

ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS ACTIVITY SHEET  
LITERARY DEVICE-SYMBOLISM

**Level:** Form 3 Term 2

**Curriculum Topic:** Literary Device-Symbolism

**Teaching Point:** Investigate symbolism used in a poem.

**Activity**

A writer can use symbolism to convey an implied thought or message. A symbol is a hidden meaning or an idea that can take multiple forms such as: colours, objects, animals and actions. Symbols contribute to connotative meaning in texts.

**Instructions:** The poem below has many symbols of objects and actions with implied meaning. Read the extract first and then look at the table below. On the left column there are symbols in the phrases identified. Write what you think the symbols mean, on the right column. Give it a try!

**Mother to Son** By 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.



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**Example:**

<b>Symbols in phrases</b>	<b>Meaning of symbols</b>
“and places with no carpet on the floor.”	Carpets are soft and comfortable material and are symbols of a lavish life. Therefore the mother in the poem refers to floors without carpet to emphasise poverty and hardship during her struggles in life.

<b>Symbols in phrases</b>	<b>Meaning of expression</b>
“Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.” <b>(line 2)</b>	
“It’s had tacks in it,”/And splinters,/ And boards torn up” <b>(lines 3-5)</b>	
“I’ve been a-climbin’ on” <b>(line 9)</b>	
“And turnin’ corners,” <b>(line 11)</b>	
And sometimes goin’ in the dark” <b>(line 12)</b>	
“Where there ain’t been no light.” <b>(line 13)</b>	
“Don’t you set down on the steps” <b>(line 15)</b>	
“Don’t you fall now” <b>(line 17)</b>	
“I’ve still climbin’,” <b>(line 19)</b>	

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**Answer Key:**

Remember, poems are subjective in nature and appeal to different people in different ways. Here are my thoughts. Yours might be similar or even not.

<b>Symbols in phrases</b>	<b>Meaning of expression</b>
“Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.” (line 2)	The crystal stair is an expression that the mother uses to show that she was not blessed or lucky, by having support, wealth and an easy life. The opposite is the sad reality of the mother where she had many struggles in life.
“It’s had tacks in it,”/And splinters,/ And boards torn up,/ and places with no carpet on the floor.” (lines 3-5)	The words ‘tacks’, ‘splinters’, ‘boards torn up’, are objects the mother uses to show difficulty and pain she endured while fighting to make herself survive.
“I’ve been a-climbin’ on” (line 9)	This phrase shows the connotative meaning of trying to move past difficulties, climbing a ladder/ stairs to overcome, think positive, self-endure and continue to strive through difficulty.
“And turnin’ corners,” (line 11)	Turning corner are the ways the mother tried to find other routes and be resourceful without succumbing to the obstacles in her path.
And sometimes goin’ in the dark” (line 12)	Darkness symbolizes death/destruction/evil. The mother in the poem sees that obstacles can make her think negative and may overpower her.
“Where there ain’t been no light.” (line 13)	No light symbolizes the days she had little hope.
“Don’t you set down on the steps” (line 15)	By not moving symbolizes becoming stagnant and not being able to overcome the obstacles or be complacent. The mother does not want this for her son as she wants him to be a stronger person.
“Don’t you fall now” (line 17)	Fall symbolizes giving up in life
“I’ve still climbin’,” (line 19)	Still climbing emphasizes the ability to still keep going, although life can be difficult. The mother is trying to motivate her son to overcome life’s adversities as she is living proof it can happen.