

“Mother to Son”: A Voice for All Time

The poem “Mother to Son” by Langston Hughes dramatizes the difficult life of one woman as she likens it to a dark and worn staircase. Six rather simple sentences are spoken ineloquently by a fictitious African American woman in the 1920s. This seems, on the surface, to be the rather insignificant musings of a racially oppressed poet with a lamentable grudge. But quite to the contrary, Hughes’s brilliant use of metaphor, imagery, characterization, and tone, woven into the historical fabric of a nation in transition, makes this poem a timeless masterpiece—one that transcends racial, gender, and generational boundaries. This one mother becomes a collective voice for every minority of color who has ever been segregated, every woman who has ever been suppressed, and every visionary who has ever dreamed. “Hughes chose to focus his work on modern, urban black life” (Baym 1088), but his “Mother to Son” is so much broader . . .

And keep going the reader must by way of the poem’s form. It is notable that there are no stanza breaks. The lines run on and on from start to finish. There is coherent syntax though; six definite sentences accurately punctuated are recognizable within one single, uninterrupted stanza. There is no break in the poem as there has been no break in the mother’s effort. “But all the time / I’s been a-climbin’ on,” (8-9) she claims, evoking a tone of weariness . . .

The poem’s *in medias res* opening, “Well, son, I’ll tell you” (1), prompts the reader to question what it was the son had asked to evoke such a reply. What compelled her to speak . . .

Also effective is the poet’s use of parallelism. This is an open form poem with no established pattern in meter, rhyme, line length, or any conventional poetic characteristics.

As such, the poem is not an uncommon modernist piece. Hughes, however, does employ various types of parallel structure throughout in order to create unity. One section that displays synonymous parallelism is in lines three and four. “It’s had tacks in it” (3) is an idea repeated in the following line “And splinters” (4) by use of synonyms. A paraphrase is formed. An identical thought is expressed using different words. One area of antithetic parallelism is displayed in the enjambed lines twelve and thirteen. “And sometimes goin’ in the dark” (12) is counterbalanced by “Where there ain’t been no light” (13). The same idea is being expressed by presentation of its opposite . . .

A single African American woman is speaking to her son, relating her own experiences; however, in documenting the dramatic monologue as a poem, her voice becomes many and reaches far beyond the ears of one. It speaks to minorities in general and attempts to propel their efforts forward in their climb toward social equality. It speaks to all sons and to all daughters, offering maternal encouragement. One mother’s voice becomes a reverberating echo through many generations by the creative strokes of a poet’s pen.

...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- (14-17)

Hughes’s fictitious character continues to inspire, and she continues to proclaim. The woman speaks on behalf of preceding generations of Africans, giving voice to their experience of living as descendants of slaves in racially segregated America. She speaks on behalf of women who continue their climb up the staircase to equality. She speaks on

behalf of immigrants stepping up to the American Dream. “Life for [us] ain’t been no crystal stair” (2). Hers is a collective voice, a voice for all time.

Works Cited

Baym, Nina, ed. "American Literature 1914-1945." Baym 705-18.

---"Langston Hughes." Baym 1087-89.

---*The Norton Anthology of American Literature, Shorter Seventh Edition.* Vol. 2.

1865 to the Present. New York: Norton, 2008. Print.

Dietrich, Katheryn Thomas. "A Reexamination of the Myth of Black Matriarchy." *Journal of*

Marriage and the Family 37.2 (1975): 367-374. *JSTOR*. Web. 11 Apr. 2010.

Hughes, Langston. "Mother to Son." Baym 1089.

The Open Bible, Expanded Edition. La Habra: Nelson, 1985. Print. New American Standard

Vers.