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A Crystal Stair

or a Broken Tread

*“When you come to the end of your rope, tie a knot and hang on.*” Franklin D. Roosevelt once said, a quotation that holds such meaning and a universal message. Life is full of struggles, and if you give up each time you won’t survive, so it’s important to stay strong. To keep going is the goal of most, if not all people. In the influential poem “Mother to Son” by Langston Hughes, the speaker is addressing her son with meaningful words of strength and wisdom and naturally comes to the conclusion that obstacles are a way of life. Even though the path may seem overbearing and “no crystal stair” (2), you must keep fighting, keep moving and not let anything or anyone hold you back. Although the language portrayed the speaker as a person of a lower class, or as negative story, the message is clear and so strong that the reader must decide whether the message of the poem is a positive or negative one.

“Mother to Son” paints a picture in the reader’s mind, of a mother and her son distinguishing that they may have a rough life, or have been going through hard times. “Well son, I’ll tell you”(1), is the way the mother starts out her lesson toward her young son. Clearly, this family seems to be poor, living in rough conditions and possibly belonging to the lower class. The mother explains to her son that life does have its downs, and times may seem unbearable:

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. (3-7)

Hughes emphasizes how the woman’s past has been by using imagery. The repetition of “and” underlines how monotonous and inflexible her hard times were.

According to Edward Hirsch, when reading a poem, you can’t just simply read the words to inhabit the true meaning: “I bring the words off the pages into my own mouth, my own body”(86). Although this may seem over the top, Hughes makes this possible with the relatable, yet controversial topic, and strong message. Reading this poem out loud gives a totally different experience compared to reading just the words. When read out loud, the reader can hear the mother’s voice talking to her child that she is protecting and loves.

The tone and style of the poem sets the reader to truly believe and picture that this is a mother, who may have been deprived as a child, talking to her son that may, and probably will follow in her footsteps. Despite the harsh past this boy’s mother may have had, she explains that she kept going, not just half the time, “but all the time”(8) and stayed strong.

I’se been a-climbin’ on,

And reachin’ landin’s,

And turnin’ corners,

And sometimes goin’ in the dark (9-12)

The imagery cast throughout the powerful lines gets the reader inside this woman’s past and allows the reader to see the difficulty that she has encountered. Nevertheless, no matter what it was, how hard it got or how much she wanted to give up, she kept going, which turned a weak soul into a strong individual. Just because you are born into a minority, a poor family or unfortunate surroundings does not determine your future, the mother explains to her child in the next lines of the poem.

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— (13-16)

Hirsch also states “The reader of poetry is a kind of pilgrim setting out, setting forth” to find the true meaning of the poem that they are about to explore (85). Finding a poem can be like finding “a message in a bottle” (84) and the reader is now it’s “secret addressee” (85). The reader doesn’t have to read the poem, they choose to, and when they do choose to explore the depths of the words within each line, the poem speaks to you, and only you, making the reader its “secret addressee”. When reading a poem, the reader is exploring the lines and each word to find the true meaning. Hughes makes this almost easy for the reader with such a relatable theme. Hearing the mothers voice talking to her young, inexperienced son is made possible, and it makes the message a lot clearer to the reader.

The structure of the poem also plays a huge part in “Mother to Son”. Free verse is the style it is written in, which brings out the poems message. There is no meter however the rhythm of the poem is a voice speaking. The mother isn’t rhyming or holding back anything she wants to say. She cares for her child, so she isn’t worried about keeping things from him because she is trying to protect him. The uneven lines and how Hughes uses unique ways to play with words, for example the line “Bare.”(7), the line is actually bare, and gives the poem a serious tone. The structure of the poem definitely gives the reader the feel that someone is actually talking as opposed to reading a poem.

Even though the language is broken up, the structure used sets the tone and the reader could actually hear the mother speaking. Although someone may come from a wealthy family, or has lived a privileged life, the reader could easily connect with what this mother is trying to tell her child. Because it’s not about being poor, or what ethnicity you are, it’s about keeping strong, and fighting through life’s obstacles, because in the end, that will determine the kind of person you are.

For I’se still goin’, honey,

I’se still climbin’,

And life for me ain’t been no crystal stair. (17-19)

The final words of the poem are indeed the most prevailing, the extreme message being held within the ingenuous lines are revealed. Even when the struggle stops, another one will most likely begin. Just because you get through one thing, doesn’t mean life will be at ease forever. The mother is illuminating that even though she got through her struggle, she’s still climbing, still fighting and she’s ok. Life doesn’t have to be handed to you on a silver platter in order for you to be content and happy. The reader realizes, with these final lines, no matter where life takes this boy, or where life has taken this woman, you don’t need a “crystal stair”(2), because no matter what life throws at you, there are always ways to push through it and endure life’s challenges.

Works Cited

Hirsch, Edward “How to Read a Poem” The World is a Text Ed. Jonathon Silverman and Dean Rager, 2nd Edt, New Jersey Pearson, 2006. 84-90. Print.