



## Social Problems Raised In “The Dream Keeper” And “Mother to Son” Langston Hughes

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**Abstract:** To identify dements and reveal the techniques used by the author to illustrate racial discrimination and injustice. This work includes several tasks that will be clarifying: to give general information; to give brief information of the evidence of the Harlem period in America; to explain about that period in America. In this research include historical, biographic, analytical, descriptive and comparative methods.

**Key words:** literature, drama, music, visual art, dance.

“Mother to Son” was first published in the magazine *Crisis* in December of 1922 and reappeared in Langston Hughes’s first collection of poetry, *The Weary Blues* in 1926. In that volume and later works, Hughes explores the lives of African-Americans who struggle against poverty and discrimination. Hughes was dubbed “the poet laureate of Harlem” for his many portraits of Harlem as a crossroads of African-American experience. “Mother to Son” is a dramatic monologue, spoken by the persona of a black mother to her son. Using the metaphor of a stairway, the mother tells her son that the journey of life more closely resembles a long, trying walk up the dark, decrepit stairways of a tenement than a glide down a “crystal stair.” The “crystal stair” is a metaphor for the American dream and its promise that all Americans shall have equal opportunities. The mother warns her son not to expect an easy climb or a tangible reward. Through the metaphor of ascent, however, the speaker suggests that her endurance and struggle are necessary to progress toward racial justice and to maintain spiritual hope and faith. In this poem, Hughes represents the personal, collective, and spiritual importance of struggle, endurance, and faith.

The struggle that the mother in this poem describes is common to all people of every race and class, but Hughes narrows in on her identity by giving the speaker’s voice the dialect of a poor, undereducated African American. Readers who recognize this dialect and who have even a little knowledge about the struggle for racial equality in the United States will be able to associate the “staircase” metaphor and the setbacks that the speaker says she faced with the obstacles faced by American blacks, particularly in the early twentieth century, when the laws of the land permitted discriminatory practices. Particular clues that this is a southern black dialect include the contraction of “I is” (“I’se) meaning a mixture of “I am” and “I have”; the addition of the prefix “a-” to the word “climbin” to indicate that the action is still going on; and the term of endearment “honey.” Independently, none of these stylistic traits would be enough to identify the speaker’s culture, but Hughes does such a thorough job of weaving a pattern together, that even a reader who is unfamiliar with the author’s racial background would get a sense of who the poem’s speaker is.

The difficulties faced by the mother in this poem are symbolized by tacks, splinters, bare floors, and dark hallways—all signs of poverty. In associating this particular black American speaker



with these particular images, Hughes is able to hint at the injustice in the relationship between poverty and race. This mother certainly is not poor because she is lazy or weak-willed, since we can see her determination to work and succeed in almost every line. For a woman of such determination to be kept this poor indicates that hardship is not a moral issue, but is related to an external cause, such as the limits that are put on people because of their race.

Since “Mother to Son” is a dramatic monologue, the primary purpose of Hughes’s word choices and line arrangements is to quickly and convincingly capture the speech and character of a disadvantaged African-American mother. To more closely approximate the rhythms and folk diction, or word choices, of a black persona or character, Hughes uses a number of poetic and literary techniques. He writes in free verse, meaning the lines are un-rhymed and vary in length and meter. Specifically, the number of syllables per line varies from one to ten. In addition to capturing the rhythms of ordinary speech, the poem’s irregular line lengths may mirror the setbacks, turns, and uneven progress of the speaker on her life’s climb. Sometimes, a poem’s shape on the page reinforces its themes.

Hughes uses other markers of African-American speech, such as contractions and colloquial uses of the verb “to be”: “I’ve been a-climbin’ on” and such variations as “set” for “sit”: “Don’t you set down.” Hughes sought to represent African-American speech with dignity and verve for, in the hands of many white American writers, black dialect was used to perpetuate stereotypes of black ignorance. Hughes sought to overturn such caricatures by representing humor, strength, wisdom, and music in the plain speech of his African-American poetic personas. After carefully interpreting the mother’s insights and messages to her son, the reader recognizes that in “Mother to Son” and many of Hughes’s poems, uneducated diction signifies a lifetime of reduced opportunity rather than ignorance or lazy speech. Thus, the emotional drama of the mother’s will to persist is heightened considerably by the disadvantage that her diction be speaks.

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