

Lesson Name:

Don't Turn Back

Student Objectives:

- Define metaphor.
- Create a metaphor that connects difficult circumstances to courage.
- Write a poem using a template that expands on a created metaphor.

Educator Preparation:

- Familiarize yourself with the lesson outline and the poem.
- Create metaphors for hardship and hope.
- If presenting this lesson yourself and time allows, students would probably greatly appreciate you sharing your own created poem alongside the modeled example.
- Prepare the [graphic organizer worksheet](#) for students.

Introduction:

Hello! Today I am sharing with you a lesson about having hope during challenging times. I will be teaching this lesson through the poem “Mother to Son” by Langston Hughes.

Instruction:

The poem we are going to read together is by Langston Hughes—one of the leading poets of the Harlem Renaissance, which was a flourishing arts movement in New York City during the 1920's by African-American writers, artists, and musicians. Langston's dad left him soon after his birth and he was mainly raised by his grandmother because his mom moved around frequently. His grandmother died in his early teen years and he spent the rest of his teenage years with his mom, moving from city to city. His teenage years were challenging, but during this time, he had a teacher who introduced him to poetry. It was through poetry that he found a way to be hopeful and to develop strength in the midst of these trials.

The poem “Mother to Son” has a mother explaining to her son that her life has not been easy either, but she has kept going and hoping. She encourages him to do the same. As we read the poem together, pay attention to the images she uses to describe her life.

Interaction:

“Mother to Son” - Langston Hughes

*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.
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.*



Hughes uses metaphors throughout the entire poem to describe the mother's life. Metaphors are a type of figurative language where an author compares one object to another object as a way of explaining the second object more fully. In the poem, Hughes compares the mother's life to a staircase that is bare, with splinters and tacks. He uses this image to emphasize the difficulty of her life. Nothing has been easy for her. In a lot of ways, the images and metaphors in this poem are pretty bleak and they don't sound very encouraging. They especially don't seem very filled with hope.

However, if you think about the poem more deeply, we start to see that the mom is trying to have a positive perspective despite the challenges she faces. Life has tried to push her down, but she keeps moving upward. Even though life has thrown her a lot of grief and struggles, she keeps on going and fighting. She encourages her son to do the same, even though presumably he has his own struggles going on. The part I love best about this poem is that the mother is such an amazing role model to her son—he is able to have a positive perspective because of the way his mother has responded to difficult circumstances helps him to be hopeful that he will get through this.

Closure:

You, too, are on a journey. You are going somewhere. On some days, it might seem like you can't take another step. On other days, it might seem like the world is fighting against you as you try to rise up. Like the son in this poem, you might just feel like turning back or sitting on the steps. But, think about how you can have hope that things will get better; a positive perspective when challenges seem daunting. How can you keep walking up those stairs and not turn back?

Activity:

As a way of thinking about how to have a positive perspective in the midst of trials and hardships, I want you to create a metaphor similar to what Langston Hughes created in his poem. Then, you will create a poem using Hughes' poem as a template. I am going to provide you with a modeled example of what to do.

Well, [your name], I'll tell you:

Life for me ain't been no _____.

It's had _____,

And _____,

And _____,

And _____

But all the time

I've been _____,

And _____,

And _____,

So, don't you _____.

Don't you _____

'Cause you finds it's _____.
Don't you _____—
For I'se still _____,
I'se still _____,

Well, Kara, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no landscaped garden.
It's had weeds,
And thorns,
And scorching sun,
And overgrown bushes
But all the time
I'se been planting,
And weeding,
And watering,
So, don't you quit your toil.
Don't you rush inside to sit all day
'Cause you finds it's sweaty out here.
Don't you stop believing in blooms—
For I'se still pruning,
I'se still planting

As you write, think of an individual in your life who has been a role model about having a positive perspective in the midst of difficult circumstances—someone who has helped you to have hope when you face trials. How do the images you created in your poem help you focus on ways to focus on this positive perspective?

Additional Resources:

- [Langston Hughes Biography](#)
- [“Mother to Son” Narrated by Viola Davis](#)
- [“Mother to Son” text](#)
- [Metaphor Mini-lesson](#)
- [Student Poem Graphic Organizer](#)