

Review of Harlem

The work of Langston Hughes was prominent during the Harlem Renaissance. Songs, poems, novels, and other literary works by Black Americans were prolific in nature as this marked a heightened sense of intellect within the black community and the desire to express the pains of social injustice through art. Langston Hughes' contribution to the cause consisted primarily of poems like *Harlem*, which can be assessed in two ways. First, Hughes asks the audience to ponder the possible fate of a dream not followed. A dream like this could be anything, such as following a passion. There is, however, a second way of interpreting the poem, namely as an isolated dream of racial equality. Nevertheless, Hughes' masterful use of rhetoric and similes brings the poem together, highlighting the theme of unfulfilled dreams.

Rhetoric is a literary element that is commonly used to persuade the audience to think or feel a certain way. Rhetoric can also be used for a dramatic effect. A rhetorical question, as shown frequently throughout *Harlem*, is not intended to formulate a direct answer, but rather to spark interest in the audience as they develop their own understanding of the subject matter. Consider these lines from the poem:

What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore-
And then run?
(Hughes, 397)

The initial question invites the audience to ponder the sense of complacency when assessing a forgotten dream. In essence, he asks the reader if a dream will shrivel up under an unforgiving sun or if left untreated, unaccounted for, will it become infected. These questions embellish the message that Hughes has for the rest of the poem.

Similes have always been a common literary device used to draw comparisons between two concepts. Langston Hughes' generous application of similes throughout the poem gives it a far from esoteric purpose. The disappointment of a broken dream will eventually happen to everyone, whether it's a simple issue like no one showing up for a birthday party, or a more tragic one like not being accepted to the college someone has yearned to attend. These easily depicted comparisons of what a broken dream mimics initiates emotion from the audience. Observe the next set of lines from the poem:

Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over like a syrupy sweet?
Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.
(Hughes, 397)

Think of the era that Langston Hughes' career peaked. Racial inequality was a heavy burden that persistently weighed down the black community. In this poem, Hughes' compares the dream of fair treatment in a supposedly free country to a heavy bag. A bag is designed to be carried, and if one continuously crams things in it, it becomes sagging, unsightly, and an encumbrance. As in the poem, Hughes compares the desires of something one cannot have to the smell of rotting flesh because it can truly become sickening and taunting to have no choice but to want for something that seems impossible to have. Additionally, the poem has an interchangeable meaning because anything the reader desires, but is unable to achieve, can easily be interpreted as the poem's message, regardless of its historical context.

In conclusion, the poem's use of rhetoric and similes forms a connection of sadness and longing for the audience. At the end we are left with the question of whether a dream untouched will explode. The sense of no one caring about a problem that hurts a community has historically led to protests and riots when a problem goes unsolved. In this poem, it alludes the beginnings of the Civil Rights movements that still serve as a reminder to us as a nation that history should not be repeated. This is the explosion that Hughes' hints at. Even without historical context, the poem is still effective, since a person who has put their dream on hold is most likely unhappy as

a result. When you reach a breaking point, one may suddenly explode with rage, resulting in even more disappointment. As such, Langston Hughes' ability to bring these emotions to light in this poem through the use of literary devices effectively portrays the overall message.

Works Cited

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