

Name of Student

Instructor's Name

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Deferred Dreams in Hughes's "Harlem"

The poem *Harlem* by Langston Hughes is about the social and emotional impact of unfulfilled dreams in a nation where freedom is still not an option for Black Americans. "*What happens to a dream deferred?*" is the first line of the poem, and it is a reflection on the psychic injury of systematic denial (Hughes 1). Hughes uses a sequence of graphic images to demonstrate the rotting, encumbrance, and eventual danger of stunted dreams. The poem when read and compared with modern scholarship, turns out to be a critique of the contradictions of the American Dream and its inability to cover Black citizens.

According to Bularzova, the American Dream is schizophrenic to the African Americans since its equality aspirations do not match with an era of racial exclusion (Bularzová 9). Hughes plays this contradiction in the first metaphor: "*Does it dry up / like a raisin in the sun?*" (Hughes 426). A dream that had been vital withers in oppressive circumstances, visibly representing what Bularzova defines as the "illusion of evolution" in the progress of the race (Bularzova 8). The raisin represents the structural racism that has led to the long-term withering of possibilities.

The criticism is sharpened in the subsequent image by Hughes when he connects the delayed dreams with physical injury: "*Or sore as a sore- / And then flee?*" (Hughes 1). The wound metaphor expresses emotional trauma, which is transferred because it is not given time to heal. According to Jassim, "*Hughes' poetry advocates such subjects as courage, rebellion, and irony in addition to the struggle for freedom. It is a reflection of the African American tradition*"

(Jassim 181), highlighting the voices of people and their sufferings. The ulcerating burn becomes a symbol of this crisis, an open wound left by social injustice.

The idea of rot extends the poem of personal harm to societal corruption: “*Does it smell like rotting meat?*” (Hughes 1). According to Larrea, Hughes turned to poetry to “confront the foundations of the white American Dream” by showing how racial injustice perverts the beliefs of the nation (Larrea 1). The smell of rotting meat is a reference to the moral corruption that results when a society refuses to keep its promise of opportunity for all.

Even the apparently sweet options conceal the threat. Hughes questions whether deferred dream “*crust and sugar over - / like a syrupy sweet?*” (Hughes 1). The picture implies the shallow histories of development that conceal open wounds. Bularzova also states that the Black American Dream serves as a myth of accessibility that is not achievable in reality (Bularzova 8). The caramelized crust is a metaphor of false hope, brightened above, and dead beneath.

The poem then moves to the burden of the unfulfilled dreams: “*Maybe it just sags / like a heavy load*” (Hughes 1). The burden is aided by the work of intersectionality by Almefawaz, which reveals how Black people are exposed to compounded pressures generated by intersecting systems of oppression (Almefawaz 3). The accrued psychological weight is observed in the sagging load.

Hughes introduces the most pressing possibility: “*Or does it explode?*” (Hughes 1). Delayed dreams can explode into social resistance if the injustices continue. Jassim highlights that the imagery used by Hughes foreshadows the outburst of anger when racism consistently thwarts progress (Jassim 175). The bombastic final line denies the closure and tells us that delayed dreams do not end in personal pain.

Hughes reveals the instability of a country raised on unfulfilled promises through metaphoric images of decay, burden, and eruption. The Harlem turns out to be a strong denunciation of the American Dream paradoxes, in which the dreams postponed by racial inequalities do not fade but evolve, rot, and eventually must be addressed.

Works Cited

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