

Give a critical analysis of Harlem.

Hughes published Harlem in 1951, near the end of the Harlem Renaissance, a cultural movement promoting Afro-American activism and artistry. It originally appeared as the first poem in the last sequence of Hughes's poetry ('Lenox Avenue Mural') in the book *Montage of a Dream Deferred*. Hughes's repetition of 'like' gives Harlem a rhetorical and structural unity: as the speaker compares the deferred dream to various objects. Each comparison both answers and expands the original question of what the dream actually was. Hughes deliberately italicised the last question 'Or does it explode?'. This gives the line a deceptive quality: implicitly warning of the bitterness and violence that often results from oppression. Harlem is a short, reflective poem, serious in tone, with a pointedly italicised, ominous ending.

The poem Harlem by Langston Hughes reflects the post-world War II mood of many Afro-Americans. The Great Depression was over, the War was over: but for Afro-Americans the dream, whatever particular form it took, was being still and continuously deferred. Whether one's dream was as trivial as winning in a gambling game, or as noble as hoping to see one's children reared properly: Langston Hughes takes them all seriously. In fact, he takes the deferral of each and every Afro-American dream to heart.

In a broad sense, the dream in this poem refers to the Afro-American people's dream for equality, fraternity and liberty; for opportunity in the land of prosperity; for a dignified ethnic identity and respected life and so on, which America is good at promising in loud voices, but not to deliver. Hughes has attempted to explain and illuminate the 'Negro condition in America'. Harlem questions the social consequences of so many deferred dreams.

The first line of the poem poses a large, open question that the subsequent questions both answer and expand. The second stanza contains a series of questions which are themselves answers to the first question of what happens to a 'deferred' or postponed dream. The first possible answer to his own question is "Does it dry up/like a raisin in the sun?" This image carries the connotation that the dream was a living entity: which has now dried up like a raisin, just like any other dried up object, a lifeless thing. Besides, drying must also include shrinking; becoming minimal. It is necessary to analyse each image in connection with the feelings of the speaker, rather than finding out the objective qualities of the image which the poem must connote: being unavoidable. The first image of the poem proposes that the long-deferred dream must dry up like a raisin. This simile likens the original dream to a grape: fresh, green, juicy and round. Since the dream has been neglected for too long: it has inevitably dried up.

The next simile of the sore 'Or fester like a sore--/And then run?' conveys a sense of infection and pain. Comparing the promised dreams with a sore, the poet suggests that unfulfilled dreams become part of us; like a long-standing injury that has gathered pus. Neglected injuries may lead to infection, even death. The word "fester" has connotations of seething decay: and 'run' literally refers to infection. From the viewpoint of the speaker, this denotes the pain that one has when one's dreams get always deferred or postponed. A postponed dream is presented before us through the metaphor

of a painful wound on the human body that has begun to be infected. The deferred dreams of the Afro-American people has become like an infected sore, that has gathered pus on the whole body of the community.

The next question,

"Does it stink like rotten meat?" intensifies the disgust. Hughes suggests that deferred dreams will annoy one continually: making one sick until they are taken care of. The poet also hints at the disastrous consequences of ignoring people's dreams. The fourth alternative attempt to guess about what will happen to the postponed dream is that it will "crust and sugar over", meaning it will develop a layer of crusty, sugary covering and seem to be healed. A crusted over and syrupy sweet will not kill people, as festering wounds and rotten meat will: but the image still carries a connotation of decay, neglect and waste. The "sweet" may represent American Dreams of equality, justice, and success which are denied to most Afro-Americans. A sweet gone bad symbolises all the broken promises of emancipation, equal opportunity, integration and reconstruction.

The third stanza of the poem is the only sentence that is not a question. Hughes says that the deferred dream may just sag, or bend with overload. This image implies that though neglected dreams may yield unspeakable, unforeseeable and varied horrors, one thing is certain: deferred dreams may weigh one down emotionally and physically, as heavily as a load of bricks. From the viewpoint of the speaker, who represents Afro-American people in general: this suggests that their unfulfilled dreams may have been a heavy emotional load on them. Hughes italicises the last line of the poem to emphasises the larger consequences of mass dissatisfaction; 'Or does it explode?' The poet implies a mass social explosion of the afflicted individuals. Ultimately, the epidemic of dissatisfaction and frustration will hurt everyone.

The speaker of Harlem is an Afro-American poet. Afro-American people were doled out the dreams of equity and equality. But these dreams never materialised. Despite legal and socio-political consensus to abolish apartheid: Afro-American people never faced an indiscriminate society. In other words, their dreams never came to be true. Afro-American people were promised equality, freedom, indiscrimination, justice; but these promises were never fulfilled. They were delayed, deferred and postponed.

The poem is in the form of the series of questions asked by a certain Harlem inhabitant, to himself or to someone listening to him: 'What happens to a dream deferred?' The subsequent questions form the answers. But the speaker's questions are more relevant than the attempt at an answer. The poem develops a series of images of decay and waste; representing the dreamer's difficult situation. The end of the poem suggests that, when despair and frustration are widely prevalent, it may explode: just as in reality it took the form of the Black Power movement of the 1960s.

The form of the poem is highly functional and so it requires special attention. The line lengths and metre create an atmosphere of jagged, nervous energy that reinforces the poem's theme of increasing frustration. In conclusion, Harlem yields special insight into the Afro-American situation that served as the gestation period of the Black Power movement of the 1960s.