

Mother to Son

BY LANGSTON HUGHES

The poem's title "Mother to Son" announces to the listener or reader that what will be spoken is personal. It's to a loved family member. **Look for other diction that shows her affection for her son.**

Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor—
Bare.
But all the time
I've been a-climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,
And turnin' corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.
So boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall now—
For I've still goin', honey,
I've still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

Line 2 establishes the central metaphor of the staircase. Tactile and visual imagery follow on the next few lines.

What might these details about the staircase symbolize? What things in her life might have been tacks, splinters, or bare? By putting the word "Bare." By itself on line 7, Hughes emphasizes it. How does its different meanings contribute to the poem?

Hughes' use of seven gerunds (-ing nouns) in lines 9-12, 18-19) has a few effects:

- 1.They show action
- 2.They repeat (like her action of climbing)
- 3.They show her voice (vernacular of no ending "g" sound)
- 4.The fact that they lack an ending also infers an endlessness to her climb

Definitions: "Enjambment" refers to lines that have no punctuation and thus link to the following line (between dark and where). "End-stopped line" means there is punctuation (like the – after now).

The speaker echoes back to line 2 – emphasizing the theme of the poem.

Look for patterns in punctuation, imagery, and diction. When does Hughes break up a line or end a line with punctuation? When are lines linked with one another? Which techniques have the biggest impact?

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