

# James langston hughes essay example

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



Much of James Langston Hughes' work addresses the racial inequality in the United States of America at the beginning of the twentieth century. There are few writers whose poetry relates this particular subject in such an eloquent and powerful fashion. The work is accessible to most readers, even those who have not experienced racism first-hand. In his poem, "Harlem," James Langston Hughes explores the struggles through which African-Americans had to endure in the first half of the twentieth century to be considered equal to white American citizens. Through his poetry, Langston Hughes shows the reader how life was for him, and other African-Americans, during that time. It is perhaps the accessibility and relevance of his work which makes it so unique, and a worthwhile part of world literature.

"Harlem" is loosely metrical and contains literary techniques such as regular rhyme, imagery and rhetorical questions. Hughes wrote "Harlem" in 1951, a time when American blacks were frustrated with their unequal status to whites. By this point, laws had been passed allowing blacks to vote and to own property. However, prejudice still continued. Black children had to attend segregated, substandard schools and adults could only aspire to secure the lower paid jobs such as ditch-digging and shoe shining. By the middle of the century, the feeling among the black community was one of irritation (Black). Interestingly, the tone of "Harlem" lacks irritation. Instead, it carries a gentle and pensive tone.

The first line of the poem poses the question, "What happens to a dream deferred?" (line 1). In this context, the "dream" means a life goal. The poem explores, through a series of further questions, what the negative effects are when a goal has to be delayed. Around the mid twentieth century, many

African Americans felt that they were having to delay their goals and dreams in life, as a result of on-going white oppression. This poem is representative of the feeling about many elements of such oppression.

The first of the following questions is: “ Does it dry up / like a raisin in the sun?” (lines 3/4). The raisin is a simile for the dream. A raisin is already dry, and if it is left out in the sun it becomes completely hard and impossible to eat. Therefore, the poet is saying that a dream made to wait becomes as dry and useless as the aforementioned raisin. Dreams such as owning a home were frequently out of reach for African Americans, causing some to lose hope that equality would ever be granted.

Hughes then goes on to say that if the dream does not dry up and ruin, perhaps it will “ fester like a sore - / And then run” (lines 5/6). The sore refers to a skin wound, which is again a simile for the dream. It is best for a sore to dry up and therefore heal. If it begins to fester and run, this is an indication that the sore is infected. The simile extends to mean that a dream left to fester may become infected with restlessness that may in turn lead to crime. Law-breaking behaviour is a potential consequence of oppression and of poverty. A person who is denied his freedom and his pride could easily become so downtrodden that he turns to crime as an alternative.

The content of the second stanza shifts from questions to a suggestion: “ Maybe it just sags / like a heavy load” (lines 11/12). Here the simile is that the dream is like a burden, making the owner walk slowly and act clumsily. A dream forced to defer may droop and become too weighty for the person’s mind to carry. This sagging could lead to depression. Hughes is exploring the different outcomes that could result from oppression; unhappiness,

depression, and other mental illnesses are just three examples.

The final line is alone in its stanza. Here, the poet returns to using a rhetorical question, but instead of being a simile like the previous concepts, the speaker exercises a metaphor of an explosion: “ Or does it explode?” (line 14). Bombs are a good example of something that explode and cause huge devastation. Although all of the listed possible results of a postponed dream are negative, this final one is the worst. If the person whose dream is delayed loses all optimism of realising his goals, he may “ explode” with his depression. The consequences of this could be disastrous. Such an eruption could be in the form of a serious crime, a serious breakdown, or worse. Therefore, an explosion could be seen as any of the already mentioned examples, but amplified beyond belief.

“ Harlem,” has a rather negative feel, without the same hope for the future of the some other works by the same poet. In terms of beautiful poetry, and in terms of shedding light on the racial inequality of the twentieth century, the works of James Langston Hughes is a worthwhile element of world literature. Perhaps one of the most commendable qualities of Hughes’ poetry is its accessibility. Most of his poems can be read and understood by the majority of readers, which is a major advantage to a poet wanting to gain popularity among the general public. Hughes’ work has been popular for many years now, and will probably continue to be so for a long time to come.

## **Works Cited**

Langston Hughes, James. “ Harlem.” Poetry Foundation. 1951. Web. 11 Nov 2012.

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poem.html?id=175884>