

"Mother to Son"

Author: Langston Hughes

Date of birth: February 1, 1902

Place of birth: Joplin, Missouri

Date of death: May 22, 1967

Place of death: New York, New York

Country: United States

Culture: African American

Type of poem: Free Verse

Appears in: *The Weary Blues*, 1926; *Selected Poems*, 1987; *Collected Poems*, 1994

James Mercer Langston Hughes was born to James Nathaniel Hughes and Carolyn "Carrie" Mercer Langston. Hughes's parents separated when he was an infant; they eventually divorced, and his mother remarried. His father headed south to Cuba and then Mexico, where it was easier to earn a living freed from discriminatory Jim Crow laws. Hughes was raised in Lawrence, Kansas, primarily by his grandmother. His mother traveled frequently looking for work and lived with her son only sporadically, often in different locations. A lonely child, Hughes took refuge in books and wrote his first poem at age twelve. He was voted class poet at grammar school in Lincoln, Illinois, and graduated high school in Cleveland, Ohio. He reconnected with his father, living with him for a time in Mexico, but they were never close. In 1921 he began publishing poems in the magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the *Crisis*.

In 1921, Hughes was admitted to Columbia University in New York City and, after his freshman year, moved to Harlem. He worked various odd jobs—including assistant cook, busboy, and launderer—while continuing to write and publish. In the early 1920s, he sailed as a steward aboard a ship to Africa, where he visited many ports and developed an insatiable wanderlust. Hughes later served aboard a freighter sailing between the United States and the Netherlands. He subsequently traveled to and worked in Paris, visited Italy and Spain, and journeyed to the Caribbean, Russia, and elsewhere. In the mid-1920s Hughes settled in New York City, where he, Countee Cullen, Zora Neale Hurston, and others became exemplars of the energy driving the movement that would become known as the Harlem Renaissance, a cultural explosion centered on that predominantly African

American neighborhood that manifested in an outpouring of dynamic artistic, musical, literary, and theatrical works. Hughes resumed his education, graduating from Lincoln University in Pennsylvania at age twenty-seven. He continued producing poetry, wrote for the theater, published a novel, and became a newspaper columnist. During a forty-year career as a writer, he published some sixty books of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction, and was in demand as an editor, anthologist, and public speaker. He died at age sixty-five of complications from prostate cancer.

"Mother to Son" was initially published in the *Crisis* in 1922 and later appeared in Hughes's first poetry collection, the award-winning *The Weary Blues*. A twenty-line composition in free verse, "Mother to Son" takes the form of an informal monologue in conversational language. The speaker, a working-class African American mother, imparts invaluable advice to her unnamed young son about the way of the world. In an extended, easy-to-understand metaphor appropriate for fixing an image in a young person's mind, she uses her own experience to delineate the difficulties of achievement for minorities in a society controlled by a white majority. For whites, she suggests, success is a relatively simple skip up a plush, glittering, well-lit "crystal stair," where everything is made easy for the climber.

For black people, however, it is a different story. The struggle of trying to advance, to get ahead in life is constant and difficult. The long haul is mettle-testing, energy-sapping, ambition-draining. The ascent traverses an endless, lightless flight of battered steps: not the showy crystal stair of the favored, but a neglected back staircase intended for servants. There are obstacles to discourage the fearful (tacks, splinters, torn-up boards, bare spots), built-in barriers where the weak will halt (landings), and unknown places where danger might lurk to trip up the unwary ("turning corners," "going in the dark"). Many who try to climb this stair give up and sit down, never to rise again. Some turn back. Others fall.

Like much of Hughes's work, "Mother to Son" has a comfortable, friendly rhythm that invites reading aloud and stimulates personal interpretation. It is composed in iambic-dominant lines that vary in beats or syllables from one to ten, averaging between five and six. For a poem of fewer than one hundred words, "Mother to Son" provides a surprisingly well developed characterization of the speaker. She speaks in dialect, using double negatives ("ain't been no") and colloquialisms ("I'se" for "I've" or "I'm") and dropping the final consonants in gerund verb forms ("climbin'," "reachin'," "turnin'"), and employs run-on sentences. Although she may seem undereducated, she is well versed in the school of hard knocks and eager to pass along what she has learned so her son will follow her example and not repeat her mistakes. She

emphasizes what is important, firmly telling her son, "So boy, don't you turn back." She softens her message with a motherly endearment: "honey." She is wise enough to repeat the lesson she is attempting to make: "Life for me ain't been no crystal stair." So, she implies in conclusion, it will not be easy for her son either, and the sooner he understands that fact, the better—but, she emphasizes, this is no excuse to give up.

Further Reading

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Hughes, Langston. *I Wonder as I Wander: An Autobiographical Journey*. Rinehart, 1956.

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Rampersad, Arnold, and David Roessel, editors. *Selected Letters of Langston Hughes*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2015.

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