Mother to Son

POEM TEXT

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'se 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'se still goin', honey,
I'se still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

SUMMARY

Ok, son, listen up: my life hasn't been an easy climb up a set of crystal stairs. The stairs I had to climb were full of tacks and splinters. The steps were falling apart, and there were spots no longer covered by carpet. But I've been climbing anyway the whole time. I've reached landings, and I've turned corners. I kept climbing up even when it was dark and there were no lights to guide me. So, son, you can't turn back. Don't sit down on the steps because it turns out to be pretty hard going. Don't fall down now. Because I'm still going, honey, I'm still climbing—and my life hasn't been an easy climb up a set of crystal stairs.

THEMES

RACISM AND PERSEVERANCE

"Mother to Son" is a dramatic monologue about surviving in the face of American racism. The speaker gives her son advice about how to improve his lot in a racist society through an extended metaphor about climbing a set of stairs. While white people can climb up a "crystal stair"—meaning they enjoy a smooth and easy ascent—black people are forced to take a dangerous and dark staircase. In this way the speaker argues that racism makes it much more difficult for black people to succeed in society, yet she also suggests that they can overcome many obstacles through perseverance and mutual support.

The speaker of "Mother to Son" distinguishes between two different kinds of staircases—and, by extension, between two different kinds of paths through life. On the one hand, there's the staircase that *she's* had to climb—which is dangerous and falling apart, with loose tacks and splinters. Sometimes the staircase has even been "dark." On the other hand, there's a "crystal stair." Crystals are smooth, shiny, and beautiful; they suggest glamor and wealth. In other words, the "crystal stair" is basically the opposite of the staircase the speaker has had to climb. Where her staircase is in disrepair, the crystal staircase is lovely and inviting. Where she has had to struggle to improve her life, the people who climb the "crystal stair" have no trouble getting where they way to go.

These two staircases aren't meant to be taken literally: rather, they'e part of an extended metaphor for the unequal opportunities and challenges that black face in their lives. Where white people have an easier and smoother course toward realizing their dreams, the poem argues, black people like the speaker and her son have to fight through difficult, dangerous challenges just to reach the same level.

The speaker is realistic and straightforward about these difficulties; she doesn't sugar-coat anything. She doesn't suggest that racism will end—she never imagines, in this conversation with her son, at least, a world *without* the obstacles and dangers that she has endured. But she is also persistent, even triumphant. Despite everything, she announces, "I'se been a-climbin' on." In other words, the speaker believes that she and her son can still lead successful lives, despite the obstacles in their way. And she offers the poem to her son as encouragement: she wants to him follow her example, to be as persistent and determined as she's been.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

The poem's first line and title make it clear that the speaker here is a mother talking to her son. The opening word and caesura—"Well,"—then make it sound like this speech is coming mid-conversation, perhaps as a response to something the son has said; it feels as if the mother is saying, "Look here." In any case, it's obvious right away that the speaker wants her child to pay close attention to what she's about to tell him.

Knowing the poem's context helps clarify what's going on here: Langston Hughes was a leading figure of the Harlem Renaissance, an explosion of black artistic output in New York in the 1920s. His work frequently focused on the black experience, and this poem is no different. The mother here is giving her son advice about how to survive and thrive in a racist society, and she bases this advice on her own experience. She uses an extended metaphor of a rough staircase to emphasize how hard she's had to fight in order to be successful. That said, the poem doesn't *explicitly* mention race, which allows its message to be taken as a broader call for perseverance in the face of hardship as well.

But back to that metaphor. The mother begins, in line 2, by proclaiming: "Life for me ain't been no crystal stair." The line repeats at the end of the poem, in line 20, and thus serves as a kind of refrain: it frames the poem, offering critical context for understanding the speaker's advice. The "crystal stair" symbolizes the privilege and power that white people enjoy in a racist society. Crystals are smooth, glamorous, and beautiful. The symbol thus suggests that white people can achieve their dreams without many obstacles: they climb easily toward their goals.

But the speaker hasn't had an easy climb, a point she emphasizes in the actual sounds of the line. The line is thick with consonant /l/, /f/, /r/, /n/, and /t/ sounds:

Life for me ain't been no crystal stair

These are harsh and sharp sounds, making the line sounds dangerous and difficult as the life that she describes.

LINES 3-7

It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor—
Bare.

In lines 3-7, the mother describes the difficulties she's faced in more detail. Unlike the smooth and glamorous "crystal stair" that white people climb, she's had to climb a dark, dangerous, and poorly maintained set of stairs—with loose tacks and splinters, missing boards, and bare places without carpet. Each of these details represents dangers and obstacles the speaker has to overcome in order to achieve her dreams, and, in turn, each of these challenges represents the dangers and obstacles that black people have to overcome in a racist society.

The speaker uses a series of devices to underline the severity of these dangers. Note, for instance, the assonant, nasally /a/ sound in line 3: "It's had tacks in it." The line sounds sharp and scary, just like the thing it describes. Lines 4-6 then each start with the word "And." These are instances of polysyndeton and anaphora, and they emphasize the way the dangers pile up on top of each other. Each obstacle is its own challenge—which the speaker further emphasizes by using end-stop in each of the poem's first 7 lines, so each danger she encounters, from tacks to carpet-less floor, feels discrete. Yet, again, they also pile up, creating an imposing and overwhelming difficulty.

Like the rest of the poem, these lines are written in free verse. They have no meter and no rhyme scheme. And in places, the length of the lines vary widely. Line 6, for example, has 10 syllables; line 7 has only one. This helps draw emphasize to line 7—and with it, the desolate condition of the staircase. The rhythm of the poem thus shifts to emphasize key details in the speaker's extended metaphor about life in a racist society.

LINES 8-13

But all the time
I'se been a-climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,
And turnin' corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.

In lines 1-7, the speaker uses an extended metaphor to describe the challenges, dangers, and obstacles she has faced as a black woman living in a racist society. It's like climbing up a dark and dangerous staircase—while white people get to climb a smooth, glamorous "crystal stair." But despite all these obstacles, the speaker announces in lines 8-13, she hasn't given up or turned back: instead she's been "a-climbin' on." She has gone up flight after flight, reached landing after landing.

She's even continued climbing when it's been "dark" in the staircase. Darkness is a symbol for despair and hopelessness—so the speaker is saying that she's kept climbing even when it's felt totally hopeless. The enjambment across lines 12 and 13 ("... in the dark / Where there ain't ...") emphasizes this sense of despair. The poem is *almost* all end-stopped, so this enjambment feels surprising, even disorienting. In it, the reader might feel the speaker's stomach sinking as she contemplates climbing another dark and dangerous flight of stairs, as she slips into despair. This suggests something important about surviving in a racist society: for the speaker, it

requires genuine resilience and perseverance in the face of seemingly endless dangers and obstacles.

The speaker also uses alliteration to subtly underline her triumph. In lines 5 and 7, there's an alliterative /b/ sound, which appears in "boards" and "bare." In lines 8 and 9, the /b/ sound returns in "But" and "been." It's striking that the same alliteration appears in both places. It runs through two different parts of the poem: it's there when the speaker describes the dangers she's faced and it's there when she describes triumphing over those dangers. The alliteration thus transforms as it moves forward in the poem. This feels like a small version of the speaker's larger message: she's taken the pain and trauma she's been forced to endure and transformed it into a source of strength and power.

Similarly, the polysyndeton and anaphora that the speaker used in lines 4-6 reappears in lines 10-12: as in lines 4-6, all three of these lines start with the word "and." There's thus a kind of symmetry between them—even though they describe opposite things. In lines 4-6, the repeated "ands" emphasized the number of the dangers the speaker has faced. In lines 10-12, it emphasizes just how far she's climbed. Once again, the speaker transforms the dangers that she encounters into a source of strength.

LINES 14-16

So boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.

In lines 1-13, the speaker outlines the dangers and obstacles she's faced as a black woman living in a racist society—and described her triumph over those obstacles through resilience and perseverance. In lines 14-16, she gets to the point: she wants her son to do the same. She wants him to follow her example, to learn from her resilience. He might be tempted by despair. He might be overwhelmed by the obstacles and difficulties in his path—and just "set down on the steps." But he shouldn't. Instead he should do as his mother has done: he should push on and upwards, no matter how hard.

The speaker's advice to her son is tough and unforgiving: she doesn't have time for weakness or hesitation. One hears this toughness in lines 14-15, with their sharp consonance:

> So boy, don't you turn back.
> Don't you set down on the steps

With their consonant /s/, /b/, /n/, and /t/ sounds, these lines are neither smooth nor gentle. The speaker is not using a soothing, sweet voice. Instead, she's being direct and tough with her son. The diacope of "don't" further underscores the speaker's conviction.

And yet, she does empathize with the challenges her son faces. The enjambment in line 15 (" ... on the steps / 'Cause you ...") captures the sinking feeling that her son has as he confronts the challenges he faces. It's a similar effect to the enjambment in line 12, where the speaker feels her own sinking despair. She knows full well how difficult this is going to be and she doesn't hide the fact that she too has felt hopeless at points in her climb.

LINES 17-20

Don't you fall now—
For I'se still goin', honey,
I'se still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

In the poem's final lines the speaker acknowledges the subtle costs that constant fighting, striving, and climbing have exacted on her. She never gets a break, never gets to stop climbing. As the poem ends she is "still climbin'" and she's still dealing with the adverse effects of racism. The speaker subtly underlines these costs with an assonant long /i/ sound that runs through the poem's final lines

> For I'se still goin' honey
> I'se still climbin',
> And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

The assonance suggests that the speaker's identity and her life are inseparable from "climbin'." Even though she triumphs over the dangers that racism throws in her way, that struggle has come to define her: she has spent her whole life climbing, striving, fighting for success. In the poem, she never gets to enjoy her success, to rest. And her life is still "no crystal stair." The return of the poem's refrain is thus sad: though the speaker knows that she can triumph over the obstacles that racism throws in her way, she cannot imagine that racism itself will disappear. Instead, it remains constant no matter how hard she strives or how much she accomplishes.

These lines are again written in free verse: they have no meter or rhyme. And like the rest of the poem, they are strongly end-stopped. Those end-stops convey the speaker's confidence—and the force of her conviction. The speaker might be exhausted and disappointed that she's had to spend her life fighting against unfair, racist obstacles. But her resiliency remains undiminished—as does her confidence that she can overcome the obstacles still in front of her.

SYMBOLS

CRYSTAL STAIR

The "crystal stair" that the speaker mentions in lines 2 and 20 is a symbol for privilege, power, and—above all—the advantages that white people enjoy in a racist society. Throughout the poem, the speaker uses an extended metaphor

to describe the challenges and obstacles she's had to overcome as a black woman: her life has been like climbing a dark, dangerous, poorly maintained staircase. The "crystal stair" is just the opposite of the staircase she's had to use. Crystals are smooth, shiny, and beautiful; they suggest glamor, luxury, and ease. While she's been struggling to climb up a treacherous and dingy set of stairs, other people have had an easy, even pleasant climb. As a symbol, then, the "crystal stair" further suggests the unfair double standard of a racist society. While white people have an easy, unimpeded climb toward their goals in life, the speaker has to face constant obstacles and dangers.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "crystal stair"
- **Line 20:** "crystal stair"

DARKNESS

Darkness in the poem is a symbol for hopelessness and despair. It appears in line 12, where the speaker describes how, as she climbed up a dangerous, poorly maintained staircase, she was "sometimes goin' in the dark." The staircase that she describes is part of an extended metaphor for the difficulties, dangers, and obstacles she's encountered as a black woman living in a racist society. As a symbol, then, the "dark" that appears in line 12 suggests how serious and demoralizing those challenges have been: at times she has lost hope, plunged into despair. And yet, she has continued to push on, continuing to climb the stairs, despite everything.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 12:** "dark"

LIGHT

Light is a symbol of hope in the poem. In line 13, the speaker notes that she has often had "no light." In other words, she has had no hope. As a symbol, then, "light" works with the symbol that appears in line 12, "dark." Both symbols emphasize that the speaker has experienced despair and hopelessness as she has struggled to overcome the obstacles and dangers of living in a racist society. It is striking that the speaker uses two separate symbols to say the same thing. It suggests that this point is really important for the speaker: she knows how demoralizing it can be to fight against racism, to try to thrive in spite of racist challenges and obstacles. But she has kept fighting and striving anyway—and she thinks her son should do the same.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 13:** "light"

POETIC DEVICES

END-STOPPED LINE

"Mother to Son" uses a lot of end-stopped lines. In fact, most of the poem is end-stopped, with only a few enjambments here and there. These end-stops play two important roles in the poem. Early in the poem, they help convey the severity of the obstacles and dangers that the speaker has had to overcome as a black woman in a racist society. Note, for instance, the end-stops in a row in lines 3-6:

> It's had tacks in it,
> And splinters,
> And boards torn up,
> And places with no carpet on the floor—

Each of these lines describes a different danger the speaker has encountered: from sharp nails to missing boards in the steps. Each of these details gets its own line and each line is end-stopped. The end-stops encourage the reader to pause at the end of each line, to reflect on each obstacle. The accumulation of these end-stops thus emphasizes the depth and severity of the dangers and difficulties that the speaker has encountered.

The speaker keeps climbing despite these obstacles. And, later in the poem, she uses end-stop to convey her conviction, confidence, and resilience in the face of the challenges she's encountered. Note the end-stops in lines 17-19:

> Don't you fall now—
> For I'se still goin', honey,
> I'se still climbin',

In this passage the speaker offers support to her son. She wants him to keep climbing and striving, despite the obstacles he faces. And she offers her own example as encouragement—she's "still climbin'" despite everything. Each of these lines is end-stopped. The end-stops underscore the speaker's conviction: the lines feel solid and definite, with no room for equivocation or doubt. In other words, the speaker transforms the meaning of end-stop as the poem proceeds. Where it initially emphasizes the dangers that she's faced, by the end of the poem it emphasizes how strong she's become by facing those dangers.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "you:"
- **Line 2:** "stair."
- **Line 3:** "it,"
- **Line 4:** "splinters,"
- **Line 5:** "up,"
- **Line 6:** "floor—"

- **Line 7:** "Bare."
- **Line 9:** "on,"
- **Line 10:** "landin's,"
- **Line 11:** "corners,"
- **Line 13:** "light."
- **Line 14:** "back."
- **Line 16:** "hard."
- **Line 17:** "now—"
- **Line 18:** "honey,"
- **Line 19:** "climbin',"
- **Line 20:** "stair."

ENJAMBMENT

The speaker of "Mother to Son" doesn't use a lot of enjambment—in fact, only 3 of the poem's 20 lines are enjambed. The speaker holds enjambment in reserve, only using it a couple of key moments in the poem, where it expresses doubt and despair—the dark emotions that haunt her as she struggles against the obstacles and dangers that a racist society throws in her way. Take a look at the enjambment in lines 12-13, for example:

> And sometimes goin' in the dark
> Where there ain't been no light,

After so many end-stopped lines, this enjambment feels a little startling and disconcerting. It mimics the feeling the speaker has as she encounters a dark staircase—and the hopelessness that such darkness symbolizes. As the sentence tumbles across the line break, readers can feel the speaker's spirits sinking, her confidence failing her.

But she keeps climbing anyway. And she spends the poem encouraging her son to do the same. The speaker of the poem is not naïve about the difficulties her son will face—and she knows that he will be tempted by despair, just like she was. She conveys her empathy with him and the challenges he will face with the enjambment that appears in lines 15-16:

> Don't you set down on the steps
> 'Cause you find it's kinder hard.

This enjambment does the same thing as the enjambment between lines 12 and 13. It conveys a sense of despair, the son's spirit sinking as he confronts the challenges ahead of him. The speaker imagines her son having the same reaction to those challenges that she had. The enjambment underscores the difficulties that the son will face. But it also underlines that he won't face those challenges alone. His mother has faced the same difficulties, and she can provide a model for how to overcome them. As the speaker uses enjambment to express despair and uncertainty, she thus also uses it to emphasize the support and encouragement she offers—which will help her son overcome that despair and uncertainty.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 8-9:** "time / I'se"
- **Lines 12-13:** "dark / Where"
- **Lines 15-16:** "steps / 'Cause"

CAESURA

"Mother to Son" contains only two caesuras, in lines 1 and 14. In both cases, the caesura occurs when the speaker takes a pause, a breath, and directly addresses her son:

> Well, son, I'll tell you:

And later:

> So boy, don't you turn back.

The pauses here are designed to attract the son's attention—almost as though the speaker is making sure he's still with her, still focusing closely on what she's saying. The slight hiccup in the poem's rhythm as these caesuras occur jolts the son, wakes him up. They also slow down these lines, encouraging the reader to take the time to really take in what the speaker is saying.

The *absence* of caesuras elsewhere in the poem is also significant. The lines are almost all smooth, the speaker taking no midline breaks or pauses to gather her thoughts or regain control of her emotions. The *lack* of caesuras, then, serves as a subtle reminder that the speaker here is firm, confident, and in control.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** ", " ", "
- **Line 14:** ", "

ALLITERATION

The speaker of "Mother to Son" uses alliteration throughout the poem. The device emphasizes the severity of the obstacles she's had to overcome—and, at the same time, it also underlines her persistence and bravery in facing those obstacles. Note, for instance, the alliterative /b/ sound that runs through lines 5-9:

> And boards torn up
> And places with no carpet on the floor—
> Bare.
> But all the time
> I'se been a-climbin' on…

At first, the alliteration connects the challenges that the speaker faces: linking the "torn-up" "boards" and the "bare," carpet-less steps. Although the speaker emphasizes the distinctness of each challenge that she faces—giving each its own line—the alliterative link between "boards" and "bare" suggests that the different obstacles and dangers she faces start to blur together, becoming one consistent source of stress and danger in her life.

In lines 8 and 9, the /b/ sound returns in "But" and "been." Where the previous lines catalogued the obstacles and dangers the speaker's had to face, these lines describe the speaker's resilience and perseverance. Despite everything, she keeps climbing. It's striking, then, that the same alliteration—the alliteration that rings through her description of the dangers she's faced—appears in lines where she describes *triumphing* over those dangers. It feels like a small version of the speaker's larger message: she's taken the pain and trauma she's been forced to endure and transformed it into a source of strength and power. In this passage, then, the same alliteration performs two opposite functions: it underlines the dangers and difficulties the speaker has endured and, at the same time, marks her perseverance in the face of those dangers.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "l," "i," "i"
- **Line 5:** "b"
- **Line 7:** "B"
- **Line 8:** "B"
- **Line 9:** "b"
- **Line 14:** "b," "b"
- **Line 15:** "D," "d"
- **Line 16:** "C," "f," "k"
- **Line 17:** "f"
- **Line 18:** "l," "st"
- **Line 19:** "l," "st," "c"
- **Line 20:** "c," "st"

ASSONANCE

The speaker of "Mother to Son" uses assonance throughout the poem. The device often helps her emphasize the dangers she has faced and the damage that such dangers have inflicted on her. In line 3, for instance, the speaker uses a harsh, nasally /a/ sound:

> It's had tacks in it,

The /a/ sound is thin, sharp, and abrasive. It matches the sharpness of the tacks that the speaker has had to walk over. In this way, the poem uses sound to underline and reinforce the pain and danger that the speaker has had to endure as she climbs.

That pain and danger have shaped the speaker's life—leaving its marks, even though the speaker triumphs in the end. The speaker subtly suggests the costs of encountering and overcoming these dangers in the poem's final three lines with an assonant long /i/ sound:

> For I'se still goin' honey
> I'se still climbin',
> And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

The assonance links together three key words in the passage: "I," "climbin'," and "life." This suggests that the speaker's identity and her life are inseparable from "climbin'." There is something sad, then, about the way the speaker uses assonance here. Even though she has triumphed over the obstacles and dangers that racism threw in her way, she has spent her whole life climbing, striving, fighting for success. That struggle has come to define her. She never gets to enjoy her success, to rest: as she says in line 19, "I'se still climbin'." The assonance thus underlines the subtle and heartbreaking costs of the speaker's struggle against racism.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I"
- **Line 2:** "i"
- **Line 3:** "l," "a," "a," "i," "i"
- **Line 4:** "i"
- **Line 5:** "oa," "o"
- **Line 8:** "i"
- **Line 9:** "ee," "i"
- **Line 10:** "ea," "i," "i"
- **Line 11:** "i"
- **Line 12:** "i," "i"
- **Line 14:** "o," "o"
- **Line 15:** "o," "e," "e"
- **Line 16:** "i," "i"
- **Line 18:** "I"
- **Line 19:** "I," "i"
- **Line 20:** "i"

CONSONANCE

The speaker of "Mother to Son" uses consonance to emphasize the danger that she's endured during her life—and, at the same time, to underscore the force of her conviction about how her son should confront the difficulties of living in a racist society. Note, for instance, the heavy consonance in the poem's refrain, which first appears in line 2, then later, as line 20:

> Life for me ain't been no crystal stair

The line is thick with /r/, /s/, and /t/ sounds that, together, feel sharp and biting. The sound of the line reinforces what the

speaker's saying. Her life has been difficult, full of dangerous obstacles and challenges. And her line sounds just as dangerous and difficult.

The line also features a hard /k/ sound, which echoes throughout the poem. This often happens in words that are spaced far apart on the page, meaning they may not really register as true consonance. That said, because the poem's lines are so short for the most part, the /k/ sound is still unmissable given its frequency. It shows up in "crystal," "tacks," "carpet," "climbin'," "corners," "dark," "Back," "'Cause," and "kinder." This is again hard, relentless sound that emphasizes the strength of the speaker's conviction. The percussive /p/ sound similarly repeats throughout the poem, adding short pops of energy into its lines via words and phrases such as "splinters," "torn up," and "places with no carpet."

The poem sustains this sharp, bristly sound throughout. But its meaning changes as the poem continues. For example, lines 14 and 15 also contain a good deal of sharp consonant sounds:

> So boy, don't you turn back.
> Don't you set down on the steps…

With its consonant /b/, /d/, /n/, and /t/ sounds, lines 14 and 15 are as abrasive as line 2. But the speaker is describing something quite different. She's no longer talking about how many challenges and dangers she's had to endure. Instead, she's encouraging her son to face those dangers, to persevere despite them. Here, the tough, percussive consonant sounds underline the speaker's passion. She's not giving her son sweet, soft words of encouragement: instead this is a tough, clear-eyed pep talk. The consonance underscores the mother's toughness.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "ll," "ll," "ll"
- **Line 2:** "L," "f," "f," "n," "t," "n," "n," "cr," "st," "st"
- **Line 3:** "t," "s," "t," "cks," "t"
- **Line 4:** "p," "t," "r"
- **Line 5:** "r," "t," "r," "p"
- **Line 6:** "p," "rp," "r"
- **Line 7:** "B," "r"
- **Line 8:** "B"
- **Line 9:** "b," "n," "n," "n"
- **Line 10:** "n," "n"
- **Line 11:** "rn," "n," "rn," "r"
- **Line 12:** "m," "m"
- **Line 13:** "r," "r," "n," "n," "n"
- **Line 14:** "b," "n," "t," "t," "n," "b"
- **Line 15:** "D," "n," "t," "s," "t," "d," "st," "s"
- **Line 16:** "C," "f," "d," "k," "d," "d"
- **Line 17:** "f"
- **Line 18:** "F," "st," "ll"
- **Line 19:** "st," "ll," "c," "l"
- **Line 20:** "l," "f," "f," "r," "n," "t," "n," "n," "c," "r," "t," "l," "st"

EXTENDED METAPHOR

At the heart of "Mother to Son" is an extended metaphor. It runs through the whole poem—and it's the key to understanding the poem's argument about racism and segregation in America. The extended metaphor begins to take shape in line 2, when the speaker announces:

> Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

The "crystal stair" symbolizes the power and prestige that white people enjoy in a racist society. Because crystals are smooth, beautiful, and glamorous, the symbol suggests that white people are able to easily achieve their goals in life: there are no obstacles or dangers in their way.

By contrast, the speaker has had to face a series of dangerous obstacles. The staircase she climbs is covered in loose "tacks" and "splinters"; some of its boards are missing; the carpet has been torn up; and often there's no light in the staircase as the speaker climbs. (That's another symbol: the darkness of the staircase represents the hopelessness and despair that the speaker feels.) Each of these details are part of the extended metaphor: taken together, they represent the obstacles and dangers that black people face as they try to survive and thrive in a racist society.

Despite this, however, the speaker keeps "climbin'." In other words, the speaker keeps improving her life, working toward her dreams and goals, despite the obstacles that have been thrown in her way. The extended metaphor thus stresses her perseverance and resilience in the face of racism. She wants to pass that resilience on to her son. As she tells him in lines 15-16:

> Don't you set down on the steps
> 'Cause you find its kinder hard.

In other words, the speaker wants her son to keep "climbin'," just like she has. The speaker thus uses her extended metaphor as a way of offering her son advice about how to succeed in a racist society: it is a matter of persistence, resilience, and, of course, listening to his mother's advice.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 2-20

POLYSYNDETON

The speaker of "Mother to Son" uses polysyndeton twice in the poem—first in lines 4-6 and later in lines 10-12. In lines 4-6, the

speaker is describing, metaphorically, the challenges and obstacles she's faced in a racist society:

> It's had tacks in it,
> And splinters,
> And boards torn up,
> And places with no carpet on the floor—

The speaker piles on detail after detail. They add up to an overwhelming and bleak portrait of the dangers and difficulties she's faced. Everywhere she turns there's more danger; no matter how far she climbs, she keeps running into obstacles and challenges. Polysyndeton is key to the effect of these lines: the repetition of the word "and" emphasizes the way the challenges faced by the speaker keep accumulating.

There's a kind of symmetry between this first instance of polysyndeton and the second instance of it, in lines 10-12:

> And reachin' landin's,
> And turnin' corners,
> And sometimes goin' in the dark

In both cases, there are three instances of the word "and." In both cases, they fall at the start of the line (which also makes these instances of anaphora, something we discuss in more depth in our entry on that device). But despite the symmetry between these two passages, something very different is happening here. Instead of describing the challenges she's faced, the speaker is describing her persistence and perseverance: despite everything, she keeps climbing up the stairs, even when there isn't any light to guide her way. Polysyndeton is once again key to the effect of these lines. As the word "and" repeats, the reader gets a sense of the scale of the speaker's accomplishment: she's climbed far, even with all the challenges that hold her back. The poem's polysyndeton thus does two different things: it conveys the scale of the challenges and obstacles that racism creates for the speaker. And, later, it conveys her persistence in overcoming those challenges.

Where Polysyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "And"
- **Line 5:** "And"
- **Line 6:** "And"
- **Line 10:** "And"
- **Line 11:** "And"
- **Line 12:** "And"

ANAPHORA

The speaker of "Mother to Son" uses anaphora throughout. As noted in our discussion of polysyndeton, much of this revolves around the word "and." But there are other striking moments as well. In lines 14, 15, and 17, for instance, the speaker repeats a variation of a phrase beginning with the words "don't you." She has spent most of the poem creating an extended metaphor to describe how difficult her life has been, but here she begins giving specific advice and instructions to her son. Having told her son that he will inevitably face hardship, she now demands that he refuse to give *in* to that hardship. The anaphora of "don't you" underscores the strength and power of her insistence:

> ... 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—

Immediately after this, the speaker uses anaphora again:

> For I'se still goin', honey,
> I'se still climbin',

Here, the speaker repeats a variation of the phrase "I's still." Having told her son that he can't give up, she reminds him that she *herself* hasn't done so; she is *still* doing everything she can to succeed or even simply get by in life, and the anaphora here emphasizes the depth of her will and determination.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "And"
- **Line 5:** "And"
- **Line 6:** "And"
- **Line 10:** "And"
- **Line 11:** "And"
- **Line 12:** "And"
- **Line 14:** "don't you turn back."
- **Line 15:** "Don't you set down on the steps"
- **Line 17:** "Don't you fall now—"
- **Line 18:** "For I'se still goin',"
- **Line 19:** "I'se still climbin',"

REFRAIN

"Mother to Son" opens and closes with a refrain. In line 2 the speaker proclaims:

> Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

And line 20:

> And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

This line is key to understanding the poem and its extended metaphor. The "crystal stair" is a symbol for the privilege and power that white people enjoy in a racist society. Crystals are

smooth and beautiful. While the speaker—a black woman—has to struggle up a dingy and dangerous staircase, white people get to walk up an easy, smooth, and beautiful staircase. In other words, they have a much easier time achieving their goals: they don't have to face any of the dangers and difficulties that the speaker does. The line thus emphasizes that the struggles the speaker describes in the poem are unfair and unjust: she has to face them simply because she's a black woman.

The repetition of the line at the start and end of the poem emphasizes this injustice, serving as a kind of frame for the poem itself. The speaker begins and ends the poem by reminding her son—and the reader—that the struggles she describes are unfair. The poem describes the strength and resilience of black communities, which allows them to persevere in the face of the challenges that racism creates. But, by using this line as a refrain at the start *and* end of the poem, it also argues that black communities shouldn't have to fight this hard to be successful. Its repetition underscores that how deeply unfair racism is, and how, even though people like the poem's speaker are strong and resilient, it's a tragedy that they should have to be so in the first place.

Where Refrain appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Life for me ain't been no crystal stair."
- **Line 20:** "And life for me ain't been no crystal stair."

VOCABULARY

Crystal Stair (Line 2, Line 20) - A staircase made out of crystals. Crystals are smooth and shiny semi-precious stones. Metaphorically, the "crystal stair" suggests a life of glamor and luxury—in stark contrast to the difficult and dangerous staircase that the speaker has had to climb.

Tacks (Line 3) - Small, sharp nails used to hold carpets and floorboards in place. The "tacks" in the staircase the speaker climbs are loose, lying on the steps—so she's in danger of stepping on them and injuring herself as she climbs.

Splinters (Line 4) - Small, sharp fragments of wood from the steps the speaker climbs. The speaker is in danger of catching such "splinters" in her feet as she ascends the staircase.

Boards (Line 5) - Floorboards. In other words, the wooden planks from which the staircase is constructed are loose and, in some places, missing—making the staircase dangerous to climb.

I'se (Line 9, Line 18, Line 19) - "I have been" or "I am."

A-Climbin' (Line 9) - Climbing. The speaker has never stopped climbing, despite the obstacles in her way.

Landin's (Line 10) - Landings. The level platform where a staircase changes direction.

Kinder (Line 16) - Kind of.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Mother to Son" is a dramatic monologue. In a dramatic monologue, the poet takes on the voices of another person. In "Mother to Son," the poet speaks in the voice of a black mother. She describes the struggles and obstacles she's faced in a racist society—and she gives advice to her son about how to survive those obstacles. Dramatic monologues don't have any set formal requirements: there's no meter or rhyme scheme that they're supposed to follow. That gives the author of "Mother to Son," Langston Hughes, the freedom to capture the precise sound of the mother's voice.

More specifically, the poem consists of a single stanza of 20 lines. It's written in free verse, and uses language drawn from African American Vernacular English (AAVE), a dialectic of English often used in black communities. The poem isn't constrained by poetic traditions that were developed by white cultures. Instead, it develops a way of writing that is attentive to the poetic richness of the mother's voice, and recreates that voice with sensitivity and precision for the reader.

METER

"Mother to Son" is written in free verse, so it doesn't have a set meter. Instead, the poem's rhythm is loose. Some of its lines are very short, like line 7, which is just s single syllable long. Some of its lines are much longer: line 6 has 10 syllables. This allows the poem to stretch and contract, following the rhythms of the speaker's voice. As a result, the poem feels conversational and intimate, like the reader is hearing someone really talking. Line 7, with its single syllable, feels like a dramatic pause as the speaker lingers over the word "bare," letting its implications sink in. Line 6, by contrast feels faster, the speaker piling detail on detail as she recounts the challenges and obstacles she's had to face. The poem's shifting rhythms thus capture the tone of the speaker's voice—and help the reader get a sense of the obstacles and challenges that she's faced in a racist society.

RHYME SCHEME

"Mother to Son" is written free verse. It has no rhyme scheme—and the poem doesn't use any end rhyme. The poem thus has a conversational, direct feeling. After all, rhyme can often seem artificial and "poetic," in the sense that it's something that doesn't just happen in everyday conversation: poets have to work hard, bending their language, to get a poem to rhyme. Because "Mother to Son" doesn't use rhyme, it feels true to the speaker's voice: it captures the way her voice really sounds, without cloaking it in poetic language.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Mother to Son" is a black woman and a mother. She is talking directly to her "son," giving him advice drawn from her own life about how to survive and thrive in a racist society. She dwells on the obstacles and dangers that she's faced—comparing her life to a slow and painful climb up a dangerous, poorly maintained set of stairs. Her implication is clear: as black people in a racist society, she and her son have to face challenges and obstacles that white people don't.

Despite the obstacles and dangers of racism—and its unfair double standard—the speaker believes that her son can succeed if he follows her advice and pushes on, regardless of the difficulties he faces. The speaker is thus a passionate critic of American racism and a strong advocate for black self-empowerment: championing the capacity of black people to succeed through perseverance and mutual support. Indeed, the poem is an example of such support, with the speaker offering her hard-won wisdom to her son to help him thrive.

SETTING

The setting of "Mother to Son" is broad: it describes American society in the early 20th century, when racist laws limited where black people could live, work, and go to school. However, it's not immediately apparent that the poem is taking on such a broad setting. At first, "Mother to Son" seems to be set in a staircase. The speaker spends a good deal of time describing that staircase: it's dark and poorly repaired, a dangerous and frightening thing to climb. But it gradually becomes clear that the staircase isn't a literal place. Instead, it's an extended metaphor for the unfair obstacles and dangers that racism creates for black Americans as they strive to realize their dreams and aspirations. So the poem's setting is much more broad than it initially appears: it's not just a staircase, but America itself.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Langston Hughes is remembered today as one of the key figures of the Harlem Renaissance. This was a vibrant artistic movement that exploded during the 1920s in Harlem, a neighborhood in Manhattan. As more black Americans migrated north, looking for work in factories, many settled in Harlem. The neighborhood became a hotbed of black intellectual and literary life, with poets, scholars, and writers from around the country rubbing shoulders. Though they often disagreed with each other, they shared a common goal: they wanted to develop a new kind of literature, literature that would express the full history of black culture—its triumphs and its tragedies. And they also wanted to use literature to protest the racism of the present.

For these reasons, the Harlem Renaissance has become one of the most important moments in the history of black literature in the United States, with poets like Amiri Baraka and novelists like Toni Morrison drawing on its influence as they developed their own portraits of the complicated richness of black life in America. Poems like "Mother to Son," alongside Hughes other early poems like "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" and "I, Too," are thus crucial documents in the development of an African American literary tradition.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Mother to Son" was written in the early 1920s. It was first published in 1922 in *The Crisis*, a magazine published by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)—one of the oldest and most important civil rights organizations in the United States. The poem is thus intimately tied to the struggles of the black community during the first half of the 20th century. During that period, there were laws across the country that limited where black people could live and work; black communities were forced to attend separate schools and to live in separate neighborhoods. These schools and neighborhoods were frequently cramped, crowded, and unsafe. As a result, these laws not only separated white and black communities, but they also made it much harder for black people to survive and thrive.

During these difficult years, civil rights organizations like the NAACP sprang up. These organizations tried to change the laws that made it legal to treat black people as second-class citizens. Some of them also worked to improve the conditions in black neighborhoods and schools. Other organizations took more radical approaches to segregation, and whether Hughes himself totally agrees with the speaker of "Mother to Son" is up for debate. In other poems, like "I, Too," Hughes advocates for a more radical response to racism—including violent resistance. In other words, "Mother to Son" presents one way to deal with racism, but this, of course, wasn't the only strategy that black poets and intellectual like Hughes contemplated at the time.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Into to the Harlem Renaissance — A detailed history of the Harlem Renaissance—with links to other Harlem Renaissance writers and texts—from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/145704/an-introduction-to-the-harlem-renaissance)
- The Weary Blues — An article from the Academy of American Poets on The Weary Blues, Langston Hughes's

first book of poems, which collected "Mother to Son." (https://poets.org/text/langston-hughess-weary-blues)

- Langston Hughes's Life Story — A detailed biography of the from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/langston-hughes)
- Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance — An article on Langston Hughes's influence on the Harlem Renaissance. (https://www.biography.com/news/langston-hughes-harlem-renaissance)
- The Poem Read Aloud — The actress Viola Davis and the poet Langston Hughes both recite "Mother to Son." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NX9tHuI7zVo)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER LANGSTON HUGHES POEMS

- I, Too
- Let America Be America Again
- The Ballad of the Landlord
- Theme for English B
- The Negro Speaks of Rivers
- The Weary Blues

HOW TO CITE

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