

Harlem

LANGSTON HUGHES

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

Langston Hughes: Poems Summary and Analysis of "Harlem"

Summary:

The speaker wonders what happens to a deferred dream. He wonders if it dries up like a raisin in the sun, or if it oozes like a wound and then runs. It might smell like rotten meat or develop a sugary crust. It might just sag like a “heavy load,” or it might explode.

Analysis:

This short poem is one of Hughes’s most famous works; it is likely the most common [Langston Hughes](#) poem taught in American schools. Hughes wrote "Harlem" in 1951, and it addresses one of his most common themes - the limitations of the American Dream for African Americans. The poem has eleven short lines in four stanzas, and all but one line are questions. Playwright Lorraine Hansbury references "Harlem" in the title of [A Raisin in the Sun](#), her famous play about an African American family facing prejudice and economic hardship. The production debuted on Broadway in 1959, only 8 years after Hughes published "Harlem."

In the early 1950s, America was still racially segregated. African Americans were saddled with the legacy of slavery, which essentially rendered them second-class citizens in the eyes of the

law, particularly in the South. Change was bubbling up, however. Hughes wrote "Harlem" only three years before the seminal Supreme Court decision in the 1954 case *Brown vs. Board of Education* that declared state laws establishing separate public schools for black and white students to be unconstitutional. Thus, Hughes was intimately aware of the challenges he faced as a black man in America, and the tone of his work reflects his complicated experience: he can come across as sympathetic, enraged, hopeful, melancholy, or resigned.

Hughes titled this poem "Harlem" after the New York neighborhood that became the center of the Harlem Renaissance, a major creative explosion in music, literature, and art that occurred during the 1910s and 1920s. Many African American families saw Harlem as a sanctuary from the frequent discrimination they faced in other parts of the country. Unfortunately, Harlem's glamour faded at the beginning of the 1930s when the Great Depression set in - leaving many of the African American families who had prospered in Harlem destitute once more.

The speaker muses about the fate of a "dream deferred." It is not entirely clear who the speaker is - perhaps the poet, perhaps a professor, perhaps an undefined black man or woman. The question is a powerful one, and there is a sense of silence after it. Hughes then uses vivid analogies to evoke the image of a postponed dream. He imagines it drying up, festering, stinking, crusting over, or, finally, exploding. All of these images, while not outright violent, have a slightly dark tone to them. Each image is potent enough to make the reader smell, feel, and taste these discarded dreams. According to Langston Hughes, a discarded dream does not simply vanish, rather, it undergoes an evolution, approaching a physical state of decay.

The speaker does not refer to a specific dream. Rather, he (or she) suggests that African Americans cannot dream or aspire to great things because of the environment of oppression that surrounds them. Even if they do dare to dream - their grand plans will fester for so long that they end up rotting or even exploding. As critic Arthur P. Davis writes, "When [Hughes] 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."