Name: _____ Class: _____

Mother to Son

By Langston Hughes
1922

Langston Hughes (1902-1967) was an American poet, activist, novelist, and playwright. He is also considered one of the leaders of the Harlem Renaissance, which was the cultural, social, and artistic movement of black artists that took place in Harlem between the end of World War I and the mid-1930s. As you read, take notes on the metaphor and larger message presented in the text.

Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor —
Bare.
But all the time
I'se been a-climbin' on,
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.
Don't you set down on the steps
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall now —
For I'se still goin', honey,
I'se still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.



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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. In the poem, whom is the speaker addressing and about what?
    A. A mother is telling a story to her child about her own childhood.
    B. A mother is describing for her son the climb up a crystal staircase.
    C. A son is recounting a conversation with his mother about his struggle to earn a comfortable living.
    D. A mother is warning her son about the difficulties of life and the struggle to persevere.

2. Which of the following best explains the significance of the staircase in the poem?
    A. The narrator describes a tiring climb up a beat-up staircase, which represents her persistence through difficulties and challenges in life.
    B. The narrator describes a crystal staircase, which symbolizes her goals and the hard work she has done to accomplish her dreams.
    C. The narrator describes her climb up a dirty staircase that transforms into a crystal stair, which represents her ability to rise above difficulties.
    D. The narrator describes herself going down a staircase that is falling apart, which represents her fleeing a difficult life.

3. PART A: Which of the following statements best describes a major theme of the poem?
    A. Never forget your family.
    B. Persevere when life isn't easy.
    C. Hope is the answer to all challenges.
    D. Respect your elders.

4. PART B: Which of the following quotes best supports the answer to Part A?
    A. “Well, son, I’ll tell you: / Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.” (Lines 1-2)
    B. “It’s had tacks in it, / And splinters, / And boards torn up, / And places with no carpet on the floor — / Bare.” (Lines 3-7)
    C. “I’se been a-climbin’ on, / And reachin’ landin’s, / And turnin’ corners” (Lines 9-11)
    D. “So boy, don’t you turn back. / Don’t you set down on the steps / ‘Cause you finds it’s kinder hard. / Don’t you fall now — / For I’se still goin’, honey” (Lines 14-18)

5. How does the poem's use of language and free verse contribute to the author's purpose?

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion. Answer one.

1. In your opinion, do all Americans have equal access to the American Dream? What are some of the factors that could make it easier or harder to achieve happiness in America? Why do you think Harlem Renaissance writers focused on the American Dream?

2. How do we achieve our goals or dreams? How does circumstance, status, and identity factor into this? In the context of this poem, how do people overcome adversity?Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.

3. In the context of this poem, what is the meaning of family? What do you think it means to be a parent, especially a mother? How do you relate to your parents or guardians when they are trying to give you advice? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.