

Mother to Son

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've 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've still goin', honey,

I've still climbin',

And life for me ain't

been no crystal stair.

—Langston Hughes



tacks nails, pins | **splinters** small pieces of wood/glass/stones



Understand and Enjoy

COMPREHENSION

Answer the following questions in brief.

1. What does the poet's mother compare her life to?
2. In Stanza 1, the poet has made use of certain words that tell of various obstacles the mother faced in her life. What are those?
3. What words or phrases indicate that she is from a poor section of society?
4. Has the climbing of the stairs been easy for the mother? If not, what difficulties does she face while climbing up?
5. Does the mother warn the son of the dangers in climbing the stairs or encourage him?
6. Explain how the poet has made use of the symbol of stairs to compare it with life.

VOCABULARY AND APPRECIATION

A. Find words in the first stanza of the poem that mean the same as:

1. uneven surface _____
2. small thin pieces of wood, metal, glass, etc. _____
3. without any protection or covering _____

B. There are many words in the poem where the poet makes use of a local dialect which also illustrates that the mother is not well-educated. Pick them out from the poem and write what they actually mean.

Example: *I've been a-climbin' on* — *It has been rising up/progressing in life.*

C. Read the following sentences:

- | She sings like a nightingale.
- | He fought as if he were a lion.

Now read this set of sentences:

- | She is the nightingale of our school.
- | He was the lion of the battle.

Notice that in both sets of sentences, comparison is done. But the modes of comparison are different. Writers and poets frequently make use of such techniques to lend a special meaning or effect to their writings.

The literary terms used for these comparisons are called **similes** and **metaphors**.

These are also termed as figures of speech.

The figure of speech used in first set of sentences is **simile**. In such sentences, comparison is done between two distinctly separate things and both of them have their identities. They are compared with the help of words - **like, as, such as**. You would have observed that 'she' and 'nightingale' are two different things and they are compared with the help of the word 'like', whereas the figure of speech used in the second set of sentences is **metaphor**. In these sentences comparison is imposed upon the compared object i.e one of the two objects loses its identity to the other object. For example 'He' and the 'lion' are not separate things in this case because 'he' possesses these qualities. Therefore, he is made to appear as a lion. However there is always a feeling of comparison. The words - **like, as, and such as** are not used for a comparison in a metaphor.

Now look for a few metaphors from the poem and write them down.

DISCUSSION

Do you think members of family, especially your parents, sometimes help you to sail out of difficult situations? Aren't they with you when you feel all alone? Can you manage without them? Discuss in groups and share with the class.

She Lived for Me



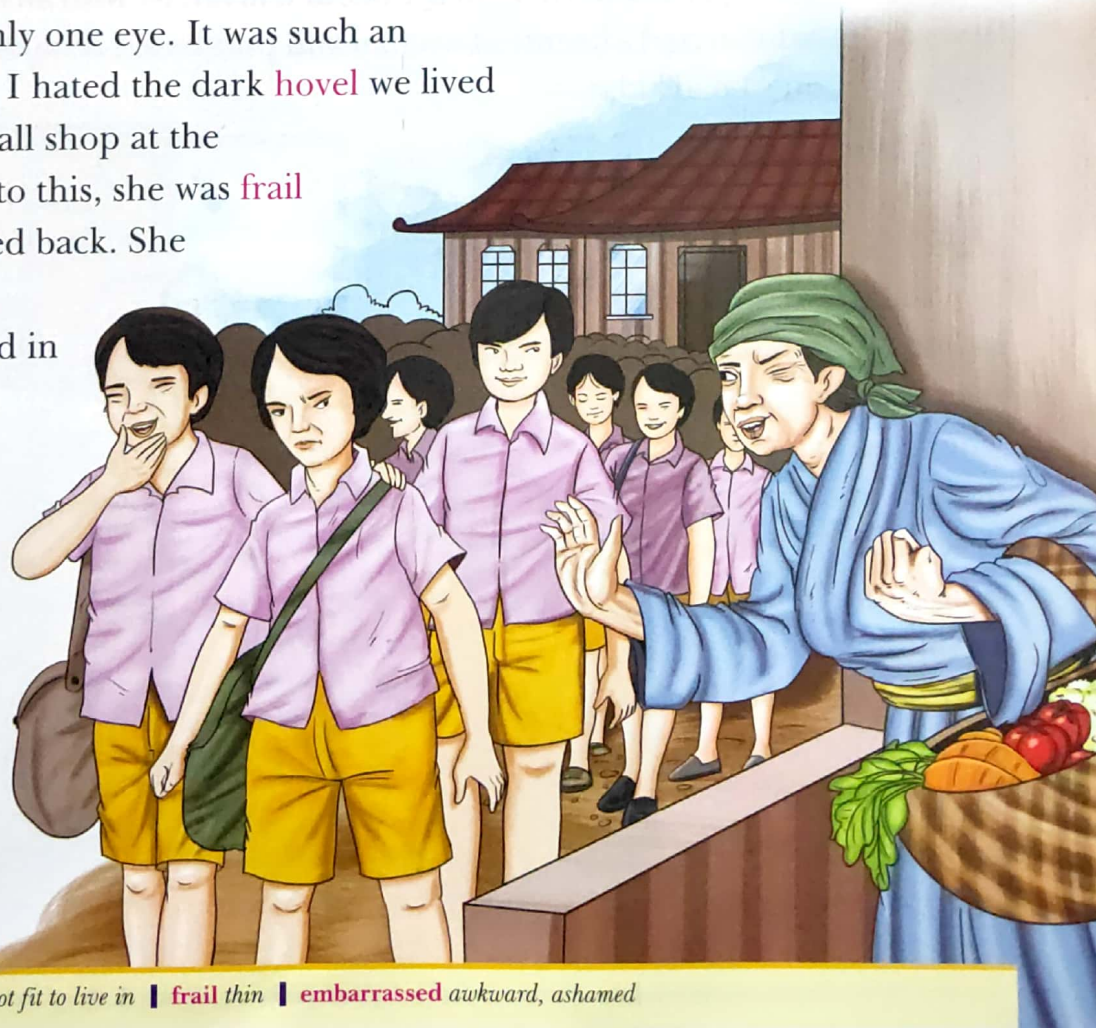
Get Started

Discuss in groups:

1. What are family relations?
2. Which relation would you assign the greatest importance? Why?

My mother had only one eye. It was such an embarrassment. I hated the dark **hovel** we lived in. She ran a small shop at the vegetable market. Added to this, she was **frail** and walked with a hunched back. She collected green leafy vegetables like spinach and in fact, anything such to sell, for the money we needed.

I remember that it was a field day, and my mother came to the school. I was **embarrassed**. How could she do this to me? I threw her a hateful look and ran out.



hovel a small dirty, damp house that is not fit to live in | **frail** thin | **embarrassed** awkward, ashamed

The next day when I went to school, my friends teased me, "Your mom has only one eye!" and laughed at me.

I wished that my mother would just disappear from this world. One day, after a great **conflict** in my mind, I finally asked her, "Mom, why don't you have the other eye? You have only made me a **laughing stock** all around. Why don't you just disappear?" My mother did not respond. I guess I felt a little bad, but at the same time, it felt good to think that I had said what I'd wanted to tell her for a long time.

Maybe it was because my mom hadn't punished me, but I didn't think that I had hurt her feelings very badly.

That night I woke up and went to the kitchen to get a glass of water. My mother was crying there, so quietly, as if she was afraid that she might awaken me. I took a look at her, and then turned away.

Because of what I had said to her earlier, there was something pinching me in the corner of my heart. Even so, I **despised** my mother who was crying out of her one eye. So I told myself that I would grow up and become successful, because I hated my one-eyed mom and our **desperate** poverty.

Then I studied really hard. I left my mother and came to Seoul and went on with my studies, and got a job of a lecturer in the Seoul University with all the confidence I had. Time flew very fast. I married a beautiful woman and purchased an apartment in the finest locality of the city. Later I had kids too.

Then I started living here happily as a successful man. I liked it because it was a place that did not remind me of my mom. This happiness was getting bigger and bigger, when someone unexpected came to see me. "What? Who's this?" It was my mother...still with her one eye. I felt as if the whole sky was falling apart on me. My little girl ran away,



conflict (here) struggle, confusion | **laughing stock** object of humiliation or ridicule | **despised** disliked | **desperate** hopeless

scared of my mom's eye.

And I asked her, "Who are you? I don't know you!" As if I tried to make that real. I screamed at her "How dare you come to my house and scare my daughter! Get out of here! Now!" And to this, my mother quietly answered, "Oh, I'm so sorry. I may have come to the wrong address," and she disappeared. Thank goodness... she didn't recognise me. I was quite relieved. I told myself that I wasn't going to care, or think about this for the rest of my life.

Then a wave of relief came upon me...one day, a letter regarding the school **alumni** reunion came to my house. I lied to my wife saying that I was going on a business trip. After the reunion, I went down to the old **shack**, that I used to call a house. There I found my mother on the cold ground. But I did not shed a single tear. She had a piece of paper in her hand... it was a letter addressed to me.

She wrote:

My dear son

I think my life has been long enough now. And... I won't visit Seoul anymore... but would it be too much to ask if I wanted you to visit me once in a while? I miss you so much. And I was so glad when I heard you were coming for the reunion. But I decided not to go to the school.... For you... I'm sorry that I have only one eye, and I was an embarrassment to you for as long as I remember. You see, when you were very little, you met with an accident, and lost one of your eyes. As a mother, I couldn't stand watching you having to grow up with only one eye... so I gave you mine... I was so proud of my son who was seeing a whole new world for me, in my place, with that eye. I was never upset at you for anything you did. The couple of times that you were angry with me. I thought to myself, 'It's because he loves me'. I miss the times when you were still young and around me.

I miss you so much. I love you. You mean the world to me.

My world **shattered!**

Then I cried for the person who lived for me—MY MOTHER.

Respond and Reflect

A. Tick (✓) the correct response for the following statements in the box provided.

1. The son hated his mother because:

- (a) she was very talkative
- (b) she had only one eye
- (c) she was a vegetable seller

2. The son made up his mind to become:

- (a) a successful man
- (b) a vegetable seller
- (c) a superhero

3. The writer joined:

- (a) a college
- (b) a university
- (c) a school

4. The little girl ran away screaming because she:

- (a) saw an old woman who had one eye
- (b) was afraid of her father
- (c) was afraid of strangers

5. The son:

- (a) welcomed his mother
- (b) screamed at his mother and told her to leave his house
- (c) introduced his mother to his daughter

6. The son was once invited to:

- (a) a business trip
- (b) a parent-teacher meet
- (c) a school reunion

7. 'My world shattered' means:

- (a) the earth broke into many pieces
- (b) everything was lost for him as his mother died
- (c) he felt embarrassed

8. The story teaches us that:

- (a) Mother's love is selfless.
- (b) Beauty is skin deep.
- (c) Think before you speak.

B. Answer the following questions briefly in about 20-30 words.

1. Describe the mother of the narrator. What did she do to earn her living?
2. Why did the narrator run away from his mother when she came to his school?
3. What did the narrator see at night when he woke up to get a glass of water?

4. What pledge did the narrator make to himself that night?
5. How did the son behave when his mother came to meet him at Seoul?
6. Why did the narrator go to his old shack, after his school alumni reunion?
7. What had the narrator's mother written in the letter?

C. The narrator was unfair to his mother. Do you think he repented of his behaviour? Why do you think so? Discuss in the class.



Learn New Words

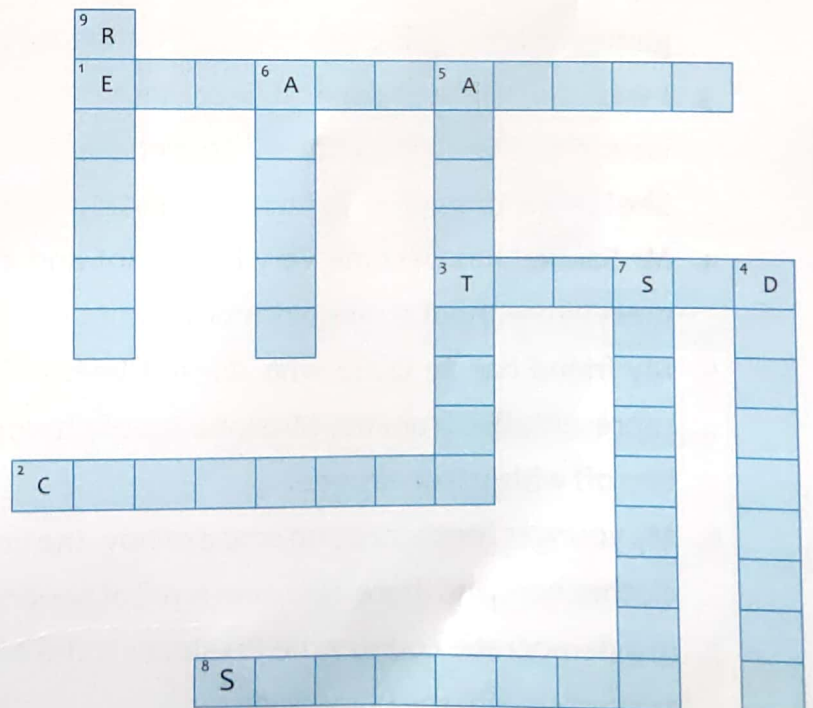
A. Find the odd one in the series of the given words.

1. cried, played, danced, laughed, sang
2. shack, apartment, hut, cottage, hovel
3. successful, embarrassed, ashamed, hateful, desperate

B. Complete the crossword puzzle.

Clues

1. feel awkward, ashamed (11)
2. struggle between two people which creates a tension (8)
3. made fun of someone in a playful way (6)
4. in despair, to lose hope (9)
5. accommodation, living quarters or rooms (9)
6. former students of an institution (6)
7. broken into pieces, destroyed completely (9)
8. a loud piercing cry (8)
9. meeting again after a long period (7)



C. Read the following extract from the lesson once again and note how the author describes his mother.

My mother had only one eye. I hated her... she was such an embarrassment. I hated the dark hovel we lived in. She ran a small shop at the vegetable market. Added to this, she was frail and walked with a hunched back. She collected green leafy vegetables like spinach and in fact, anything such to sell, for the money we needed.

However, we can make use of certain phrases to describe a person, very much needed in our everyday conversation.

Read the following description given below about people and see if you can choose the right phrase befitting the person from the box given.

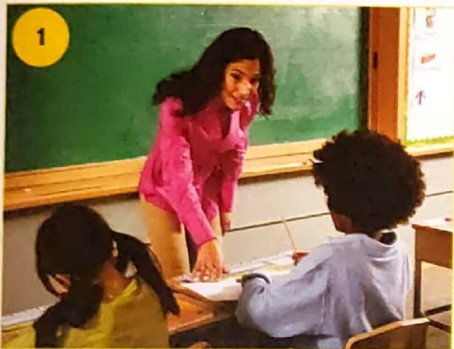
a figurehead a gatecrasher a whizz-kid a daredevil a busybody
a skinflint a sponger a litter lout a big shot a killjoy

1. Vivek is always seen borrowing things. Yesterday he borrowed my bicycle and returned it when it got punctured. Mrs Lal told that he took ₹ 500 last month from her and has not yet returned. He doesn't work; he just seems to live off others.
2. My sister's son is only 16, yet he is brilliant with computers. In fact, he has just written a game and it's so good that leading PC gaming companies want to buy it.
3. I was at my sister's Silver Jubilee Anniversary the other day when this woman came in wearing a bright pink saree. I'd never seen her before so I asked my sister who she was. She had no idea either. In fact, it turned out that nobody at the party knew her.
4. Mr Samuel has become very important and influential person these days. You cannot meet him without an appointment.
5. My friend has an uncle who doesn't believe in spending money. In fact, once when a representative from the Missionaries of Charity came to him asking for donations, he let him off with just one rupee.
6. My younger brother has no sense of how the house is kept clean. He throws his shoes and clothes here and there. His room is full of papers crushed and thrown on the floor.
7. In a democratic country the President is the official head of a nation. The actual powers are vested with the Prime Minister.
8. There is a character named Scrooge in Charles Dickens' play 'The Christmas Carol'. He hates celebrating Christmas and disapproves of all things that others enjoy. He also tries to stop them from enjoying themselves.

9. Mrs Promila is the BBC news channel of our locality. She knows almost everythingwhose daughter got marriedwhose son has divorced his wife and how many cars and dogs the people in the street have. I just don't understand how she finds time for all these things!
10. He enjoys the parachute gliding down to the earth after ejecting off from the plane. He has done many such feats before. These stunts seem like a game to him.

Learn the Language

- A. Look at the following pictures. Make a meaningful sentence for each picture by choosing words given in Columns A, B and C. One is done for you.



A	B	C
1. a teacher	(a) sells clothes	(i) in a clinic
2. a saleswoman	(b) takes care of the patients	(ii) in a departmental store
3. a chef	(c) teaches students	(iii) in an airline
4. a flight attendant	(d) cooks food	(iv) in a school
5. a doctor	(e) serves passengers	(v) in a restaurant

1. ← *A teacher teaches students in a school.* [A - (1), B - (c), C - (iv)]

2. ←