



## Social Problems Raised In “Mother to Son” Langston Hughes

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**Abstract:** Langston Hughes and the basic themes of his poetry. It is important to know about an idea of that period. Theoretical part of the work can be useful for the articles, diploma works in American Literature. The Practical value lies in as a source of preparation for lectures and seminars on American literature classes.

**Key words:** Mother to Son, smoothness, ease, delicacy and wealth.

“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.

Lines 1-2. The first two lines establish what the title implies: this poem is a dramatic monologue spoken by the persona of a mother to her son. The son never speaks; the mother’s life experience and advice may therefore apply to all readers, but particularly to young African-American readers. The metaphor of the crystal stair may represent several things. It may symbolize dreams that the mother once held but which she has learned no longer to expect. The crystal stair may also represent the mother’s spiritual quest toward heaven, Christian grace, and redemption. Or, in material terms, it may invoke the large, gleaming staircases that starlets glide down in movies. In each possible interpretation, the crystal stair connotes smoothness and ease, delicacy, wealth, and a clear, well-lit path toward a rich (material or spiritual) destination. These connotations contrast with images in the poem that show how rough and discouraging the mother’s actual life has been.

Lines 3-7 In these lines, the mother describes the specific ways that her life’s journey has diverged from the ideal of the crystal stair. Grammatically, the “it” in line 3 refers to the subject of



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the previous sentence: “Life.” Thus one might interpret the line to read, “my life’s had tacks in it.” Or, extending the metaphor of the stairway (of life), the “it” may refer to stairs. Tacks and splinters may be read as figurative hazards one might find on an actual stairway in a rundown building. The tacks, splinters, worn-out carpet, and torn-up boards represent overuse and neglect. Many travellers before the mother have hauled themselves on this journey, and many will do so after her. The damaged parts of the stairway may represent the inability of individual sojourners to repair the structures under-girding their lives (such as poverty and reduced opportunity) or it may represent the disadvantaged state of black life in America itself. The “torn up” boards may represent someone’s attempt to dismantle this stairway altogether. R. Baxter Miller interprets the “tacks” and “splinters” in this poem as threats to the mother’s body and soul. Physically, the tacks and splinters represent small, nagging pains that might puncture and infect the mother as she struggles upward. Symbolically, however, these small threats represent potential injuries to “the black American soul.” The mother’s recognition of these obstacles and her apparent avoidance of them signal her wise negotiation of life’s setbacks.

Lines 8-11 Having listed some of the literal and figurative hazards the son might encounter on his journey, the mother affirms the value of persistence and faith in one’s goal. From lines 8 to 13, she makes it clear that, despite obstacles, she has continued to make gains. The mother’s personal advancement represents progress for the black race as well. The landings and turns in the mother’s climb may be metaphors for brief victories or respites from personal, racial, or spiritual struggles. The mother may mention these moments of ease to assure the son that some parts of life’s uphill climb will offer glimpses of hope and accomplishment.

Lines 12-13 Like the tacks and splinters in lines 3 and 4, the image of a dark stairway with the light removed, broken, or never installed, calls to mind an actual stairway in a building of poor tenants. Hughes includes such realistic details to make the metaphor of a stairway literal and symbolic at once. It is easier for readers to grasp and remember ideas that they can picture or sense, so poets often include sensory details in their work. In this poem, Hughes carefully includes details that appeal to the reader’s vision, hearing, and touch. The tacks and splinters of lines 3-4 awaken the reader’s sense of touch and danger; the darkness in lines 12-13 causes the reader to experience the mother’s blind groping around obstacles toward an unseen goal. The mother’s “goin’ in the dark / Where there ain’t been no light” may represent her persistent struggles despite her own waning faith or hope. Or, the dark may symbolize the external obstacles despite which she climbs. Hughes may repeat the idea of darkness twice in lines 12-13 to suggest different kinds of darkness: physical and spiritual. Or the repetition may serve to make the mother’s words sound like real speech, which is usually more repetitive and colloquial than written words.

Lines 14-20 From line 14 to 20, the mother’s advice takes a final turn. Whereas the first seven lines depict the hardships the son can expect in life and the next six lines assert the mother’s example of persistence through adversity, the final seven lines urge the son to keep going, despite setbacks and his wishes to stop or turn back. The critic Jemie translates the mother’s command in line 15, not to “set down on the steps,” into specifically black, urban, social terms. In *Langston Hughes: An Introduction to the Poetry*, Jemie argues that “to stop is to become a sitter on stoops and stander on street corners ... or to become a prostitute, pimp, hustler or thief. To despair is, in short, to wither and die.” The mother urges the son not to succumb to the temptation to give up. Having felt despair and resisted it, she knows that the choice to persist benefits the individual and the race. She warns



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him in line 17 not to fall 'now' because she has brought them so far and is 'still climbin'." The potential "fall" might symbolize both their falls from spiritual grace as well as a political setback for African Americans. Collectively, if many sons (and daughters) despair and drop out, the struggle for equality is that much less likely to succeed. In the last line, the mother repeats her refrain regarding the moral, spiritual, and political necessity to endure adversity and keep climbing.

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