



Langston Hughes's "Harlem": A do or Die Situation

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Langston Hughes is considered one of the most influential and prolific African-American poets of the twentieth century. He published poetry from the Harlem Renaissance, a period during the 1920s when African-American artists and their works flourished in Harlem, to the Civil Rights and Black Arts movements. Following the Civil Rights movement, the Black Arts movement of the 1970s combined militant black nationalism with outspoken art and literature. Onwuchekwa Jemie, in his book *Langston Hughes: An Introduction to the Poetry*, interprets the poem as a militant outcry against racial injustice. Jemie argues that the images in the poem build in intensity until "the violent crescendo at the end." Jemie writes, "rotten meat is a lynched black man rotting on the tree. A sweet gone bad is all of the broken promises of Emancipation and Reconstruction, ... integration ... and Equal Opportunity. It might even be possible to identify each of the key images with a generation or historical period ..." These interpretations are not shared by many critics, but Jemie's reading is notable for its departure from the widespread black opinion that Hughes's writing was not militant enough to remain relevant in the wake of the Black Arts movement. By finding radical implications in Hughes's earlier poetry, Jemie revives poems such as "Harlem" for politicized contemporary readers.

Commenting on the innovative musical structure of the volume in which "Harlem" is a keynote poem, many critics, including Walter Farrell and Patricia Johnson, writing in the journal MELUS, note that Hughes "breaks down the barrier between the beginning of one poem and the end of another. [The volume may be described] as a series of short poems or phrases that contribute to the making of one long poem. Each poem maintains some individual identity as a separate unit while contributing to the composite poetic message. Movement between passages is achieved by thematic or topical congruency or by interior dialogue." "Harlem" is placed toward the end of Montage and comments on the widespread despair and frustration expressed by the personas in preceding poems. Thus "Harlem" may be read as both a distinct individual poem and an outstanding note in much larger symphony.

“Harlem” is a short, reflective poem, somber in tone, with an ominous, pointedly italicized ending. It appeared originally as the first poem in the last sequence of poems (“Lenox Avenue Mural”) in the book *Montage of a Dream Deferred*. Sometimes *Montage of a Dream Deferred* has been reprinted in its entirety (as in Hughes’s *Selected Poems*); sometimes “Lenox Avenue Mural” has been reprinted separately; often “Harlem” has been reprinted alone.

The poem can stand alone. Although it is part of a suite of six poems (“Lenox Avenue Mural”) and of a book of ninety-one poems (reduced to eighty-seven in *Selected Poems*), it is self-contained and autonomous. It consists of seven short sentences, the last six of which respond to the opening question, “What happens to a dream deferred?” Of the six responses, all but one are themselves framed as rhetorical questions. The whole of *Montage of a Dream Deferred* is set in Harlem, yet only two of its ninety-one poems mention Harlem in their titles (“Harlem” and “Night Funeral in Harlem”). Simply being titled “Harlem” gives this particular lyric a special recognition in the sequence.

The “dream deferred” is the long-postponed and, therefore, frustrated dream of African Americans: a dream of freedom, equality, dignity, opportunity, and success. This particular poem does not define or give examples of the dream (many other poems in *Montage of a Dream Deferred* do this); it concentrates, instead, on possible reactions to the deferral of a dream, ranging from the fairly mild-mannered (“Does it dry up/ like a raisin in the sun?”) to the threatening (“Or does it explode?”). The first five potential responses to frustration are essentially passive, the last one active.

Langston Hughes first made his home in Manhattan’s Harlem in 1922. He was a leading figure in the Harlem Renaissance, the 1920’s flowering of African American literature and art. Although he traveled widely and often, he kept circling back to Harlem. He lived there, on a more-or-less permanent basis, from the early 1940’s on, maintaining a home on West 127th Street for the last twenty years of his life. *Montage of a Dream Deferred* is a product of the late 1940’s, when Hughes had at last settled in Harlem.

The variety of responses that “Harlem” suggests as reactions to the deferring of a dream may be taken as a sort of cross-section of behavior patterns Hughes saw around him among the citizens of Harlem. The poem reflects the post-World War II mood of many African Americans. The Great Depression was over, the war was over, but for African Americans the dream, whatever particular form it took, was still being deferred. As Arthur P. Davis wrote in a 1952 article in *Phylon*, “with Langston Hughes Harlem is both place and symbol. When he depicts the hopes, the aspirations, the frustrations, and the deep-seated discontent of the New York ghetto, he is expressing the feelings of Negroes in black ghettos throughout America.”

The most striking features of “Harlem” are the vivid, even startling, metaphors that Hughes introduces as possible answers to the poem’s opening question, “What happens to a dream deferred?” Each metaphor could be taken as suggesting a pattern of behavior. Drying “up/ like a raisin in the sun” could refer to the gradual shriveling of a dream or a person, still sweet but wrinkled, desiccated. (Lorraine Hansberry’s 1959 play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, ruminates on this sort of response to a dream deferred—taking its title from Hughes’s poem.) To “fester like a sore—/ And then run” suggests something considerably more unappealing—and dangerous—than drying up: a wound not

healing. Eventually a limb or a life may be lost. Worse still among its implications is that it will “stink like rotten meat,” for now life is gone from the organism entirely and putrefaction has set in. “Stink” is used as an intentionally offensive, vulgar word, suitable for the occasion.

So far there has been a kind of logical progression, from dehydration to localized decay (“fester”) to wholesale decomposition, but here the poem takes a surprising turn. To “crust and sugar over—/ like a syrupy sweet” seems anticlimactic at first, after rot; “sugar” and “sweet” recall the concentrated sweetness of a raisin.

Hughes may have been thinking of a false, “syrupy sweet” form of behavior—what Paul Laurence Dunbar, in his poem, “We Wear the Mask,” called “the mask that grins and lies”—an outer “crust” that hides. The poem does not say what it hides, but one may be reminded of the narrator’s grandfather in Ralph Ellison’s novel *Invisible Man* (1952), a grinning, subservient old man who, on his deathbed, “had spoken of his meekness as a dangerous activity”—who had told his grandson “to overcome ‘em with yeses, undermine ‘em with grins, agree ‘em to death and destruction, let ‘em swoller you [like too much sugar, perhaps] till they vomit or bust wide open.”

Each of the last two answers to the question “What happens to a dream deferred?” is set off from the others. Penultimately, there is the statement, “Maybe it just sags/ like a heavy load”—perhaps the saddest of the responses, suggesting depression and despair. Finally, there is the overtly warning question: “Or does it explode?” When violence broke out in America’s inner cities in the 1960’s, Hughes’s poem proved to have been prophetic.

By no means are the metaphors in “Harlem” meant to exhaust the number of possible responses to the deferring of a dream. Indeed, another poem in *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, “Same in Blues,” uses a repeated refrain to state that in a dream deferred there is “A certain/ amount of traveling,” “A certain/ amount of nothing,” and “A certain/ amount of impotence.” The poem notes that “There’s liable/ to be confusion/ in a dream deferred.” Even with “traveling,” “nothing,” “impotence,” and “confusion,” the list of responses is nowhere near exhausted. There may be as many dreams deferred as there are residents of Harlem or as there are African Americans.

Historically, “Harlem” can be looked upon as a literary harbinger of the Civil Rights and Black Nationalist movements that took place during the two decades after its publication. Additionally, when we compare “Harlem” with earlier, frequently anthologized Hughes poems, such as “Dream Variations” (1924) and “I, Too” (1925), we note a shift from the confident, optimistic tones of the earlier verse to the defiant warning that may be construed from the final line of “Harlem.” Literature, as many scholars suggest, is a good way to read history, and if we use these earlier and later Hughes poems as a way of assessing race relations during this quarter century, then we come to the inescapable conclusion that few gains have been achieved during this period. As we know from our study of history, social movements are often characterized by explosive, unpredictable events fueled by long years of disappointment and frustration. Indeed, as this dream continues—in the eyes of many Americans—to be deferred, we might link the final line of “Harlem” with reactions to assassinations, controversial court decisions, and to the institutional kinds of discrimination that persist in our society. And when we recall W. C. Handy’s reference to Hughes’s wherewithal to be brief, we

note in this eleven-line poem the poet's ability to skillfully blend history and art with the politics of resistance.

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