

Mother to Son

Langston Hughes

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.

Questions for Discussion and Writing

1. To gain insight into the poem's basic meaning, apply the SOAPSTone method. Keep in mind that some of these elements function on multiple levels (e.g., author and speaker).

- What is the **subject** of the poem?
- On what **occasion** do you think the speaker is saying the poem?
- Who is the intended **audience** for the poem?
- What do you think the **purpose** of the poem is?
- Who is the **speaker** in the poem?
- What is the **tone** of the poem (the speaker's attitude toward the subject)?

2. Discuss the **form** of the poem—elements such as **meter**, **structure**, **sound devices**, and **rhyme scheme**. How does the poem's form contribute to its meaning?

3. The poem consists largely of an **extended metaphor**. Identify this metaphor, and interpret its various aspects. What do the following things represent?

- "tacks" (line 3)
- "splinters" (line 4)
- "boards torn up" (line 5)
- bare places "with no carpet" (lines 6-7)
- "landin's" (line 10)
- "corners" (line 11)

- dark places without light (lines 12-13)
4. In contrast with the **metaphor** above, what would a "crystal stair" (lines 2 and 20) be?
 5. Discuss the speaker's use of **repetition** in the poem. What is the effect of these repeated elements?
 6. Why do you think Hughes chose to use **colloquialisms** (spoken, informal expressions) in the poem such as "ain't," "climbin'," and "I'se"? What effect(s) do these expressions have?
 7. What message is the speaker trying to convey, and what **rhetorical strategies** does she use to convey that message effectively?