

Mary Kathleen Grzenia

Professor Hale

SOFIA: Writing About Literature Laboratory

10 August 2011

Title

**Comment [MK1]:** Insert winning title here!

Humankind possesses a potent ability to envision and cherish goals, accomplishments, and a fragmented yet promising future. It is this vigorous, hopeful imagining that we call dreaming. But what happens to us when our dreams fail to take form, when our desires and plans for achievement are arrested before they reach fruition, when they experience temporary or even permanent suspension? The human spirit that was so lately transfixed by the dual forces of hope and creativity can either become reluctant or defeated, agitated or aggressive. Langston Hughes's "Harlem" paints a simultaneously subtle and vivid picture of the human reaction to unresolved dreams. In "Harlem," Langston Hughes uses diction and stanza form to illustrate how "dreams deferred" can deflate and aggravate the human spirit (1).

**Comment [DU2]:** Use only his last name?

After opening the poem with the question, "What happens to a dream deferred?," Hughes begins to answer that query in the remaining lines of the poem by employing simple and effective language. He does not specifically address what effect "a dream deferred" has on the human attitude, but knowingly implies that whatever influences a dream will always touch the human creator. Hughes also introduces his irregular stanza form in the first line. By divorcing the line from the rest of the piece, he places an accent on and draws attention to the weight of such a question. In so doing, the poet likewise creates a physical manifestation of a "deferred dream," detaching it from the body of the poem. Unable to achieve their dreams, individuals may experience feelings of complete dismay and remoteness from other creative people. Lines

**Comment [DU3]:** Develop a more concrete introductory sentence stating what the paragraph is analyzing.

**Comment [DU4]:** Hints?

**Comment [DU5]:** Rephrase.

**Comment [DU6]:** Ugh!

2-3 compare a delayed dream to a desiccated “raisin in the sun.” Hughes’ comparison of an unfulfilled dream to a raisin is highly appropriate because a raisin is shriveled bi-product of a grape, a once lush fruit bursting with delicious promise. It is a miniscule, relatively unappealing version of its previous form. Much like a raisin is relieved of its life-giving fluids, so does the human spirit undergo deflation when an inspirational dream is not realized. Hughes’ incorporation of the phrase “in the sun” serves to further emphasize how a dream and dreamer suffer defeat. A seemingly positive expression, according to the *OED*, “in the sun” connotes being “exposed to public view.” Depending on our stance or role in the world, our dreams are subject to public ridicule, criticism, and abuse. In the face of adverse opinion or “brighter” ideas, pride and belief in what we have conceptualized is put to the test, and sometimes accepting surrender appears to be the final option.

**Comment [DU7]:** Can this be elaborated?

Lines 4-5 of “Harlem” lend themselves to the sense of a dreamer’s aggravation. Hughes likens a suspended dream to an inflamed, seeping wound: “Or fester like a sore/And then run?” *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* asserts that “fester” denotes “to cause increasing poisoning, irritation, or bitterness.” A scorned dream incapable of execution or development certainly inflicts irritation and frustration upon its architect. His or her sense of purpose, motivation is transformed into unproductive exasperation. It causes the pain of a physical “sore,” what the *OED* claims is a “grievous state; affliction, misery” and “mental suffering, pain, or trouble; grief, sorrow, anxiety, or the cause of this.”

**Comment [DU8]:** Dictionary edition?

**Comment [DU9]:** Quotations necessary?

**Comment [DU10]:** Necessary?

**Comment [DU11]:** ☺

Hughes continues to express how “a deferred dream” deflates and aggravates the human spirit in lines 6-8 of “Harlem.” He associates an unattained aspiration with “rotten meat” in order to convey how a vision that goes untested may begin to decay and waste away. A dream, that nearly tangible, rousing distillation of the human mind will begin to decompose a person’s

creative energy when they are forced to relinquish it. The *OED* maintains that “crust” in line 7 denotes “to form or contract a crust; to become covered with a crust or hardened surface.” This word, in the context of the poem, however, connotes a barricade, isolation from a dream. In conjunction with “sugar” which *The Merriam Webster Dictionary* defines as “to make palatable or attractive,” line 7 once again produces the feeling of vexation as a result of desiring an appealing yet unreachable dream.

**Comment [DU12]:** Use a different word.

The diction of lines 9-10 clearly exhibits a tone of deflation. The word “sags” is immediately related to deflation and decline. As *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines it, “sag” indicates a loss of “vigor” and the contextual example the dictionary uses is “spirits sagging from overwork.” Therefore, the denotation and connotation of “sag” stress the way in which an interrupted goal occasionally strains and weighs down the human will to persevere. In accordance with mood created by “sag,” “load” in line 10 reinforces the impression of discouragement. According to *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* “load” can mean “something that weighs down the mind or spirits.” An unrealized dream undoubtedly has the power to burden a person’s intellect and passion. Finally, the separation of these two lines and the manner in which they hang off the primary stanza embody the idea of sagging in a visual way.

**Comment [DU13]:** More to say?

**Comment [DU14]:** More to say?

**Comment [DU15]:** More?

Hughes’ final line reinforces the antagonizing distress faced by a discouraged dreamer and the way in which he or she responds to it. Line 11, “Or does it explode?” indicates immense aggravation and turmoil. “Explode” is a common word connoting an intensely violent action resulting from long-withheld rage. The explosion may manifest itself in a physical, martial way, or may arrive in the form of a rash and volatile outburst. Because he frames the last line like an unanswered question and once again distances it from the rest of the poem, Hughes achieves a

tone of uncertainty which fortifies the sentiment of confusing despair felt by those who abandon their dreams.

Comment [DU16]: Too long

The conclusion of Langston Hughes's "Harlem" professes the attitude, "There is no concrete solution or means for apprehending 'dreams deferred' but visceral outrage against those who dare suppress your dreams, including yourself." Some may choose to endure the paralyzing effects of deflation and wasteful aggravation, while others may "explode," channeling their momentary disappointment into new modes of creativity and energy. Hughes' unaffected diction and disjointed stanza form appeals to readers, and not only asks them "What happens to a dream deferred?," but, "How will you let it affect you?"