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.

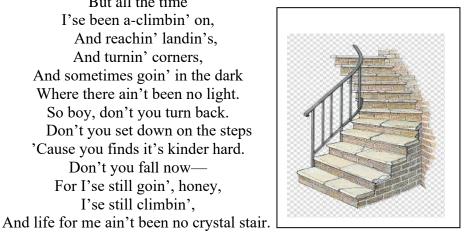
Instructions: The poem below has many symbols of objects and actions with implied meaning. Read the extract first and then look at the table below. On the left column there are symbols in the phrases identified. Write what you think the symbols mean, on the right column. Give it a try!

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',





5

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15

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Example:

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

Symbols in phrases	Meaning of expression
"Life for me ain't been no	
crystal stair."	
(line 2)	
"It's had tacks in it,"/And	
splinters,/ And boards torn	
up" (lines 3-5)	
"I'se been a-climbin' on"	
(line 9)	
"And turnin' corners,"	
(line 11)	
And sometimes goin' in the	
dark" (line 12)	
"Where there ain't been no	
light." (line 13)	
"Don't you set down on the	
steps" (line 15)	
(7)	
"Don't you fall now"	
(line 17)	
"I'se still climbin',"	
(line 19)	

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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.

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