

# English Eduspot

**([englisheduspot.blogspot.com](http://englisheduspot.blogspot.com))**

## SSLC ENGLISH


Intensive Coaching  
Sessions

SESSIONS

*Mahmud K Pukayoor*  
*Blog: [englisheduspot.blogspot.com](http://englisheduspot.blogspot.com)*  
*Whatsapp: 9895889250*  
*Voice Call: 8848153351*  
*Email: [englisheduspot@gmail.com](mailto:englisheduspot@gmail.com)*

## Chapter 4 (Poem)

# Mother to Son



**About the poet:** Langston Hughes (1902 – 1967)



**James Mercer Langston Hughes** was an American poet, social activist, novelist, playwright, and columnist from Joplin, Missouri. He was one of the earliest innovators of the then-new literary art form called jazz poetry. He was born on 01 February 1902 in Joplin, Missouri, United States. He completed his education at Lincoln University and Columbia University. Langston Hughes is best known as a leader of the Harlem Renaissance. *'Montage of a Dream Deferred'*, *'The Negro Speaks of Rivers'*, *Let America Be America Again'*, etc. are some of his known works. He won many awards and honours like *'Anisfield-Wolf Book Award, Spingarn Medal'*, etc. He passed away on 22 May 1967 in New York.

### Glossary:

1. **'ain't been:** (here) hasn't been
2. **Tack (n):** a small nail with a sharp point and a flat head.
3. **Splinter (n):** a small thin sharp piece of wood, metal, glass, etc. that has broken off a larger piece.
4. **Torn up:** broken into pieces.
5. **Bare (adj):** uncovered, (here) without any luxuries of life.
6. **I'se been :** I've been
7. **A-climbin':** climbing

8. **Reachin'**: reaching
9. **Landin's**: landings, landing area of a staircase.
10. **Turnin'**: turning
11. **Goin'**: going
12. **There ain't been no light**: there has been no light.
13. **Set down**: sit down
14. **'cause you finds it's kinder hard**: Because you find it a kind of hard task.
15. **I'se still goin'**: I'm still going
16. **I'se still climbin'**: I'm still climbing

### ➤ **Poetic Devices used in this poem**

**Visual images:** 'tacks', 'splinters' "torn-up boards, bare floor with no carpet symbolizing the hardships and poverty of life. Crystal stair: symbolizing comforts and luxuries of life.

**Metaphor:** The life of the mother is compared to a crystal stair to establish that her life has never been comfortable, luxurious or glamorous as a crystal stair.

**Alliteration:** Alliteration is very sparingly used in "“*Don't you set down on the steps*” with the sounds 'd' and 's'.

**Anaphora:** This literary device has also been rarely used in the poem, by which the word 'And' is repeatedly used at the beginning of many lines.

**Read the following lines from the poem 'Mother to Son' and answer the questions that follow.**

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.

1. Who is the speaker in the poem? Do you feel the presence of a listener? How?
2. What does the expression 'crystal stair' stand for?
3. How was the mother's life?
4. Comment on the style of writing and poetical devices used in these lines.
5. Comment on the language of the mother.
6. What do the expressions 'reachin' landin's', 'turnin' corners' and 'goin' in the dark' signify?

**Read the following lines from the poem ‘Mother to Son’ and answer the questions that follow.**

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.

7. What does the mother advise her son to do?
8. How does the mother encourage her son in facing hardships?
9. Point out examples of alliterations from these lines.

**Answers to questions based on lines of the poem**

1. The speaker is a mother who is the representative of the black Afro-American community. The opening line of the poem, “Well, son, I’ll tell you”, clearly expresses that the mother is asking her son to listen carefully to her advice.
2. ‘Crystal stair’ stands for the comforts and luxuries of life.
3. The mother’s life had never been a crystal stair; it had tacks and splinters all the way. Her life had never been comfortable; it was full of hardships and obstacles.
4. The poem is in the style of ‘free verse’. It does not have a consistent meter pattern, rhyme or any other musical pattern. The comparison of the mother’s life to a crystal stair is an example of the extended metaphor.
5. The language used in the poem is a deliberate attempt of the poet to depict the mother as an illiterate and poor woman of the Afro-American community.
6. The expression ‘reachin’ landin’s and ‘turnin’ corners’ signify the different phases of the mother’s life. Sometimes she finds some momentary solutions for her problems. The expression ‘goin’ in the dark’ signifies the hopeless moments of her life.
7. She advises her son not turn back when he faces an obstacle in the way, not to sit down when he finds it difficult to climb life’s stairs and not to fall down in his youthful days, for his mother is still climbing the difficult stairs of her life.
8. She encourages her son by telling her own experiences. She is still climbing the rough and tough stairs of life without yielding in front of the hardships of life.
9. In the line ‘Don’t you set down on the steps’ there is a repetition of the letters ‘d’ and ‘s’ and that makes ‘alliterations’.

- **Attempt a brief appreciation of the poem ‘Mother to Son’, focusing on the theme, style and figures of speech used.**

### **Mother to Son by Langston Hughes**

Langston Hughes was an American writer and social activist. He is best known as a leader of the Harlem Renaissance - a period of musical, literary, and cultural proliferation that began in New York’s African-American community during the 1920s and early 1930s. The movement was instrumental in developing a new sense of Black identity.

In the poem **Mother to Son**, the mother says to her son that life has never been as smooth and comfortable as a “crystal stair” for her. Her stair has always had tacks, splinters and torn boards on it, as well as places without carpet. The stair is bare – a life bare of all luxuries and comforts. However, she still climbs on, reaching landings, turning corners sometimes going through darkness. She advises her son, “So boy, don’t you turn back.” She instructs him not to go back down the stairs even when he finds climbing is hard. She encourages him to climb the stairs of life by saying that she is still going and still climbing in her old age. In the poem, the poet depicts the mother as an epitome of the African-Americans’ life during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The poem is a **dramatic monologue** written in the **Free Verse style** which is an open form of poetry. It does not use consistent meter patterns, rhyme, or any other musical pattern. The tone of the poem is didactic, encouraging, and hopeful.

The poet excellently exploits all the possibilities of the visual imagery by using words like ‘tacks’ and ‘splinters’ to portrait the hardships; “boards torn up,/And places with no carpet on the floor—/Bare” to represent miseries and poverty of the mother. The word ‘dark’ shows hopeless condition of the mother. The use of the vernacular and dialectic language is adequate enough to portrait an illiterate, poor woman in readers’ imagination.

The life is compared to a crystal staircase and maintains it throughout the poem. This is an example the extended **metaphor**. Crystal is smooth and glamorous, but fragile and slippery. But the mother’s life has never been smooth and luxurious; whereas her struggles and efforts have always been strong, steady and sturdy.

**Alliteration** is sparingly used in the poem such as the “d” and “s” sounds, as in “*Don’t you set down on the steps.*” The poet has used the poetic device **anaphora** in which “*And*” is used at the beginning of many of the lines.

### **Let’s revisit (Textbook page 42)**

1. In the first seven line, a stairway with ‘tacks in it and splinters’ is being compared to **life**.
2. In this poem, boards with ‘tacks and splinters’ and ‘boards torn up’ are symbols for **a life with many difficulties and challenges**.
3. What does ‘*reachin’ landin’*’ symbolise in the mother’s life?  
Ans: compassionate forces in her life.
4. Why do you think the word ‘bare’ is used in the poem?  
Ans: to emphasize how difficult and ‘bare’ of luxuries the mother’s life had been.
5. Which of the following is the most suitable meaning for ‘*turnin’ corners*’ in the poem?  
Ans: phases in her life where she tried to solve problems on her own.
6. What is the theme of the poem?  
Ans: Don’t give up; reach out to the goals you have set for yourself.
7. The ‘crystal stair’ is a metaphor used in the poem. Why do you think Hughes is referring to the stairway as ‘crystal’?  
Ans: Crystals are beautiful, but they are also fragile and slippery.

8. Why is 'stairway' used as an appropriate metaphor to describe the wisdom the mother is trying to impart to her son?  
Ans: One requires steady persistence to go up and down a stairway.
9. What is the most likely age of the son?  
Ans: Teenage.
10. The language used in the poem, pertaining to a particular culture or geographic area is known as a *dialect*.

➤ **Activity 1 (Textbook page 44)**

The metaphor '...life for me ain't been no crystal stair' is an extended metaphor. It is seen throughout the poem. Do you think that the poem can convey the right idea without this metaphor? Why?

The extended metaphor of the 'crystal stair' is the soul of the poem, Mother to Son; without which the speaker mother cannot draw her real life-picture before her son. She compares her life and experiences to a stair saying that it has always been for her a stair with tacks, splinters and torn up boards. Her stair has never been as comfortable and luxurious as a crystal stair. The mother wants to advise her son to meet and tackle the hardships of life. She also wants to warn him against being disappointed in the absence of comforts and luxuries of life. The poet uses the staircase as a symbol of both difficulties and comforts in a person's life by depicting two types of staircase – the crystal stair with beauty, comfort, luxury etc. and the staircase with torn up boards, tacks and splinters symbolizing the difficulties of life.

➤ **Activity 2 (Textbook page 45)**

1. What is the relevance of the metaphor 'crystal stair'?  
Ans: The poet uses the metaphor 'crystal stair' to say that the life of the mother is not smooth, comfortable and luxurious as a crystal stair. So, we can easily understand the hardships of such a person in life.
2. Why does the poet use the Afro-American dialect in the poem?  
From the language of the mother, we can understand that she is a representative of the Afro-American community. The dialect shows that she is an illiterate woman of the backward sect of the society.  
The examples of the dialect are 'ain't been', 'I'se been', 'climbin'', 'turnin'', 'goin'' etc. ,and such usage shows that the user is uneducated.

➤ **Activity 3 (Textbook page 45)**

Work out the thematic parallelism between these two poems (Mother to Son and "Kozhi") and present your ideas before the class.

Both these poems are thematically almost identical. They are didactic –in the form of advice- in tone. The advice is to be careful in life, and they proclaim that the persistent hard work only brings success in life. Both the poems are expressive of mothers' anxiety, concern and affection over the life of their children.

## **English Eduspot** ([englisheduspot.blogspot.com](http://englisheduspot.blogspot.com))

*Mahmud K Pukayoor*  
*Blog: [englisheduspot.blogspot.com](http://englisheduspot.blogspot.com)*  
*Whatsapp: 9895889250*  
*Voice Call: 8848153351*  
*Email: [englisheduspot@gmail.com](mailto:englisheduspot@gmail.com)*