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### Mother To Son

Langston Hughes remains one of the most famous writers to come out of the Harlem Renaissance, a movement featuring black writers providing their intellect and advancing their artistic skills. This era allowed them to express and create their own identity, and was known as the golden age for African American culture. Hughes joined this movement during his time enrolled at Columbia University. In his simple poems, he was able to examine the social conscience and the different aspects of African American experience through lyrical beauty (Voigt). His poem "Mother to Son" depicts a mother teaching her son a lesson on perseverance by using figurative language to get his point across to the readers.

Hughes was raised by his mother, since his parents separated right after he was born. Since he had such a deep bond with his mother, this poem has a personal resonance with him (Britannica). The poem "Mother to Son" is written in the voice of an imaginary character, the mother, and not from the point of view of the author, which makes this piece unique. Being a black single mom in America, Hughes' mom probably faced her fair share of struggles, such as when her husband left her after Hughes was born (Britannica). Aidan Wasley states "The poem's use of the dramatic monologue places the reader in the position of the son, listening to his mother draw a lesson from her life that can be applied to his own. The reader is thus drawn into the poem, as the son's frustrations become our own, and the mother's advice becomes directed at us"

(Wasley). This statement on Hughes can be seen in the poem when the mom says “Don’t you fall now— / For I’s still goin’, honey, / I’s still climbin’”(17-19). The mom is depicted talking directly to the readers to advocate determination and courage. She points out that she has experienced struggles, but continues to remain motivated and determined. The mother sets herself as an example of what the son should be doing in his own life.

This poem was one of Hughes’s earlier poems which he wrote when he was 21. Just like many other poems, he focuses on the hardships many African Americans encounter in their lives. Hoyt W. Fueller explains that Hughes "chose to identify with plain black people ... precisely because he saw more truth and profound significance in doing so" (Poetry Foundation). Hughes wanted to reveal the everyday struggles of black people to the rest of the world. His goal in all his writings, was to depict the suppression of blacks in America. He achieved his goal through a generalized view of African Americans. You can see the focus on everyday black culture in to the dialect he chooses to write in. Words like “goin’”, “reachin’”, and “turnin’” show the sing-songy vocabulary associated with the harlem renaissance. Using these words, the author further develops the mother’s character. Additionally, it provides the reader with an example of the dialect and accent of the people during the movement.

This poem could be considered an extended metaphor since the stairs are the main focus of the work. Throughout the poem, the mom connects aspects of broken stairs such as “splinters” and “boards torn up” as obstacles everyone faces in life and must overcome to keep rising up the stairs. The line, “Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair” was said both in the second and last line. This line ties the whole poem back to the main theme that life does not come without its struggles, but a person’s capability to confront and overcome these problems shows true

character. The stairs symbolize the journey that her son must conquer. His journey begins at the very bottom of the staircase. He must be strong and persevere higher and higher up the stairs.

Hughes uses anaphora multiple times in his poem to describe the stairs, one example being,

It's had tacks in it,  
 And splinters,  
 And boards torn up,  
 And places with no carpet on the floor  
 Bare. (3-7)

The lines that begin with “and” show the use of anaphora. Hughes does this to emphasize the importance of the mother’s message. Each line builds off the next, to highlight the hardships the mom knows her son will face. The line “and boards torn up” (5) could be referring to her lack of support in raising her son. Her husband left when Hughes was at such a young age and yet she was still able to persevere and keep climbing. Additionally, one line says only “Bare” (7). This could be Hughes accentuating the need to battle some problems by oneself since this line portrays a mood of loneliness. The crystal stair is also an allusion to Jacob’s “staircase to heaven” in the Old Testament of the Bible. This bible story has been interpreted that one would achieve spiritual elevation at the top of the ladder (Ancient Origins). In relation to the poem, this story promotes the importance of achieving one’s full potential.

Towards the end of the poem after the mother reflects on her own experiences, she returns to addressing her son and says, “So boy, don’t you turn back. / Don’t you set down on the steps / ’Cause you finds it’s kinder hard” (14-16). Turning back or stepping down could be

interpreted as getting misled in life. This ending reiterates the message of having the will to persevere despite adversity or distractions. Still today, this poem remains important because its timeless message continues to impact readers and inspire them to stay motivated and not allow setbacks to stop them.

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