

ANALYZING POETRY: “MOTHER TO SON” BY LANGSTON HUGHES

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?

A mother is speaking to her son. The title, “Mother to Son” indicates this. This is also indicated in line 1 with “Well, son . . .,” line 14 with “So boy . . .,” and line 18 with “. . . honey.”

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
painful	The stairsteps of her life have contained tacks, splinters, and broken boards.
dangerous	At times, she had to walk on in the dark, without seeing what lay ahead.

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?

This language helps give the poem a familiar and informal tone, showing that the speaker (the mother) is comfortable with the person being addressed (the son).

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.

A. to create assonance

D. to add emphasis to the word

B. to make the reader pause

E. to create onomatopoeia

C. to take up more lines

F. to represent the word visually

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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.

The speaker is comparing life to a staircase. The staircase may be a symbol of moving upward, improving yourself, or climbing up in status or social acceptance. Crystal is a clear, beautiful, expensive material. Using a staircase made of crystal would mean living in luxury, surrounded by light and beauty. A life that was a “crystal stair” would be an easy, comfortable life. The mother is saying that she has not had that.

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

Repeating the phrase adds emphasis to it. The speaker is telling her son that she has faced challenges, and though she continues to have difficulties, she persists. She is encouraging her son to persevere as she has.

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?

Student answers will vary.
