

# A MOTHER'S STRUGGLE IN LANGSTON HUGHES'S "MOTHER TO SON"

Submitted by:

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## ABSTRACT

This extended essay is concerned with images of a mother's struggle in Langston Hughes "Mother to Son". The purpose of this study is to present the struggle through imagery, literature and society. The imagery is chosen as the intrinsic element of literature and society as an extrinsic element of the poem. The study applies a library research method. This study adopts Perrine's concept of imagery and Wellek and Warren's concept of literature and society. "Mother to Son" figuratively describes the mother's struggle which makes a movement in her life to a better life. It is also about how the mother advises her son not to easily give up even the life is getting harder. As a result, this poem describes the mother's struggle beautifully.

**Keyword:** *imagery, literature and society, struggle, advice, better life*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background of the Study

This study is concerned with images of a mother's struggle in Langston Hughes's "Mother to Son". The images describe figuratively a mother's advice for her son about freedom from slavery. The mother tells her son that freedom needs struggle. Hughes describe the struggle in a free verse of 20<sup>th</sup> lines. The free verse describes how the mother's struggle to make her life better when she lived in the era of slavery, and it also describes the mother's advice to her son.

The writer chooses "Mother To Son" because this poem is interesting to analyze. The poem does not only have deep meaning but also contains about social condition, such as racial and struggle for freedom.

## **1.2 Purpose of the Study**

Intrinsically, this essay will describe how imagery, connotation and denotation are applied to describe the struggle. Extrinsically, this essay will describe how the struggle is made to reach freedom.

## **1.3 Scope of the Study**

This extended essay focuses on imagery, connotation and denotation in "Mother to Son" to describe the struggle. In addition, the discussion about literature and society in "Mother to Son" is taken as the extrinsic aspect of the poem.

# **2. THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK**

## **2.1. Previous Studies on Langston Hughes's "Mother to Son"**

The text of “Mother to Son” was taken from [www.poemhunter.com](http://www.poemhunter.com). This essay is based on three selected previous studies on Langston Hughes’s “Mother to Son”, namely “Poetry for Students”, “Racial Issues in Langston Hughes Poetry” and "An Overview of 'Mother to Son'". The selection was made because of the relevance of the studies with the symbol in the poem.

In conclusion, the three studies have one theme in common about struggle for freedom. Ed Marie Rose Napierkowski and Mary Ruby discuss “Mother to Son” as a mother’s struggle in life; whereas Št pán Bo ek’s thesis, *Racial Issues in Langston Hughes Poetry*” discusses how the mother tries to change her life and supports her son. A mother advises her son to keep going his life when in his life there so many obstacles. Furthermore, in Aidan Wasley, "An Overview of 'Mother to Son,'" in *Poetry for Students*, he is trying to describe difficulties with which a mother has been through. However, the discussion about images in the poem does not exist in their studies. Therefore, the writer tries to describe the images in “Mother to Son”.

## **2.2. Intrinsic and Extrinsic Overview on Langston Hughes’s**

The intrinsic aspect, the writer will discuss types imagery, connotation and denotation. Imagery itself is concerned with human five senses. Imagery may be defined as the representation though language of sense experience. Poetry appeals directly to our senses, of course, through its music and rhythms, which we actually hear when it is read aloud. (Perrine, 1969:54)

Connotation and denotation becomes the other intrinsic element that will used by the writer to analyze “Mother To Son”. Connotation refers to secondary meaning of a word or expression in addition to explicit or primary meaning, and Denotation is about the explicit meaning of a word or expression “the dictionary meaning or meanings of the word” and “The Connotation are what it suggest beyond what it expresses: its overtones of meaning.” (Perrine, 1965: 38)

For the extrinsic aspect, the writer will discuss literature and society. Literature is considered to reside in society.

The poet himself is a member of society, possessed of a specific social status: he receives some degree of social recognition and reward} he addresses an audience, however hypothetical. Indeed, literature has usually arisen in close connection with particular social institutions} and in primitive society we may even be unable to distinguish poetry from ritual, magic, work, or play(Rene Wellek and Austin Warren 1949:89)

The writer thinks that the discussion about imagery will complement that literature and society so as to form a thorough description of the mother’s struggle.

### **3. RESEARCH METHOD**

To write this essay, the writer applied a library research. In his library research, the writer collected the data related to the discussion about the images, connotation and denotation in the poem from books, journal articles, and websites about Langston Hughes’s poetry. According to Marry W. George, a library research

involves identifying and locating sources that provide factual information or personal/expert opinion on a research question;

necessary component of every other research method at some point (2008: 6).

Referring to George's statement about a library research, the writer arranges his discussion in three stages. On the first stage, the writer intends to describe imagery in the poem. "Mother to Son" tells about a mother's struggle in her life and a mother's advice for her son. On the second stage, the writer will discuss literature and society as the extrinsic aspect of the poem. On the last stage, the writer intends to relate his discussion about imagery to that of literature and society.

The relation is possible because the writer applies a contextual analysis. By applying a contextual analysis, the writer draws his description of the struggle from the choice of words which provokes his human senses.

## **4. DISCUSSION**

### **4.1 Intrinsic Element**

#### **4.1.1 Connotation and Denotation**

There is connotation and denotation which contain in "Mother To Son" to describe the mother's struggle.

Line 2

Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

The underline word is connotation. Langston Hughes in this poem describe “crystal stair” as the mother’s life journey. The mother says that because her life has not been a staircase made of crystal which means that life is as not as easy to imagine. However, in denotation crystal stair, it means a set of stairs and its surrounding walls or structure.

#### **4.1.2 Imagery**

The discussion about the intrinsic element of Hughes’s “Mother to Son” concerns with imagery in the poem. Through the imagery the mother’s struggle is figuratively described.

Line 1

Well, son, I’ll tell you:

In this first line, the underlined words are auditory imagery. It implicitly describes that the moment when she says “I’ll tell you”, she wants to say something important to her son. In this line, the mother tries to ask her son to pay attention to what his mother is about to say because there is implicit importance in it.

Line 2

Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.

In this line, imagery which contain is kinesthetic imagery. It seems when the mother says “Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair”, she means that the meaning of

the phrase “crystal stair” implicitly refers to her life itself. The mother illustrates her life like a crystal stair, which means that she tells her son how difficult life has been. She tells him that he needs to climb up to improve her life better and still continues her struggle.

Line 3

It's had tacks in it,

Tacks in this line means nails; in other words, this line contains of tactile imagery. The line “It's had tacks in it” implicitly describes obstacles in mother’s life. In her life, there are so many obstacles or problems, and the mother describes the obstacles as tasks which she has to finish.

Line 6

And places with no carpet on the floor—

This line contains visual imagery. The phrase “places with no carpet on the floor—“ gives a sense of visual because the eyes can see the place without a carpet on the floor. This phrase implicitly describes obstacles in mother’s life: life is not as easy as it is imagined, and the mother compares her life to the place with no carpet on the floor.

Line 18

For I'se still goin', honey,

The underline in this line is kinesthetic imagery. “goin’” is an act or instance of leaving a place. “For I’s still goin’, honey,” is describe about mother’s struggle. The mother still fights for her life even though there are many obstacles and problems in her life. She continues her life even though it is very hard for herself.

Struggle needs a movement. In this poem most of all, the struggle are mostly described in kinesthetic imagery, which implies that the mother needs to struggle really hard to achieve a better life for both herself and her son.

#### **4.2 Extrinsic Element**

Literature and society become the main concern in the extrinsic element which this study discusses. In “Mother to Son” there is a struggle of a mother in a society where racial segregation takes place. In the poem, there is also a form of conversation between the mother and her son.

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—

The lines describe about the life the mother had been through. She got many obstacles in her life, such as where she lived when black people were treated like slaves and did not have anything in her life. The mother also lived when the racism



and oppression was strong in the era. In society, Afro-American could not get a decent needs for a life, such as education, economy and even basic human rights.

The intrinsic and extrinsic elements in the poem are related to each other; the interrelation is about movement. The movement in the poem means that the life is getting harder, the mother along with her son should never stop to survive. Survival for the mother means a movement to free themselves from slavery and racial segregation.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

“Mother to Son” tells a mother’s struggle. The poem also tells the mother’s advice for her son to survive in this life even the life is being cruel to him. Each line of “Mother to Son” describes the struggle. Being taken as intrinsic elements, the mother’s struggle is described in imagery. Most of the imagery is categorized as kinesthetic imagery; the images of which mirror the struggle. Kinesthetic is a sense of movement, and in the line it means that struggle in life needs a movement to make life itself better than it is at the moment.

Literature and society is taken as the extrinsic element to describe the struggle. Viewed as the extrinsic element, “Mother to Son” literally discusses slavery which befell to Afro-American. Langston Hughes uses the point of view an Afro-American mother to picture slavery, where she experienced the life as a slave to the whites.

The description of both the intrinsic and extrinsic element of the poem makes the mother's struggle vivid to read, and it makes the poem beautiful to read and learn from.

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