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12 August 2011

Deflation and Aggravation in Langston Hughes's "Harlem"

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 once inspired 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. 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. The name of the poem itself points to the historical sector of New York called a Harlem, a place where African Americans' creative prospects were mocked and denied; a place where the human soul's ingenuity was frequently overcome. In "Harlem," Langston Hughes uses simile, diction, and stanza form to illustrate that "dreams deferred" deflate and aggravate the human spirit (1).

After opening the poem with the question, "What happens to a dream deferred?" Hughes begins to answer that query in the remaining lines by employing simile and diction. Lines 2-3 introduce the metaphorical comparison of a delayed dream and a desiccated raisin: "Does it dry up/ like a raisin in the sun?" Hughes's use of simile to demonstrate how an unfulfilled dream is

like a raisin is highly appropriate; much like a raisin is relieved of its life-giving fluids, so does the human spirit undergo emotional deflation when an inspirational dream is not realized. A raisin is a miniscule, relatively unappealing version of its previous form, a once lush fruit bursting with delicious promise. Nevertheless, it contains a complex sweetness all its own, as Hughes seemingly acknowledges in lines 7-8. In a similar way, the deflation or sense of defeat a person feels after his dream has shriveled can be used to channel either a positive or negative outlook. The dreamer may be motivated to reconsider or rebuild a dream until it assumes a new shape, one that is sweeter and more hopeful than the original. There are, however, those who choose to desert their dreams and block all innovative thoughts about them. Hughes's incorporation of the phrase "in the sun" serves to further emphasize how a dream and dreamer suffer emotional defeat or bask in the optimistic light and heat of new inspiration. On the one hand, according to *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, "in the sun" connotes being "in the public eye." 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. However, an idea may grow to maturity in the presence of a public crowd. The criticism we receive may encourage us to return to the drawing board and perfect a concept instead of forsaking the goal altogether.

Unable to achieve their dreams, individuals may experience feelings of complete dismay and remoteness from other creative people. Hughes demonstrates this idea through the 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 and crafting a blatant pause between the first line and the following stanza.

Hughes applies the simile of an inflamed, seeping wound to a suspended dream in lines 4-5 in order to address a dreamer’s aggravation: “Or fester like a sore/And then run?” *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* asserts that the verb “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 Merriam-Webster Dictionary* claims is a “a source of pain or vexation: affliction.” For innovative people there is nothing more obnoxiously painful than an aspiration that cannot be pursued. Just like an infected sore, it eats them alive while they search for the cure: a creative breakthrough.

Through a continued use of simile and diction, Hughes expresses how “a deferred dream” deflates and aggravates the human spirit in lines 6-8 of “Harlem.” He associates an unattained aspiration with “rotten meat” to convey how a vision that goes untested may begin to decay and waste away. A dream, a 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 the verb “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 isolation from a dream. Acting as a tough layer, the resilient crust prevents access to a soft, “syrupy” interior (8). In conjunction with the verb “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. Furthermore, lines 7-8 are a reflection of the

lines 2-3 referencing the raisin: a dream may require time and criticism before its joys are ready to be tasted.

The diction of lines 9-10 clearly exhibits a tone of deflation. The verb “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. According to *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* “load” can mean “something that weighs down the mind or spirits.” In accordance with the mood created by “sag,” “load” in line 10 reinforces the impression of discouragement, the notion that unabated pursuit of a goal leads to physical and mental exhaustion. Therefore, an unrealized dream undoubtedly has the power to burden a person’s intellect and passion.

The separation of lines 9-10 from the rest of the poem and the manner in which they hang off the primary stanza embody the idea of sagging in a visual way. (To view the way the poem looks on the page, see the appendix at the end of the essay.) These lines lend themselves to the message of suspended dreams in a subliminal manner. They represent the way in which dejected or irritated dreamers sometimes strive to cling to their hopes just as the lines seem to struggle to hold on to the main stanza. Therefore, the pattern successfully bolsters Hughes’ theory of “dreams deferred” and the physical and emotional strain of trying to maintain them.

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. In so doing, fortifies the sentiment of confusing despair felt by those who abandon their dreams.

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?"

APPENDIX

Harlem
Langston Hughes

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like sore –

And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over –

like syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags

like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

Works Cited

Hughes, Langston. "Harlem." *Teaching American History.org*. Ashbrook Center for Public

Affairs at Ashland University, n.d. Web. 16 Aug. 2011.