

ANALYZING POETRY:

“MOTHER TO SON”

BY LANGSTON HUGHES



The poet Langston Hughes was a prominent figure in the literary and artistic movement of the early 20th century known as the Harlem Renaissance. This movement celebrated Black American language, music, art, and culture. Read Langston Hughes’s 1922 poem “Mother to Son,” and then answer the questions that follow.

MOTHER TO SON by Langston Hughes

- 1 Well, son, I’ll tell you:
Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.
It’s had tacks in it,
And splinters,
- 5 And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor—
Bare.
But all the time
I’ve been a-climbin’ on,
- 10 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.
- 15 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’,
- 20 And life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.

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Directions: Answer the following questions about Langston Hughes’s poem “Mother to Son.”

1. Who is the speaker in this poem, and who is the speaker addressing? What specific lines in the poem indicate this information?

2. Consider the speaker’s message throughout the poem. Identify two adjectives that describe the speaker’s life, and write them on the lines. Then, cite details from the poem to support your answers.

Adjective	Evidence

3. The speaker of this poem has a distinct voice and way of using language. Specifically, the speaker drops the ending “g” in verbs ending in *-ing*, as in “climbin;” and uses the contractions “ain’t” and “I’se.” How does this language impact the meaning and tone of the poem?

4. “Mother to Son” is written in free verse—that is, without a regular rhythm or rhyme scheme. As in all poetry, the poet’s choice and placement of words is significant. Look at lines 6–7. Why do you think Hughes split the lines this way, leaving just one word on line 7? Circle the three best answers.

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| <p>A. to create assonance</p> <p>B. to make the reader pause</p> <p>C. to take up more lines</p> | <p>D. to add emphasis to the word</p> <p>E. to create onomatopoeia</p> <p>F. to represent the word visually</p> |
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Keep going! Answer the following questions about Langston Hughes’s poem “Mother to Son.”

5. Reread line 2 of the poem, and consider the metaphor about the speaker’s life.

“Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.”

Part A: Explain the significance of the metaphor.

Part B: Why does the poet repeat the metaphor in the poem’s final line?

6. What is the main message you think the poet wishes to convey with this poem?

- A. Life can be full of challenges, but you must persevere despite the difficulties.
- B. Even when times are tough, it’s possible to see the beauty in life.
- C. The difficulties and challenges in life make the journey worthwhile.
- D. You must fight to win when life presents a painful climb.

7. How might you apply this message in your own life?
