

Language of Maternal Wisdom: A Critical Discourse Analysis of "Mother to Son" by Langston Hughes

Rhemari-Ann G. Alcantara

President Ramon Magsaysay State University

ABSTRACT:- This study critically analyzes Langston Hughes's poem "Mother to Son" through the lens of critical discourse analysis, focusing on the interplay between language, power, and social context. The poem, spoken in the voice of an African American mother, conveys themes of resilience, hardship, and generational wisdom using African American Vernacular English (AAVE), metaphor, and vivid imagery. By examining the poem's linguistic features and discursive strategies, this paper reveals how Hughes gives voice to the lived experiences of marginalized communities, particularly African American women. The analysis highlights the poem's role as a pedagogical and emotional discourse, where maternal language serves to guide, empower, and prepare the next generation for life's challenges. Ultimately, the study underscores the poem's cultural and social significance as a literary reflection of perseverance and strength within the African American experience.

Keywords:- Critical Discourse Analysis, Resilience, African American Vernacular English (AAVE), Maternal Voice, Marginalization

I. INTRODUCTION

Langston Hughes, a central figure in the Harlem Renaissance, harnessed his literary talents to depict the multifaceted experiences of African Americans in the 20th century, capturing both their struggles and triumphs (Rampersad, 1986). Although Hughes's work appears ostensibly accessible, this simplicity belies the intricate layers of meaning woven into his poems, plays, short stories, and essays ("The Art and Imagination of Langston Hughes," 1990). His role extended beyond artistic creation, as he actively championed young, militant Black artists, providing them with practical, moral, and emotional sustenance while also offering constructive criticism to both the new generation and his contemporaries (Smethurst, 2002).

Hughes's literary contributions intricately explore the interconnected themes of identity formation, the relentless pursuit of social justice, and the indomitable resilience exhibited by the Black community, demonstrating a profound understanding of the nuances that constitute the Black experience; he masterfully employs narrative techniques, skillfully weaving together linguistic and rhetorical elements, to portray the complex tapestry of Black life, thereby amplifying voices that have been historically marginalized and suppressed within prevailing cultural discourses, fostering a more inclusive and representative literary landscape (Jarrett, 2010).

The objectives of this study encompass a comprehensive analysis of Hughes's poem "Mother to Son" through the lens of critical discourse analysis, with a particular emphasis on unraveling the linguistic strategies employed to convey profound insights into the intricate dynamics of familial relationships, the transmission of wisdom across generations, and the enduring spirit of resilience.

Furthermore, the research seeks to illuminate the stylistic devices and rhetorical techniques utilized by Hughes to elicit specific emotional responses from the audience, thereby deepening the reader's comprehension of the poem's underlying thematic concerns; by meticulously examining the structural and semantic components of the poem, this study aims to uncover the subtle nuances embedded within the text, revealing the intricate interplay between language, power, and social context (Ranguti & Tannada, 2024).

II. METHODOLOGY

Critical discourse analysis, as a theoretical framework, transcends conventional linguistic analysis by delving into the intricate interplay between language, power, and ideology within specific social contexts. This approach facilitates the deconstruction of textual elements to expose underlying assumptions, biases, and power relations that shape meaning and influence interpretation (Asghar, 2014).

III. DATA ANALYSIS

The analysis involved the following key steps:

- a) **Textual Examination.** A thorough examination of the poem "Mother to Son" was conducted to identify salient linguistic features, including metaphors, similes, imagery, and rhetorical devices. (Onwuegbuzie & Denham, 2014)
- b) **Contextual Analysis.** The historical, social, and cultural context in which the poem was written was analyzed to understand the broader influences shaping Hughes's work (Liando et al., 2022).
- c) **Discursive Strategies.** The discursive strategies employed by Hughes, such as narrative voice, tone, and perspective, were examined to discern their impact on the poem's meaning and reception. (Miller, 2013)
- d) **Thematic Interpretation.** The dominant themes of resilience, perseverance, and intergenerational wisdom were identified and analyzed in relation to the poem's linguistic and contextual elements (Valoojerdi, 2021).

IV. ANALYSIS

Literary works are made of language and language is the material of literature (Caparas, 2017). The poem employs the use of African American Vernacular English, imbuing the text with a distinct cultural identity and authenticity. The mother's speech patterns reflect her background and lived experiences, creating a sense of intimacy and connection with the reader. The poem opens with a direct address, as the mother begins with "Well, son, I'll tell you" (Ebede, 2017).

V. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Critical Discourse Analysis of Mother to Son by Langston Hughes

Lines from the Poem / Evidence	Linguistic Features	Discursive Strategies	Pattern Observed	Meanings Constructed
"Well, son, I'll tell you:"	Direct address	Establishing intimacy, maternal role	Beginning with a conversational tone	Establishes a personal and guiding relationship between speaker and listener.
"Life for me ain't been no crystal stair."	Negative concord (AAVE), Metaphor	Contrast, Rejection of ideal	Repeated at the beginning and end	Establishes the central theme of a life marked by hardship, challenging idealized notions of ease and privilege.
"It's had tacks in it, / And splinters,"	Concrete nouns	Listing, Vivid imagery	Use of harsh, tangible objects	Conveys the painful and difficult nature of the speaker's life experiences
"And boards torn up,"	Concrete nouns, Passive voice	Vivid imagery, Implied damage	Depicts a state of brokenness and instability.	Suggests setbacks and challenges that have actively damaged the speaker's life journey.
"And places with no carpet on the floor— / Bare."	Simple vocabulary, Short sentence	Vivid imagery, Emphasis	Conveys a sense of deprivation and lack of comfort.	Underscores the basic and often harsh conditions the speaker has endured.
"But all the time / I've been a-climbin' on,"	AAVE, Present continuous tense	Perseverance, Determination	Emphasis on continuous action despite difficulty	Highlights the speaker's ongoing effort and resilience in the face of hardship
"And reachin' landin's, / And turnin' corners,"	Action verbs, Spatial metaphors	Progress, Navigation	Suggests moments of respite and	Conveys a sense of moving forward, albeit with effort and occasional

			changes in direction.	changes in circumstance.
"And sometimes goin' in the dark / Where there ain't been no light."	Negative construction, Sensory detail	Metaphor for hardship, Uncertainty	Imagery of struggle without guidance.	Represents periods of difficulty and uncertainty where the path forward was unclear.
"So boy, don't you turn back."	Imperative verb, Direct address	Guidance, Warning	Direct command emphasizing perseverance.	Urges the son to continue despite challenges, drawing on the mother's experience.
"Don't you set down on the steps / 'Cause you finds it's kinder hard."	Imperative verbs, AAVE, Causal conjunction	Warning, Explanation	Connects potential difficulty with the need to persevere.	Discourages giving up when faced with hardship, normalizing the difficulty of life's journey.
"Don't you fall now—"	Imperative verb, Emphasis	Warning, Urgency	Short, direct command emphasizing the danger of failure.	Conveys a strong sense of the importance of maintaining resilience and not succumbing to challenges.
"For I'se still goin', honey,"	AAVE, Term of endearment, Present continuous tense	Reassurance, Modeling	Reinforces the speaker's ongoing perseverance.	Provides a living example of resilience for the son to follow, emphasizing the mother's continued struggle and determination.
"I'se still climbin',"	AAVE, Present continuous tense	Reinforcement, Determination	Repetition of the central action.	Underscores the continuous effort and unwavering spirit of the speaker.
"And life for me ain't been no crystal stair."	Negative concord (AAVE), Metaphor	Restatement, Closure	Returns to the central contrasting image.	Reinforces the central theme and provides a sense of closure, leaving the listener with the enduring message of a life of hardship and resilience.

Voice and Identity through Language. Hughes employs the voice of an African American mother to convey a message of resilience and perseverance. The poem's language is steeped in the vernacular of the speaker, marked by features of African American Vernacular English such as "ain't been" and "I'se been a-climbin'" (Tumbahang, 2019).

Metaphor as a Framework for Life's Journey. The central metaphor of the "crystal stair" effectively symbolizes the idealized version of life, which is contrasted with the mother's lived reality. The negative construction "Life for me ain't been no crystal stair" serves as a powerful rejection of this ideal, immediately establishing the poem's thematic focus on hardship and struggle (Spacey, 2025).

Material Hardship and Socioeconomic Reality. The imagery of "tacks," "splinters," and "boards torn up" creates a vivid depiction of material hardship. These concrete nouns evoke a sense of pain, discomfort, and instability, reflecting the socioeconomic realities faced by many African Americans during the early 20th century. The absence of "carpet on the floor" further underscores the lack of comfort and basic necessities, highlighting the speaker's impoverished living conditions (Hooks, 2020).

Perseverance and Agency in the Face of Adversity. Despite the challenges she faces, the mother emphasizes her continuous effort to overcome obstacles. The repetition of "I'se been a-climbin' on" reinforces her agency and determination, demonstrating her refusal to be defeated by her circumstances. The action verbs "reachin'," "turnin'," and "goin'" suggest a sense of progress and navigation, even in the face of uncertainty (Comanelea, 2019).

Pedagogical Role of Maternal Discourse. The mother's direct address to her son ("boy") establishes a clear pedagogical intention. She uses her own experiences to impart valuable lessons about resilience and

perseverance. The imperative verbs "don't you turn back," "don't you set down," and "don't you fall now" serve as both warning and encouragement, urging him to avoid succumbing to the difficulties of life. She advises her son not to easily give up even when life gets harder (Gibran, 2016).

Emotional Connection and Encouragement. The use of the term of endearment "honey" creates a sense of emotional warmth and connection, softening the harsh realities of the mother's experiences. This familial intimacy enhances the impact of her message, making it more personal and relatable to the reader. The poem underscores the delicate balance between individual struggle and familial responsibility, particularly within marginalized communities, highlighting how mothers often navigate their own hardships while simultaneously nurturing and preparing their children for the realities of their world (Mark et al., 2019).

III. DISCUSSION

Hughes's "Mother to Son" deftly encapsulates the ethos of Black motherhood, portraying the speaker as both a survivor of profound adversity and a fount of wisdom for her son, thus rendering the poem a powerful intergenerational dialogue on navigating life's challenges, the nuanced intersections of race, gender, and class that shape individual experience, and the enduring strength found in familial bonds (Reyes, 2003). The mother is passing on her experiences and struggles in the society so her son can know what to expect (Palacios et al., 2013).

Analyzing the poem, Langston Hughes's "Mother to Son," through a critical lens reveals how the speaker's resilience is not merely an individual trait but a product of systemic factors and social expectations (Hannon et al., 2023). The woman's role in the family and society is important because the kind of knowledge and advice she is offering to the son is critical for him to survive in that society.

The poem "Mother to Son" explores themes of perseverance, maternal guidance, and the realities of hardship through the lens of an African American mother addressing her son. The poem's effectiveness resides significantly in its employment of the mother's voice, which functions as a potent instrument for conveying lived experience, transforming individual narrative into a broader reflection on the resilience and fortitude essential for navigating a life characterized by adversity. The poem acts as a beacon of guidance, illuminating the path forward amidst life's inevitable struggles, encouraging the next generation to embrace resilience and determination in the face of adversity (O'Reilly, 2004).

VI. CONCLUSION

Langston Hughes's "Mother to Son" powerfully portrays the resilience of African American motherhood through rich language, metaphor, and cultural expression. Using African American Vernacular English and vivid imagery, the poem shares a mother's life lessons of perseverance and strength. Her voice serves as both a personal testimony and a universal message, encouraging the next generation to face life's struggles with courage and determination. Ultimately, the poem highlights the power of language to convey wisdom, nurture resilience, and reflect the realities of marginalized communities.

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President Ramon Magsaysay State University