie tore into bits the note she had started. She was Peggy's best friend, and Peggy was the best-liked girl in the whole room. Peggy could not possibly do anything that was really wrong, she thought.

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As for Wanda, she was just some girl who lived up on Boggins Heights and stood alone in the school yard. She scarcely ever said anything to anybody. The only time she talked was in the school yard about her hundred dresses. Maddie remembered her telling about one of her dresses, pale blue with coloured trimmings. And she remembered another that was brilliant jungle green with a red sash. “You’d look like a Christmas tree in that,” the girls had said in pretended admiration.

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Thinking about Wanda and her hundred dresses all lined up in the closet, Maddie began to wonder who was going to win the drawing and colouring contest. For girls, this contest consisted of designing dresses and for boys, of designing motorboats. Probably Peggy would win the girls' medal. Peggy drew better than anyone else in the room. At least, that's what everybody thought. She could copy a picture in a magazine or some film star's head so that you could almost tell who it was. Oh, Maddie was sure Peggy would win. Well, tomorrow the teacher was going to announce the winners. Then they'd know.

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The next day it was drizzling. Maddie and Peggy hurried to school under Peggy's umbrella. Naturally, on a day like this, they didn't wait for Wanda Petronski on the corner of Oliver Street, the street that far, far away, under the railroad tracks and up the hill, led to Boggins Heights. Anyway, they weren't taking chances on being late today, because today was important.

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“Do you think Miss Mason will announce the winners today?” asked Peggy.

“Oh, I hope so, the minute we get in,” said Maddie. “Of course, you’ll win, Peg.”

“Hope so,” said Peggy eagerly.

The minute they entered the classroom, they stopped short and gasped. There were drawings all over the room, on every ledge and windowsill, dazzling colours and brilliant, lavish designs, all drawn on great sheets of wrapping paper. There must have been a hundred of them, all lined up. These must be the drawings for the contest. They were! Everybody stopped and whistled or murmured admiringly.

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As soon as the class had assembled, Miss Mason announced the winners. Jack Beggles had won for the boys, she said, and his design for an outboard motor was on exhibition in Room Twelve, along with the sketches by all the other boys.

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“As for the girls,” she said, “although just one or two sketches were submitted by most, one girl — and Room Thirteen should be proud of her — this one girl actually drew one hundred designs — all different and all beautiful. In the opinion of the judges, any one of the drawings is worthy of winning the prize. I am very happy to say that Wanda Petronski is the winner of the girls’ medal.

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Unfortunately, Wanda has been absent from school for some days and is not here to receive the applause that is due to her. Let us hope she will be back tomorrow. Now class, you may file around the room quietly and look at her exquisite drawings.”

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The children burst into applause, and even the boys were glad to have a chance to stamp on the floor, put their fingers in their mouths and whistle, though they were not interested in dresses.

“Look, Peg,” whispered Maddie. “There’s that blue one she told us about. Isn’t it beautiful?”

“Yes,” said Peggy, “And here’s that green one. Boy, and I thought I could draw.”

**THANK
YOU**

